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Tentative Futures: Ethics and Sexuality in the Nineteenth-Century Novel

by

Amy Hope Jamgochian

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Rhetoric

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Judith Butler, Co-Chair
Professor Dorothy Hale, Co-Chair
Professor Shannon Jackson
Professor Kent Puckett

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Abstract

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This dissertation takes the ubiquity of nineteenth century narratives about young girls' development as an important sign, not of Victorian gender conformity or sexual unfreedom, but rather of the presence of a special force in this figure in flux. Looking at emblematic narratives of female development that hinge on plots about marriage and inheritance, this dissertation finds there articulated three sets of possibilities for queer futurity, one of which each chapter lays out. "Queer futurity," a term much bandied about in queer theoretical circles recently, is, according to some, impossible. This dissertation finds in novels by Jane Austen, George Eliot, and Henry James attempts at articulations of queer futurity, enabled by the figure of the girl, even amidst the seas of heteronormative trajectories in which characters in these novels are adrift. What on the surface seems so vehemently straight—for example a girl who reaches adulthood through marriage, a line of inheritance that must continue—is actually anything but: in the midst of some of the most important tropes of what Edelman calls "reproductive futurity"—Judith Halberstam's "family, inheritance, and child rearing"—what emerge are queer kinship, complex and refracted lines of desire. While others have also found vast areas of possible futures away from normative sexual structures, the tendency has uniformly been to assume that such possibilities are unequivocally ethically positive, which this dissertation, as well as the novels on which I focus, call into question.

The introductory chapter situates the problem of ethics and sexuality by surveying the queer theoretical landscape that invests in "the future" such strong ethical undercurrents. If for so many today the question of access to futurity defines the center of possible change, for equally many nineteenth century novelists, it seems that it was the figure of the girl that offered the most cogent chance for ethical difference. Beginning with a close reading of Henry James's story, "Maud-Evelyn," this chapter asks how gender, as imagined and represented by three of the nineteenth century's novel-writing luminaries, might figure into the current debate, as well as how the nineteenth century thinkers adumbrated some of the ethical problems of sexual radicalism, along with the promises, even within plots so adamantly focused on marriage. The introduction also situates the dissertation's relationship to queer theory, narrative, and the notion of becoming, from Nietzsche to psychoanalytic theory and beyond.

In chapter 1, I look at Jane Austen's final completed novel, *Persuasion*. This novel presents Anne Elliot, a young female character who resists the futural trajectories with which she is surrounded, instead opting throughout much of the novel for a relationship to the body, pain, and trauma that allows her access to sensation in a way detached from the relationships to narrative, figuration, and selfhood that define her contemporaries. By framing Anne's relationship to pain and representation through Jean-Jacques Rousseau's deliberations on language, property, and masochism in the age of rationality, this chapter shows how what is a major upheaval of mores in so many ways nevertheless also adheres to an unhappy relationship to the ethic of sympathy that such a break intended to expand. Deleuze offers to this deliberation an understanding of masochism that helps this chapter articulate the dubious benefits for self-determined womanhood of otherwise so disruptive forces.

Part of what muddies the waters of ethics in deliberations of futurity is, then, the question of how much the self can or must play a part in an other-oriented endeavor. The second chapter takes up this problem in a close reading of George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. Through its focus on one young woman's attempt to create both female agency and ethical sense, the novel surveys several different imaginations of futurity for their potential to weave together this conceptual amalgamation: the value of writing, primogeniture, and entailment as futural acts are evaluated for their capacity to create a different and less heterocentric way of life while still maintaining Eliot's complex ethical standard of interrogating claims to sovereignty at every step at the same time as she privileges a sense of personal responsibility towards others. I look toward both the deconstructive line of thought that undermines the author as sovereign and Nietzsche's elaboration of *ressentiment* in attempting to understand how it is that the novel both celebrates and honors what I call queer modes of life, at the same time as it sacrifices the seemingly death-drive-driven "queer" at its center, the infamous character Edward Casaubon.

Henry James in *What Maisie Knew* comes perhaps closest to what seems a workable queer novelistic ethic, positing rather than queer antisociality in the face of trauma the radical possibilities available in avowing vulnerability. Performativity, or iteration, ends up fueling this queer possibility, but also gives the novel the final capacity to derogate it, to turn queer tragic. Chapter 3 performs a close reading of this novel, focusing on the young girl at its center, who is both traumatized and comedic, sensitive and stalwart. In an assessment of the "negative turn" in queer theory, this chapter asks how a young girl who otherwise seemingly transforms the damaging sexual standards in which she is steeped, can nevertheless end up the object of derision and heartbreak. By framing the discussion through one of the psychoanalytic theories from which many of the so-called negative queer philosophies emerge, that of Laplanche, this chapter is able to examine the ways in which these queer theories of desire and futurity miss the centrally ethical—and indeed in many ways positive—part of the hypothesis of our unavoidable imbrication with the other. So too, of course, does this novel in some ways finally fail in its attempt at ethical possibility, suggesting that queer negativity has a long and vital history, if not necessarily a sturdy future.

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Introduction: Queer Futural Ethics and the Girl in the Nineteenth Century British Novel

If, as Foucault claims, we are not the “other Victorians” we think we are on account of our ostensibly continued sexual repression, it would nevertheless seem that we Europeans and Americans might yet closely resemble our Anglo-American forebears in our persistent fixation upon marriage.¹ For Victorians, the main political issues with regard to marriage were the rules about the availability of divorce and coverture: who could file for divorce and on what grounds; did woman have legal rights of her own, or should her husband assume her rights upon marriage? The 1857 Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act liberalized divorce to the extent that it made it more easily available, but while men only had to prove adultery to gain a divorce, women had also to prove desertion, cruelty, rape, sodomy, incest, or bigamy.² It was not until the 1893 Married Women’s Property Act that women were allowed to retain their property upon marriage. The overwhelming focus of more recent marriage debate, in the United Kingdom as well as in the United States, is of course gay marriage: should same-sex couples have the same right to enter into a monogamous commitment of legally shared property? In both debates, the figure of the child is central: in the nineteenth century discussion, the health and welfare of the child depended, according to many, upon maintaining marriage at any cost.³ The fact that married women had no property rights also meant that children’s fates were tied solely to their fathers’ or stepfathers’ discretion. In the current gay marriage debate, conservative opponents of gay marriage cite homosexuality as a force of degradation of children and “family values”; proponents of gay marriage suggest that privileges conferred to the family and to children, such as custodial rights, should be available to same-sex partners; and some more radical queer opponents of gay marriage suggest that marriage ought not be the guarantor of children’s well-being at all.⁴

This dissertation also looks to the figure of youth—and the girl in particular—to seek the nineteenth century literary antecedents of the use of young female figures to formulate improved forms of relational equality. However, not all visions of girls in nineteenth century literature endorse liberalized (or more conservative, for that matter) marriage as the redeemer of social ties. Instead what the following chapters find is one trajectory of Victorian interest in youth whose iterations together suggest the figure of the girl as the fulcrum of what can be articulated as queer futural ethic of sociality. That is, this dissertation explores three successively more

1. This should not be seen as an attempt to oppose Foucault’s claim that private life in marriage attracted less and less scrutiny through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; rather, the boundary line of married and unmarried, private and vulnerable to public scrutiny and the disciplinary workings of power, came under intense interest and debate as marriage began to offer the shield from this disciplinary function.

2. Phillip Mallett, “Women and Marriage in Victorian England,” in *Marriage and Property: Women and Marital Customs in History*, ed. Elizabeth M. Craik (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1984).

3. A useful summary of the debate can be found in Henry James, Horace Greeley, and Stephen Pearl Andrews, *Love, Marriage, and Divorce, and The Sovereignty of the Individual* (Boston: Benj. R. Tucker, 1889).

4. For an overview of the sides of the marriage debate, from a radical perspective, see Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal* (New York: Free Press, 1999).

articulated nineteenth-century visions of how a figure of a girl might be at the center of queer futural ethical debates about sociality, relational futures imagined outside of the aegis of marriage.

Nineteenth century Anglo-American literature is of course replete with stories of young women and marriage; indeed the “marriage plot” is well-established as one of the prevailing story lines of novels of this time. Of course, this plot more frequently concentrates upon the course a young woman or man took to achieve marriage, famously ending before the reader receives any tale of actual married life. Thus one point the Victorian novel makes clear is that another young female figure affected by marriage is the young person who will come to be a married adult. Hidden within at least several of these stories is a less apparent view of the possibilities that inhere in this premarital moment, possibilities that resemble less a shift in the boundaries of marriage and more moves away from the obsessive interest in marriage altogether. From the notion in Jane Austen’s *Persuasion* that pure desire, pleasure, and sympathy are available solely—though with great restriction—to the premarital young woman, to the attempt in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* to forge ethical futurity apart from the heterosexual norm, and finally to Henry James’s *What Maisie Knew*, in which relational freedom and capacity are most particularly open to the little girl, this dissertation tracks a development through the nineteenth century of progressively more coherent accounts of queer relational possibility, all functions of a girl figure situated in an at least temporarily oblique relation to marital prerogatives. As this introduction will elucidate below, this “queerness” is a matter not merely of same-sex sex, but rather of desire that manifests in non-heteronormative ways.

“Maud-Evelyn”

As numerous queer theorists and historians have noted, the nineteenth century witnessed an increasing crystallization and specification of sexual taxonomies in Europe and America, a radical shift in the understanding of sexualities. This shift was paralleled by changing restrictions and possibilities with regard to that which fell outside the boundaries of marriage and those who were therefore not safeguarded from the multitudinous and complex interventions to which “perversion” came to be subject. It thus comes as little surprise that the most recognizably “queer” of the authors discussed in the chapters that follow is also chronologically latest, and that the most articulate form of queer futural possibility is found in his writing. Therefore just as the dissertation’s chapters conclude with his work, so too does this introduction open with a consideration of one of his (admittedly odder) short stories, “Maud-Evelyn,” which helps suggest how girlhood could provide the substance for a theories of queer ethics. The story is the tale of a Lady telling the tale of her friends Lavinia and Marmaduke. Lady Emma reports to her rapt listeners that upon Lavinia’s immediately-regretted refusal to marry Marmaduke, this young man traveled to Europe and befriended an older couple, the Dedricks, who drew him into their obsession with their long-dead daughter, Maud-Evelyn. As the story proceeds, the listeners hear of Marmaduke’s increasing enamorment with this dead girl as the time passes. Marmaduke finally reports to Lavinia (who is still timidly awaiting another proposal from Marmaduke) that he is engaged to Maud-Evelyn. And no sooner has Lavinia accepted and indeed embraced this pronouncement than Marmaduke appears in full mourning, calling himself Maud-Evelyn’s widower. The ever-faithful Lavinia nevertheless nurses Marmaduke in his final illness, and ends up inheriting the fortune that he had inherited from the Dedricks.

The eponymous girl on whom the action turns is of course wholly missing, which Donatella Izzo argues nullifies her, brands her the mere conduit for male traffic: “From woman

to portrait, statue, puppet, image, and then nothingness. ‘Maud-Evelyn’ is the consummation of the absence of woman in her representation: it eliminates her physical existence, and it even does away with the material prop of a painted or sculpted image, which still point back to a woman’s body, whose shape and existence they mimic.”⁵ While Izzo’s reading certainly demonstrates the way in which the girl in question functions as no more than a place-holder for the operations that traverse through her imagined figure, what it does not explain is the queer benefit another girl, Lavinia, ultimately derives from the girl-effigy whose wonders Marmaduke constantly narrates to her: after all, Lavinia, who remains symbolically ever a girl because of her unmarried but about-to-be engaged status, survives as a partner to Marmaduke in his declining years and inherits a vast fortune. She evades entirely the fate of her eight siblings, who, Lady Emma reports with asperity, “have never done anything for her”; instead they “help, actually, in different countries and on something, I believe, of that same scale, to people the globe.”⁶ That is, while one girl in the story can plausibly be said to represent the displacement of woman by objects, it is another girl who finally receives the bounty of those objects, in what the interlocutors in the story view as “wonderful” and a “piece of luck,” and this girl lives on to share her joy in these objects with her friend and mother figure, Lady Emma. This latter relationship brings to the fore not the normative continuity of child-production that Lavinia’s siblings represent, but altogether different ways that relationships, kinship, and symbolically-laden goods can carry on a line of persons.⁷ Girlhood turns out to be not only an absent form ripe for projection, but also an ideal sphere for the introduction of change.

It is clear then that the figure of the girl holds multiple valences in this story. On the one hand, the girl represented by Maud-Evelyn is a fantastical figment of the imagination, which spreads from her parents to Marmaduke to Lavinia; Lady Emma in hearing about this girl disseminates the story to all who listen to her tell it. The girl in this case is not merely a typical image of the traffic in women, but rather an example of narrative’s power to move people, both male and female—and not merely narrative, but more precisely the story of a girl. While her reported former beauty certainly plays a part in this appeal, no less significant is her age at the time of her death, though there is some obscurely comedic confusion as to what it was: Lavinia first reports to Lady Emma that she died at “fifteen, I believe. As a little girl.”⁸ Moments later, Lavinia mentions Maud-Evelyn’s striking looks again:

“It appears she was lovely.”
 I doubtless fairly gaped. “A little girl in a pinafore?”
 “She was out of pinafores; she was, I believe, when she died, about fourteen. Unless it was sixteen!”⁹

It is thus not Maud-Evelyn’s precise age that catches the fancy of her story’s followers, but rather the stage in which that age places her: she is too old for the short skirts of girlhood, and just barely old enough to be viewed without scandal as an object of desire. She is at the indeterminate age at which sexuality presents itself and may attract comment, but is meant not to

5. Donatella Izzo, *Portraying the Lady: Technologies of Gender in the Short Stories of Henry James* (University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 132.

6. Henry James, “Maud-Evelyn,” in *The Soft Side* (London: Methuen, 1900), 280.

7. *Ibid.*, 279.

8. *Ibid.*, 290.

9. *Ibid.*, 291.

be acted upon. Crucially, this stage provokes her parents and Marmaduke and even Lavinia to fascination and even a cultish obsession, but also to the great and overriding desire to thrust this dead girl into the married womanhood that her death prevented her from attaining. Once they have achieved this goal in their fancy (through setting up a marital suite for Marmaduke and Maud-Evelyn including wedding gifts, and enacting her death and Marmaduke's widowerhood), the Dedricks and Marmaduke very soon die, the "sum of passion ... spent."¹⁰ The story of an unending female adolescence is both thrilling in the desire it sparks and intolerable in its incompleteness.¹¹

But on the other hand, another girl maintains this indeterminate state and survives all those engaged in the plot to complete Maud-Evelyn by marrying her to Marmaduke. Lavinia's sustained existence, augmented by her inherited fortune, stands as the marker of human continuation in the story. For the Dedricks, whose hopes were invested entirely in those products of marriage, their offspring's death marks the effective end of the future. As Marmaduke explains, "You see, they couldn't do much, the old people—and they can do still less now—with the future; so they had to do what they could with the past."¹² They fulfill this prompting with gusto, but the future is not entirely obviated in the story. Contrary to the notion of the marriage-obsessed, it is not the possible fruits of ritual heterosexual bonding that ensure the future, but rather something else, something queer, something emblemized by Lavinia, the girl who never leaves her pre-married state. Indeed, marriage and reproduction seem in this story little more than dead ends.

Queer futurity in the story inheres not only in Lavinia's accession to a future unmoored from the norms of marriage and reproduction. Marmaduke too, in fact, escapes the same, given that he marries a girl already dead. In this (non-)act, he forever averts the cementing of relations with Lavinia that he has been avoiding for so long, while still ensuring that he need not engage in any of the corporeal obligations or products marriage typically augurs. Lady Emma too partakes of the distance from conventional standards in her surrogate parenthood of both main characters: Lavinia is the daughter of one of Lady Emma's former governesses and Marmaduke is the son of one of Lady Emma's suitors. Lady Emma feels, she tells her listeners, an obligation toward both. (And perhaps the siblinghood that her maternal relationship to them would imply is what makes their own marriage impossible—indeed the notion that they are siblings returns when Lady Emma is relating Marmaduke's eventual decline: "She moved about him like a sister of charity—at all events like a sister."¹³) But Lady Emma also feels caught between them—"I had in a manner to answer to each for the other"¹⁴—in a triangulation that mirrors the Marmaduke-Maud-Evelyn-Lavinia triangle and suggests the ways in which desire can be structured by its

10. *Ibid.*, 307.

11. This would seem to accord to one of Freud's models of pleasure, which specifies that pleasure lies in the satisfaction or removal of the source of excitation. Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1968). As Luce Irigaray has pointed out, this might be seen as a "male" model of desire, comparable to ejaculation. Luce Irigaray, "The Blind Spot of an Old Dream of Symmetry," in *Speculum of the Other Woman* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 53. It should be noted however that this is not the only way this story defines pleasure, and indeed other models override it.

12. James, "Maud-Evelyn," 303.

13. *Ibid.*, 309.

14. *Ibid.*, 280.

interruptions.¹⁵ In all of these instances of queerness in “Maud-Evelyn,” the understanding of the conditions of the future is structured in contradistinction to the normative constraints of reproduction.¹⁶

The narrative structure of the story plays a part in its queer futural thrust. As Shoshana Felman has pointed out, the frame structure obscures origins.¹⁷ In this case, an unnamed narrator tells the story of Lady Emma telling the story of Lavinia and Marmaduke to multiple listeners at a party. Lady Emma, as mediator between the two non-lovers, acquires her details from both figures. The story belongs to no one, and has an unclear, disseminated point of origin. Felman associates such dispersion with the way in which the unconscious seeks endlessly and fruitlessly for its unfindably lost origins; importantly in the current analysis, clear and infallible origins that may be sought at all are a myth, an insight that pertains not only to the psychic desire for wholeness that Felman invokes but also to the heteronormative instantiation of biological heredity as destiny, which of course plagues some understandings of Freudian theory as well.¹⁸ Instead, with the embedded narrative, it seems that origins are dispersed, multiple, and unreliable.

The narrative structure of “Maud-Evelyn” therefore acts as an instantiation of the unfolding of the future outside circuits of reproduction. It also exemplifies the ways in which queer experience can be transmitted, without the ostensibly necessary props of legal validity, consanguine heirs, or ensuring a future through one’s biological children. Stories and histories of those exempt or excluded from the annals of fact substantiated by these latter methods can still circulate and be dispersed and proliferate into the future, just as “Maud-Evelyn” demonstrates the ways in which queerness can thrive where normative forms of personal relationships cannot.¹⁹

In narrative structure and in its characters, then, “Maud-Evelyn” presents a vision of queer possibility. So while Izzo’s censure of the story still surely stands—the pretty girl’s death seems indeed the most interesting and useful thing about her—the story also introduces the possibility of an ethical kernel within the story’s queer use of girlhood and marriage. Life flourishes in this story where otherwise it might wilt: a man may both resist marriage and reap all

15. René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

16. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes, “isn’t it a feature of queer possibility—only a contingent feature, but a real one, and one that in turn strengthens the force of contingency itself—that our generational relations don’t always proceed in this lockstep?” Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You’re So Paranoid You Probably Think This Essay Is About You,” in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 147.

17. Shoshana Felman, “Turning the Screw of Interpretation,” in *Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading: Otherwise*, ed. Shoshana Felman (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 122.

18. This parallels Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s point, made in a reading of Henry James, that parenting doesn’t have to happen in that mythological moment of infancy, and it doesn’t have to be within the Oedipal triangle, but is rather the act of defining individuation and relationality, which is a lifelong task. Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading.”

19. The narrative frame allows the story to reorder chronology as queer in a sense as well, in a form of what Gérard Genette calls complete analepsis, in which a retrospection of the past is coterminous with the present (and in this case the future). Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 53.

its benefits, while an unmarried woman may partake in and indeed produce forms of future and kinship outside of the realm of parturition.

There are numerous problems with this conception of queer potentiality, however. First, a man of Marmaduke's time and culture most likely would have been able to live as a bachelor with little censure,²⁰ so Marmaduke's evasion of marriage is not precisely the feat it might seem in the story, which is nevertheless centered around this man's complex and difficult marital prevarications with Lavinia, and of course the giant imaginary edifice he builds in his pretend marriage to Maud-Evelyn. One might deduce from this disparity the possibility that the pressures of heterosexual activity bled over into felt pressures regarding its typical course of officially authorized attainment.

There is also the issue of the different treatments Maud-Evelyn and Lavinia receive—both after all are unmarried young women in the minds of their friends, yet one is idolized and retrospectively frenzily married off while the other is left to age alone. The unmarried girl seems only a threat when she is pretty, or when she is dead. Yet in a way it seems it is Lavinia's comparatively unspectacular looks and personality that allow her the sneaky radical queer potentiality into which Maud-Evelyn had no chance of escaping. This may be seen as one irony of some queer radicalism—that it may come at the cost of an appearance of failure with regard to heterosexual norms.

Associated with such an irony is the fact that for Lavinia the pleasures of queerness are many, but do not appear to include what for some would be the most obvious: physical sensuality, or sex. Must queer radicalism for a woman emerge at the expense of sexual pleasure? And if so, how much has it in fact achieved, and how queer indeed is it?

Moreover difficult to square with queer potentiality, or indeed with almost any interpretation of this story, is the intentional ambiguity the frame narrative leaves with the reader. The tone of the story is unclear, which resulted in highly variable reviews of the story. For instance Krishna Baldev Vaid sees the tone as an ethical mistake on James's part: "A wrong choice of *persona* invariably produces a false note as, for instance, in the case of 'Maud-Evelyn' (1900) where the narrator ruins the effect of the story by her inappropriately frivolous tone."²¹ Lady Emma's delight in the final turn of events—whether because of Lavinia's material acquisitions or because Lavinia has finally been rewarded after all of her sorrows—is apparently the wrong tone to take, but only if the moral content of the story is to mourn the loss of the dead girl's potential for marriage and to grieve over Lavinia's similar fate with regard to wedlock. Leon Edel too saw the story as a solemn one, which he suggested probably paralleled James's experience on mourning his cousin Minny's death.²² Yet compare the latter views to that of a

20. Consider for example Darwin's elaborate consideration of the pros and cons of marrying, with a wife rating, "better than a dog anyhow." Alan Macfarlane, *Charles Darwin and Thomas Malthus* (2002 [1838]); available from www.alanmacfarlane.com/texts/chapter1.pdf.

21. Krishna Baldev Vaid, *Technique in the Tales of Henry James* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), 61.

22. R.W.B. Lewis points out, "The saddest of [James's] reflections as he thought and wrote about Minny, was 'of the gradual change and reversal of our relations: I slowly crawling from weakness and inaction and suffering into strength and health and hope; she sinking out of brightness and youth into decline and death,'" noting that "Leon Edel, at the close of *The Untried Years*, points to two little known tales of Henry James, 'Longstaff's Marriage' (1878) and 'Maud-Evelyn' (1900), as being sinister and ghostly versions of the phenomenon here described by Henry." R.W.B. Lewis, "The Names of Action: Henry James in the Early 1870s," *Nineteenth Century Fiction* 38, no. 4 (1984), 478.

contemporary reviewer of the story, who wrote, “In the story called ‘Maud-Evelyn’ the eccentric spirit of whimsy is riotous. Maud-Evelyn is a child who died at some early age and who lives in the memory of her parents with such intensity—but it is folly to translate or curtail the wonderful web into which Maud-Evelyn’s adventures are woven!”²³ Is the story a hilarious and wonderful adventure, as Lady Emma and her listeners might have it, or is it a sad and ghostly tale, as it has been characterized by many others? This uncertainty is built into the narrative. Perhaps, rather than showing the falseness of any interpretation, this complication suggests that the text allows for both the tenacity and the tentativeness of its notion of queer futurity, as well as for the tenacity and tentativeness of the cult of worship of marriage and reproduction.

A final potential problem lies within the story’s vision of the future, which would seem in this analysis to find reproduction as an objectionable form of futurity, at least insofar as it seems so clearly to fail and to be replaced by so many other images of the transmission of the future. Is the refusal of reproduction the only form of queer radicalism? Is it an ethical form of futurity to see hope in the figure of the child or reproductive human as counterrevolutionary, or is it yet another form of antifeminism?

Queer Futural Ethics and the Girl

The following chapters look to three novels that span the nineteenth century and that struggle with similar questions and problems. For each, in different ways and with varying degrees of certainty, a radical queer possibility is in fact contingent upon the figure of the girl, and futurity is closed down not by reproductivity per se, but rather by the heteronormativity—that is to say the path towards marriage—too often conflated with it. Such questions and difficulties are also critical to current queer theory and politics. Most famous (or infamous, as the case may be) is Lee Edelman’s recent excoriation of what he calls “reproductive futurism,” opposable, Edelman argues, only through queer repudiation of the future in toto.²⁴ For Edelman, all possible notions of futurity partake of the constraints of heteronormativity, so queers would ideally instead yield to the death drive, that is, refuse all allegiance to identity and suturing, which require us to disavow the death drive. Rather than seeing the children as our future, we should abjure the figure of the child in all its sentimentality, in all forms by which we are urged to understand the child’s preservation and protection as the linchpin of possibility, the guarantor of change. Edelman’s forceful claim immediately sparked responses, from faithful devotees, to those sincerely appalled, to the cautiously believing or disbelieving. For instance, Judith Halberstam has taken up Edelman’s mantle, writing that *No Future* is “one of the most powerful statements of queer studies’ contribution to an anti-imperialist, queer counterhegemonic imaginary,” and only faulting Edelman for the narrowness of his primary textual sources.²⁵ Among critics, José Esteban Muñoz accuses Edelman’s theory of only pertaining to middle- and upper-class white men.²⁶ Tim Dean finds fault with Edelman’s understanding of drives as something one might

23. Elisabeth Luther Cary, “Henry James,” *Scribner’s Magazine* 36 (1904), 399.

24. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004). It cannot quite be said that Edelman is proposing a political strategy, because he considers all politics to be caught up in reproductive futurism; rather the political strategy he proposes is to reject politics altogether.

25. Robert L. Caserio et al., “Forum: Conference Debates – The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory,” *PMLA* 121, no. 3 (2006), 823-24.

26. *Ibid.*, 825. Also see José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

plausibly be able to embrace, as well as with Edelman's elusion of Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, and Nietzsche, among others, in a book that wrangles with notions of futurity and rebellion against the norm.²⁷ Others, including Susan Fraiman, have criticized Edelman for the hardly-concealed anti-feminist urge in the effort to repudiate children and childbearing.²⁸ Such controversy points to the question of how to envisage the future as the most salient issue for queer theory and politics. As Elizabeth Freeman posed the conflict in 2007, "do all futurities entail heteronormative forms of continuity or extension? If I were committed to describing where queer theory is now, I might use this question as the X to mark the spot of our collective critical endeavor."²⁹ Thus in looking to the figure of the girl in nineteenth century British novels, this dissertation also endeavors to contribute to the twenty-first century critical conversation about what role youth and gender might play in attempts to escape the logic, as unremitting today as it was two hundred years ago (if in different forms), of sexual normativity and heteronormative hegemony.

The Youth and the Girl

Why the girl? As the above discussion of "Maud-Evelyn" suggests, the figure of the developing girl is particularly resonant because of its liminal status. Again and again Henry James turned to young women in his stories and novels, but he was not unique in this choice; eighteenth and nineteenth century novels are replete with tales of young women. Much as it may be argued that the *Bildungsroman* is a male form, the number of coming of age novels about girls in the long nineteenth century attests to an equally intense interest in how young women attained their aesthetic and moral education in the world.³⁰ This, I argue, is due to the fact that youth and particularly girlhood might offer a decisive plane on which to imagine a different future. To the concretized ideas of adult identity and Being, toward which the many are urged to strive, and whose functions so often only men of a certain class and heritage can ever fully attain, the ideas of youth and girlhood counter values of Becoming, critique, multiple and fluid identifications, and alternate trajectories with regard to seeming imperatives of development. While such a counter admittedly only offers the binary other to the adult Being it opposed, in the process of doing so it presents fruitful, if fragile, possibilities of paths that diverge so substantially from ossifications of identity that they suggest, queerly, radically, that it could be bypassed altogether, without abandoning ethical concepts in the bargain. These notions find their support in psychoanalytic, queer, deconstructive, and Deleuzian uses of the ideas of the youth and the girl,

27. Tim Dean, "An Impossible Embrace: Queerness, Futurity, and the Death Drive," in *A Time for the Humanities: Futurity and the Limits of Autonomy*, ed. James J. Bono, Tim Dean, and Ewa Plonowska Ziarek (Bronx: Fordham University Press, 2008).

28. Shannon Jackson offered me a first consideration of this line of thinking in an unpublished essay. See also Susan Fraiman, *Cool Men and the Second Sex* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 130-37; and Jennifer Doyle, "Blind Spots and Failed Performance: Abortion, Feminism, and Queer Theory," *Qui Parle* 18, no. 1 (2009).

29. Elizabeth Freeman, "Introduction," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13, no. 2-3 (2007), 165.

30. On the female *Bildungsroman* see Susan Fraiman, *Unbecoming Women: British Women Writers and the Novel of Development* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). See also, however, Marc Redfield's thoughtful analysis of the difficulties of definition and delineation with regard to *Bildungsromane*. Marc Redfield, *Phantom Formations: Aesthetic Ideology and the Bildungsroman* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996). It seems to me that there is more emphasis on ethics in the female coming of age story and less on the Schillerian self-education implied by the term *Bildung*.

all of which offer crucial background for the ways in which this dissertation formulates the significance of the young woman.

The notion of youth has long been fetishized, to the extent that it can be conceived of as a form of critique in itself. For instance, in considerations of the notion of “becoming” one finds the becomings of youth to be most potent. The becoming Nietzsche conjures is at times quite literal and offers an introduction to the force that the metaphor of youth offers to projects of dismantling received constructions of reality. He discusses in *Twilight of the Idols* a man in his mid-twenties:

And everywhere an indecent haste prevails, as if something would be lost if the young man of twenty-three were not yet “finished,” or if he did not yet know the answer to the “main question”...a higher kind of human being...has time, he takes time, he does not even think of “finishing”: at thirty one is, in the sense of high culture, a beginner, a child.³¹

Nietzsche captures here both the urgency of completion attributed to modern notions of adolescence and the lifelong critical energy that might be supplied were the metaphor of youth and incompleteness to be applied achronologically.³² The “higher kind of human being” Nietzsche invokes is one who sustains the adolescent or youthful indeterminacy indefinitely.

For Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick too, youth persistently holds a central place, which presents the significant queer theoretical force of this figure. Her notion of critique is hinged to life paths, and as for Nietzsche, for Sedgwick the figure of the youth—in particular the young reader—holds radical potential. Explaining the hope she holds for reparative critique, she describes the example of:

the interpretive absorption of the child or adolescent whose sense of personal queerness may or may not (*yet?*) have resolved into a sexual specificity of proscribed object choice, aim, site, or identification. Such a child—if she reads at all—is reading for important news about herself, without knowing what form that news will take; with only the patchiest familiarity with its codes; without, even, more than hungrily hypothesizing to what questions this news may even proffer an answer. The model of such reading is... a much more speculative, superstitious, and methodologically adventurous state where recognitions, pleasures, and discoveries seep in only from the most stretched and ragged edges of one’s competence.³³

Sedgwick’s figure of the reader experiencing becoming is one of creativity, thrill, and potential.³⁴ Although in other work Sedgwick has been interested in discussing the queer adolescent suicide rate and other grave signals of the real risks present to this figure, here the pain of liminality is offset by the exhilarating potential it seems to offer.³⁵

31. Friedrich Nietzsche, “Twilight of the Idols,” in *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: The Viking Press, 1968), 511.

32. For a genealogy of adolescence, see John Neubauer, *The Fin-de-Siècle Culture of Adolescence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

33. Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading,” 3.

34. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 345.

35. See for example Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “How to Bring Your Kids up Gay,” in *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

Offsetting any possible reification of youth in this critical enterprise, Sedgwick offers an alternative temporality that she sees coming out of and demanded by reparation, what she sees as a joyful temporality of presence: “one another immediately, one another as the present fullness of a becoming, whose arc may extend no further.”³⁶ This is an understanding of time that like Nietzsche’s belies generational regularity or typical expectations of age groups. The loss of normative timelines that Sedgwick describes as a consequence of queer familial arrangements, as well as the sad history of AIDS in the last few decades allows for a different experience of exposure to others. In it becoming is available, and evades teleological narrative strictures. Yet Sedgwick maintains “becoming” as the movement by which selves are the most pleasurable exposed to others, and able to be mindful of and heal wounds, by which, that is, her idea of reparative critique operates. In doing so, she also sustains the figure of the hopeful youth in the wings of her theory. The analogy of youth hold particular critical sway because of its grasp on the vision of an actual body and an individual psyche, in whom the work of critique seems materially emblemized.

If becoming and its young mascot are appealing figures for critics for whom joy and pleasure must be an ethical outcome of critique, youth may indeed be thought of as a hermeneutic in itself. In this, the critique would seem to accord to one of Sedgwick’s descriptions of paranoid critique, or indeed of immanent critique, in that “the way paranoia has of understanding anything is by imitating and embodying it.”³⁷ In the use of becoming and youth as forms of critique, the consistent move seems to be to attempt to undo any temporal constraints on youth, in other words to dismantle the very figure by which this critique operates. Just as the young person cannot know the parameters of the body it will grow into, so too is this hopeful form of critique a matter of contingencies, or fiction, as Foucault would have it, creating futures that rise from injured histories. The young person this critique calls on, for Nietzsche and for Sedgwick, must remain youthful to maintain its growth, but must always look forward to adulthood, much like utopia, as the goal of a felicitous critique.

Youth and becoming have been studied more systematically by psychoanalytic theory, which also helps point to the potentialities this figure holds, particularly in its female form. Not only does this body of theory offer an attempt to account for the distinction between the sexes, but it also helps provide a sense of why sexuality and desire, when considered in conjunction with the young person, present in modern western culture a complex and potentially dangerous, but also potentially fruitful combination. The child in general is central in Freudian theory for numerous reasons, firstly because of the polymorphous perversity which makes infantile sexuality so different from that of adulthood. According to Freud’s then—and still—scandalous claims, children are not only sexual beings, but their sexuality does not follow the typical adult forms.³⁸ It is “radically mobile,” as Leo Bersani puts it,³⁹ having unsettled object, aims, and libidinal zones. Freud’s complex understanding of childhood sexuality necessarily and deliberately belies the idealized notion of childhood innocence sexual that saturates western

36. Ibid., 27.

37. Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading,” 10.

38. Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, ed. James Strachey, trans. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

39. Leo Bersani, *The Freudian Body* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 46.

culture.⁴⁰ Children, in Freud's view, cannot be, as Edelman claims, the image of heterocentric hegemony. Rather, as Tim Dean puts it, "far from the antithesis of queerness, children may be regarded as the original queers."⁴¹

Moreover, as Nancy Chodorow points out, Freud vacillates in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* between considering the breast or the drive to have primacy.⁴² That is, Freud is never entirely clear on whether love and desire are formed intersubjectively through the child's attachment to the breast or solipsistically as a natural development of the drives. The notions conflict in a significant way, never coming to rest on the ethical primacy of self or other, independence or social responsibility.⁴³ It is importantly childhood in which Freud most vividly imagines the development of this clash. Thus for Freud the inception of the most basic ethical conflict is instinctive in the child, inherent to development, and moored in the age-based progression of gender norms and sexual desire. This adds a crucial ethical susceptibility to psychosexual developmental trajectories, as much as Freud's theory also reframes the question of agency through its theory of drives and unconscious desire.

Not only does childhood sexual development for Freud seem to usher in the naissance of ethical quandaries, but according to Leo Bersani's reading it also presents some of the central aporias of sexuality. Bersani points out that the child is a representation in Freud of a clash between teleological understandings of sexuality and ones that see it as shattered.⁴⁴ That is, Freud allows for both a linear definition of sexuality as the process towards the telos of genital heterosexuality, and a circular definition of sexuality as the "refinding of an object,"⁴⁵ the object in question being the mother, the shattering break from whom molded all desire that follows. Jean Laplanche expands such connections through his explanation of the temporal drama of development, which also suggests the unusual position in which the developing child resides. In Laplanche's interpretation of Freud, youth is crucial, for it is only at the "temporal barrier" of puberty that the enigmatic signifiers of the originary trauma become sexualized.⁴⁶ At this point, the developing being starts to acquire its relationship to the imposing puzzle of sexuality, and its overwhelming cultural significations. Until then merely an unknown world in which the child was knit, but did not understand, the compounded words, gestures, and acts of the world of

40. On the ways in which the mythical coherence of adulthood is structured by the fantasy of childhood innocence in western culture, see Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan; or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1984).

41. Dean, "An Impossible Embrace," 128. Michael Snediker makes a similar point when he questions Edelman's "slap-happy eschewal of The Child, as though there were only one ideological Child. As though there weren't within cultural discourse (not just the specter, but) the tenable, exquisitely precocious, touched and touching figure of a Queer Child." See Michael Snediker, "Queer Optimism," *Postmodern Culture* 16, no. 3 (2006), n. 18. See also Kathryn Bond Stockton, "Growing Sideways," in *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*, ed. Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

42. Nancy Chodorow, Foreword in Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, xv.

43. This is, incidentally, Donna Przybylowicz's conclusion about Henry James. Donna Przybylowicz, *Desire and Repression: The Dialectic of Self and Other in the Late Works of Henry James* (University, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1986).

44. Bersani, *The Freudian Body*.

45. That is, "The finding of an object is in fact a refinding of it." Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, 88.

46. Jean Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 40.

sexuality are taken up by the adolescent into his or her signification and corporeal everyday use. Yet this development is in its nascent stage at this point, leaving its subject still in part unaware of codes of sexual signification, so allows for the kind of open and creative structure that Sedgwick describes above.

That part of this dissertation's understanding of the importance of the girl turns on psychoanalytic accounts of childhood does not imply that I want to disregard the complications of using Freud in talking about gender. As many feminist theorists have pointed out, Freud's theory is weak on women.⁴⁷ According to Irigaray, for instance, his understanding of the little girl is merely as a little man, who is at a disadvantage because she has to go through the difficult process of becoming a woman and losing all of the advantages of being a little man. "A man minus the possibility of (re)presenting oneself as a man = a normal woman."⁴⁸ Robbed by psychoanalytic theory of the means of representation, which is solely mediated by men, the woman remains in a sort of limbo, unrepresented and unrepresentable in the symbolic, but ousted from the position of girl (boy). Whereas her male contemporary emerges from youth into the realm of the father, suitably detached from the mother, the object of his desire, the woman has little form of exit from girlhood beyond becoming a mother replacement to a man. In a brief aside, Barbara Johnson shows us how this might operate in a sense to girls' benefit, however. She writes:

According to prevailing developmental schemes . . . although the mother is seen as powerful, her power, viewed exclusively through the eyes of the child, is a power that must be overcome, outgrown, escaped. Whether that power is nurturing or smothering, it is seen as a threat to autonomy. And autonomy comes to stand as the very structure of maturity. Any theory that sees maturity as the achievement of separation is bound to see the mother's power as inferior—as less desirable—than the father's. If the father stands for distance and the world and the mother stands for closeness and the home, then the more like the father one is, the more mature one is considered to be. According to this hierarchy of development, a woman would almost by definition never achieve full maturity, especially since she is constantly in danger of falling into symbiosis by becoming a mother herself. But a model of maturation that measures development by the standard of only one gender is clearly inadequate.⁴⁹

It would be foolish to suggest that the view Johnson describes is materially positive for woman: as in Irigaray's understanding of the phallic economy of representation, this is an ideological

47. On the multifaceted biographical factors that contributed to Freud's attitude towards women, see Lisa Appignanesi and John Forrester, *Freud's Women* (New York: Basic Books, 1992). Freud and Freudian psychoanalytic theory have been viewed as both adversary and ally by different feminist theorists, but most recognize the complexity of his contributions with regard to women. See for instance de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*; Diana Fuss, *Identification Papers* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Jane Gallop, *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982); Luce Irigaray, "Belief Itself," in *Sexes and Genealogies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Irigaray, "The Blind Spot of an Old Dream of Symmetry"; Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, eds., *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne* (New York: Macmillan, 1982); Toril Moi, "Representation of Patriarchy: Sexuality and Epistemology in Freud's Dora," in *In Dora's Case: Freud-Hysteria-Feminism*, ed. Charles and Claire Kahane Bernheimer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

48. Irigaray, "The Blind Spot of an Old Dream of Symmetry," 27.

49. Barbara Johnson, *A World of Difference* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 142.

realm in which woman is a lesser being. However, several critical and relational possibilities are enabled by the odd position in which the girl is placed in this developmental scheme. First of all, the female, who “would almost by definition never achieve full maturity,” remains in the indeterminate state that Nietzsche and Sedgwick above, for instance, see as allowing for the highest forms of critique. Secondly, this position is enabled and defined by lack of autonomy. Whereas the male is imagined to forego his childhood attachments, the female embodies such attachment. This presents the girl-who-can-never-grow-up as the image of the imbrication of persons, the inevitable attachments by which persons are formed, according to much Freudian theory. While the figure of the girl is seldom valued in this position, this body of thought does in fact suggest that much of the suffering and harm of civilization emerges from the repudiation of such underlying connections between humans.⁵⁰ The figure of the girl thus offers an image of unrepudiated attachment, a different foundation for ethical thought.

Deleuze and Guattari also envision the girl in particular as emblematic of possibilities for ethical difference.⁵¹ Much of the way they present the girl’s potentialities is in the context of their use of the term “becoming-woman,” which they claim challenges the rigid and deceptive notions through which we have come to organize experience. Because “man” encompasses all being at this juncture, becoming-woman offers a way away from the humanist and phallogocentric notion of the stable subject at the center of perception. The girl has a privileged position in becoming-woman: as Deleuze and Guattari put it, “girls do not belong to an age, group, sex, order or kingdom: they slip in everywhere, between orders, acts, ages, sexes:...The girl is like the block of becoming that remains contemporaneous to each opposable term, man, woman, child, adult. It is not the girl who becomes woman; it is becoming-woman that produces the universal girl.”⁵² The girl is for Deleuze and Guattari one of the most concentrated locations of the possible effects of becoming-woman: in the girl as western culture has constructed her, we can imagine intermediacy between identities, which would allow liberation from identity-based desire as well as from identity-based ethics, both of which are so often driven by *ressentiment*.⁵³

50. Freud seems to attest to this in his confessed lack of ability to reach “the oceanic feeling” described by Romain Rolland. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (New York: Norton, 1989).

51. As Elizabeth Grosz puts it, Deleuze and Guattari see the girl “as the site of a culture’s most intensified disinvestments and re-castings of the body.” Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 175.

52. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1987), 277. For more on Deleuze’s use of the girl, see Catherine Driscoll, “The Woman in Process: Deleuze, Kristeva and Feminism,” in *Deleuze and Feminist Theory*, ed. Ian Buchanan and Claire Colebrook (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000).

53. There is a growing body of feminist criticism of Deleuze and Guattari, particularly their notion of becoming-woman. See Rosi Braidotti, “Becoming Woman: Or, Sexual Difference Revisited,” *Theory, Culture, and Society* 20, no. 3 (2003); Verena Andermatt Conley, “Becoming-Woman Now,” in *Deleuze and Feminist Theory*, ed. Ian Buchanan and Claire Colebrook (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000); Driscoll, “The Woman in Process: Deleuze, Kristeva and Feminism”; Pelagia Goulmari, “A Minoritarian Feminism? Things to Do with Deleuze and Guattari,” *Hypatia* 14, no. 2 (1999); Elizabeth Grosz, “A Thousand Tiny Sexes: Feminism and Rhizomatics,” *Topoi: An International Review of Philosophy* 12, no. 2 (1993); Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*; Dorothea Olkowski, “Body, Knowledge and Becoming-Woman: Morpho-logic in Deleuze and Irigaray,” in *Deleuze and Feminist Theory*, ed. Ian Buchanan and Claire Colebrook (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000). Even Brian Massumi, one of Deleuze and Guattari’s most distinguished English translators, notes that

Such a girl, as the fruitful locus of possibilities of queer difference, is at the center of the following chapters, each one offering hope for the radical revision of ethics that I am describing as queer futural ethics. What do these terms mean for these chapters?

Queerness

“Queer” is a deliberately indeterminate word, implying for the purposes of the following chapters not a history of same-sex attraction or homosexual identity, but rather non-heteronormative practices and acts with regard to desire.⁵⁴ Of course “desire” is similarly nebulous to “queer,” encompassing sexual attraction and sexual acts, but also types of libidinal interest in the other the coordinates of which do not necessarily specifically map onto normative understandings of the workings of the body or even necessarily to affectionate feelings. We have seen the way in which the sensual seems to disappear from James’s otherwise all too queer delineation of relationality in “Maud-Evelyn.” To call Lavinia’s fairly desiccated form of life queerly sexual might seem to fall prey to what Sara Ahmed describes as a hazard of some abuses of the non-specificity of “queer.” She writes that “to lose sight of the sexual specificity of queer would also be to overlook how compulsory heterosexuality shapes what coheres as given and the effects of this coherence on those who refuse to follow this line.”⁵⁵ That is, there are undeniable effects upon one’s experience of the sensual that result from falling outside the rule of heterosexuality. However, this dissertation argues that queerness demonstrates that how we understand the sexual is more complex than perhaps delineating the organs and bodies that take part in any given act.⁵⁶ By divorcing “queer” from what we understand as the typical physical manifestations of desire, it is also possible to construct new visions of what bodily desire might look like. Although such a hopeful delineation does not mean that James’s Lavinia, for instance, maintains some secret store of squarely physical queer sensuality that the discerning reader might ferret out, it does suggest that the queerness that appears in the story in other realms also might hold out the possibility for the redefinition of physical relationality as well. I would argue that the extent to which the novels this dissertation discusses succeed or fail in offering such a thing suggest not the failure of the physical with regard to queerness, but rather the firm calcification of ideas of physical desire, transformations of which must necessarily be slow and uneven.

“Deleuze and Guattari’s formulation of the concept of ‘becoming-woman’ is indeed sexist.” Brian Massumi, *A User’s Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Deviations from Deleuze and Guattari* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992), 89. For the purposes of this dissertation, what is important is the sense of possibility Deleuze and Guattari’s privileging of the girl reflects. While the chapters that follow can hardly claim to contribute to the feminist discussion of becoming-woman, to the degree that they present the varied outcomes of ethics and futurity as imagined through possibilities in the girl, they do offer critique of becoming-woman in such a form.

54. On the history and usage of “queer,” see Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), particularly chapters 7 and 8.

55. Sara Ahmed, “Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12, no. 4 (2006), 44.

56. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick clearly had such complexities in mind when delineating the crucial terms of her claims in *Between Men*: “I will be using ‘desire’ in a way analogous to the psychoanalytic use of ‘libido’—not for a particular affective state or emotion, but for the affective or social force, the glue, even when its manifestation is hostility or hatred or something less emotively charged, that shapes an important relationship.” Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 2.

“Queer” involves a libidinal position towards the other that does not partake of normative structures of self-other relationships in desire. Note for instance Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner’s definition of “queer culture”: “By queer culture we mean a world-making project, where “world,” like “public,” differs from community or group because it necessarily includes more people than can be identified, more spaces than can be mapped beyond a few reference points, modes of feeling that can be learned rather than experienced as a birthright.”⁵⁷ As Berlant and Warner suggest, the indistinctness of “queer”’s parameters offers the potential for inclusiveness on numerous registers. Unlike “gay” and “lesbian” or any of these words’ synonyms, “queer” does not specify gender. It also does not limit itself to “women-loving-women” and “man-loving-men,” but remains open to all variations from the sexual norm, such as BDSM and transsexuality.⁵⁸ It moreover remains open to change in meaning. As Tim Dean puts it, “‘becoming queer’ is an interminable enterprise not of negation but invention, an adventure in becoming other to oneself independently of categories of gender or sexual identity.”⁵⁹ “Queer” thus offers a sense of change possible in the future that is foreclosed by the rigidity of most identity categories.

It is important to point out, however, that the presence of “queerness” offers no guarantee of radicalism, political or ethical. At the same time as this insight has seen itself iterated not infrequently in queer theoretical circles, just as frequently repeated is the hope, the fervent belief, the perhaps mystical faith, that non-normative desires somehow might purchase radical difference.⁶⁰ One aspect of queerness that might explain the hope that it might herald change is its implication of relational bindings to the other. If, that is to say, queerness offers an ethical or political intervention, one of the ways it does so lies in its redefinition and reconfiguration of relationality. And even in some of the most avowedly “antisocial” of queer theoretical works,⁶¹ we can see this relational quality at play. For instance, in Leo Bersani’s classic considerations of masochism, he argues that the most politically radical appropriation of sexuality would be to succumb to the powerlessness and loss of control that shaped our desires in infancy. “We desire,” Bersani writes, “what nearly shatters us.”⁶² That is, sexual pleasure is a repetition of the mutually painful and pleasurable experience of infantile vulnerability and incapacity, which we

57. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998), 22.

58. Of course, this short list makes the same conflation that the “GLBTQ” (and etc.—I have encountered other variations, including GLBTQI and more) of pride parades does, of sexual “orientation” with gender identification. On the other hand, many who identify as transsexual also understand their desires as “queer” insofar as the necessarily diverge from the norm. Jay Prosser disputes this conflation. See Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), chapter 1. The connection that “queer” makes between gender and sexuality is manifest in the relatively new identificatory term, “genderqueer.”

59. Dean, “An Impossible Embrace,” 139-40.

60. Elizabeth Grosz, for instance, writes, “So simply *being straight* or *being queer*, in itself, provides no guarantee of one’s position as sexually radical: it depends on how one lives one’s queerness, or one’s straightness, one’s heterosexuality as queer.” Elizabeth Grosz, “Experimental Desire: Rethinking Queer Subjectivity,” in *Supposing the Subject*, ed. Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1994), 143. Or note Leo Bersani’s rejection of all previous queer theoretical claims for the political potentiality of queer forms of desire, only to install his own championing of power-role-upending masochism as the ultimate radical socio-sexual act. Leo Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?,” in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1988).

61. See chapter 3 below for a longer discussion of the antisocial strain of queer theory.

62. Bersani, *The Freudian Body*, 40.

had to learn to enjoy, at least in part, in order to survive. Rather than attempting to forge our desires upon the fantasy of wholeness, invulnerability, and control that we are encouraged by the phallic symbolic regime to long for, Bersani suggests that we look instead towards the powerlessness of “a more radical disintegration and humiliation of the self.”⁶³

Judith Halberstam claims that Bersani’s “anti-communitarian, self-shattering and anti-identitarian” understanding of sex sparked the naissance of a body of works in the same vein, of “what can only be called an anti-social, negative and anti-relational theory of sexuality.”⁶⁴ However, it is important to note that much as Bersani has called in his work for a certain type of “shattering,” he defined this shattering from the start as the *jouissance* of *exceeding* usual boundaries of the self. After all, the baby who is vulnerable to the parent or caretaker is entirely dependent upon that person and certainly may not discard all sense of community or others. To give way to this state, to find pleasure in such vulnerability and dependency means also abandoning certain ideals of independence, bodily boundaries, and self-reliance that are built into normative notions of desire. This need not be seen as the repudiation of all others, but rather can be interpreted as representing another configuration of relationality. As Dean puts it, “the shattering of the civilized ego betokens not the end of sociality but rather its inception.”⁶⁵ That is, a new kind of relationality might be possible upon the destruction of the foundations of the old forms. It is thus no surprise that in *Homos* Bersani specified that homo-ness (his term for the political difference that queerness could offer) “necessitates a massive redefining of relationality . . . a potentially revolutionary inaptitude—perhaps inherent in gay desire—for sociality as it is known.”⁶⁶ It is not sociality tout court that rankles Bersani, but that sociality that accords to normative shapings of desire. And it is also thus less of a turnaround than Bersani himself suggests it is, when nearly two decades after his publication of the theory that masochism is a tautology for sexuality, Bersani has begun to theorize instead about “new relational modes.”⁶⁷

The “queer,” therefore, as I have understood and employed it in the chapters that follow, is necessarily an attempt at ethical movement toward or regarding the other. How this queerness manifests, how ethical its manifestation in fact turns out to be, vary according to the texts in which it appears. However, throughout, I take certain precepts of queer theoretical work as axiomatic.

First, given the foundational status the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* holds for queer theory, it seems almost unnecessary to point to Foucault’s claim that saying no to power does not in fact obstruct power’s workings, but instead is “part of the same historical network as the thing it denounces.”⁶⁸ However, some of the principle texts of recent queer theory nevertheless fall squarely into such a project of negation and rebellion. Witness for example Judith Halberstam’s cry for queers to “embrace a truly political negativity, one that promises, this time, to fail, to make a mess, to fuck shit up, to be loud, unruly, impolite, to breed

63. Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” 217.

64. Judith Halberstam, “The Anti-Social Turn in Queer Studies,” *Graduate Journal of Social Science* 5, no. 2 (2008), 140. Christopher Lane agrees with this assessment. See Christopher Lane, “Uncertain Terms of Pleasure,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 42, no. 4 (1996), 815.

65. Caserio et al., “Forum: Conference Debates - The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory,” 827.

66. Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 76.

67. Leo Bersani, “Sociality and Sexuality,” *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 4 (2000), 641. Also see Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *Intimacies* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2008).

68. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 10.

resentment, to bash back, to speak up and out, to disrupt, assassinate, shock and annihilate.”⁶⁹ Here Halberstam announces a campaign built precisely upon the forms of rebellion that Foucault derides. Note too Halberstam’s language: she appeals for readers to “fuck shit up,” just pages after she has quoted Edelman’s now oft-cited passage, “fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorized; fuck Annie; fuck the waif from *Les Mis*; fuck the poor, innocent kid on the Net; fuck Laws both with capital Ls and with small; fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop.”⁷⁰ Both Edelman and Halberstam use “fuck” as precisely the rhetorical hammer that characterizes this expletive’s normative use. This defiant swearing alone, unusual for scholarly writers and in texts mostly read by other academics, is symptomatic of both authors’ relegation of Foucauldian insights: speaking sex in all its perceived crudity and against implied inhibitions is once again here ostensibly a revolutionary act, rather than an insidious way we further discipline ourselves within the constraints of power, as Foucault would have it.⁷¹

Part of the reason Foucault makes this point is to interrogate the ease with which the school of reverse discourse characterizes its image of the operation of change. For Foucault, maintenance of the hegemonic order of things in fact relies upon the “fuck no” to power that accompanies its “yes.” Instead, transformation of power arrangements, culture, political realities, is a much more subtle and complex operation. This dissertation takes from Foucault this assumption, that transformation of everyday reality is not where it would necessarily seem most obvious, most vociferous, most outraged, most oppositional. Rather, if there are to be new possibilities that emerge out of queerness in some way, then we must look in less obvious places.

One canonical location of such a place emerges from Judith Butler’s work on performativity. This dissertation also takes for granted Butler’s understanding of change as a process of performative iteration and reiteration of identities and calcified constructions of reality, often parodic or ironic, but never precisely openly rebellious. Instead, the iteration of naturalized identity categories that we take to be truth both relies on a certain allegiance to the history of those categories and the overturning of our assumption of their truth or essence. Butler’s initial formulation of this understanding of performativity demonstrated how gender is enacted through socially constrained and stipulated repetitions rather than through the expression of essence.⁷² The theory grew to account more closely for the ways in which manifestations of sexuality also rely on iteration.⁷³ Queerness is performative to the extent that it seems to mimic the supposedly original sexualities that it appears to have followed, but then in such a parodic relationship both undermines these sexualities’ status as origin at the same time as it transforms them into new acts, identities, possibilities. The weight and constraint of history is important

69. Halberstam, “The Anti-Social Turn in Queer Studies,” 154. On Halberstam’s explanation of her use of reverse discourse, which she sees as strategic and as sanctioned by Foucault, see Judith Halberstam, “Masculinity without Men (Interview with Annamarie Jagose),” *Genders* 29 (1999), paragraphs 9-11.

70. From Edelman, *No Future*, 29.

71. Edelman claims that sexuality will continue to constitute *meaning* as long as politics is tied in with reproductive futurity, so I take it that more than pushing a radical queer agenda, he wants to move away from the disciplining force of sexuality at all. This could be seen as one way of responding to the rallying call in *The History of Sexuality*.

72. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

73. Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

here: both enabling and limiting transformation of relationships between people, taxonomies and grammars of the past constitute the syntax of future change. This means that there may indeed be no decisively “positive” step toward ethical difference, no one move that offers uncompromising improvement, no step in the “right” direction that does not partake in a potent history of wrong steps. Yet performativity itself ties us not only to history, but also to the social contexts in which its iterative utterances or acts are marked as felicitous or infelicitous.⁷⁴ As such, to acknowledge performativity is to acknowledge our imbrication with the other, the ways in which we are temporally, materially, and historically entwined with the people around us in all of our everyday actions. Although acknowledging our ties to the other does not preclude nevertheless choosing to cause harm, or might suggest a certain immobility with regard to ethical agency, it necessarily increases the urgency of considering our overwhelming accountability to the other.

In keeping with such a declaration of the possible stain from which every transformation is born and our connections to others (sometimes injurious, sometimes pleasurable or helpful), this work attempts to continue the path of critique and hermeneutic suspicion with which some of the most important queer theoretical works have made their way, as well as to perform what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has called “reparative” reading.⁷⁵ By this, Sedgwick refers to “the many ways in which selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them.”⁷⁶ Notions of queer ethical difference must necessarily in this mode be fragile, possibly inconsistent. Just as performative acts are redolent of the history that they may in fact end up deposing, reparative strategies are never necessarily strong theories.⁷⁷ What Butler and Sedgwick’s theories have offered to this dissertation are a critical theory of change that is both “positive” and genealogically aware, while queerness itself focuses the discussion insistently upon transforming social relations, no matter how precarious and even possibly contradictory such attempts may be.

Ethics

Accordingly, I do not try to find in the novels I discuss in the following chapters unified ethical programs, but rather areas of queer possibility. The domain of ethics under consideration is neither that of a system nor of a set of prescriptions, but rather that of the intersubjective encounter,⁷⁸ which arguably occurs both between persons (as represented—as well as

74. J.L. Austin, whose coining of “performativity” launched its entrance into so many extra-linguistic realms, also offers lovely and intricate categorizations of possible forms of infelicity. See J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975).

75. Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading.” Butler has also referred to this as “capacity.” Judith Butler, “Capacity,” in *Regarding Sedgwick: Essays on Critical Theory and Queer Culture*, ed. Stephen M. Barber and David L. Clark (New York: Routledge, 2002).

76. Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading,” 150.

77. Sedgwick makes the strong/weak distinction, calling upon Silvan Tomkins’ understanding of strong versus weak affects. *Ibid.*, 136. While Sedgwick devotes part of this essay to an attempt to show that the notion of performativity within sexuality is in fact a paranoid (and thus strong) theory, I think that as much as performativity may rely on a logic of exposure for its radicalism, it is also a creative and tenuous way to imagine how difference may come about from what otherwise seems a closed system.

78. I have not had time in this dissertation to consider the fascinating differences between the schools of analytic practice that so closely study intersubjectivity. With more time I would look into the ways in

ideologically informed and produced—by characters in novels) and between the reader and the text. Ethics here therefore involve a revaluation of values, whether on the part of the novel or on the part of individual characters, when received values are clearly uninhabitable by so many lives. One of the main thrusts of this revaluation concerns a matter of acknowledgement of the vulnerability of self to other and other to self, a consideration that has been devalued, and that is revalued in the queer ethics that the works discussed herein offer. The conception of a problem within modes of relationality is fundamental to much nineteenth century narrative, particularly within the discourse of sympathy. However, as the following chapters will continually demonstrate, the structure of sympathy as it was perceived in the nineteenth century was inimical to what we will understand as ethical behavior. It goes hand in hand with the more harmful effects of property relations, including coverture; it is problematically gendered in the typical expectation that the female would bear its brunt; and it contends inadequately with the delicate balance between radical vulnerability to the other and self-protection to which ethics of the intersubjective encounter must attend.

Eighteenth century moral philosophers, such as Adam Smith and David Hume, proposed various models for peaceable and ethically principled relationships to others, quite often particularly enabled by the term “sympathy.” Countless nineteenth century novelists in Britain, doubtless influenced by moral philosophy of the previous century, used similar schema and vocabulary in thinking through how to contend with the other’s vulnerability. Much recent criticism has suggested that this ethic of sympathy, in its all of various manifestations, was ideologically flawed.⁷⁹ First of all, in numerous ways its restructuring force is seen as suspect. For Foucault, sympathy left to run rampant “would reduce the world to a point, to a homogeneous mass, to the featureless form of the Same.”⁸⁰ Translating such suspicions of sameness to queer theory, Lynn Huffer concurs with Foucault that the sameness that the ethic of sympathy promotes can blind us to otherness and difference.⁸¹ In other critiques, sympathy has been seen as unraveling any stable notion of individual responsibility in the way that it works to separate the individual from linguistic ownership or agency;⁸² as involving self-consolidation

which the object-relations, intersubjectivist, self-psychology, and relational schools of thought consider these realms of ethics.

79. Nineteenth century novelistic sympathy also has its defenders. See for instance Brigid Lowe, *Victorian Fiction and the Insights of Sympathy: An Alternative to the Hermeneutics of Suspicion* (London: Anthem Press, 2007), in which sympathy is argued to be “radically intersubjective” in some Victorian novels, and not the damaged and damaging reflection of patriarchal, capitalist, and imperialist values that so many recent critics have claimed it is. Both Forest Pyle and Hina Nazar make cases for George Eliot’s notion of sympathy as transcending its usual failings. See Forest Pyle, “A Novel Sympathy: The Imagination of Community in George Eliot,” *Novel: a Forum on Fiction* (1993); Hina Nazar, “Philosophy in the Bedroom: Middlemarch and the Scandal of Sympathy,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 15, no. 2 (2002).

80. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 27.

81. Lynne Huffer, “‘There is no Gomorrah’: Narrative Ethics in Feminist and Queer Theory,” *differences* 12, no. 3 (2001). For a recent argument that sympathy as it was presented in the nineteenth century novel was not about absolute identification with the other, but rather about harmony, see Rae Greiner, “Sympathy Time: Adam Smith, George Eliot, and the Realist Novel,” *Narrative* 17, no. 3 (2009). And for a recent defense of the ethical virtues of attending to sameness, see Kaja Silverman, *Flesh of My Flesh* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

82. Redfield, *Phantom Formations*, chapter 5.

that is analogous to commodity-exchange and is therefore ethically degraded;⁸³ as paradoxical in its aesthetic quality;⁸⁴ and as problematic, given the pleasure the sympathizer can take from “sympathizing” with the sufferings of another.⁸⁵ Moreover, according to much scholarship on sympathy, this idea of fellow feeling was highly gendered. Defined in general as feeling for or with an other, sympathy in its ideal form involves an experience of two persons melding into one, within shared emotional experience. According to Eric Daffron, such a notion of melding threatened male identity.⁸⁶ It was useful, instead, in the domestic setting in which so many nineteenth century novels placed it: women, after all, were expected to lose themselves to others, by the very rules of coverture.⁸⁷ Critics have concluded that sympathy’s structure was at its roots patriarchal and even sadistic, as much as it was heralded as the ethical form that would relieve woman’s plight.⁸⁸

The important thing to note, then, about the ethic that seems to rule supreme in nineteenth-century British literature is that the era’s most central texts consistently indicated that sympathy was not working. What these texts also acknowledge, insistently and repeatedly, is the overwhelming vulnerability people have to each other; it just turns out that according to many of the nineteenth century texts that explore this affect, “sympathy” is an inadequate way of expressing or enacting an ethic in regard to that vulnerability.

The question of sympathy is not only an issue of debates about morality, because just as the content of moral philosophy and the plots of so many Victorian novels were focused on sympathy, novelistic narrative itself was expected to elicit sympathy from the reader, and even to train the reader in sympathetic response. So too was the form and theory of narrative that emerged in the nineteenth century concerned with the workings of this structure of feeling. As

83. Audrey Jaffe, *Scenes of Sympathy: Identity and Representation in Victorian Fiction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000).

84. David Marshall, *The Surprising Effects of Sympathy: Marivaux, Diderot, Rousseau, and Mary Shelley* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988).

85. Leo Bersani, “Representation and Its Discontents,” in *Allegory and Representation*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981). This view has been voiced by many. Consider a scenario suggested by Barthes: “Supposing that we experienced the other as he experiences himself—which Schopenhauer calls compassion and which might more accurately be called a union within suffering, a unity of suffering—we should hate the other when he himself, like Pascal, finds himself hateful.” If the other suffers from hallucinations, if he fears going mad, I should myself hallucinate, myself go mad. Roland Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 57.

86. Benjamin Eric Daffron, *Romantic Doubles: Sex and Sympathy in British Gothic Literature 1790-1830* (New York: AMS Press, 2002). Lucinda Cole argues, on the other hand, that there were two versions of sympathy in operation, an animalistic sympathy of uncontrollable sentimentality that women were thought to be capable of, and a more considered and self-willed sympathy that was man’s realm. Cole comes to similar conclusions however, that the way sympathy was understood consolidated normative ideological structures of gender relations. See Lucinda Cole, “(Anti)Feminist Sympathies: The Politics of Relationship in Smith, Wollstonecraft, and more,” *English Literary History* 58, no. 1 (1991).

87. Rachel Ablow, *The Marriage of Minds: Reading Sympathy in the Victorian Marriage Plot* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

88. See Laura Hinton, *The Perverse Gaze of Sympathy: Sadomasochistic Sentiments from Clarissa to Rescue 911* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999); Nancy Roberts, *Schools of Sympathy: Gender and Identification through the Novel* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1997). It also had disciplinary and colonizing effects, according to Amit Rai. See Amit S. Rai, *Rule of Sympathy: Sentiment, Race, and Power, 1750-1850* (New York: Palgrave, 2002).

Dorothy Hale has shown, theories of the novel from that of Henry James, through formalism and poststructuralism, and to the present “ethical return” in literary theory have consistently assumed that the ethical task of the novel is to inculcate the reader in sympathy for an unknown (and finally not entirely knowable) other.⁸⁹ Elsewhere, Hale presents a century of understandings of novelistic subjectivity as an experience of interiority that invokes our constitutive boundedness to the other; “sympathy” thus wrought is an experience of both ethical possibility and individual constraint.

One question that thus emerges is whether the sympathy novels are meant to invoke falls prey to the same failings that seem to plague the sympathy those novels portray. That is, is the sympathizing reader subject to the same differential functions of sympathy’s gendering? Are power differences similarly eluded by readerly sympathy? The following chapters attend to the discourses of sympathy in the novels they discuss, but attempt to delineate differences between these discourses and the ethic that each novel aspires to, both within its narrative and in the text-reader relationship that the novel imagines. The forms of queer ethics that the novels considered here formulate thus stand in opposition to the structures of sympathy that each novel implicitly critiques. What is produced are three different sets of possibilities with regard to stances toward the other that interrogate individual sovereignty and acknowledge intersubjective vulnerability while also attempting to reconsider the membranes that separate persons.

Futurity

As the recent debates in queer theoretical realms have made clear, the future is a vital focus for queer radicalism, if only for some in the sense that allegiance to “living for” it should be rejected. For Lee Edelman most particularly, all notions of futurity are inextricably knotted up with narratives of heterosexuality:

Politics is a name for the temporalization of desire, for its translation into a narrative, for its teleological determination. Politics, that is, by externalizing and configuring in the fictive form of a narrative, allegorizes or elaborates sequentially, precisely *as* desire, those overdeterminations of libidinal positions and inconsistencies of psychic defenses occasioned by what disarticulates the narrativity of desire: the drives, themselves intractable, unassimilable to the logic of interpretation or the demands of meaning-production; the drives that carry the destabilizing force of what insists outside or beyond, because foreclosed by, signification.⁹⁰

This view emerges from a Lacanian reading of the subjective experience of desire in the current sociopolitical setting. In this view, entry into the symbolic order involves a necessary trauma that leads us to deny the chaos of the drives and to seek instead, albeit endlessly and fruitlessly, wholeness through desire. According to Edelman’s analysis, seeking meaning and repudiating the drives through desire have turned into a necessarily heterosexual plot. In this view, the only way to get away from the massive accretion of cultural, political, and psychic heterosexualization that has become tangled in with the narrative of desire is to reject narrative—and thus futurity—altogether. Thus Edelman’s theory takes the approach that the only results that can come out of the pain and loss of entry into the symbolic are denial and heterosexualization with the function of producing the illusion of wholeness.

89. Dorothy J. Hale, “Fiction as Restriction: Self-Binding in New Ethical Theories of the Novel,” *Narrative* 15, no. 2 (2007); Dorothy J. Hale, *Social Formalism: The Novel in Theory from Henry James to the Present* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

90. Edelman, *No Future*, 9.

This dissertation follows a similar model, to the degree that the chapters to come tend to trace the psychic experience of desire to the traumatic break that accompanies entrance into signification. I also admire the finely wrought (if perhaps overly euphuistic) manner in which Edelman has presented the tangled web of heteronormativity to which all social, political, and psychic structures are intractably bound, and I have not once doubted that there is far more than a grain of truth to this seeming conspiratorial paranoia. However, rather than conceiving of heteronormative hegemony as the sole available response to originary psychic trauma, I present texts that in fact produce queer narratives of desire that manage to respond to the rupture that is linguistic subjectivity, and to envision a future that does not necessarily accede to the hetero norm. In some cases, it is this rupture that is the occasion for responsibility toward the other that constitutes an ethical response to many of the social problems that Edelman decries.

There are numerous antecedents for this latter set of views, which have influenced this dissertation and which help situate the queer futural possibilities that the chapters to follow explore. First, as mentioned above, is the work of Jean Laplanche, who has stressed the experience of trauma that lies at the core of psychic constitution: much like Lacan, Laplanche emphasizes the profound influence of the infant's entry into language. For Laplanche, however, language is not that which alienates the subject from the Real, thus introducing the structure of all desire as lack. Instead, the "enigmatic signifier"—language along with non-linguistic systems of signification, neither of which the infant can fully or even partly comprehend—is the "introjection" of the other, which we experience before our own unconscious has been constituted.⁹¹ We are therefore intersubjective beings by virtue of our very formation, and the trauma at our formation is what allows this linguistic intersubjectivity to be born. This intersubjective shattering is at the core of our inevitable sexual perversion, as Laplanche understands it. For Laplanche, all human sexuality and desire is in an anaclitic relationship to any biological urge upon which it leans. This means that objects of desire only ever metaphorically connect to the "original" biological drive of infant nourishment that is their referent. All sexuality should thus be seen as equally perverse, as in equally distant from biology. Intersubjectivity and trauma are in this view necessarily "perverse," and futurity is nothing more than the continuation of such perversion in the face of our shattering.

Such "perversion" is, as far as the following chapters are concerned, central to the imagination of new understandings of the futural. Nietzsche offers another version of the futural potentiality within pain when he states that "even in a wound there is the power to heal."⁹² That is, for Nietzsche there lies beyond exposure a variegated and intricate world of repair. Nietzsche introduces the possibility that critical perspectives on one's culture are impossible without the often painful abandonment of popular morality and ideals. When the philosopher performs such an act, "a tremendous new prospect opens up for him, a new possibility comes over him like a vertigo, every kind of mistrust, suspicion, fear leaps up, his belief in morality, in all morality, falters."⁹³ Nietzsche's notion of exposure is one of a subject who chooses to open himself up to injury, and this distinguishes him from all who prefer to live passive and timid lives in order to avoid this possibility. For Nietzsche, the act of the critic opening himself up to the risk of being

91. Jean Laplanche, "Implantation, Intromission," in *Essays on Otherness* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Jean Laplanche, "An Interview with Jean Laplanche by Cathy Caruth," *Postmodern Culture* 11, no. 2 (2001).

92. Nietzsche, "Twilight of the Idols," 465.

93. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 20.

outside of culture is conceived as a painful and never-ending process of becoming: “all becoming and growing—all that guarantees a future—involves pain. That there may be the eternal joy of creating, that the will to life may eternally affirm itself, the agony of the woman giving birth *must* also be there eternally.”⁹⁴ Pleasure and creation are thus only achievable through pain for Nietzsche, an assertion he wants to substantiate with a physiological example. Indeed, just as the metaphors of childbirth, growth, and the wound suggest, critique is for Nietzsche an embodied enterprise. In his words, “one should make no mistake about the method in this case: a breeding of feelings and thoughts alone is almost nothing...: one must first persuade the *body*.”⁹⁵ The notion of becoming thus provides Nietzsche the equally material figure of a growing self, by which to conceptualize the work of critique. Thus although Nietzsche is not interested in the potential intersubjective relations that might be concomitant with the vulnerabilities necessary for new possibility, his work does indicate the way in which the desiring body might play a crucial part in envisioning alternate futurities.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick also proposes that future change might involve a reparative process. Calling on the psychoanalytic writing of Melanie Klein, she suggests that critique abandon paranoia and seek instead to write from the depressive position, in which the subject uses a reparative approach to “move toward a sustained *seeking of pleasure*.”⁹⁶ Sedgwick does not recommend a critic steeped in naive optimism but what she describes in fact as a subject who knows trauma:

Hope, often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates. Because she has room to realize that the future may be different from the present, it is also possible for her to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did.⁹⁷

With this, Sedgwick introduces a new set of considerations. By appealing to trauma here, she calls on the image of the wounded or exposed person, who uses his or her injury to access an understanding of the contingency of both the past and future. This operation is painful in its acknowledgment of losses, but also offers the thrill of possibility in the notion that all need not have necessarily been lost, that there were options in the past as well as there are in the future.

It crucial to my understanding of futural possibility that pain and trauma can play a central role in change; they also offer a revisioning of temporality itself, a queering of time. For example, if Sedgwick is read alongside Laplanche, this subject injured in its hope might also be said to be consistently reminded by its wound of the originary injury by the enigmatic signifier that instituted his or her subjectivity. Importantly, it is in the acknowledgment of this exposure to the other that the wounded subject of trauma is able to have the different relationship to temporality that Sedgwick describes. This temporality is that of *Nachträglichkeit*, the notion of “afterwardsness” within which trauma is experienced, instituted by the original trauma of the infant, yet only experienced as painful through a second incident.⁹⁸ In terms of hope as

94. Nietzsche, “Twilight of the Idols,” 562.

95. *Ibid.*, 552.

96. Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading,” 15.

97. *Ibid.*, 24-25.

98. See Laplanche, “An Interview with Jean Laplanche.”

Sedgwick describes it, this temporality can be seen to come in to play in a relationship with the past and future that is able to experience past events in new ways, and in thus healing old histories creates new narratives that offer different possibilities for future outcomes.

For Sedgwick, a notion of critique as a strategy of Kleinian reparation achieves not only a move away from paranoia, but a psychological orientation that is “less drive-oriented than affect-oriented.”⁹⁹ Considering her ideas from within Laplanche’s understanding of trauma removes the distance between reparation and the drive, but allows the reparative impulse to maintain materiality within critique as an ethical project. A function of the psyche important for Laplanche’s thought on trauma, the drive could be seen at times dangerous as an explanatory structure, as it seems to work to collapse behavior into biological imperatives, which undermines the possibility of contingency. However in Laplanche’s interpretation of Freud, the drive is only the foundation for the impulse, which is, as Laplanche puts it, “propped” on the drive, without actually being subject to a biologizing force.¹⁰⁰ Propping is therefore the function by which trauma, sexuality, and language are instituted, creating the space between the drive and the impulse. Sedgwick writes, “[A reparative impulse] wants to assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer to an inchoate self.”¹⁰¹ With the notion of propping, this unformed and lacunary self is also the traumatized and exposed self, the injured subject who is available to critique insofar as he or she is wounded. It is then within reparative strategies—that indeed in Sedgwick are deeply related to trauma, sexuality, and language, as well as hope—that the wounded self finds the means of revitalization available following the scandal of exposure.

As Heather Love has written, “the art of losing [is] a particularly queer art.”¹⁰² Such a notion underscores numerous variations of “positive” and “negative” views of queer or radical futurity, thus it cannot be seen as simply or straightforwardly underwriting a view that what we must practice losing is the future itself. Instead, as this dissertation proposes, some tentative narrative threads in the nineteenth-century novel demonstrate ways in which the queer art of losing might very well be concomitant with the queer art of future-making.

Narrative and the Nineteenth-Century British Novel

The question still remains of why the nineteenth century British novel in particular would be a valuable place to seek thought on queer futural ethics. Even if it is accepted that an avenue of revitalization after the trauma of signification might enable rather than hinder queer futurity, it might seem that such a possibility translated into the literary would look far more like the abstraction and challenge of norms that characterizes modernist literature or the fragmentation and play of postmodernism than what we have come to see as the traditional realism of the nineteenth century novel. Doubtless the historically later eras have produced potent queer interventions, but the genre at hand in fact distinctly suits the model of change mentioned above, by which change is not a matter of initiating reverse discourse but rather one of revaluative iteration of normative modes of desire.

99. Ibid., 25.

100. Jean Laplanche, “The Drive and its Object-source: its fate in the transference,” in *Seduction, Translation, and the Drives*, ed. John and Martin Stanton Fletcher (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1992).

101. Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading,” 28.

102. Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Harvard University Press, 2007), 24.

Certainly novels of these temporal and geographical coordinates almost always demonstrate a predisposition to teleology that seems to outfit them for a heteronormative structure¹⁰³—beginning-middle-end, birth-adolescent struggle-marriage (or any number of plots along these lines—birth-marriage-death, oral-anal-genital, and so on). Yet as Peter Brooks has pointed out, the “narratable” element of a novel is comparable to the “state of deviance and detour” by which Freud characterizes perversion.¹⁰⁴ This suggests that what Brooks refers to as “narrative desire” is anaclitic—has no relationship to the seeming biological imperatives that it mimics, but rather draws upon them in order to create a small edifice of difference. But do the normative trajectory and traditional closure of novels stamp them too indelibly with the normativity that they resemble and seem to perpetuate? According to D.A. Miller, although the closure of novels is significant, novels “are never fully or finally governed by it.”¹⁰⁵ Roland Barthes helps elucidate this view when he suggests one way in which such hegemonic functions of the novel would be impossible to legislate: rereading. Rereading, according to Barthes, “draws the text out of its internal chronology (‘this happens *before* or *after* that’) and recaptures a mythic time (without *before* or *after*); . . . rereading is no longer consumption, but play (that play which is the return of the different).”¹⁰⁶ The possibility of queer reading, then, is not necessarily a matter of the structure, form, or content of what is read, but rather inheres in the practices of the reader. In this view, styles of reading inform the radical potential of a book: rereading “is actually and invariably for a ludic advantage: to multiply the signifiers, not to reach some ultimate signified.”¹⁰⁷ The meaning of traditional novels (as of course of any text) never need be that which they most manifestly propose, but rather develops in multiple ways upon multiple readings.

The movement away from chronology that Barthes’ discussion of rereading invokes accords to some theorists’ claims that the realistic novel deals most effectively of all genres with the idea of time. Georg Lukàcs famously wrote, “only the novel, the literary form of the transcendent homelessness of the idea, includes real time—Bergson’s *durée*—among its constitutive principles.”¹⁰⁸ That is, for Lukàcs, the novel is that which most closely accords to the perceptual experience of time, which is not necessarily ordered by regularity, predictability,

103. Numerous theorists have attempted to account for why the novel manifested as it did, where it did, and when it did, none of which questions I can answer here. For some of the most important of such inquiries, see Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1981); Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1969); Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957); Georg Lukàcs, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971); Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel 1600-1740* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987); Marthe Robert, *Origins of the Novel*, trans. Sacha Rabinovitch (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980); Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957).

104. Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 108.

105. D.A. Miller, *Narrative and its Discontents* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), xiv.

106. Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), 16.

107. *Ibid.*, 165.

108. Lukàcs, *The Theory of the Novel*, 121.

or causality, but rather by mobility, heterogeneity, and freedom. Thus again what might appear unremittingly teleological can actually be seen to undermine such a temporal scheme.

For Mikhail Bakhtin, similarly, the novel is the “genre of becoming.”¹⁰⁹ Because the novel is still an open form, in the process of development, according to Bakhtin, it alone is suitable for understanding the ongoing development of the self in the world. Or as Bakhtin puts it, “Only that which is itself developing can comprehend development as a process.”¹¹⁰ This notion also introduces the ethical possibilities that Bakhtin sees the novel as offering. Not only does its temporality potentially defy teleology, but some of this form’s typical features offer a new way in which to contend with otherness. Bakhtin describes the way in which the novel functions dialogically to reflect “heteroglossia,” or the multiplicity of ideological voices clamoring to be heard in the culture from which the novel stems. The voices of culture speak through the author, who may start with a plan or theme, but is the most part driven by heteroglossia. The novel is in this view a genre in which multiple others may be encountered, the literary form through which exposure to the other is most explicitly thematized and enacted.¹¹¹

The general form of the *Bildungsroman* that influenced so many nineteenth century novels is an explicit example of the thematization of exploration of the self’s relationship to the community through a developmental model, which makes the nineteenth century novel a particularly fruitful place to explore this ethical possibility. As mentioned above, according to historians of sexuality, the nineteenth century is the era in which sexuality was invented.¹¹² Nineteenth century literature from Europe, Britain, and the U.S. has thus been drawn upon by numerous scholars of sexuality studies as a crucial mirror and site of production of sexual culture. Lynne Huffer adds an interesting incentive to this area of concentration in her call for queer theorists to take narrative into account in their understanding of performativity and ethics: narrative for Huffer is what brings relationality into what she sees as the otherwise solipsistic ethos of queer ethics. While I would disagree that solipsism is the overall flavor of queer ethical considerations of performativity, I think that Huffer’s point reflects the persistent need to consider the effects of accretions of time and the imbrication of the other on the self in understandings of queer experience. The nineteenth century novel offers an exceptional arena in which to attempt such thought.

The novels I discuss in the following chapters all involve developing young women and are all by authors whose own lives were famously resistant to heteronormative paths. Jane Austen, as D.A. Miller points out, was a “spinster,” but did not fit into the prescribed abjection of this figure because of her immense success, even in her lifetime.¹¹³ George Eliot famously had a

109. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 22.

110. *Ibid.*, 7.

111. Or, as Bakhtin puts it elsewhere, “The word in language is half someone else’s.” *Ibid.*, 293. This statement offers a broader understanding of the reason all literature might produce an experience of the other—simply because it is a property of language. And Bakhtin’s claims for the superiority of the novel in this regard are less convincing than his general theory of heteroglossia, in my opinion, yet it is still useful to consider the novel as a form that stresses multiple voices.

112. 1870 is of course Foucault’s date for this “event,” with which later critics have quibbled. The important point is not the precise date, but the series of cultural transformations that occurred around this time.

113. D.A. Miller, *Jane Austen, or, The Secret of Style* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

relationship with a married man for seventeen years and then in the last year of her life married a man twenty years her junior. And Henry James has of course become notorious for the sometimes hardly veiled same-sex eroticism in his letters and literary productions.¹¹⁴ That these three authors are at the center of the western canon is crucial: unorthodox as their socio-sexual positions may have been, they were evidently in the right cultural location to portray the knots in which their own sexual cultures were tied, problems that clearly appealed to their readers.

And this dissertation does consider the novels at hand as representations of and attempts to work out some of the ideological puzzles around desire whose inception seems to have been in the nineteenth century. Not only does literature offer indications of the coordinates of the ideological functions of its culture, but it is also certainly productive of such functions. While certainly much of this “productivity” involves disciplinary functions, the chapters that follow also focus on what possibilities the novels under discussion offer, within their presentations of queer futural ethics, as well as the ways in which the novels also work to thwart these possibilities.¹¹⁵ Both demonstrate crucial ideas about the way sexuality has come to be shaped today, the problems we encounter in sexual politics, and potential ways to create difference.

I consider these texts through theoretical lenses of psychoanalytic theory, but not religiously. The theorists whose works interested me for this project are all concerned with the subjective experience of the intersection of self and other, especially as it pertains to desire and ethics. Queer theory is the most immediate source for such thought, and much of it relies, as I do, on psychoanalytic theory, which is one of the most thorough ways subjectivity, otherness, and sexuality have been thought through together. Foucault and Deleuze and Guattari, whose works are also vital to the chapters that follow, carefully and systematically reject many of the foundational precepts of psychoanalysis in their considerations of how we are constrained by cultural formations, *including* psychoanalysis, *including* sexuality. Yet in following with my unfaithful approach to psychoanalysis, I believe this tension is productive and allows both sets of theories to reach some of their limits.

Chapter Overview

Chapter 1, on *Persuasion*, finds a fragile queerness within a form of masochistic vulnerability, which falters in the face of the seemingly prescribed ethic of sympathy and the understanding of futurity as marriage. Rather, then, than precisely locating a queer futural ethic in this novel, I find that Austen poses ethics, queerness, and futurity as incompatible, by virtue of flaws in the system of property that Austen portrays as governing desire. Beginning by looking at Austen’s own letters to her niece Fanny, this chapter demonstrates that sympathy is contingent for Austen upon a certain experience of reading: here we find a theory of the novel not unlike what Henry James would come to explicitly articulate later in the century. In this view, one’s own

114. With the accompanying mountain of speculation about his personal life, upon which this dissertation does not touch. Judith Butler has asked me whether the same-sex eroticism in James is “hardly veiled” or “barely unveiled.” I suppose the answer to this question would depend upon one’s understanding of eroticism, and what “reveals” it or “conceals” it. James’s work reads to me at times as bursting at the seams with sensual and erotic unspeakability, while at other times it seems to avoid the body and its pleasures so scrupulously that the reader wonders whether any of the characters ever even eat.

115. There has been considerable debate in the recent decades about whether literature is disciplinary or might have a radical function; see in particular D.A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

imagination is sparked by the experience of reading about an other, which in turn allows for fellow feeling to emerge. However, for Austen in her letters, such sympathy is mitigated and even terminated when the girl one is reading about marries. In order to understand this, the chapter looks to Rousseau's theory of sympathy alongside his *Confessions*, in both of which the complex interactions of desire, imagination, and sympathy for the other are thematized. These works of Rousseau's read together demonstrate how property relations can thoroughly spoil any way in which sympathy might be regarded as an ethic. Its operations instead start to look increasingly like the *ressentiment* of the heterosexual traffic in women that Austen suggests limits it; what remain are the minor possibilities that emerge in experiencing pleasure in the other through masochistic sensibilities. The rest of the chapter explores how these themes are borne out in Austen's final novel, *Persuasion*, in which what seems a queer victory yields an ethical and futural defeat. Using Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "becoming-woman," the chapter considers how *Persuasion*'s version of queer openness to difference butts up against feminist values of self-possession.

In the second chapter, I look to *Middlemarch*, in which several forms of futurity are evaluated: childbearing, writing, and inheritance. The chapter finds in *Middlemarch* the complex ways in which notions of agency and sovereignty in the authorial experience are tied up with ethical questions about desire: writing is a dead end futurally, as is emblemized in its writer-figure, Casaubon's spectacular failures, as well as in Eliot's own personal correspondence. *Middlemarch* also rejects reproductive futurity out of hand, in the form of the scorn it piles on those who pursue it, at the same time as it punishes its most antireproductive, unheterosexual character, Casaubon, relentlessly. The novel's heroine, Dorothea, is the avatar of these moves, and her failures of sympathy, oft-cited in criticism of the novel, are deeply caught up in this contradiction. The queerest form of futurity that finally wins out, in the end, is also what seems the most typical of constructions of heteronormativity: inheritance and entailment. The chapter turns to Freud's discussion of narcissism for an understanding of why entailment might possibly be a queerly other-oriented concept of futurity, but also suggests that the sacrifice of Casaubon reveals the ethical breakdown at the heart of this concept.

Finally, Chapter 3 locates in *What Maisie Knew* the dissertation's clearest articulation of ethical queer futurity. In this novel is developed a relational, futural, and ethical queer theory of desire. Acknowledging many of the same issues of the shattering at the core of subjectivity that inform antisocial queer theories, *What Maisie Knew* offers in response to shattering not lack but vulnerability and given-over-ness. Maisie, the young girl who is caught up in this vulnerable state experiences the barrage of linguistic, sexual, and physical incursions of the other, responds through "stupidity," silence, and wonder. These forms allow for Maisie to enact critique, ethical choices of responsibility toward others, and revaluation of values. Without them, even Maisie falls into her parents' failings, in this case an occurrence of racism toward one of her father's paramours. Except in this single case, the novel offers freedom and sovereignty in the shape of self-protection, as well as the power to substitute and triangulate in desire, both of which are queer interpersonal forms of desiring. *What Maisie Knew* distinguishes in the figure of the girl child an ideal form for presenting this possibility, demonstrating that the use of the child in futural imaginings is not at all limited to saccharine images of purity on which to mould continued heteronormative deluded denials of lack, but rather actually presents the perfect occasion for overturning such performances. The conclusion of the novel undermines this same potentiality, however, in its derisive vision of the future it has imagined, therefore, as with the previous chapters, leaving one without a clear image of seamless queer futural ethics.

Plenty of little dead girls

In the story “Maud-Evelyn,” Lady Emma, states wryly that “The portrait of the little dead girl had evoked something attractive, though one had not lived so long in the world without hearing of plenty of little dead girls.”¹¹⁶ Yet in fact the story shows how evocative the figure of the girl is, not only when she is a pretty young dead thing, but also when she is a site of queer futural possibility. Even for the skeptical Lady Emma, a girl is the focus of all hope, only it is not a portrait of a dead one upon which she trains her attention. Of course the queer futural possibility that is produced is dubious, its ethical value unsure. The frame narrative of the story suggests, however, that such indeterminacy may be the mark of ethical possibility, rather than that which sullies its potential. The chapters that follow continue to articulate the dubious and unsure ethics of queer futurity that might be found in the girl.

Part of the intention in this adherence to such tenacious yet tentative futures is as an attempt to contribute to the now-long recent Foucauldian task of seeking forms of change that evade the disadvantages of pure opposition. Such forms may necessarily appear, or indeed be “weak,” as Sedgwick has pointed out; they certainly come with flaws, as the three chapters that follow will suggest. And as Butler as well as much deconstructive and psychoanalytic work have so powerfully made clear, they will necessarily be haunted by their antecedents, just as much as they are fueled and given force by the same. These cautions do not signal doubt in the utility or hope of queer futural ethics, but rather indicate the critical attitude with which we should approach any form of change and the difficulty of predicting what may trip up the lockstep of time.

By looking to nineteenth century British fiction, I look both to the literary past that has helped shape the current cultural imaginary in the west and to the historical past that gave rise to its narratives. In the first place, that era’s fascination with marriage and the young girls whose lives above all others’ are meant to be shaped by it certainly continues to this day. But we also see in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries a continuing narrative of obsession with young girls, which all too frequently takes a form perhaps best adumbrated in the nineteenth century by Lewis Carroll, but certainly also by the dead girl that is Maud-Evelyn. This version of the girl figure also concerns desire and its alternate trajectories—consider tot beauty contests, child sexual abuse fixations, and other patterns of sexualization of young women (and sometimes young men) that present drastic destabilization of consent as well as harmful incursions on the other’s body. However, this particular girl figure who seems to provoke such frenzy clearly represents not a new form of ethics but instead continued and acute violations of ethics.¹¹⁷ This dissertation proposes that there is an alternate strand of considerations of the girl in nineteenth century British literature that offers an antidote to such devastations of interpersonal relations, in a very similar form: the young girl whose desires take a new turn. By looking away from the Maud-Evelyns and towards the Lavinias, this dissertation finds seeds planted in the nineteenth century of different forms of growth that a focus on the girl’s desire could uncover. What this dissertation understands as “queer” is that unforeseeable growth, the unexpected turns through which desire emerges as something different.

116. James, “Maud-Evelyn,” 353.

117. On this see especially James R. Kincaid, *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1994) and Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan*.

Chapter 1
 “A Something Between Delight and Misery”:
 Sympathy and Masochism in *Persuasion*

“How she could say things to her beloved, who traced his shadow with such pleasure!”
 —Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Essay on the Origin of Languages*

Anne Elliot of Jane Austen’s *Persuasion* is an instance of a character whose relationship to desire forges a queer relationship to sociality for a good part of the novel. A surface reading of this novel, however, might indicate otherwise. For instance, early in *Persuasion* the narrator describes Anne’s feelings about love:

How eloquent could Anne Elliot have been! how eloquent, at least, were her wishes on the side of early warm attachment, and a cheerful confidence in futurity, against that over-anxious caution which seems to insult exertion and distrust Providence! She had been forced into prudence in her youth, she learned romance as she grew older: the natural sequel of an unnatural beginning.¹

It would seem from this passage that the natural order for a girl is romance and happiness about the future, both of which will then coincide neatly with, or even create, “eloquence.” Anne has, it appears, learned this lesson, as so often Austen’s heroines learn lessons about morality and love by the end of the novel. From such a reading one could only make heteronormative assumptions about the function of the girl in Austen’s work: the figure of the girl would seem to involve a conflation of natural orders of romance, futurity, and properly ordered speech and narrative. Such a view has certainly been endorsed by the numerous critics of the novel who have extolled the “romantic” and “optimistic” qualities of *Persuasion*; it has been branded Austen’s “autumnal” work,² as if Austen reached with *Persuasion* the late peak of her own developmental process just as Anne Elliot blooms when it is almost too late. In this reading, Austen’s life works constitute a sort of *Bildungsroman* sequence of their own, in which the soon-to-die author reaches the fullness of her artistic blossom just as her final disease sets in. Or, if we interpret “Autumnal” in its connotation of “past one’s prime” rather than its more positive meaning of “late blooming,” this is a story in which the deathly-ill Austen is finally mature enough to contemplate her regrets, through the character of Anne, and to again endorse the road she should have taken.

The fictive illusion of progress not only dominates critical understandings of the developmental trajectories of characters in *Persuasion*,³ but is moreover the reigning reading of

1. Jane Austen, *Persuasion* (New York: Penguin, 1989), 50. Page numbers will hereafter appear in parentheses in the text.

2. Claudia Johnson, *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 144.

3. See for instance Woo-Sang Moon, “On *Persuasion*,” *English Studies* 8 (1984); Diana Postlethwaite, “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child: Austen’s Anne Elliot and Freud’s Anna O.,” in *The Anna Book: Searching for Anna in Literary History*, ed. Mickey Pearlman (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1992); Joanne Wilkes, *Jane Austen’s Persuasion* (South Melbourne: Sydney

Austen's own personal and artistic relationship to this novel. One pocketbook edition of Jane Austen's *Persuasion* reveals as much with the typical mass market apparatus it includes. A blurb on the back prepares the reader for Austen's "most optimistic and romantic work . . . affirming the lasting power of love and the rejuvenating power of hope"; the biographical paragraph inside the front cover of the book unsubtly weaves Austen's own life into the norms suggested by these words. This blurb consists of two sentences about Austen's birth and early education, two more to list her publications and the date of her death, and between these, this brief but remarkable commentary: "Although Austen did not marry, she did have several suitors and once accepted a marriage proposal—but only for one evening. Austen never lived apart from her family, but her work nevertheless shows a worldly and wise sensibility."⁴

There are many possible reasons the editor in charge of this publication affirmed Austen's mini-biography to consist almost entirely of the birth-marriage-death trilogy that so clearly did not define her life: her works are all about marriage, and seem to endorse such a life trajectory, so it might be pertinent to express Austen's own affinity with this path; very little of note is said to have *happened* in Austen's life, as her history is classically told, so perhaps filler was needed; and the book is marketed toward a mass audience—maybe market research confirms that readers think marriage *is* life. These two biographical sentences indeed serve to mitigate Austen's status as unmarried, by assuring the reader that she *could have* married, was adequately desired, and that she somehow gained access to the world of life—to her "worldly and wise sensibility"—*in spite of* never having achieved the step to adulthood and cosmopolitanism that consists of parting from one's parents and officially joining a mate. The marriage-primed reader can thus enter Austen's "most optimistic and romantic work" and still trust the hope it gives us about love, in spite of what might otherwise apparently strike one as the author's shaky ethos.⁵

How accurate indeed are such interpretations? Anne's own musings, as reported by the narrator, in fact undermine this set of views: "How eloquent could Anne Elliot have been!": the modal perfect tense here reveals not the truth of Anne's learned eloquence,⁶ but rather its unfulfilled possibility, immediately then downgraded: "how eloquent, at least, were her wishes..." Anne may in retrospect consider warm attachment and cheerful confidence in futurity to be the proper form for a young psyche, but rather than producing the sort of concomitant discursive accomplishment that "eloquence" would presume, this deliberation offers Anne merely eloquent thoughts. Moreover, this "natural sequel" is one that originates from unnature, from an origin grounded in the perversions of sensibility to which Anne's early life was evidently subject; how much can one in fact trust "nature" borne of the unnatural? How native to the self could such learned romance be? Finally, to what extent should Anne's success in life lessons drive our interpretation of the novel? Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick warns readers about the

University Press, 1991); Michael Williams, *Jane Austen: Six Novels and Their Methods* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986).

4. Austen, *Persuasion*.

5. The unreliability of Austen's ethical appeal (at least in an authorial-intention-guided reading) in terms of heterosexual bliss is in fact at the center of Marvin Mudrick's critique of Austen's novels. See Marvin Mudrick, *Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1952).

6. Terence Parsons indeed warns that "The truth conditions . . . for the modal perfect are peculiar." Terence Parsons, "Eventualities and Narrative Progression," *Linguistics and Philosophy* 25, no. 5/6 (2002), 687.

limitations of reading Austen's novels solely in terms of the "lessons" their characters learned. To do so, she argues, is to overlook the pleasures and desires implicit in the novels in favor of dour explanations about virtue, the "dryly static tableau of discrete moralized portraits" that heterosexualizes in the same motion with which it drains the novels of passion.⁷ This chapter will show that the function of the girl in *Persuasion* with regard to futurity, narrative, and desire is neither neatly, nor heterosexually, aligned. The novel belies the progress narratives that govern so many of its readings, offering a vision of queer pleasure that defies logics of such lessons of development, love, romance, and indeed futurity.

While some early twentieth century readers of Austen like Virginia Woolf regretted the domesticity of Austen's settings,⁸ feminist scholarship has gone great lengths to suggest the political implications of the private female lives rendered in Austen's novels.⁹ Critical opinion has been split, however, about what politics are therein represented, whether Austen's view was conservative or progressive.¹⁰ While a good proportion of these debates has involved the possible feminist allegiances in Austen's novels, another strand of criticism has persevered that involves Austen's queerness.¹¹ Austen is alternately represented as fiercely heterosexual,¹² as queerly compelling to gay men,¹³ or as revealing in her novels perverse pleasures inassimilable to heterosexuality.¹⁴ In many of such debates, political, feminist, and queer, the impetus seems to be on Austen to have produced evidence of some political philosophy, whether it be conventional or in some way revolutionary. This chapter will suggest, however, that to the extent that Austen queers desire, she also uses her work to consider the ways in which such queerness is incompatible with futurity or with the morality of her time—thus considering

7. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl," in *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 128-9.

8. Virginia Woolf, "Jane Austen at Sixty," *New Republic* 37 (1924).

9. Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

10. Critics interpreting Austen as conservative include Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975); Alistair M. Duckworth, *The Improvement of the Estate: A Study of Jane Austen's Novels* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971); Jan Fergus, *Jane Austen and the Didactic Novel: Northanger Abbey, Sense and Sensibility, and Pride and Prejudice* (Totowa: Barnes & Noble, 1983); Tony Tanner, *Jane Austen* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986). On the side of Austen's progressive content include Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*; Mary Evans, *Jane Austen and the State* (New York: Tavistock Publications, 1987); Johnson, *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel*; Margaret Kirkham, *Jane Austen, Feminism and Fiction* (Brighton: Harvester, 1983); Alison G. Sulloway, *Jane Austen and the Province of Womanhood* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989); James Thompson, *Between Self and World: The Novels of Jane Austen* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 1988).

11. Claudia Johnson most helpfully outlines this debate, up to the mid-1990s, in Claudia L. Johnson, "The Divine Miss Jane: Jane Austen, Janeites, and the Discipline of Novel Studies," *boundary 2* 23, no. 3 (1996). Much of the summary here is indebted to Johnson's review.

12. See, for instance Tanner, *Jane Austen*.

13. D.A. Miller, *Jane Austen, or, The Secret of Style* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003); Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?," in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1988).

14. See Sedgwick, "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl"; another example, far removed from—and preceding—Sedgwick's queer theoretical commitments, is Mudrick, *Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery*, in which Mudrick accuses Austen of the perversity of evading heterosexual pleasure.

Austen's work queerly stages a cultural and political critique rather than offering a political philosophy. Like Claudia Johnson, who writes, "'I cast my lot with the queer Austen,'"¹⁵ this chapter to be sure finds queerness in *Persuasion*, in the form of Anne Elliot's experience of desire and vulnerability as well as in Austen's own letters to her niece Fanny, but contends that the queer ethic available for Austen's portrayal is one by which Austen cannot devise a possible future or feasible conduct with regard to the other. In Austen therefore there is an ineradicable opposition between the sympathy that so often constituted the female ethical goal of the novel at the time, as well as of its vision of futurity, and the acknowledgment of vulnerability to the other only to be found in queer desire.

Austen's sympathy

Austen's critique of sexual culture and politics is clearly allied with her complex relationship to sympathy. This relationship is well-illustrated in a letter she wrote to her favorite niece, Fanny, in February, 1817. The letter begins:

My Dearest Fanny,

You are inimitable, irresistible. You are the delight of my life. Such letters, such entertaining letters, as you have lately sent! such a description of your queer little heart! such a lovely display of what imagination does. You are worth your weight in gold, or even in the new silver coinage. I cannot express to you what I have felt in reading your history of yourself—how full of pity and concern, and admiration and amusement, I have been! You are the paragon of all that is silly and sensible, commonplace and eccentric, sad and lively, provoking and interesting. Who can keep pace with the fluctuations of your fancy, the capprizios of your taste, the contradictions of your feelings? You are so odd, and all the time so perfectly natural!—so peculiar in yourself, and yet so like everybody else!

It is very, very gratifying to me to know you so intimately. You can hardly think what a pleasure it is to me to have such thorough pictures of your heart. Oh! What a loss it will be, when you are married. You are too agreeable in your single state, too agreeable as a Neice. I shall hate you when your delicious play of Mind is all settled down into conjugal & maternal affections.¹⁶

The mutual affinity and community of feeling—or of vulnerability to the other—that classically define sympathy are manifest in Austen's initial words, which might seem inseparable from the address of a lover. The letter soon settles, however, into what more resembles a fan's note to her favorite novelistic heroine. Responding to the vicissitudes of Fanny's tales of flirtations and courtships, Austen bears a striking similarity, that is, to many of her own readers.¹⁷ She relishes reading about the details of Fanny's dramas, feels wise and somewhat judgmental amusement at Fanny's girlish silliness, suffers Fanny's sorrows, and celebrates her victories. Her feelings while reading are such that even the indomitable Jane Austen "cannot express" them—the letters transform her, she seems to claim, into a silently expectant reader. And Austen as a well-trained

15. Johnson, "The Divine Miss Jane," 146.

16. Deirdre Le Faye, ed., *Jane Austen's Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 329.

17. Terry Castle has written that Austen's letters to Fanny are "giddy, sentimental and disturbingly school-girlish for a 42-year-old woman" and offer evidence for what would be the "vulgar case for Austen's homoeroticism" rather than any empathy. It would be facile indeed to claim that Austen's letters reveal sexual feelings for Fanny, but I argue that empathy is less *missing* here than it is transformed, interrogated. See Terry Castle, "Sister-Sister: Review of Jane Austen's Letters edited by Deirde Le Faye," *London Review of Books* 17, no. 15 (1995), 6.

reader predicts the same ending to Fanny's adventures as her own readers can always expect at the end of her novels: matrimony.

The conjugal state, apparently celebrated in Austen's novels, is figured here plainly as a loss. This loss is manifold: first, Austen implies that upon Fanny's marriage she will lose the pleasure of reading about Fanny's "history." The novel that constitutes Fanny's period of courtship will conclude. Furthermore, "as a Neice" Fanny may be "the delight of [Austen's] life," but the marital tie will trump previous kinship priorities, and Austen will no longer be privy to Fanny's "queer little heart." Austen may no longer, as aunt, address her niece in the quite the same sympathetic terms of love that will now be reserved for a husband. Thus also lost will be the fungibility of expressions of love, such that an aunt might articulate passion for a girl as readily as—more readily than, perhaps—a suitor. The value of ardent expressions of affection from a maiden aunt is necessarily downgraded in the face of those declarations that accompany the "true" love of marriage. As long as Fanny's life resembles the premarital period that makes up the bulk of Austen's works, Austen is able to respond like an interested reader, feeling passionately for and with the character whose words she reads.

The nuances of this letter thus suggest a theory of readership by which reading narratives produces ethical feeling.¹⁸ However, not all aspects of the typical structure with which Austen's own works are formed act equally in this regard. Yet when marriage concludes this story, Austen promises no such sentimental generosity: "I shall hate you," she warns—playfully, but not without another level of earnestness. A final palpable loss of this letter indeed suggests why Fanny will lose Austen's sympathetic response: her "delicious play of Mind" will vanish, replaced by the rote affections of wife and mother. Not only will imagination and wit disappear in favor of more staid responses to the world in general, but the sensuality explicit in "delicious play" must expire in spite of the tangible physicality that conjugality and parturition would seem to imply. Narrative thus seems to have an oddly double face ethically, both enabling and then destroying ethical feeling for and vulnerability to the other.

The "Oh!" with which Austen proclaims such losses is the perfect register of the alarm with which she registers this incipient set of changes. Such an almost extra-linguistic utterance suggests that the loss of imagination that marriage apparently adumbrates leaves Austen momentarily speechless, momentarily robbed of her own imaginative skill by the breathtaking specter of loss of sympathetic communion with Fanny's fancies and feelings, as Fanny fades into a derivative maternal shade of herself. The history that so readily engages a sympathetic response—the story of a woman's move toward marriage—must necessarily end, it seems, with the retraction of sympathy, inseparable from the dulling of imagination. Robbed of "such thorough pictures of [Fanny's] heart" to feed her imagination, Austen's sympathy will fade along with her spectatorial pleasure. And it is not only Austen's capacity for fellow feeling that is lost. For a Freudian reversal is plain in Austen's forewarning of hatred: "I shall hate you" easily collapses into "You shall hate me" with a consideration of the way in which this letter conceives of sympathy as intertwined with imagination: when Fanny's "delicious play of Mind is all settled down into conjugal & maternal affections," she will lose the imaginative capacity necessary to remain sympathetic toward her aunt, so just as Austen foresees the loss of her own sympathetic response, so too does she predict the end of Fanny's agreeable response. The doubled force of

18. As Dorothy Hale has demonstrated, such a notion has underwritten novel theory from its inception. See Dorothy J. Hale, "Aesthetics and the New Ethics: Theorizing the Novel in the Twenty-First Century," *PMLA* 124, no. 3 (2009); Hale, "Fiction as Restriction: Self-Binding in New Ethical Theories of the Novel"; Hale, *Social Formalism*.

“too agreeable . . . too agreeable” becomes in this reading less a superlative expression of affection than an acquiescence on Austen’s part to the impossibility of Fanny sustaining such a sentiment. Fanny has been too agreeable to be true. (In posthumous retrospect we may register the accuracy of such a prevision: Fanny indeed came to disparage the memory of her eminent aunt, famously stating that Austen “from various circumstances was not so refined as she ought to have been for her talent.”¹⁹)

If such an account paints too stark a picture of Austen as a bitter detractor of marriage or as wholly unsympathetic, it should also be noted that later in the same letter she encourages Fanny to marry. “Do not imagine that I have any real objection,” she writes. “I only do not like you should marry anybody. And yet I do wish you to marry very much, because I know you will never be happy till you are; but the loss of a Fanny Knight will be never made up to me. My ‘affec. niece F. C. B—’ will be but a poor substitute.” Austen acknowledges, for one thing, here, that Fanny is in the same bind as any other young woman in her culture: female happiness is constructed as available only within matrimony. Ethics are necessarily compromised, but not entirely: if Fanny’s imaginative capacity and sympathetic availability to her aunt must recede in marriage, it is only Austen’s retention of fellow feeling that will allow for this loss to be borne. Because Fanny’s happiness resides in the prospect of a husband, Austen must stand in favor of this plan in order to preserve at least a shadow of her own sympathetic response, though Fanny’s may be lost. While she must trade in the finer sympathy that may be afforded the lively protagonist that is “a Fanny Knight,” the “poor substitute” of a fellow feeling that pays tribute to the happiness of another is still in force, no matter how misdirected that happiness may be.

One problem with sympathy in Austen is thus that this popularly valorized portal of access to the other, so exalted in her novels, is inimical to the other value lauded in her works, romantic heterosexual union. This letter confirms that for Austen fellow feeling can be beautifully evoked by narrative; it begins as a scene of reading that transforms into a spectatorial event of mutually entwined sensibilities in the mind of the reader. Yet the trajectory that allows for such an ethical feeling in the first place seems to necessitate its diminishment. The most fertile grounds for sympathy, this novelist attests, are the “fluctuations of . . . fancy, the capprizios of . . . taste, the contradictions of . . . feelings” that inhere most spectacularly in the story of a single young woman on the marriage market. What makes a character sympathetic puts her in danger of precisely what will eventually necessarily delimit and reduce the sentiment. Narrative success is caught between dual and opposing values: the great, productive, and sensual feeling for the other that is sympathy and the lesser, staid feeling for the other that is marriage. It is thus that Austen critiques the structure of sympathy that romantically melds pairs of persons,²⁰ because this structure leaves women *too* vulnerable.²¹ However, as her letter to Fanny shows, the progression toward marriage nevertheless enables such vulnerability to the other, a feeling which is practically synonymous with desire.

19. Margaret Wilson, *Almost Another Sister: Fanny Knight, Jane Austen’s Favourite Niece* (Maidstone: George Mann Books, 1998), 110.

20. Benjamin Eric Daffron presents an analysis of such a critique of sympathy in Romantic literature, in Benjamin Eric Daffron, *Romantic Doubles: Sex and Sympathy in British Gothic Literature 1790-1830* (New York: AMS Press, 2002).

21. Rachel Ablow’s study of Victorian sympathy similarly indicts *couverture* as the gendered difference that makes this ethic untenable for women. See Rachel Ablow, *The Marriage of Minds: Reading Sympathy in the Victorian Marriage Plot* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

How is it that the two seemingly similar endeavors of sympathy and marriage—attempts, both, to affix one individual’s affections and attentions to another—could result in such contrary ethical consequences in Austen’s thinking? And why is narrative such an insistent presence in this problem? Perhaps oddly, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s deliberations about sympathy offer a possible answer. Rousseau has never been the most obvious philosopher to put in conversation with Austen. Though a near contemporary to Austen, his work is not easily amenable to hers; in discussions of Austen’s morality, the Scottish Enlightenment philosophers of the time, David Hume and Adam Smith, are far more frequently considered, their work appealing perhaps to the explicit morality of her works. And questions of the novelist’s influences most frequently turn to Samuel Johnson.²² Austen was, to be certain, aware of Rousseau, her brother James having published an article while at Oxford which manifested concern about “the excess of sentiment and susceptibility, which the works of the great Rousseau chiefly introduced.”²³ James Austen’s critique of Rousseau was possibly inherited from Johnson, who had this to say about Rousseau:

I think him one of the worst of men; a rascal, who ought to be hunted out of society, as he has been. Three or four nations have expelled him: and it is a shame that he is protected in this country. . . . Rousseau, Sir, is a very bad man. I would sooner sign a sentence for his transportation, than that of any felon who has gone from the Old Bailey these many years. Yes, I should like to have him work in the plantations.²⁴

Jane Austen’s influences and affinities need not be long rehearsed to suggest convincingly that this apparently so mannerly figure might not have been any more taken than Johnson was with the law-flaunting, proto-Marxist, masturbatory, masochistic, child-abandoning, and passionate father of revolution that Rousseau’s reputation (and his own confessions) hold him to be. Though I believe that Austen’s reported distaste for intense sensibility is overstated in much criticism of her work,²⁵ it could very well be true that she herself saw little similarity between her sense of the world and Rousseau’s. I would nevertheless like to suggest that Austen and Rousseau converge surprisingly on their understanding of sympathy, and that Rousseau’s (law-flaunting, proto-Marxist, masturbatory, masochistic, child-abandoning, and passionate) analysis of this sentiment helps elucidate Austen’s seemingly paradoxical stance toward it. That Austen would not have avowed any tie to Rousseau is consonant, in fact, with the way in which ideas similar to his appear in her novels.

Rousseau’s Pity

22. See, for instance Gloria Sybil Gross, *In a Fast Coach with a Pretty Woman: Jane Austen and Samuel Johnson* (New York: AMS Press, 2002).

23. Walton Litz, “The Loiterer: A Reflection of Jane Austen’s Early Environment,” *Review of English Studies* XII, no. 47 (1961).

24. James Boswell, *Life of Samuel Johnson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). As Johnson’s hyperbolic vehemence might lead us to suspect, his disparagement of Rousseau very possibly cloaked a deeper identification. Mark Temmer argues that Johnson and Rousseau’s ideas are not necessarily as opposed to each other as it might seem from this witticism. See *Samuel Johnson and Three Infidels: Rousseau, Voltaire, Diderot*, (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1988).

25. For one argument against the claim that Austen is hostile to sentiment, see Inger Sigrun Brodey, “Adventures of a Female Werther: Jane Austen’s Revision of Sensibility,” *Philosophy and Literature* 23, no. 1 (1999).

Like Austen, Rousseau sees a form of sympathy as a crucial component of ethical response to the other, and traces this capacity to imagination and narrative. Like Austen, Rousseau is ambivalent, ultimately, about our capacity to produce sympathy in contemporary times. What Rousseau offers to Austen's doubts about the ethics of sympathy is a more explicit examination of the way in which feeling for the other is fueled by imagination and narrative, as well as a conceptualization of how we might envision a golden mid-point of ethical possibility between narrative and its typical conclusion in the post-Enlightenment order of things.²⁶ For Rousseau, a queer type of passion is on the one hand necessary for acknowledging the other's exposure, but is on the other hand a delicate flower whose bloom is cut short by relationships borne of private property. We will see that Austen's views are surprisingly similar.

The passions comprise the foundation of Rousseau's theory of language: they are innately human, but evolve through time based on their mode of expression.²⁷ Passions, he argues, are both social and linguistic. They are social because they result from our exposure to other people; they are intimately connected to the word because language is a result of the human need to communicate passions, rather than a tool of physical survival: "It is neither hunger nor thirst but love, hatred, pity, anger, which drew from [people] their first words."²⁸ Sympathy [*pitié*]²⁹ emerges as Rousseau's privileged passion, doing ethical work where love, hatred, and anger are inadequate, yet this passion is endangered by language, at the same time as it depends on language for its workings. Rousseau elucidates this morass in his most important deliberation on pity, which appears in the *Essay on the Origin of Languages*. Here he links this sentiment to the possibility of ethical treatment of others, and suggests that it is knowledge that affords us such a capability:

We develop social feeling only as we become enlightened. Although pity is native to the human heart, it would remain eternally quiescent unless it were activated by imagination. How are we moved to pity? By getting outside ourselves and identifying with a being who suffers. We suffer only as much as we believe him to suffer. It is not in ourselves, but in him that we suffer. It is clear that such transport supposes a great deal of acquired knowledge. How am I to imagine ills of which I have no idea? How would I suffer in seeing another suffer, if I know not what he is suffering, if I am ignorant of what he and I have in common. He who has never been reflective is incapable of being merciful or just or pitying. He is just as incapable of being malicious and vindictive. He who imagines nothing is aware only of himself; he is isolated in the midst of mankind.

26. In fact, the way in which Rousseau links passion, ethics, and language curiously prefigures Foucault.

27. Great thanks are due to David Bates and Judith Butler for my understanding of Rousseau's work, any missteps in which reading are of course entirely my own error.

28. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Essay on the Origin of Languages," in *On the Origin of Language: Two Essays* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1986), 12.

29. The 1762 edition of the *Dictionnaire de L'Académie française* defines "pitié" as "Compassion, sentiment de douleur pour les maux, pour les misères d'autrui," so I take it that Rousseau was using the term synonymously with the way I am understanding "sympathy." *Sympathie* was used more at this time as a term for general correspondences. ("SYMPATHIE : Correspondance des qualités que les Anciens imaginoient entre certains corps ; SYMPATHIE se dit aussi De la convenance & du rapport d'humeurs & d'inclinations"). It is of course curious, then, that the translator chooses nevertheless "pity" over "sympathy": considering the extent to which we will see that the ethical force of *pitié* for Rousseau remains difficult or even impossible to achieve, it could in fact be that "sympathy" is too utopian a form.

Reflection is born of the comparison of ideas, and it is the plurality of ideas that leads to their comparison. One who is aware of only a single object has no basis for comparison. And those whose experience remains confined to the narrow range of their childhood also are incapable of such comparisons. Long familiarity deprives them of the attention requisite for such examination. But to the degree that something strikes us as novel, we want to know it. We seek rapport with those we know. Thus we come to ponder what is before our faces, and experience of the strange leads us to examine the familiar.³⁰

For Rousseau, as for Austen, pity requires imagination. Imagination is necessary in the operation of pity because it is only through an imagined identification with the sufferer that we may feel for him or her. Important to this account of pity's inauguration is that fellow feeling for Rousseau is an epistemological problem. In order to spark the fellow feeling that he sees as innate to the human, we must have knowledge, which can only be attained through "reflection." Reflection, in turn, involves the need to have the distance of strangeness or difference from a thing before we can assess it critically and come to know it well; when we do, we render the thing familiar, known. In this sweep of the strange that subsumes different to same, humans secure the capacity to compare self to other and thus develop the affective tools for sociality. It is importantly the play of sameness and difference that enables this apprehension. Thus not only is this an argument about knowledge, but the knowledge that here enables fellow feeling for the other is characterized as having linguistic properties. Language, also constructed through fluctuations of sameness and difference, operates in this excerpt as the metaphorical underpinning of Rousseau's thesis about pity: like reflection, language operates through the differences, not functioning properly unless one word is distinguished from another; but also like reflection, language relies on iterability and repetition, and upon the recognition that comes from sameness. Thus familiarity always reigns in the midst of difference.³¹ What this account achieves in terms of feeling for the other is this affect's grounding in certain discursive capacities. Recall that Austen's letter to Fanny suggests that an aspect of novelistic narrative provoked fellow feeling: Rousseau's account offers a structural linguistic explanation for this conjunction.³²

One consequence of Rousseau's undergirding of ethics with the play of difference in language is that he thus dissociated himself from a number of his contemporaries' values, just as Austen did, in my reading. Particularly, his proto-structuralist account of language distances Rousseau from his Enlightenment contemporaries who considered language an indexical reflection of reality. Rousseau's continual stress of the primacy of passion over reason concurs with this dissociation. Though reflection and reason seem to have a place in adequate expression of the passions for Rousseau, they are also precarious values. Crucially, Rousseau depicts pity at

30. Rousseau, "Essay on the Origin of Languages," 32.

31. While this understanding of language obviously rehearses fundamental tenets of structuralism and deconstruction generated from Saussure's structural linguistics, Rousseau's understanding of language prefigures some important aspects of these theories. Jacques Derrida considers Rousseau's concept of pity closely in Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, transl. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

32. Rousseau also notes the value of narrative forms of discourse in particular, when he writes that "the successive impressions of discourse, which strike a redoubled blow, produce a different feeling from that of the continuous presence of the same object." Rousseau, "Essay on the Origin of Languages," 8.

what he imagines was its fullest and historically earliest flower, before reason overcame it.³³ In his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, Rousseau attacks Enlightenment values as the eventual demolisher of natural pity: “Reason is what engenders egocentrism, and reflection strengthens it. Reason is what turns man in upon himself. Reason is what separates him from all that troubles him and afflicts him. Philosophy is what isolates him and what moves him to say in secret, at the sight of a suffering man, ‘Perish if you will; I am safe and sound.’”³⁴ Thus the reflection that in one instance could enable access to the suffering other now closes individuals off from each other. Suddenly the taxonomies and hierarchies of Enlightenment scientificity fling humans back to a state that resembles their pre-linguistic “savagery.” The sophisticated language of reflection only allows at this point in time a more lyrical mode of expressing self-centered lack of care, the whispered philosophical kiss-off of “Perish if you will.” Pity is lost and replaced with barbaric lack of care for the other. What causes this change for Rousseau helps demonstrate the problem of sympathy for Austen as well.

Two vital developments play a large part in Rousseau’s account of the downfall of pity: public esteem and private property. In the former case, Rousseau sees denser and larger-scale social formations transforming the regard of others into a cultural value, a fetishized object of pride and desire.³⁵ “And this was the first step toward inequality and, at the same time, toward vice. From these first preferences were born vanity and contempt on the one hand, and shame and envy on the other.”³⁶ Not only does an increased interest in public esteem result from changed demographic circumstances (more contact with strangers who might judge one based on superficialities), it is also a consequence of a changed conceptual landscape. Suddenly in “civilized” society one’s “image” is always in thrall to others, who may alternately raise its value or threaten its worth; this doubling and hierarchization of the self renders image more important than subject. The Enlightenment self in Rousseau’s view defined by outside influences entirely. “Such, in fact, is the true cause of all these differences; the savage lives in himself; the man accustomed to the ways of society is always outside himself and knows how to live only in the opinion of others.”³⁷ To the extent that image is all that matters, it is our personal property to defend and improve at any cost, undertakings that make us self-centered and unsympathetic or even cruel. The fact that we are in this narcissistic ownership relationship to our selves is for Rousseau dangerous because of the loss of pity, but also because we are to an extent always also owned by others. It is private property, thus, to which Rousseau’s most fervent opposition stands.

The second discourse begins with the dawn of private property: “The first person who, having enclosed a plot of land, took it into his head to say *this is mine* and found people simple enough to believe him, was the true founder of civil society.”³⁸ With one fell swoop of a speech act, the age of property begins. Clearly here already language has become sophisticated enough

33. Rousseau’s theories of language and inequality rely on imagined genealogies of the past that never square up with recorded history. Historical moments such as this one can instead be considered more as utopias, which for reasons of rhetorical force Rousseau places in the past.

34. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992), 37.

35. Given Rousseau’s proto-Marxist opinion about property, it is not too much of a stretch to compare the place of “image” in his work to the commodity fetish.

36. Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, 49.

37. *Ibid.*, 70.

38. *Ibid.*, 44.

to produce categories of ownership—the word “mine” in particular—and thus to effect the event of the earth’s partitioning into such groupings, alongside the self’s similar splitting. The performative force of the language of ownership leads here to the idea that land, and indeed anything else, may also be owned.

Rousseau is thus an early voice bemoaning the ills of modernity,³⁹ which he registers as traumatic. Though the figurative use of “trauma” only emerged over a century later with psychoanalysis, Rousseau’s works anticipate notions central to this later figuration: that a wound can be physical or psychic, and that a culture as a whole can undergo trauma.⁴⁰ His works trace the movement from pre-industrial, pre-rational society to industrialization and urbanization, and he registers the new order with shock. Not only can Rousseau’s own agitated affective response be characterized through the jolting devastation that characterizes trauma, but his sketch of the vagaries of language posits that such shock is structural.

As his history of language has it, “The first tongues, children of pleasure rather than need, long bore the mark of their father. They lost their seductive tone with the advent of feelings to which they had given birth, when new needs arose among men, forcing each to be mindful only of his own welfare, and to withdraw his heart into himself.”⁴¹ Language initially promoted a flowering of our passions—love, pleasure, and seduction play a large part here, alongside pity—and thus attached us to the physicality of emotion. The advent of property, along with the new conceptual heights of language, turned words into the enemy of the passions they once fostered: the boundaries of the body were traversed in the production of the doubled self of private property, and soon rational concepts took over where once passion dwelled. Thus the language that produced reality in the form of passionate attachments to the other is now unable to keep up with its own creation.⁴² The new affective landscape, full of tumultuous emotions in response to a new civilization, becomes a treacherous territory once language loses its passionate properties and once people return to caring only about their own interests. Real suffering increases with the mass technologies of modernity, and language becomes concomitantly ineffective in the face of this suffering. Recall that Rousseau’s pity is an operation of “getting outside ourselves and identifying with a being who suffers. . . . It is not in ourselves, but in him that we suffer.” Once we are focused on property, be it image or land, our language allows us to utter “mine” but not to articulate suffering *in* another. The awkwardness of this formulation [*ce n’est pas dans nous, c’est dans lui que nous souffrons*] attests to the incommensurability of language in its contemporary incarnation to testify to the trauma of modernity.⁴³ It is such a traumatic

39. Of course private property was not born in the eighteenth century, but the concatenation of cultural forces with private property that Rousseau laments is particular to modernity, broadly speaking (and given the bizarre and fictionalized historical accounts and timelines Rousseau offers, one can only speak broadly).

40. Baudelaire, Benjamin, etc. More recent work in this vein includes Cathy Caruth, ed., *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); and Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, eds., *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

41. Rousseau, “Essay on the Origin of Languages,” 46.

42. Such a failure of paternally-envisioned origin is also manifest in *Frankenstein*. See David Marshall, *The Surprising Effects of Sympathy: Marivaux, Diderot, Rousseau, and Mary Shelley* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988).

43. This is one of the principal notions of more recent critiques of modernity and its traumatizing effects. See for instance Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996); and Felman and Laub, eds., *Testimony*.

incommensurability and consequent loss of passionate possibility that this chapter will suggest is also at the core of Austen's representation of desire in her final novel, as well as in her words to her niece.

The way in which Rousseau himself reports that he responded to such a situation also lends an elucidation to the complications we will see characterizing Austen's attempt at a queer ethic. Rousseau's personal traumatic reaction to the changes of modernity is patent in his portrayal of his life in his *Confessions*. According to him, experiences of speechless shock in childhood were at the heart of his two most consequential personal characteristics, masochism and compassion. He recounts a number of beatings in his childhood, in particular those by two of his guardians, M. and Mlle. Lambercier. When Mlle. Lambercier beat the child Rousseau—which happened, he writes, “when we deserved it”—he reports that “the very strange thing was that this punishment increased my affection for the inflictor. It required all the strength of my devotion and all my natural gentleness to prevent my deliberately earning another beating; I had discovered in the shame and pain of the punishment an admixture of sensuality.”⁴⁴ A lifetime of unfulfilled masochistic desires and fantasies resulted from this experience, Rousseau reports. This “perversion,” “in a sense diametrically opposed to the one in which [my passions] should normally have developed,”⁴⁵ is a matter of the imagination: “To fall on my knees before a masterful mistress, to obey her commands, to have to beg for her forgiveness, have been to me the most delicate of pleasures; and the more my vivid imagination heated my blood the more like a spellbound lover I looked.”⁴⁶ It is not a physical response to others that conjures passionate desire, for Rousseau, but rather one's own imagination.

Thus the capacity which enables reflection and thus in turn language and sympathy, is also the faculty that sparks desire. Desire seems therefore one possible form of exposure to the other, like sympathy, the ethical operation of which requires the linguistic capacity for an interplay of sameness and difference. That this form of desire veers away from normative and accepted desire Rousseau considers an unfortunate idiosyncrasy of his character and a mistake of fortune, but at the same time he suggests it has redemptive possibilities. He points out that “this way of making love does not lead to rapid progress, and is not very dangerous to the virtue of the desired object,” claiming that in fact his masochistic desires have in this way “preserved the purity of my feelings and my morals.”⁴⁷ While the moral codes of late eighteenth century Europe about sexuality certainly did not condone masochistic acts, Rousseau here claims that in fact his masochistic desires are precisely what allows him better to align his behavior to this dictates of these codes. Unlike other desires, this one does not lead him to the corruption of others or to the degradation of his own moral standing within such sexual regulations. Rather it both protects him and others from breaking the rules such as they are (or even being subject to them) at the same time as it affords Rousseau a uniquely sensuous and imaginative pleasure, all the more so perhaps because it falls outside of normative codification.

Not only does Rousseau's moral justification of his “perversion” suggest that he considers it to have ethical valences, but he also couples this etiology of his masochism with the story of another beating that he more directly associates with his idea of ethics. The other beating that leaves a permanent mark on Rousseau's psyche is at the hands of Mlle. Lambercier's husband. In this instance, Rousseau recounts having been unjustly accused of and punished for a

44. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions*, trans. J.M. Cohen (New York: Penguin, 1953), 25.

45. *Ibid.*, 26.

46. *Ibid.*, 28.

47. *Ibid.*, 28.

crime he didn't commit: breaking Mlle. Lambercier's comb. Thus unlike Mlle. Lambercier's justified beatings, this one is undeserved. It is also, of course, performed by a man, not a young woman. Describing the indignation of his child self at this miscarriage of justice, Rousseau calls on the reader to "imagine the revolution in his ideas, the violent change of his feelings, the confusion in his heart and brain, in his small intellectual and moral being! I say, imagine all this if you can. For myself I do not feel capable of unraveling the strands, or even remotely following all that happened at that time within me."⁴⁸ This exhortation of the reader to "imagine" is also of course a plea for sympathy; that Rousseau might be incapable of enacting such a conceptual exercise, as he claims, is disingenuous, the reader soon learns. He professes two paragraphs later the effect of this wrong was precisely to awaken his sympathetic capacity, exceptional among humans, he suggests:

That first meeting with violence and injustice has remained so deeply engraved on my heart that any thought which recalls it summons back this first emotion. The feeling was only a personal one in its origins, but it has since assumed such a consistency and has become so divorced from personal interests that my blood boils at the sight or the tale of any injustice, whoever may be the sufferer and wherever it may have taken place, in just the same way as if I were myself its victim. When I read of the cruelties of a fierce tyrant, of the subtle machinations of a rascally priest, I would gladly go and stab the wretch myself, even if it were to cost me my life a hundred times over. I have often run till I dropped, flinging stones at some cock or cow or dog, or any animal that I saw tormenting another because it felt itself the stronger.⁴⁹

Though this scene of pity's birth does not include the interpersonal dynamic it had in his *Essay on the Origin of Languages*—though Rousseau's capacity for pity was born, that is, in *self-pity*—he describes the eventual effect of this moment as one of expanding sympathy for all who suffer. However, it is worth noting that his examples of sufferers are on the one hand characters in books and on the other hand animals. And indeed the characters his reading focuses on are not the sufferers, but their tormenters: Rousseau himself seems to be their main prey. The affective response that ensues is, as in his theoretical account of pity, to produce suffering "not in ourselves, but in him"—"as if," Rousseau puts it here, "I were myself its victim"; yet the effect of this shared feeling for Rousseau is the desire to wound the cause of the suffering, to "stab the wretch myself," to "fling. . . stones" at a cruel animal. Sympathy is clearly ethically ambivalent in this incarnation. Not only does it appear as either fictional or nonhuman, but it also seems to instigate more violence rather than performing as the counterpoint to malice and vindictiveness that the *Essay on the Origin of Languages* posits it to be.

In keeping with Rousseau's theoretical deliberations, it follows to conclude that his own experiences of the passions are stained with the dye of modernity. Rousseau's theoretical texts interweave with his personal history to present a picture of a civilization gone awry. In modernity, "enlightenment" has meant the pillaging of language's passionate roots, which has left behind a culture absent of the means for interpersonal succor for suffering, as well, we will see, as damaged in its capacity for desire. While pity would be the ideal response to such suffering, it cannot be sustained to ethical effect in the form in which it is available. First, it is born in Rousseau in possibly narcissistic self-pity: it is an injustice against himself that the child Rousseau feels so passionately about. It is also recalled not by learning firsthand about another

48. Ibid., 29.

49. Ibid., 30.

human suffering but rather by reading about oppressors and by seeing the spectacle of nonhuman pain; at this remove from the actual suffering human other, it seems merely to produce more violence and suffering.

Desire and its available expressions in modernity undergo a significant alteration as well. “Who would imagine,” Rousseau asks, “that I owe one of the most vigorous elements in my character to the same origins as the weakness and sensuality that flows in my veins?”⁵⁰ While indeed it may seem bizarre to consider sympathy and masochism in the same stroke, sympathy’s intertwining with masochism in this chapter of Rousseau’s history is crucial. The body has been so thoroughly abstracted by language and notions of private property—into “image,” as Rousseau’s *Second Discourse* would have it,⁵¹ and as text or animal in *The Confessions*—that it is perhaps not surprising that Rousseau’s eroticization of pain takes the place of normative forms of sexual desire for the other: in lieu of injuring others’ reputations or virtue, masochism allows its subject to eschew the view of the other as property at all, instead focusing on one of the most intense possible sensate awarenesses of an other. The only injury possible in masochistic desire is to oneself, and such desire also both sparks the imagination and renders its subject physically, not abstractly, aware of the other. Thus while Rousseau’s ideal of sympathy seems in the end inimical to his circumstances—only to be ineffectively reached by harming animals and imagining duels with fictional tyrants—he does in fact unwittingly theorize an ethic of masochism. We might say that pain is pleasurable in Rousseau’s masochism in part because it is the one way to feel *for* and *with* the other that does not partake of cruelty and narcissism. Unlike sympathy, masochism’s pleasurable pain bypasses the problems of language and is purely of the senses. For Rousseau, as well, we will see, as for Austen, the antidiscursive quality of the only kind of desire that truly and ethically exposes one to an other is also what makes this desire ethically regressive. Its distance from narrative forms also means it has limited capacity to address the cultural conditions that force this distance in the first place. Moreover, Austen’s work adds to Rousseau’s deliberations the complex and paradoxical way in which gender plays into the relations of property which so forcibly limit sociality.

Sympathy in *Persuasion*

In what follows, I will attempt to show that Austen’s novel *Persuasion* manifests a pity whose arc passes through the possibility of actual sympathy and into the savagery of civilized feeling; it also reproduces another term of Rousseau’s consideration of sympathy: masochism. Certainly the attribution of “masochism” to Jane Austen or her works is just as anachronistic as it is to Rousseau, Leopold von Sacher-Masoch not having been born until after both Austen and Rousseau were dead, and the designation of “masochism” for which Sacher-Masoch is infamous not having been coined until the late nineteenth century. And in Austen’s case, if not Rousseau’s, this term may as well seem wildly inappropriate and sensationalistic, which in some uses it could well be. However, this chapter considers masochism not necessarily as the deviant sexuality generally connoted by the term, but rather, as Rousseau’s deliberations have begun to suggest, as a structure of response to pain and suffering, as an ethic divergent from but associated with sympathy, as bound up in the trauma of modernity, and as a unique answer to forms of sexual behavior whose codifications seem to beckon injury. What *Persuasion* offers us is a glimpse of how such a structure of response might be enacted within the constraints of the world

50. *Ibid.*, 28.

51. This again seems to adumbrate the notion of the image in Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994).

of manners of the early nineteenth century “middle class aristocracy” whose doings Austen’s novels dramatize.⁵² Like Rousseau, Austen links pity’s demise to property relations and certain circumstances of modernity, and sees in pleasurable pain one possible way to salvage some of what is lost when pity is no longer available. This masochism is as uncertain as Rousseau’s, however, much as it momentarily seems to offer an escape. But like Rousseau again, the conditions of possibility of Austen’s work inhere in similar linguistic properties on which Rousseau places the blame for the trauma of civilization. For Austen these properties are consistently narrative in form, and *property* is conveyed through its gendered manifestation in *couverture*. The final revision Austen makes to Rousseau is her more nuanced conceptualization of the formation of desire in intersubjective vulnerability.

As for Rousseau, ethical possibility is severely constricted for Austen. As we have seen, Austen’s own conception of sympathy seems from her letter to Fanny to be similarly equivocal to Rousseau’s. Sympathy is for both writers dramatized by the scene of a reader or spectator’s imagination, which is activated into identifications that are not easily sustained. For Rousseau private property alongside linguistic conventions of the Enlightenment are to blame for the degradation of pity; Austen’s letter to Fanny seems in particular to fault marriage, a likewise politically freighted institution premised on property relations. And just as Rousseau sees the conceptual hierarchies of science and rationality as stripping language of passion, so too does Austen predict that the narrowing of Fanny’s passions to the legally and religiously sanctioned realm of the conjugal will deprive her of the stormy passions of her less-regulated single self. When Austen exclaims to Fanny, “Oh! What a loss it will be, when you are married,” she registers what might be named a traumatic response to sympathy’s modern paucity—this is not to say that Austen is necessarily literally traumatized, but rather to suggest that the loss of sympathy produces the shock of the modern.⁵³ This structure is most evident in the novel Austen was just completing at the time of writing this letter to Fanny, *Persuasion*.

Drastic transformations play a part, first of all, in the historical context of the novel. At the time of Austen’s writing in 1816 and 1817, the Napoleonic Wars had just ended. Britain emerged as a powerful nation, and its navy as the most esteemed in the world, so it was a time of burgeoning nationalist pride. But approximately 75,000 British troops fought against the French between 1792 and 1815 and over a quarter of them died. For a British population of only about 15 million, these were overwhelming losses, and they occurred on a greater scale than the world had ever seen. Death on a mass scale, one danger of technological advances, is often identified as one of the major instigators of the trauma of modernity.⁵⁴ As other critics have argued, the great pain thematized throughout *Persuasion* suggests that Austen was responding, in part, to the question of suffering brought to the fore by war.⁵⁵

Guarded Sympathy: the Elliots

52. “Middle class aristocracy” is the term Nancy Armstrong coins to designate the almost-gentry status of Austen’s main characters. Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*.

53. On this understanding of modernity as shock, see Walter Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1968).

54. Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000).

55. For instance, Mary Favret argues that *Persuasion* is “an everyday record of the felt if not acknowledged experience of war” Mary A. Favret, “Everyday War,” *English Literary History* 72, no. 3 (2005), 621.

Suffering could indeed be said to be *Persuasion*'s most repeated theme. In spite of its reputation as Austen's "autumnal" and most optimistic novel, *Persuasion* is replete with deeply unhappy individuals; this offers numerous levels at which sympathy's workings can be interrogated. At the beginning of the novel, Anne Elliot is the "nobody" that was an unmarried twenty-seven year old woman in the early 1800s. Her loving mother has died and she is ignored and neglected by her father and sister; "her word had no weight; her convenience was always to give way—she was only Anne" (26). Yet Anne is by no means the only sufferer in this book. Before introducing her heroine, the novel presents Anne's father, Sir Walter Elliot, who has his own miseries and despairs, which we see him alleviating by reading the *Baronetage*, the history of his family's aristocratic ascendancy: "There he found occupation for an idle hour, and consolation in a distressed one; there his faculties were roused into admiration and respect, by contemplating the limited remnant of the earliest patents; there any unwelcome sensations, arising from domestic affairs, changed naturally into pity and contempt" (23). Sir Walter's suffering only produces an inversion of the workings of sympathy. Suffering, for Sir Walter, brings not the imaginative capacity to feel the suffering of others, but instead a type of pity of that is paired with contempt and the vain self-contemplation of *amour propre*. Sir Walter reads the *Baronetage* as if it were the Bible, and the rational discourse of the landed aristocracy could indeed be said to be his religion. That he derives comfort in times of woe from this gentry-venerating book closes off the movement of sympathy so that it is no longer dialogic; if it appears at all, it is in the form of self-pity.

Sir Walter is a reader like Austen, like Rousseau, yet reading only reinstates the ills of his culture—vanity and pride of ownership. His turn to the word does not attest to trauma or mitigate its origin within the attestation, but rather enmeshes him further in the property relations that bring trauma about—in particular for Sir Walter the property of his name and his public image as gentry. Sir Walter is a man who can, as Rousseau put it, be "mindful only of his own welfare." The narrator seems to concur with such a view in the tone of condemnatory irony that suffuses this opening. Sympathy falls short twice then here, in that Sir Walter's afflictions prompt as little fellow feeling in the man himself as they do in the narrator. The reader of *Persuasion* is thus interpellated into the novel through a negative example of reading: if we are to avoid the condemnation Sir Walter receives, if we are to receive anything from reading besides a narcissistic reflection of ourselves, we must not read for reflections of our own value. What is interesting about this lesson is that it exhorts the reader to a less shallow, more feeling reading than Sir Walter, while simultaneously suggesting that we need not spend too much sympathy on the man who narcissistically invests his passions in self-love and the closed histories of the aristocracy. If there is any compassion left for Sir Walter, it may be of the "poor substitute" type that Austen predicts she will retain upon Fanny's marriage. Such disidentification with an other results, it seems, in the breaking off of the exchange of difference and sameness that allows for sympathy. When we can no longer imagine ourselves suffering as they do, compassion stops short. The novel thus performatively guides the reader through the same mitigated sympathy of modernity that it critiques.

A second, similarly negative, lesson in how to read comes through Anne's shallow and affected older sister, Elizabeth. The narrator at first seems to proffer this unmarried twenty-nine year old pity. Like her father, she also knows misery, which rates a lovely description:

For thirteen years had she been doing the honours, and laying down the domestic law at home, and leading the way to the chaise and four, and walking immediately after Lady Russell out of all the drawing-rooms and dining-rooms in the country. Thirteen winters' revolving frosts had seen

her opening every ball of credit which a scanty neighbourhood afforded, and thirteen springs shewn their blossoms, as she travelled up to London with her father, for a few weeks' annual enjoyment of the great world. (27)

Like Anne, Elizabeth suffers the pain of her unmarried status, and though the narrator teases her to a degree, her sorrow is nevertheless palpable and poignant, expressed in the anaphoric refrain—thirteen years, thirteen winters, thirteen springs—that lends pathos and a sense of *durée* to her suffering. However, the reader soon learns, through Elizabeth's own reading practices, that like her father, this young woman is suffused with the culture of inheritance and ownership:

[She] would have rejoiced to be certain of being properly solicited by baronet blood within the next twelvemonth or two. Then might she again take up the book of books with as much enjoyment as in her early youth; but now she liked it not. Always to be presented with the date of her own birth, and see no marriage follow but that of a youngest sister, made the book an evil; and more than once, when her father had left it open on the table near her, had she closed it, with averted eyes, and pushed it away. (27)

Like her father, Elizabeth sees the Baronetage as “the book of books”; free indirect narration helps us ascribe this designation to Elizabeth while also maintaining our ironic distance from such a blasphemous imputation. The reading material that would matter to Elizabeth above all others is therefore unreadable until she may attain the terms of its storyline. “The book of books” is only as holy as its designation when it offers narcissistic impressions; it is “an evil” until Elizabeth may see herself on its reflective surface. The spectacle of the other that this book makes up produces not the reflective capacity that might enable understanding of others' suffering—though it may be remembered that it is a testament of deaths as well as marriages and births—but rather a reflection, if not yet of Elizabeth's narcissistic absorption into a narrative of aristocratic entailment, then of a culture obsessed with ownership. Again the reader of *Persuasion* learns a complicated lesson about readership: if we are not to be like Elizabeth, then we may not pettishly shove away the book we are reading, just because it is not about us. Again readerly sympathy is not beckoned; instead the novel reiterates the notion that feeling for the other is diminished by the worship of property.

Also undeserving of our sympathy is Anne's miserable married younger sister, Mary, who projects her own ongoing psychic misery onto one of the most fully-fledged cases of hypochondria in Austen's oeuvre.⁵⁶ Austen typically reserves some of her most vicious humor for hypochondriacs. When Anne stops for a visit at Mary's house, Mary assails her with complaints, the consequence, the narrator tells us, of loneliness:

[B]eing alone, her being unwell and out of spirits, was almost a matter of course. . . . she had not resources for solitude; and, inheriting a considerable share of the Elliot self-importance, was very prone to add to every other distress that of fancying herself neglected and ill-used. . . . “I am so ill I can hardly speak. I have not seen a creature the whole morning. . . . I do not think I ever was so ill in my life as I have been all this morning—very unfit to be left alone, I am sure.” (57)

When Mary does not get enough attention, she finds herself to be physically sick. Her complaints are a forceful (and grating) Rousseauian reminder that the passions are a matter of

56. Emma's father, Mr. Woodhouse, is of course a close second, as are a number of the characters in *Sanditon*. On hypochondria in Austen, see D.A. Miller, “The Late Jane Austen,” *Raritan* 10 (1990).

sociality, and that language speaks not to physical needs but to emotional ones. Mary has gained what her sister Elizabeth longs for: a titled, wealthy, and landed husband; her life has been written into the Baronetage for all to read. Yet her social needs remain unmet. It is crucial that *Persuasion* stresses the inadequacy of the narrative plot the Baronetage endorses in generating functional social relations. Instead of being happy at her success, Mary is peevisish and fretful, and turns her in fact capacious imaginative facility wholly over to fancied illnesses.

In some ways the novel's account of Mary's hypochondria seems to prefigure Freud's. Hypochondria, according to Freud, is a close cousin of narcissism. The hypochondriac, faced with excitations in the psyche that cannot be directed toward outside objects, turns them onto the body, supposing it to be sick.⁵⁷ (The narcissist, on the other hand, turns these excitations onto his or her own ego.) The reason some impulses must be quashed is what Freud came to call the "reality principle," the fact that social constraints sometimes force us to defer or deny pleasures.⁵⁸ In hypochondria, eroticism is first displaced onto the hypochondriac's body, when it cannot be directed toward someone else's. As the tension of this displacement mounts, the relocated excitation comes to feel less like pleasure and more like illness. The "reality" that denies object-oriented placement of libidinal excitation is synonymous with social reality. In the case of Mary, her proper and successful marriage have blocked her from the social interactions that would fulfill her physiological, sensual, social needs for interactions with others. Relegated to "conjugal & maternal affections," she is also consigned to a misfiring libido. What her hypochondria offers Mary, given that the narrative of marriage into landed gentry has failed to relieve her of unhappiness, is a new narrative of the "neglected and ill-used" wife. Through this also culturally condoned narrative, she achieves a height of *self*-pity, if nothing more. Thus it seems that Austen's account of hypochondria here also adumbrates what Freud's does not mention: that what seems a personal failure and individual source of distress is a result of the impossibility of desire in an era that equates desire with property. Ethical consideration of the other is likewise stunted.

Indeed, although Mary's fancy manufactures her own infirmities again and again, she has not the reflection to see the real sufferings of others. When she lets slip to Anne that Wentworth has suggested that Anne looks "so altered he should not have known you again," the narrator comments on Mary's lack of sympathy. "Mary had no feelings to make her respect her sisters in a common way" (81). *Persuasion* thus relates culturally misdirected routes of excitation to the demise of sympathy. The reflective capacity that language allows for does offer Mary an outlet for her unhappiness, through displacing it onto an imagined construction of her own body; yet like Sir Walter and Elizabeth, Mary only further enmeshes herself, in this practice, in the property relations that structure her social world. Focused on the image of her doubled self, her chief contact with others becomes her exhortation that they believe this fancied vision of herself. Through the novel's representation of Mary, we see one reason why marriage might strike Austen as such a profound loss.

One thing hypochondria and concomitant property relations offer Mary, however, is a kind of physical self-ownership, otherwise seldom dramatized in Austen's works. By so insistently publicizing her body, Mary demands that others recognize it as her own, in what might in other circumstances or contexts resemble a feminist victory. However, the ills of

57. Sigmund Freud, "On Narcissism: An Introduction," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1968).

58. Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1968).

private property seem here to trump the liberation implied by female self-ownership. Moreover, Mary understands her body as a burden, insistently entreating others to take responsibility for it.

Anne's immediate family thus offers an illustration of the woes inherent in Enlightenment rationality, as Rousseau diagnoses it: each member of this small group suffers as a result of the various ownership relationships they inhabit, and each attempts to attest to this suffering through their connection to various narratives. For Sir Walter and Elizabeth it is "the book of books" that makes up the language of testimony; Mary, already having exhausted that book's succor, invests in the plaintive story of tragedy-struck, ailing wife. These various attempts only enmesh the three further in the narrative structures and taxonomies that produced their suffering in the first place. Such suffering is endemic in *Persuasion*. To add to the general feeling of misery, we enter the novel just as this family of three has realized the full extent of the financial crisis that has been looming over them. Yet it is clear that these sufferers do not have equal status; the despairs of Anne's family are consistently presented in the narrative as little more than fatuous expressions of greed, vanity, and ennui, while Anne's are taken at least somewhat more seriously, if not entirely.

Anne and Pain

Many of the sources of Anne's pain are the same as her sisters: like Elizabeth, she is unmarried at an age by which she should have children, and she has been disappointed in love; like Mary she is ignored socially. (For instance, when Anne plays piano at the Musgroves', "She knew that when she played she was giving pleasure only to herself; but this was no new sensation" (67).) Anne does not respond, however, with the narcissism or hypochondria that disqualify her sisters for sympathy, nor with the vanity that make her father a conceited fool and likewise unsympathetic. Rather, she remains kinder and more generous than her family, yet she is not entirely sympathetic as a character—"You may *perhaps* like the Heroine," Austen told Fanny, "as she is almost too good for me."⁵⁹ As Austen's comment leaves unsurprising, in portraying Anne's goodness, *Persuasion* also permits room for the reader to withhold sympathy from this character, as Austen herself admits to doing. Moreover, Anne, like her family, does not always produce impeccable sympathy for others. Yet she is different. To understand Anne's alternate response to her sorrows, we might recall Rousseau's enlightenment human, "turn[ed] in upon himself," isolated, saying, "in secret, at the sight of a suffering man, 'Perish if you will; I am safe and sound.'" Rousseau attributes human self-centeredness to reason ("Reason is what engenders egocentrism, and reflection strengthens it."), arguing that the person exposed to the ills of rational society will become closed to others and incapable of the kind of responsiveness to the other that is sympathy; also recall that for Rousseau desire and passion are a result of imagination. I would like to suggest that Anne's differences from her sisters involve a divergent response to rational society, and, briefly, a distinct method of relating to others.

The part of rational society that Anne refuses is the social order with which her family is so concerned; she declines to make her public image a priority and falls in love with Wentworth, a moneyless navy man, "a stranger without alliance and fortune" (47). After her first disappointment with Wentworth, she resigns herself to being unmarried. Unlike her father and sisters, she is uninterested in titles, wealth, and normative marital success, and worries less about appearing wealthy than about appearing kind and ethical. For example, she retains her friendship

59. Le Faye, ed., *Jane Austen's Letters*, 335.

with the widowed and poor Mrs. Smith, in spite of her father and Elizabeth's horror that she would keep company with someone of such a lower class.⁶⁰

We have seen that Elizabeth and Mary protect themselves from their unfulfillable needs through refocusing their energies on themselves, through narcissism and hypochondria. If Anne's needs are likewise unfulfilled, her quietly oppositional stance to the cultural mores she was brought up to live by leave her to forge her own alternate stance to sociality; she suffers more,⁶¹ but is treated with a measure of narratorial sympathy unshared by her family. It is not, importantly, anywhere in discourse that Anne finds an escape from suffering. One of the rare occasions Anne attempts to resort to the written word to contend with her feelings is on a walk with Wentworth and others,⁶² on which she knows she will be miserable. She tells herself:

Her *pleasure* in the walk must arise from the exercise and the day . . . and from repeating to herself some few of the thousand poetical descriptions extant of autumn . . . She occupied her mind as much as possible in such like musings and quotations; but it was not possible that when within reach of Captain Wentworth's conversation with either of the Miss Musgroves, she should not try to hear it. (104)

As Adela Pinch points out, this attempt to resort to literature fails just as all the others do, in producing any alleviation of affect.⁶³ Turn as Anne might from the Baronetage to the alternate discourses of romanticism, she finds that discourse tout court fails to speak to her emotional miseries. Yet it should be noted that Anne is turning not to the types of novelistic narrative that Austen's letter to Fanny or her family's habits suggest are the key to pleasure. Anne rejects these, it seems, for the discrete images of autumn supplied by pastoral verse, yet another rejection of the rational discourses she is taught will save her. While the latter is duly criticized by both Anne and the novel, the former, with so little cultural resonance, is unlikely to offer the brightening of affect that Anne seeks.

If Anne has a different positionality toward suffering, it is expressed most singularly in her particular relationship to pain, which seems to change in the course of the novel. Early in *Persuasion*, she attempts to commandeer pain's sway in her life. She effects this less by egocentrically retraining her attentions onto her self as her family members do, and more by trying to close herself to pain's force. When her father and sister fail to invite her to Bath, where

60. D.A. Miller notes about Mrs. Smith that she is "a sort of Anne without a conventional happy ending, but helps keep us envisioning Anne without one, too." Miller, *Jane Austen, or, The Secret of Style*, 73.

61. Such is the consequence Nietzsche predicts for breaking away from the norm. See the introduction of Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989); Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense," in *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870s*, ed. Daniel Breazeale (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1979).

62. Anne also spends a considerable amount of time, according to the narrator, advising Captain Benwick on the works of theology that he should read to soothe his broken heart. In the end, however, she fears that "like many other great moralists and preachers, she had been eloquent on a point in which her own conduct would ill bear examination." There seems here again to be an admission that the non-narrative discourses to which she thinks one should turn fail even Anne, though her good sense tells her they should not. Again Anne's "eloquence" is circumspect.

63. Adela Pinch, *Strange Fits of Passion: Epistemologies of Emotion, Hume to Austen* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 157.

they are moving, the narrator reports that Anne is little slighted: “Anne herself was become hardened to such affronts” (54). Or, when Wentworth has rejoined her society and she must be in his presence repeatedly, this experience “was a new sort of trial to Anne’s nerves. She found, however, that it was one to which she must inure herself. . . . she must teach herself to be insensible on such points” (72). Or when Mary reports to Anne Wentworth’s cruel assessment of the fading aspect seven years’ separation (and as many years of gloom) has had on Anne’s looks, she deliberates: “‘So altered that he should not have known her again!’ These were words which could not but dwell with her. Yet she soon began to rejoice that she had heard them. They were of sobering tendency; they allayed agitation; they composed, and consequently must make her happier.” (81) In all of these instances, Anne industriously attempts to close herself off to pain’s effects; the novel suggests that this has been her *modus operandi* since her earlier romance with Wentworth ended. And more even than just shutting pain out, Anne in each instance seems to turn her anxiety—“agitation,” “nerves”—into a granite, sober affect that she claims to associate with “happiness,” though it may seem to many readers redolent instead of deep melancholy.

Though Anne does not resort to the egocentric spectacles she is so accustomed to trying to ignore in her family, her behavior should still be considered on a parallel plane with her family’s. Just as her father and sisters close off the play of sameness and difference needed for fellow feeling for an other, so too does Anne effect such a closure through her self-barring from pain. At the same time, however, she seals herself from desire, pleasure, and sympathy. In this portrait of a developing psyche resisting the incursion of others, Austen again curiously prefigures Freud. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud pictures the psyche as an “undifferentiated vesicle,” an organism that must rapidly become callused to the barrage of stimuli that assails it from outside.⁶⁴ The organism must in response close in on itself, shutting out the contact with the other that produced the possibility of suffering in the first place. Like Anne early in *Persuasion*, the organism must do so to allay suffering. For Freud, narcissism and all other defenses of the ego are a subset of this closing off of the self from the other; Anne’s acts would therefore fall under the same heading as Sir Walter’s and her sisters’. Figured in biologicistic terms, this reflex appears to Freud as inevitable, and as one of the ways humans protect themselves from trauma. Anxiety, for instance, is a way of anticipating events so that they will not have the element of surprise that makes a situation traumatic. The subtext of his argument suggests that this spontaneous self-protective movement is also the source of the paucity of ethical responses to the other in humans, in his estimation.⁶⁵ If we are constantly closing ourselves down to outside influence, we are no better than Rousseau’s Enlightenment savage, concerned solely with himself and his property. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud seeks, without success in the end, I would argue, to find just one avenue by which humans might be other-oriented, including the possibility of masochism (“we may be driven to reflect on the mysterious masochistic trends of the ego”⁶⁶). Anne’s responses to pain early in the novel would seem to affirm Freud’s position that even the most selfless-seeming human behavior in the end privileges self over other. Indeed, we see numerous breakdowns of sympathy surrounding Anne’s character throughout *Persuasion*. Yet again the Austenian difference is that *Persuasion* suggests that a different cultural, and gendered, force behind such breakdowns: an awkward concatenation of the physical necessity of property for survival with the inimical status property

64. Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle.”

65. Freud too is responding to historical traumas, of World War I in particular, at the time of writing *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

66. Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” 13-14.

has to the “romance” requires by the only narratives available to women for gaining property creates a situation in which an “open” attitude towards the other is dangerous indeed for a woman.

Of course, at times the sympathy withheld from Anne is that of the narration for her, as Austen’s own attitude may lead us to expect. Anne’s own words become the vehicle for such withholding. Anne for instance states late in the novel that “One does not love a place the less for having suffered in it, unless it has been all suffering, nothing but suffering” (212). Anne’s tendency toward the dramatic use of epistrophe, the repetition of a word at the end of a clause for pathetic effect (“suffering, nothing but suffering”; “the misery of a parting—a final parting” (48)), notably echoes the early description of Elizabeth’s similar refrain of suffering, “thirteen years” etc., which was presented through anaphora, the repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of a clause. This echo is another hint of narratorial defection from unreserved identification with Anne, and for that matter possibly from the seeming stance in the novel about Anne’s suffering. The novel thus occasionally refuses even Anne sympathy, adumbrating and highlighting what I will argue are Anne’s own sympathetic failures. However, at times the narrator seems parallel to, or in league with, Anne’s affective sense of the world. Anne’s epistrophes could be said to be in a synecdochical relationship with the novel’s repeated representations of her sorrows. In presenting both the narrative voice’s absence of feeling for Anne at times and its ability to meld with Anne’s stance, the novel enacts a play of identification and disidentification, privileging identification yet never finally giving sympathy full rein.

Not only does the novel deny full sympathy for Anne, but it also declines to characterize her as a sympathetic being. I have discussed the ways in which Anne’s difference from other characters comes in part from her refusal of the language of rationality to a small, but significant, degree. By renouncing a place in the Baronetage, Anne has also fended off the some of the paucities of passion (narcissism, hypochondria, vanity) that accompany this cultural narrative. Additionally, by turning away from the narrative structures that cripple her family so, she develops a space for their critique. Appearing in their place, however, is not the sympathy Rousseau would most hope for: Anne does achieve a measure of fellow feeling for others, but always with a twist. For instance, when she considers that Wentworth must too experience sorrow at seeing Anne, she concedes he may have feelings—experiences, perhaps, fellow-feeling for another, but denies the depth of his experience: “There must be the same immediate association of thought, though she was very far from conceiving it to be of equal pain” (83). Or in the case of a friend whose fiancé has died, though “the sympathy and goodwill excited towards Captain Benwick was very great,” Anne thinks to herself, “he has not, perhaps, a more sorrowing heart than I have” (118). Here again, Anne’s sympathies for others are measured, just as the narrator’s are for her.

Additionally, as Anne has more and more frequent contact with Wentworth, her powers of fathoming, and sharing, his feelings seem to sharpen, yet the “sympathy” this occasions little resembles the shared suffering by which sympathy is generally characterized. When Anne sees Wentworth thinking about a young man who died in the war, she immediately intuits his derision (assuring herself only she has noticed): “it was too transient an indulgence of self-amusement to be detected by any who understood him less than herself” (87-88); or, later, Anne catches from Wentworth “a contemptuous glance” toward her sister Mary’s nasty snobbery, “which Anne perfectly knew the meaning of” (106); Anne also observes Wentworth’s contempt toward her other sister, Elizabeth, who had snubbed him in the past: “She knew him; she saw disdain in his eye” (256). In all of these cases, as in “true” sympathy, Anne perfectly shares Wentworth’s

feelings. Yet it is as if understanding Wentworth to have a spiteful thought enables Anne to indulge for herself the same ill will. This sympathetic response again operates less to join persons together in mutual assistance and respect, and more to separate Anne from others, in the self-pronouncement of social codes that are as cutting as her sisters', if based on more meritocratic standards. As with the child Rousseau, "sympathetically" flinging rocks at animals, what results from an oppositional response to the violences of one's culture is not an necessarily an especially keen sympathy. It is on the one hand a failure of sympathy perhaps, but on the other hand and more critically, the novel in such instances demonstrates the limitations of the structure of sympathy as it is available in this cultural formation. It is notable in this regard that such interludes are some of the most pleasurable parts of the novel: finally Anne is not alone in her critique; finally she has a partner with which she can share her indignation. And the novel trains the reader in the same critique, so the reader too is invited in to the pleasure of shared discernment.⁶⁷

If Anne's lack of sympathy for others is the result of her attempts to close herself off from the possibility of pain, this may also be interpreted as an attitude towards narrative itself. Representing the closing off of the ego in Austen's work in Freudian terms, D.A. Miller suggests that this stance toward the other is an issue of narration or "narratability": "[T]he novelist's most admirable heroines (Elinor, Fanny, Anne) have practically to be abducted into narratable zones, almost as though the excitement they exerted themselves to defend against were part of a sexual advance. . . . Virtually every event in the novelistic world represents to them some loose, dangerously free-floating energy that must be bound."⁶⁸ For Miller, in question is the eventual closure toward which he argues Austen's novels fiercely and moralistically drive. What is "narratable"—also represented by "the fluctuations of . . . fancy, the capprizios of . . . taste, the contradictions of . . . feelings" that engage Austen's own sympathies for Fanny—is just what must end in order to return to "a state of absolute propriety,"⁶⁹ or what Miller calls "The novelist's ideal—what she calls 'the reality of reason and truth'—. . . a great good place where movement (unless already known and reduced to an iterative mode) is impossible."⁷⁰ If this is Austen's "ideal," she does also allow some degree of exploration of that which evades closure. Even the closely regulated moral world in Austen's novels is, as Miller argues, "never fully or finally governed by [closure]."⁷¹ That is, though narrative closure must rule the novel's end, and the closural binding of the ego also clearly rules Anne's early response to painful affects, there are points at which freedom from such binding rules. What is significant in the light of Miller's argument is that in order to be—if all too briefly—"narratable," what the heroine must avoid at all costs are precisely the narrative forms that are available to her.

Anne and Pleasure

Not only does Anne refuse the dictates of the Baronetage and the seductions of nervous illness, but she also in time seems to curb her tendency stoically to close herself off from pain. Yet this change does not lead to the expansion of sympathy. After all the suffering and pain with which *Persuasion* commences, while sympathy remains a rare enough commodity, exposure to the

67. D. A. Miller's *Jane Austen, or, The Secret of Style* deftly demonstrates the workings of such complex readerly sympathies.

68. D.A. Miller, *Narrative and its Discontents* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 51.

69. *Ibid.*, x.

70. *Ibid.*, 54.

71. *Ibid.*, xiv.

other in the form of pleasure does finally make an appearance for Anne, near the end of the first volume. Its materialization is exemplified in (and in part instigated by) a mundane enough incident of resort town flirtation. While Anne is in Lyme, she encounters a man who she later learns is her cousin, Mr. Elliot:

[A]s they passed, Anne's face caught his eye, and he looked at her with a degree of earnest admiration, which she could not be insensible of. She was looking remarkably well; her very regular, very pretty features, having the bloom and freshness of youth restored by the fine wind which had been blowing on her complexion, and by the animation of eye which it had also produced. It was evident that the gentleman, (completely a gentleman in manner) admired her exceedingly. Captain Wentworth looked round at her instantly in a way which shewed his noticing of it. He gave her a momentary glance, a glance of brightness, which seemed to say, "That man is struck with you, and even I, at this moment, see something like Anne Elliot again."

In this lovely vignette of relayed glances, Austen captures more than just conventional erotic triangulation. Not only is the "bloom and freshness of youth" that signals Anne's sexual attractiveness activated by her acknowledgment of Mr. Elliot's interest (and of Wentworth's awareness of Mr. Elliot's admiration) but we here see that what is uniquely able to provoke intense pleasure in this novel is at a remove from language. It is not the witty banter of mutual understanding, or kind words, but rather largely the visual realm that produces Anne's confident pleasure: Anne sees Mr. Elliot looking at her and then sees that Wentworth has seen the looks exchanged as well. All of this looking and seeing and being seen engenders a physical effect on Anne—her "animation of eye"—and also on Wentworth, whose "glance of brightness" is so luminous that it seems to utter an entire approving epistle to the admiration-intoxicated Anne. While Anne may remain closed to the narrative discursive realms that so drive her family members, a set of corporeal incursions—her reception of glances in this scene—seem to open her to others in a way that she had previously refused.

Anne's earlier closure to others demonstrated that one must be vulnerable to pain in order to realize pleasure, a position that the novel stresses as Anne acknowledges more of her exposure to others. And after pleasure is readmitted into her life, it comes indeed to be remarkably entwined with pain in the novel. Anne for instance states late in the novel that "when pain is over, the remembrance of it often becomes a pleasure" (212). Numerous formulations in the novel suggest indeed the inseparability of seemingly opposed affective experiences: "emotions so compounded of pleasure and pain that she knew not which prevailed" (112); "It was agitation, pain, pleasure, a something between delight and misery" (203); "She was deep in the happiness of such misery, or the misery of such happiness, instantly" (259-260); "I am half agony, half hope" (267). Such juxtapositions suggest instead of opposition of terms, actual reliance of each upon the other: the more emotional pain one is willing to experience in proximity to an other, it seems, the likelier one will be to find pleasure, delight, hope as well. It is important to note that Austen revises Rousseau here in two ways. First, Anne's position clarifies the notion that any affective experience of the other—necessary for ethics in Rousseau's view—necessitates that one *be composed by* the other, to the extent that they may either injure or give delight to one. Secondly, *Persuasion* allows the reader to critique the gendered differentials of such a position: what Rousseau does not consider is how very dangerous such an ethic is for women in particular, who are already legally given over to the other as property. *Persuasion* finally offers a vulnerability to the other that is divorced from narratives of property—and from narrative itself—within Anne's experience of pain, but the novel refuses to ally this intersubjectivity to

sympathy. When Anne drops her protective, melancholic defense to others, her ability to feel for or with their pain in sympathy does not necessarily increase; rather enabled is a capacity to find pleasure in pain. Not having pledged herself to bind psychic energies to ailing cultural narratives, Anne experiences the form of pain that liberates her into new, queered relations to others, developing a psychic morphology that might be called a masochistic sensibility.⁷² This intensifies as Anne's physical proximity to Wentworth increases.

Persuasion dramatizes Anne's newfound sensibility most vividly in what might be considered the shock of the erotic. The moments of most intense shock in *Persuasion* each occur in the encounters between Anne and Wentworth that progressively cement their recaptured love, of which there are several. In the first instance, Wentworth assists Anne with an unruly child who insists on clinging to Anne:

In another moment, however, she found herself in the state of being released from [the boy]; some one was taking him from her . . . and he was resolutely borne away before she knew that Captain Wentworth had done it. Her sensations on the discovery made her perfectly speechless. She could not even thank him. She could only hang over little Charles, with most disordered feelings. His kindness in stepping forward to her relief—the manner—the silence in which it had passed—the little particulars of the circumstance—with the conviction soon forced on her, by the noise he was studiously making with the child, that he meant to avoid hearing her thanks, and rather sought to testify that her conversation was the last of his wants, produced such a confusion of varying, but very painful agitation, as she could not recover from (100-101)

Here Anne is so startled by Wentworth's act that she is sensorially overwhelmed and deprived of words. It is physical touch that effects this state: the moment Wentworth comes into contact with Anne's body to move the child, Anne's typically controlled discursive stance disappears. She instead *finds herself* in a physical state she has not herself chosen, moved by another whose approach is so surprising that Anne experiences a breakdown, both of perception, and of the language to describe what she has perceived. That Anne's response to Wentworth's touch might be described as one of trauma is patent. Freud defines trauma as "any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield [of the organism]. . . . a breach in an otherwise efficacious barrier against stimuli."⁷³ Until this moment Anne has presented a far more solid barrier against pain—remember that "Anne herself was become hardened"—but against the erotic surprise of Wentworth's physical incursion into that barrier she has no defense. The shock of the erotic—that which most intimately conflates pain and pleasure—is what exposes the limits of language, for Anne as for Rousseau. Anne moreover apprehends, in a halting series of sentence fragments, that Wentworth too has been struck silent, though the reader may not know whether by the sheer sensuality of this encounter or by his perception of a maternal Anne whom he might someday possess, along with her corporeal proceeds. Removed from the purview of language by an accidental touch, Anne, if not Wentworth as well, is momentarily also outside the limitations of the cultural narrative toward which she seems to march, instead finding herself inside a sensation of the other's presence for which her language

72. Deleuze and Guattari discuss this potentiality of pain in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1987); Deleuze expands on it in Gilles Deleuze, "Coldness and Cruelty," in *Masochism* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), which this chapter discusses briefly below.

73. Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," 29.

has no name. This masochistic sensibility is the most complete intersubjectivity the novel illustrates.

Anne does return, however, to the linguistic self-command that has briefly abandoned her: “She was ashamed of herself, quite ashamed of being so nervous, so overcome by such a trifle; but so it was; and it required a long application of solitude and reflection to recover her” (101). In other words, after this experience, she diligently reverts to the binding mechanism and aloneness with which she has been accustomed to seal out painful external incursions. What is enabled in the moment between Anne and Wentworth is thus not sympathy, which according to Rousseau would require a more sustained and more linguistically centered fellow feeling—indeed, Anne immediately withdraws into herself and considers only how to curtail her own distress. Instead of sympathy, it is sensuality that has been produced, the physical medium of the passions which according to Rousseau has otherwise been drowned out by the strains of rational discourse. Unlike sympathy, sensuality must only have a momentary effect; it is confined to the temporal boundaries of the event rather than residing in the imagination or in the capacity for reflection. It is shock which enables Anne’s encounter with the passions, as it was for Rousseau, as if the operation of being dislodged entirely from rational discourse requires a certain violence.

Another wordless physical interchange suggests again the intersubjectivity possible within masochistic exchanges. On the same walk on which Anne has failed to find consolation in poetry, she shortly becomes physically exhausted from walking. She demurs when asked to join the members of the party riding in the carriage, when:

Captain Wentworth, without saying a word, turned to her, and quietly obliged her to be assisted into the carriage. Yes—he had done it. She was in the carriage, and felt that he had placed her there, that his will and his hands had done it, that she owed it to his perception of her fatigue, and his resolution to give her rest. . . . it was a proof of his own warm and amiable heart, which she could not contemplate without emotions so compounded of pleasure and pain that she knew not which prevailed” (111-112).

Wentworth’s maneuver is wordless as well as quiet—physical perception momentarily eclipses language in its capacity to disclose others’ sensibilities. He does not ask Anne if she is tired, but rather perceives her fatigue as sensually as she then receives his gesture. “Yes—he had done it.” The em-dash indicates shock in Austen’s prose as appreciably as exclamation points, and operates in this passage to point to another moment of speechlessness on Anne’s part, her wordless response to Wentworth’s physical proximity, to his touch—his hands, and to the way his perception of and benevolent incursion into her physical state has overridden linguistic modes of communication. Even moments later when Anne has composed herself enough for contemplation, the emotions that arise are a cacophony of pleasure and pain, but enable her to realize that “he could not see her suffer without the desire of giving her relief” (111). Masochistic sensibility reigns, again briefly, showing here the way in which it seems to make possible a kind of feeling for and *in* the other that otherwise in *Persuasion* appears impaired. Again Anne must will herself back into the narrative of her cultural surroundings, but not until she has druggedly allowed the moment to linger: “Her answers to the kindness and the remarks of her companions were at first unconsciously given. They had traveled half their way along the rough lane before she was quite awake to what they said” (112). Just as the state of sleep suspends us, in Freud’s view, from the reality principle, and allows us to live out in our dreams

what is forbidden in reality, so too does Anne's shocked state here suspend Anne in her sensual, pleasurable, pain.⁷⁴

The final scene of the novel in which shock is central also begins to reveal why the masochistic sensibility cannot be sustained or maximized for its potentially other-orienting effect. At this point in the novel Anne has begun to realize that she may have a chance of marrying Wentworth after all. She is no longer here the faded and forlorn creature we first see tidily and assiduously stitching her psychic surface to avert woes, but has bloomed again, in part through the shocked sensuality that has once again given her hope. Yet rather than creating for her a more permanent exit from the narratives it was helping her escape, what it has also allowed her, it seems, late in the novel, is a more efficient and culturally scripted mode of response. Waiting for a carriage in Bath one day when Wentworth is believed to be out of town, she "descried, most decidedly and distinctly, Captain Wentworth walking down the street":

Her start was perceptible only to herself; but she instantly felt that she was the greatest simpleton in the world, the most unaccountable and absurd! For a few minutes she saw nothing before her. It was all confusion. She was lost; and when she had scolded back her senses, she found the others still waiting for the carriage . . . He was more obviously struck and confused by the sight of her than she had ever observed before; he looked quite red. For the first time, since their renewed acquaintance, she felt that she was betraying the least sensibility of the two. She had the advantage of him, in the preparation of the last few moments. All the overpowering, blinding, bewildering, first effects of strong surprise were over with her. (202-3)

As before, Anne is shocked into insensibility, this time by the mere spectacle of Wentworth's physical presence. Unexpectedly appearing where he shouldn't be, Wentworth again imposes his body on Anne in a startling way. Yet before she has even fully experienced this shock, she reprimands herself: she is "the greatest simpleton in the world, the most unaccountable and absurd!"—as if hearing what her sister Elizabeth might say about her "start." Though Anne then returns to her fugue state, momentarily bereft of understanding, she soon again restores her senses and re-channels the self-reproach, "scold[ing] back her senses." While Anne has achieved a measure of self-control again, through this superegoic self-chiding, it is more remarkably Wentworth this time who is evidently "struck." Anne, quickly recovered, discerns that Wentworth's shock is great. Though she still considers the fact of Wentworth's physicality in her vicinity unpleasurably exciting in the intense tension it inspires, Anne's agitation is clearly mitigated by the awareness of Wentworth's own response to her presence. She perceives that "She had the advantage of him" because of this, and instead of pure shock—"the overpowering, blinding, bewildering, first effects of strong surprise"—this time she feels "delight" and "pleasure" alongside the excitation that upsets her.

Although these are indeed the same "delight" and "pleasure" of sensuality, with which this chapter has characterized Anne's previous spaces of masochistic sensibility, this time they also bear a trace of *Schadenfreude*. Anne finally has a measure of control over her experience, encouraged, no doubt, by the incipience of her entrance into a more culturally condoned narrative order. Just as the voice of reason disrupts the pure masochism of this scene, urging

74. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey (New York: HarperCollins, 1998). Again Austen seems in this to adumbrate some of Freud's psychic economies—here in the workings of a type of unconscious principle—but attributes them more to the a cultural domain in which gender difference and literal economic forces play a far larger role.

Anne to shake off her shock and trauma, so too has the voice of reason—in the name of a possible marriage—started to impinge on Anne’s consciousness, with a force far greater than Wentworth’s unsanctioned physical proximity could ever thwart. She seems here to have mastered the stimuli that earlier had overwhelmed her; instead of the seeming masochism of the juxtaposition of pleasure and pain, Anne’s difficulties diminish in the face of another’s. That is, masochism transforms almost into sadism once Anne realizes her own capacity to strike Wentworth to the extent he has “struck” her. This is a triumphant moment for Anne’s self-possession, and thus paradoxically and unavoidably a moment of female triumph over male possession just as Anne is about to take Wentworth’s name, become legally his property. As Rousseau makes clear, and as Anne’s family members verify, even such an abstract form of ownership as “self-possession” is part and parcel of the ills of private property, and thus stands in the way of ethical passions. The vulnerability and pleasure of masochistic sensibility are thwarted by the necessity of all-too-brief self-avowal, with which *Persuasion* figures Anne’s accession of womanhood—the only kind of womanhood that merits that title, which is marriage.

Adela Pinch points out, similarly, that Anne’s response to trauma shifts in the course of *Persuasion*: “As the novel progresses, Anne’s moments of shock and inundation increasingly take a typically sublime turn: a trauma from without is parried and inverted to become part of a power within.”⁷⁵ Anne has indeed begun by the end of the novel to produce a powerful resistance to the outside world, as Pinch suggests. Not only has she retained her ability to bind unpleasurable excitations, but she has also developed a manner with which to combat the pleasure-pain intrusions that throw her so thoroughly. Such resistance is formed, as it must be, discursively, through the only modes of language that will enable her to function in her social setting. That is, such power and sublimity are the ambivalent ethical stance that characterizes what I see as the position toward Anne’s suffering with which the novel concludes. By the end, Wentworth’s sensual advances must be foreclosed as much as any other infiltration or wound, in order for Anne to exist happily beyond the painful-pleasurable moment. Pinch again:

Persuasion dramatizes the position of the woman as knower in the novel of manners by presenting us with a heroine who seems to resist knowing what she doesn’t already know, and who experiences knowledge of others’ wishes and desires as a form of oppressive persuasion. If eighteenth-century writers suggested that the name for the state of knowing someone else’s feelings was ‘sympathy,’ Austen suggests here that it may feel more like persuasion.⁷⁶

There is no viable route to sympathy *or* pleasure, finally; all considerations or experiences of the other are too close to injury. In the end, anything that invites exposure to the other presents for the young woman too compounded an experience of being given over, which is already so thoroughly her position as it is. Knowledge, sensuality, sympathy are all in the end too unsafe. If rational discourse is what poisoned the waters of passion, it is also the only possible antidote to its own toxin.

It is thus unsurprising that when finally Wentworth screws up the courage to declare his love to Anne, once again, it is in a letter. He writes:

I can listen no longer in silence. I must speak to you by such means as are within my reach. You pierce my soul. I am half agony, half hope. . . . For you alone I think and plan. —Have you not

75. Pinch, *Strange Fits of Passion*, 155.

76. *Ibid.*, 145.

seen this? Can you fail to have understood my wishes? I had not waited even these ten days, could I have read your feelings, as I think you must have penetrated mine. I can hardly write. I am every instant hearing something which overpowers me. . . . A word, a look will be enough to decide whether I enter your father's house this evening, or never. (267-268)

In the course of the development of Anne's consciousness, Wentworth has come to seem progressively more susceptible to pain, as this letter attests. He suspects—correctly—that Anne has knowledge of his love for her, but professes his own blindness about her feelings. She has successfully concealed her passions. In line with the distance this concealment suggests, what was once the couple's unmediated sensuality is now relegated to the written word. Rousseau claims that just as scientific language robs us of passion, so too, especially, does writing: "Writing, which would seem to crystallize language, is precisely what alters it. It changes not the words but the spirit, substituting exactitude for expressiveness."⁷⁷ Though it would be hard to claim Wentworth's romantic letter is inexpressive, it is vital to note the way the letter changes the tone of passion. Physicality is reduced in it to metaphors of rationality: Wentworth opposes "silence" with the written word, understands "speech" to reside in the letter, and feelings are to his mind things that are "read." Within such figural transformations, love itself comes to resemble not the speechless sensation of one body's surprising impingement upon another, but rather the formalized procedure codified as a marriage proposal, which is what Wentworth hopes and predicts will be the result of his missive. *Persuasion* thus charts the transformation of masochistic sensibility into contract law.

Masochism and Narrative

A utopian sensuality momentarily balances on the precipice in *Persuasion* between civilization and its discontents, but to preserve a fragile ethical system, civilization and thus disembodiment must win out. Giles Deleuze suggests that masochism is the dream of an ethic that breaks away from the phallus and allows for mutual human respect untainted by a constant sense of threat from without, while sadism clings desperately to the old order of phallic hegemony and the control of the superego. He writes, "Masochism is a story that relates how the superego was destroyed and by whom, and what was the sequel to this destruction."⁷⁸ The masochistic sentiment in *Persuasion* begins to fulfill such a mandate. Through her rejection of some of the discourses of rationality that suffuse her social circle, Anne has the psychic capacity to experience a sensuality that is normally barred, within the wordless immediacy of pain. Anne also rejects aristocratic values, defies authority figures, and befriends people below her station, all attitudes that would seem to comprise the destruction of the superegoic function of her culture, or, as I have discussed it until now, the rejection of rational discourses. She seems to be in a perfect position to enact the kind of masochistic ethic that might allow for Austen to have given us in her final work a sense of optimism about humanity that so many critics and readers have evidently found in *Persuasion*. Yet the only narrative form that will allow for Anne's ultimate success—as well as that of the novel—is that which insists she return instead to sharing the contempt and derogation of others that equips the individual for success in a community, the attitude central to the linguistic property relations endemic to the order of marriage to which she eventually accedes. "Sadism also tells a story," Deleuze writes. The story sadism tells is almost transposable to a story of all of phallic culture, all of the normative Oedipus complex. Rather

77. Rousseau, "Essay on the Origin of Languages," 21.

78. Deleuze, "Coldness and Cruelty."

than entering marriage as a Masoch-ian contract by which power structures are called into question, Anne's concluding marriage effects the shoring up of institutional power: "She gloried in being a sailor's wife, but she must pay the tax of quick alarm for belonging to that profession which is, if possible, more distinguished in its domestic virtues than in its national importance" (283). Anne has rejoined the fold in this last line of the novel, acceded to the grasp of her community so much that her marriage constitutes an enlistment into military force. In return she gets glory, if at the price of more potential for loss in the culture of violence and war whose name she has taken. As Adela Pinch puts it, "For Anne, there is no falling out of quotation."⁷⁹

For Anne, that is, there is no option of an alternative narrative or script. Just as Austen predicts for Fanny, the ethical incapacities that accompany the normative sexual script are very nearly unavoidable, much as one may temporarily experience their delightful suspension. *Persuasion* seems to act thus as a powerful sublimation of Austen's asseveration to Fanny, "I shall hate you." What the novel revises from Austen's own letters, however, is the hope that narrative in any form would allow for intersubjectivity: for Anne it is only in brief moments of antinarrativity that the form of intersubjectivity that is sensual pleasure—that is, in this case masochistic sensibility—is to be found.

And the great novelist thus chooses narrative, for what choice does she, any more than Fanny or Anne, have but to accede to the power of iteration, as mired in modern ills as it may be? Yet it should not be forgotten what she produced in the process; D.A. Miller reminds us, as does Barthes, that conclusions do not fully cordon off meaning.⁸⁰ In Anne's developmental trajectory toward the inevitable future, she experiences a palpable queerness in her suspended pleasures. While this temporary girlhood queerness defies and rejects the logic of sympathy in which her ethical culture is suffused, it accesses an even more potent (if less caring for the other) exposure to the other, a vulnerability to which "sympathy" as such has no access. To Rousseau's notion of Enlightenment paucity of feeling, Austen therefore adds the deficiencies presented by gender's part in the culture of private property, as well as the way in which a particular sort of *narrative* usage of language partakes in this culture. To Freud, whom Austen's psychologies at times curiously prefigure, Austen also presents the extent to which it is in fact necessary to consider the forces of a culture of private property within individual psychology. And finally, to Deleuze's assessment of masochism, *Persuasion* presents a gendered double-bind.⁸¹ In her final completed novel, Austen gives the reader, in the girl, a vexed queer ethic, along the way carefully delineating the reasons that it evades care for the other as much as she demonstrates why it may not be confused with futurity.

79. Pinch, *Strange Fits of Passion*, 163.

80. Miller, *Narrative and its Discontents*; Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974).

81. This also pertains to Deleuze and Guattari's notion of becoming-woman, which considered in this sense does not sufficiently take account of the hegemonic force of iteration. See Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, chapter 10.

Chapter 2
The Will to Queer Futurity in *Middlemarch*:
Dorothea, Casaubon, and Eliot

Like many characters in nineteenth century British novels, Dorothea Brooke of *Middlemarch* receives an unpleasant surprise in a will: her deceased husband, Edward Casaubon, has added a codicil that prevents Dorothea from inheriting anything from him should she ever marry Will Ladislaw, Casaubon's nephew. While Dorothea is financially comfortable enough to sustain the potential loss of support, Casaubon's postscript casts a public shade on her relationship with Ladislaw, as well as private shame. Dorothea learns of the addendum from her sister, Celia, who does her best to cheer Dorothea up after the news:

“What I think, Dodo,” Celia went on, observing nothing more than that Dorothea was leaning back in her chair, and likely to be passive, “is that Mr. Casaubon was spiteful. I never did like him, and James never did. I think the corners of his mouth were dreadfully spiteful. And now he has behaved in this way, I am sure religion does not require you to make yourself uncomfortable about him. If he has been taken away, that is a mercy, and you ought to be grateful. We should not grieve, should we, baby?” said Celia confidentially to that unconscious centre and poise of the world, who had the most remarkable fists all complete even to the nails, and hair enough, really, when you took his cap off, to make—you didn't know what:— in short, he was Bouddha in a Western form.¹

Celia's best effort at consolation is by no means surprising, coming from this very silly and superficial sister of the far more earnest and thoughtful Dorothea: breezily suggesting to her bereaved and shaken sister that Casaubon is really better off dead—and that it is his physiognomy that proves his unworthiness, Celia quickly moves on to her favorite topic, the brilliance of her infant son. While the digressiveness of her train of thought in part simply reflects Celia's frivolous style, there is also an internal logic to the trajectory of her ideas, one that is indicative of an ethical problem at the heart of *Middlemarch*. Celia moves deliberately from a discussion of the dead scholar, whose impotent, dry, and unpleasant character makes his death “a mercy,” to a consideration of what would seem to be his opposite, the new and lively product of her fecundity, the son whose perfection is complete and whose future is assured. Celia's values, it would seem, tend toward the esteem of reproductivity and its products, and anything—such as the ungenerative Casaubon—that seems to suspend this form of being is unworthy of existence and a loss one need not grieve. The ethical problem thus inherent to this is that valuing life in one set of circumstances would sanction giving thanks for its premature end in another. Yet at the same time, the shifting point of view enabled by Eliot's brand of free indirect discourse introduces doubt into any asseveration of the novel's position.

This chapter argues that *Middlemarch* uses such seeming contradictions to articulate its own troubled ethic. The question of whose future should be secured and whose future need not matter is at the heart of the novel's ethical conundrum. Celia's high regard of reproduction is not shared by other characters or by the novel, which is clear in Dorothea's own lukewarm response

1. George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (New York: Norton, 1977), 340. Page numbers will hereafter appear in parentheses in the text.

to this adored child, but Celia's negation of Casaubon in order to pronounce the higher worth of another form of life is somewhat of a parody of the novel's own use of denunciation of this character to articulate another view of futurity. And the novel achieves this denunciation in large part through Dorothea, who, like Jane Austen's characters, must go through a developmental trajectory that traces her attempt to forge a personal ethic of relationality within the confines of her socio-historical position. That the ethic—and the sense of futurity—she eventually creates veer substantially from heteronormativity is unsurprising for the very queer author that Eliot was; however, that this ethic also relies for its foundation upon the sacrifice of another form of queerness, represented by Casaubon, is remarkable and has been virtually ignored by critical deliberations on this novel.

This chapter considers, and to a good degree allies itself with, the deconstructive line of critique of *Middlemarch* that emerged in the 1970s, which finds at the heart of Eliot's work a crisis of authorship. What I add to this discussion is the notion that *Middlemarch* explicitly aligns this crisis with sexual politics, showing how queer ethics and futurity are added by the difficulty of coping in the face of what we have come to call the death of the author—God may have been killed, as Nietzsche said, but “Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us?”² The one way *Middlemarch* locates to contend with this crisis of in this case narratorial authority while still maintaining an ethic is through a queerness that negates the queer.

Whereas Austen portrays the conflation of private property, romance, and sympathy as rendering queer futural ethics impossible, Eliot reveals through Dorothea the possibility of a queer futural ethic, but one that is severely mitigated. Through Dorothea, the novel reviews three forms of futurity: reproduction, writing, and inheritance. In a 1866 letter to an admiring American feminist, Harriet Melusina Fay Peirce, Eliot revealed a fascinating relationship to the first two of these. In this letter, she uses pregnancy and childbirth as a metaphor for the writing process, in answer to her correspondent's effusive suggestion that writing must be a gratifying and self-fulfilling process for Eliot: “My consciousness is not of the triumphant kind your generous joy on my behalf leads you to imagine. Exultation is a dream before achievement, and rarely comes after. What comes after, is rather the sense that the work has been produced within one, like offspring, developing and growing by some force of which one's own life has only served as a vehicle, and that what is left of oneself is only a poor husk.”³ Eliot's unromantic view of reproduction is clear here: rather than using the childbearing metaphor as an idealized view of the mother as the productive and creative household divinity who might be capable of spawning an infantine Buddha, Eliot figures procreation as a form of parasite hosting.⁴ What is produced is less a deity than a bloodsucking creature, and the party so often figured as active in this proposal is a mere “husk,” an unwitting host. While unlike in true parasitism, a child falls into the same species as its mother, Eliot's emphasis indeed seems to be on the disconnection

2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 181.

3. Rosemarie Bodenheimer, *The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans: George Eliot, Her Letters and Fiction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 162.

4. Of course Eliot was not alone in her skepticism about the role of the procreator. Queen Victoria even wrote in 1858 to her oldest daughter, “What you say of the pride of giving life to an immortal soul is very fine, dear, but I own I cannot enter into that; I think much more of our being like a cow or a dog at such moments.” Roger Fulford, ed., *Dearest Child: Letters between Queen Victoria and the Princess Royal, 1858-1861* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964), 115.

between these two beings, and the agency implied in the active force of the being who is born, over and above that of its putative maker.⁵

What is equally interesting is that writing should fall into the same category for Eliot: the invention involved in this process evidently resembles for her the same unencouraged inhabitation by a greedy foreign body with which she figures reproduction. Just as a child is conceived of some elements foreign to the body that carries it, so too are a share of the materials that go into the making of a novel gleaned from outside its author. Either being, textual or biological, then takes on a life of its own, leaving its bearer. In articulating reproduction and writing in this way, Eliot undermines the narcissistic attachment that so often accompanies either of these endeavors. In a way, one could say that Eliot thereby “queers” both, in that she radically divorces these activities from the typical paternal and maternal self-satisfaction with which they are generally depicted (and one only need to look as far as Harold Bloom to see how much writing is supposed to be a heterosexually futural form⁶). However, in doing so she does not seem to redeem them or resignify them towards a potential benefit, but rather to dismiss their usefulness for articulating any sense of the transformation of interpersonal ethics with which I am understanding queer futural ethics. There is instead a breakdown of two typically heteronormative views of futurity, which Eliot figures as personal bereftment rather than “exultation” or relational difference. The subject who procreates or writes ends up a “husk,” an empty and solitary being, reverting into the shattering and lack that supersede entrance into interpersonal connection. This subject trades narcissistic fantasies of futural agency for isolation and emptiness. And as this chapter will discuss, *Middlemarch* demonstrates through its treatment of Casaubon that that this figure of lack and antifuturity is in no way to be valorized or understood as having any power to subvert.⁷

Middlemarch can in fact be read as a test of queer futural ethics, in which progeneration and writing do not satisfy the anti-narcissism and dedication to social relations that the novel sets up as the ultimate ethical goals. However, Eliot’s convictions about the notion of the author as host present an ethical problem by which any establishment of an ethic that can be endorsed even within these scruples nevertheless falls prey to the pitfalls of sovereign individuality. This chapter will first discuss this ethical aporia as it has been presented in criticism of *Middlemarch*, and then will explore the clear connection Eliot draws between it and sexuality, finally moving to a discussion of why *Middlemarch* is constrained to make the ethical concessions it does and how the novel finally presents a somewhat viable queer futurity.

Middlemarch and the Death of the Author

While Eliot does not “queer” reproduction and writing in an ethical or futural sense, she does call into question the conflation of these activities with the triumphant kind of path of individual agency to which, for instance, her character Celia seems to adhere. In this challenge to normative notions of agency, Eliot adumbrates the post-structuralist turn that would a century

5. Metaphors for female procreation frequently carry ideological connotations having to do with lack of agency, so in this Eliot is staying close to normative understandings of reproduction. See Emily Martin, “The Egg and the Sperm: How Science Has Constructed a Romance Based on Stereotypical Male-Female Roles,” *Signs* 16, no. 3 (1991).

6. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

7. For an essay that discusses Mr. Casaubon precisely in these terms, see Sylvie Jougan, “Excès et pénurie dans *Middlemarch*: Le cas de Mr Casaubon,” *Cahiers Victoriens et Édouardiens* 63 (2006).

later proclaim the death of the author, thus joining in the foundations of this mode of thought that were brewing in her own time among its theoretical precursors. In this way calling into question normative understandings of the individual procreative agency of authorship, Eliot also problematizes any straightforward readings of novelistic ethics: can the novel be understood as having an ethical voice? If so, whose voice is it? If there is a kind of life that is valued in the novel, then who is it who is doing the valuing? Would it be possible to claim that there a center from which ethical decisions in the novel emerge?

Certainly in the example of Celia we cannot take young woman's words as the novel's own position. As this quotation makes clear, the narrative consistently derides Celia. She is shallow and unperceptive in her judgments and laughable in her narcissistic worship of her child. And the novel certainly makes a continual and frequently-noted effort to solicit sympathy for Casaubon—famously stressing for instance that even Casaubon “had an equivalent centre of self, whence the lights and shadows must always fall with a certain difference” (146). Or, more to the point of Celia's physiognomic assessment of this man, “In spite of the blinking eyes and white moles objectionable to Celia, and the want of muscular curve which was morally painful to Sir James, Mr. Casaubon had an intense consciousness within him, and was spiritually a-hungred like the rest of us” (192). At times, *Middlemarch* takes great pains, that is, to humanize Casaubon on the level of all of its characters. On the other hand, Celia surely speaks a truth for most readers of the novel. It is in no way radical to suggest that Casaubon's death comes as a relief to even the most sympathetic. When he has his fatal heart attack, Dorothea is on the verge of committing her young life to a promise to further his faulty scholarship beyond his death and in perpetuity; he has up to this moment neglected, ignored, and acted irritably toward Dorothea for most of their apparently-unconsummated marriage; and much of Dorothea's previous ambition and strength of character has been supplanted by despair and depression. Casaubon's death not only saves her from her miserable life with this unhappy man, but also releases her from the impossible decision she must make to be faithful to her husband at the permanent price of her own selfhood and sanity. *Middlemarch* thus gives its readers every reason to relish Casaubon's demise, at the very same time as it cautions us against identifying with the unsympathetic and narrow-minded frivolity that would dare voice such a response. The reader is inducted into the ethical problem the novel presents through this play of sympathies.

Thus if there is an ethical issue inherent to this text, its narrative form moreover compounds the difficulty of locating its source. The reader is confronted in Celia's statement with an ethical hall of mirrors: it is of course technically Eliot who has chosen to kill off her horrible character, in a show of *deus ex machina* that has led Marc Redfield to posit Eliot herself as the cruel perpetrator of this act;⁸ likewise, Celia rejoices in his death, as may the reader; and with Casaubon's demise, there is now room for new and less objectionable life, in the person of Celia's sainted baby.⁹ On the other hand, the narrator has previously asked us over and over to sympathize with Casaubon; Celia is conversely a figure of scorn who motivates substandard sympathy; and Dorothea herself, as we shall see, rejects Celia's reverence for reproduction much along the same lines as Eliot. Yet Casaubon is also treated as unsympathetic, to the extent that

8. Marc Redfield, *Phantom Formations: Aesthetic Ideology and the Bildungsroman* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 142-6.

9. Note that this is literal: Celia expects Dorothea to redirect her life to maternal duties—the space left by Casaubon should naturally be filled by this new baby, Celia thinks; she is of course, and importantly, wrong, to Dorothea's view.

the novel presents his death as one that no one need necessarily mourn.¹⁰ Finally, the novel seems to punish nonreproductivity, in the form of Casaubon, at the same time as it mocks the baby-having enterprise in the form of Celia. That is all to suggest that *Middlemarch* offers few clues as to how one might interpret its own presentation of ethics or agency, much as these matters play a central role in Eliot's thought throughout her oeuvre.¹¹ Instead it gives the reader opportunities to experience the same confusion of sympathies and antipathies that seems to drive its own narrative voice.¹²

The unlocatable figure of responsibility in *Middlemarch* is in fact at the center of one influential strand of deconstructive considerations of this novel, which nicely articulates the ethical problem Eliot exposes, while refraining from analyzing the sexual coordinates of that ethical quandary. For instance, according to J. Hillis Miller, whose essay "Optic and Semiotic in *Middlemarch*" initiated this theoretical development, the sometimes conflicting families of metaphor that Eliot employs in *Middlemarch* stage the impossibility of narrative objectivity: "The web of interpretative figures cast by the narrator over the characters of the story becomes a net in which the narrator himself is entangled and trapped, his sovereign vision blinded"¹³ *Middlemarch* thus presents, according to Miller's reading, the inability of representation to offer a totalizing view of the world, as well as the collapse of any notion of the narratorial domination suggested by "sovereignty." However, Miller leaves the reader with a collapse more formless than in fact does Eliot.

Neil Hertz followed Miller's essay with a proposal that Eliot struggles in *Middlemarch* between a notion of authorial narcissism and mastery and the idea of authorial "self dispersion" that is "part of a recurrent—sometimes anxious, sometimes masterly—questioning of the grounds of fiction."¹⁴ That is, put into Miller's terms, Eliot slips in *Middlemarch* between understanding the author as a sovereign figure and suspecting that the author is blind, and hardly at the helm of his or her fictional endeavor. While Miller's focus on the narrator is replaced in Hertz's essay by a discussion of the author, both point to a concern Eliot's works manifest that the novel does not offer a space of ethical agency, nor a figure who can be an ethical agent, however ardently her novels advocate the necessity of this property in the human. Yet again, as in Miller's essay, Hertz declines to scrutinize the points at which this ethical breakdown occurs.

Finally, Marc Redfield reiterates Miller and Hertz's claims, writing that in *Middlemarch* Eliot identifies with the sadistic originator of the violent acts in her novels at the same time as

10. For a discussion of how the proscription of mourning operates as a manner of dehumanizing exclusion, see "Melancholy Gender / Refused Identification" in Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

11. On the difficulty of locating the moral position of the narrator in this novel, see Elizabeth Ermarth, "Method and Moral in George Eliot's Narrative," *Victorian Newsletter* 47 (1975); Michael Peled Ginsberg, "Pseudonym, Epigraphs, and Narrative Voice: Middlemarch and the Problem of Authorship," *English Literary History* 47, no. 3 (1980); Richard Poirier, "Middlemarch, Chapter 85," *NCF* 35 (1980); Nina Auerbach, "The Waning George Eliot," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 25, no. 2 (1997); and George Levine, *The Realistic Imagination* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 260-261.

12. It is also this that might drive the classic criticism of this novel, that it too precariously balances caricatures with in-depth portrayals.

13. J. Hillis Miller, "Optic and Semiotic in *Middlemarch*," in *The Worlds of Victorian Fiction*, ed. Jerome H. Buckley (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 144.

14. Neil Hertz, *George Eliot's Pulse* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 25, 28.

she distances herself from such acts through language.¹⁵ For Redfield the upshot of the distancing effect narrative has on agency is to erode sympathy as an ethic. He writes, “Sympathy’s condition of possibility is its own destruction; or, put another way, sympathy’s reiterated, fragile survival occurs thanks to a capacity for error . . . which, in the rhetorical terminology proper to a critique of aesthetics, may be called irony.”¹⁶ The way that sympathy undermines inevitably narcissistic individuality in Eliot’s work, according to this account, also creates a situation of dubious agency and responsibility. So at the same time as sympathy is an indispensable ethical attribute for Eliot, it also unravels the fundamental terms of ethical life—such as responsibility—that it seemed in the first place to produce. Once more leaving off at the breakdown of agency, Redfield offers little analysis of the specific forms which the collapse of ethics into linguistic instability take.

Unmistakably influenced by the idea of the death of the author, this strand of critical interpretations valuably suggests that Eliot’s work is a singular instance of an author’s revelation that her work is not the immaculate product of individual creativity, but rather stands as evidence that such a concept of sovereign subjectivity in creative output is impossible. As Barthes explains such a notion, in a metaphor that echoes Eliot’s metaphorical affinities, “The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture.”¹⁷ Yet as all three critics of Eliot’s work point out, in *Middlemarch* the absence of the sovereign figure is never complete, is always ironic to a certain degree: the narrator or author *is* the figure who makes the sovereign decision, at the same time as the slipperiness of reference that deconstructionist accounts of language posit necessitates that this sovereignty is limited, effaced. In an echo of Nietzsche’s notion that secularism has been tragically incapable of replacing the God which it so eagerly killed, this recognition of the way a sovereign figure lingers even beyond its theoretical demise suggests that the author’s disappearance has somehow come too early. For Miller, Hertz, and Redfield, language is at the center of this unsolvable aporia, which then has ethical effects that also partake of the same irretrievable distance between signifier and signified: if linguistic and narrative conventions problematize consciousness and its origin, then attribution of moral responsibility is imperiled just as is the capacity of any given word or concept to signify the thing-in-itself.¹⁸

What is useful about these critics for this chapter is the way in which they each bring to the surface the problem of the author. They show that while there is an unmistakable ethic articulated systematically throughout Eliot’s work, her novels simultaneously deconstruct the possibility of the authorial center that must necessarily enact this ethic. However, as I have begun to suggest, two issues remain unanswered by these readings: first, what keeps a modicum

15. He adds that in *The Lifted Veil*, she uses “narrative conventions as paradoxes of consciousness”; that is, the main character’s telepathy calls into question whether our thoughts come from inside of us or from outside of us. Redfield, *Phantom Formations*, 142-6, 160.

16. *Ibid.*, 170.

17. Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Image-Music-Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 146.

18. It would be specious to represent the three authors discussed above as producing the same exact form of ethical critique; for each critic the ethical effects of Eliot’s dispersed narratorial center are somewhat different, and only Redfield goes into detail about ethical implications. It should also be noted that *différance* and *écriture* are the unmentioned center of these readings, although Hertz and Redfield seem more de Manian than Derridean. For a discussion of how Eliot’s work fits into deconstruction, see K. M. Newton, “George Eliot and Jacques Derrida: an elective affinity,” *Textual Practice* 23, no. 1 (2009).

of sovereign author-function in place? If it is the case that some form of *différance* unravels subjectivity so much that a generation of critics can agree that the author is dead, then what accounts for this figure's continual haunting of the novel? Foucault's answer is that we rely on the author-function to soothe our fear of rampant proliferation of meaning,¹⁹ but it seems odd that an author so intent on questioning this function, as Eliot is claimed to be, would end up preserving it to such a degree. Second, what motivates the particular forms of ethical collapse that occur, when they do? For instance, while Hertz and Redfield agree that Eliot's ethical system is curtailed particularly within the way in which Casaubon is "exiled" and "exorcised,"²⁰ it is never clear why any one character would warrant such an ethical breakdown more than the others. That Casaubon represents the lack of referentiality of language just begs the question more: why is it *this* character in particular who comes to represent this crisis? This chapter will undertake to answer the latter question first, in order to set the stage for discussing the former. The particularities of the way in which Casaubon is cast out by the novel will help demonstrate the structural effects of this move in the ethical system in place.

Casaubon, Dorothea, and Eliot's Queerness

Mr. Casaubon, Sinthomosexual and Writer

The following sections delineate how depriving Casaubon of a future might be structurally necessary to the novel's establishment of a queer ethic of futurity. This dispossession can also help explain the inescapable sovereign author function of the novel. As Foucault points out in "What is an Author?" while Barthes and Derrida's varying speculations about the death of the author may well be perfectly sound "It is not enough . . . to repeat the empty affirmation that the author has disappeared."²¹ What Foucault calls the "author-function" is still very much relied upon in literary theory, and still stands as a shadowy presence, Foucault claims, behind Barthes's newly born reader and Derrida's notion of *écriture*. Just so does the sovereign author linger in *Middlemarch*, much as it is also effaced. If *Middlemarch* posits a certain unavoidable sovereign-function of the author, the novel's treatment of Casaubon reveals the political and ethical implications that arise from this. Not only is authorial sovereignty seemingly impossible to displace, but it is endemic to the ethical message of the novel. That "the author is dead" makes little difference to the fundamental structure of sovereignty in the novel, as I will try to show, and this has important ethical and political implications. The novel's ethic in fact relies on this authorial function, such that the possibility of this ethic also works to its detriment, as Redfield claims. I will try to show, however, that alongside the problem of reference that such critics bring up, political structures of inclusion and exclusion produce this situation, and sexuality forms its content. In the first place, politics are central to the novel: the term "middlemarch"

19. See Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion, *Essential Works of Foucault: 1954-1984* (New York: The New Press, 1998).

20. Redfield, *Phantom Formations*, 156. Hertz, *George Eliot's Pulse*, 41. J.H. Miller does not treat the question of Casaubon in "Optic and Semiotic in *Middlemarch*." In later work, he shows an approbatory view of the ethics inherent in the novel's handling of Casaubon, writing that Casaubon's character shows the way in which the other can always be known, even through barriers of race and gender. J. Hillis Miller, *Others* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 72. To my thinking this reading sidesteps the question of the construction of sympathy in the novel, as well as a number of the nuances of the narrative treatment of Casaubon, as I discuss below.

21. Foucault, "What is an Author?" 209.

means “the middle borderland, a representative place but by no means a center of civilization,”²² and thus it is evident that the eponymous town in which this novel’s action takes place is an any-city, a mini-polis through whose relations we can look at the function of the political on a larger scale. Yet as J. Hillis Miller makes clear, *Middlemarch* is as concerned with the microscopic as it is with the macroscopic.²³ If authorial sovereignty is an ineffaceable specter in the universalizable polis that is Middlemarch, then Mr. Casaubon is the singular site of its performative instantiation.

As Celia’s statement to Dorothea indicates, and as a generation of critics have substantiated, Casaubon receives especially severe treatment in this otherwise ethically vigilant novel. Not only is his death mid-novel an occasion that clears the way for the entrance in Dorothea’s life of joy and more refined ethical feeling, rather than any grief to speak of for the man himself, but the novel also conveys profound doubts throughout about his worthiness as a human, as a subject of compassion. Chapter XLII, for instance, begins with the epigraph from Henry VIII, “How much, methinks, I could despise this man / Were I not bound in charity against it!” (288) It is not, this epigraph suggests, anything about Casaubon as an individual that saves him from utter narrative loathing, but rather an abstract notion of Christian duty. As David Parker points out, this epigraph acts to produce less a cessation of the hatred it would seem to deny than a travesty of any claim the novel might make to preclude such a feeling; indeed, “the mockery releases the liberating possibility of actually loathing ‘this man’ frankly and to the full—a possibility that corresponds to a gathering need audible in the narrating voice, not to be ‘bound’ in feeling by anything at all.”²⁴ However, once again, such a statement suggests that the entire content of the ethical breakdown is to dissolve any ethical substance, a notion that seems more supported by contemporary theory than by the novel’s own treatment of its characters, which has a quite specific content: one is bound in feeling here precisely to the loathing Parker predicts.

Consider for instance a scene in the same chapter, in which Dorothea attempts to hold Casaubon’s arm while walking, only to encounter his own stiff-bodied unwillingness for even such a small gesture of relationality:

There was something horrible to Dorothea in the sensation which this unresponsive hardness inflicted on her. That is a strong word but not too strong. It is in these acts called trivialities that the seeds of joy are for ever wasted, until men and women look round with haggard faces at the devastation their own waste has made, and say, the earth bears no harvest of sweetness—calling their denial knowledge. You may ask why, in the name of manliness, Mr. Casaubon should have behaved in that way. Consider that his was a mind which shrank from pity: have you ever watched in such a mind the effect of a suspicion that what is pressing it as a grief may be really a source of contentment, either actual or future, to the being who already offends by pitying?

22. Alexander Welsh, “The Later Novels,” in *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, ed. George Levine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 62.

23. Miller, “Optic and Semiotic in *Middlemarch*,” 142. Miller explains that For Eliot, neither the macroscopic nor the microscopic can offer an objective view. For instance: “Even with a microscope directed on a water-drop we find ourselves making interpretations which turn out to be rather coarse; for whereas under a weak lens you may seem to see a creature exhibiting an active voracity into which other smaller creatures actively play as if they were so many animated tax-pennies, a stronger lens reveals to you certain tiniest hairlets which make vortices for these victims while the swallower waits passively at his receipt of custom.” (39)

24. David Parker, *Ethics, Theory, and the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 77.

Besides, he knew little of Dorothea's sensations, and had not reflected that on such an occasion as the present they were comparable in strength to his own sensibilities. (294)

Casaubon here "inflicts" his unresponsiveness on Dorothea, a word that suggests a figurative injury even in such a passive act, and not too strong a word, the narrator insists. Though it is a "triviality," a mere moment of brushing off, the narrator associates it with the waste of joy, devastation, denial, lack of manliness, suspicion, pitilessness, and lack of empathy. Clad in such foul characteristics, Casaubon, the narrator concludes from one small, if synecdochal, gesture, is indeed as difficult to sympathize with on any level as the epigraph to the chapter anticipates. Why exactly might this character be so particularly unworthy of the ongoing sympathy other characters merit? The above passage suggests in its metaphors that this narratorial attitude is explicitly connected with Casaubon's inability to forge a future: Eliot does not choose imagery of "unresponsive hardness" together with the wasting of seed accidentally. These images together intimate that if Casaubon has any sexual edge, it is onanistic, as solitary and antirelational as the rest of his being.²⁵ That Casaubon, this passage suggests, calls his "denial knowledge," that is, that he considers the barrenness of his affective surroundings to successfully inform and augment his erudition, links this unfortunate and unpitiable character's sexual shortcomings to his intellectual lack. In both areas, Casaubon is fruitless: both unable to produce offspring and incapable of completing, or even of conceiving of, his ostensibly great intellectual work, the "Key to all Mythologies."²⁶

Casaubon himself makes the connection between writing and reproductivity when he contemplates some of the bitter feelings he holds about his marriage: "To let any one suppose that he was jealous would be to admit their (suspected) view of his disadvantages: to let them know that he did not find marriage particularly blissful would imply his conversion to their (probably) earlier disapproval. It would be as bad as letting Carp, and Brasenose generally, know how backward he was in organizing the matter for his 'Key to all Mythologies.'" (260) Just as the novel dismisses this man for his incapacity to measure up to normative standards of procreativity, whether in flesh or in print, so too does he express his own humiliation at the same inability, seemingly for him as well as for the novel two forms of futurity inseparably entwined with each other.

Dwight Purdy's analysis of *Middlemarch* frankly and somewhat inadvertently offers one reason that these failures would automatically and clearly dispossess Casaubon of narratorial or readerly sympathy. This critic too claims that the novel effectively withdraws its sympathy for Casaubon by the end, which is revealed in the cessation of references to Casaubon as "poor," the adjective Purdy shows reveals the workings of sympathy in *Middlemarch*. Purdy's explanation for this recantation hinges on Casaubon's sexual abilities: while Casaubon's sexual impotence seems to be suggested, Purdy writes,²⁷ the novel cannot name this trouble, because "an explicit reference to impotence would also affect the quality and degree of the reader's sympathy for

25. Richard Ellmann also points this out. See Richard Ellmann, "Dorothea's Husbands," in *George Eliot*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), 72.

26. It is probably unnecessary to carry the sexual metaphors so far as to note that not only is Casaubon incapable of using his key to unlock any available door, but that moreover he can hardly be said to have a key at all.

27. The critical history of discussion of Casaubon's possible impotence is not inconsiderable: see in particular "Implication and Incompleteness in *Middlemarch*" in Barbara Hardy, *Particularities: Readings in George Eliot* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1983) and Ellmann, "Dorothea's Husbands."

Casaubon or even undermine it completely, adding a contemptuous or even risible nuance to ‘poor.’ We are less apt to empathize with sexual inadequacy than with a prosperous man’s fear of public exposure (Bulstrode), or a young man’s stupidity in hoping to make up a debt through horse trading (Fred Vinny).”²⁸ Purdy’s contention that sympathy for Casaubon recedes in the novel does indeed seem instantiated by the narrator’s waning terms of commiseration for this character; what is more interesting about Purdy’s statement is his own notion of sympathy’s workings. The average reader, this claim contends, would be little inclined to extend the same fellow feeling for Casaubon’s lack of sexual success that other characters’ character flaws merit. Rather than denounce this statement as a substandard sympathetic response or as a politically unfortunate assumption, we might instead say that it reveals certain normative workings of sympathy: that is, one common site of the failure of sympathy—a typical exception to the rule of sympathy—takes place in the arena of sexuality, as Celia’s comments also suggest. Casaubon seems to be exempt from the rule of sympathy because everything about his character flies in the face of reproduction. According to Purdy, only by hiding this problem can Eliot attempt to garner any fellow-feeling for him at all, mitigated though it may be.

What is notable is that Casaubon fails in the forms of futurity that Eliot seems to dismiss anyway: he is sexually sterile and incapable of garnering the will of the word which he seems to worship above human relations. One might expect that the novel would laud him for his distance from these discarded ideals of futurity, but in fact *Middlemarch* continually excoriates him on the basis of it. Casaubon, for years intent on completing his multivolume work, the “Key to All Mythologies,” suffers under the increasing suspicion that he is incapable of producing the creative and monumental scholarship he expects of himself. Expecting nevertheless that upon his death that Dorothea will use his notes and directives to continue and conclude his not-so-great work, Casaubon has been sadly mistaken, *Middlemarch* tells the reader:

[H]e willingly imagined her toiling under the fetters of a promise to erect a tomb with his name upon it. (Not that Mr. Casaubon called the future volumes a tomb; he called them the Key to all Mythologies.) But the months gained on him and left his plans belated: he had only had time to ask for that promise by which he sought to keep his cold grasp on Dorothea’s life.

The grasp had slipped away. Bound by a pledge given from the depths of her pity, she would have been capable of undertaking a toil which her judgment whispered was vain for all uses except that consecration of faithfulness which is a supreme use. But now her judgment, instead of being controlled by dutiful devotion, was made active by the embittering discovery that in her past union there had lurked the hidden alienation of secrecy and suspicion. The living, suffering man was no longer before her to awaken her pity: there remained only the retrospect of painful subjection to a husband whose thoughts had been lower than she had believed, whose exorbitant claims for himself had even blinded his scrupulous care for his own character, and made him defeat his own pride by shocking men of ordinary honor. (341-2)

Unlike Eliot’s assessment of her own writing as at least a progeny, Casaubon’s is a “tomb”; rather than the imminent opening up to new interpretation, to the ongoing and unbounded pulsation of history that would be offered by a true key to all mythologies, it is the final granite closure of a life, an unambiguous denial of futurity. Casaubon’s determination to produce in

28. Dwight H. Purdy, “‘The One Poor Word’ in *Middlemarch*,” *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 44, no. 4 (2004), 813. Purdy’s final claim in this essay, it should be noted, is that it is Rosamond who most particularly strains the novel’s capacity for sympathetic response. I would disagree, based on the simple observation that Rosamond is allowed to live, and Casaubon is not.

such a way all but destroys all possibility that such an effort might bear any fruit: this last bid for futurity is no longer quite narcissistic, no longer entirely onanistic, given that Casaubon wishes for Dorothea to assist in his last erection, albeit of his tomb, as we know. However, this is too cold, too inhuman a desire for the novel or Dorothea to entertain seriously. All that Dorothea can consider about Casaubon now that she is no longer confronted by the “living, suffering man,” is pain, subjection, selfishness, defeat and lack of honor. Where for Dorothea there was “union,” she now realizes in a return of judgment, there was only for Casaubon alienation. Over and over the novel thus stresses that the Casaubon’s failure with regard to even forms of futurity that we have seen are suspect in Eliot’s worldview dismiss him from ethical consideration. That Casaubon is so sterile, so insistently ignominious where any sort of reproductivity is concerned, jettisons him from the novel’s ethical universe.

The fact that this man represents the obstruction of all futurity either in the form of reproduction or in the form of writing is essential to his position: he seems at the same time the ideal instantiation of the absence of hetero-futurity—the figure of the death drive, which Lee Edelman has called the “sinthomosexual”²⁹—at the same time as this position offers him no safety from the novel’s sovereign machinations, which indeed seem to focus quite intently on him.³⁰ Nor, it seems, does Eliot find in his enactment of these anti-futural principles any delivery from the logics which her queer opposition would seem to predict. Her narrator seems rather to join her characters in utter abhorrence for the queer form of existence that would hold such positions.

Eliot and Unloving Love

Casaubon’s exile seems, however, to be the extreme exception to Eliot’s usual queerness. This author was certainly in little way driven by the same normative sexual morality of so many of her contemporaries: not only does Eliot’s own history of marital nonconformity suggest her derision of such principles,³¹ but Eliot moreover provides throughout her oeuvre notions of love and sexuality that frankly resist normative definitions. Her approach is illuminated interestingly in a translation she provides in *Adam Bede*, her first novel. Midway through this novel, the parish vicar, Mr. Irwine, offers young Arthur Donnithorne advice about love: “Ah, my boy, it is not only woman’s love that is *απερωτος ερωσ* as old Aeschylus calls it. There’s plenty of ‘unloving love’ in the world of a masculine kind.”³² Though the vicar is a minor character, it is significant that his interest in the classics far supersedes his allegiances to the Bible. This preoccupation reflects Eliot’s own intellectual pursuits: while in the course of writing *Adam Bede*, she was also reading Aeschylus’s *Oresteia* trilogy, in German.³³ In the vicar’s citation we see, however, that the German translation with which Eliot was working, by Johannes Franz,

29. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 36.

30. Clearly Bulstrode and Rosamond also bear a share of the novel’s antipathies, both for their extreme narcissism; fittingly to the organizational ethical scheme this chapter proposes, however, neither is as pilloried as Casaubon.

31. Eliot lived for most of her adult life with George Lewes, a man who was married to another woman; Eliot and Lewes never married and never had children. After Lewes died, Eliot married a man 20 years her junior, to continued scandal.

32. George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (New York: Signet, 1961), 250.

33. Joseph Wiesenfarth, “George Eliot’s Notes for *Adam Bede*,” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 32, no. 2 (1977), 149-150.

must not have satisfied her; *ensetzlicher Liebe*, by which this edition of Aeschylus's trilogy translates *απερωτος ερωσ* means "terrible love" or "appalling love."³⁴ While Eliot appears to have accepted the rendering of *ερωσ*, or *eros*, by "love," she chose to retain the literal translation of *απερωτος*, which means "loveless" or "unloving."³⁵ Context surely played a part in this decision: in the quotation from *Adam Bede*, Mr. Irwine is speaking of a grandfather's complex love for his grandson and heir: Arthur has just speculated on the oddity of this man cutting off all his deserving female heirs in favor of Arthur, while at the same time, "it seems a pleasure to him to make my life a series of petty annoyances."³⁶ The *eros* in question is a mixture of male filial loyalty and resentment: Squire Donnithorne's attitude toward Arthur is reminiscent of the patrilineal fidelity and favoritism of some versions of love, but lacks conventionally affectionate interpersonal behavior, indeed seeming to betray the opposite. A love expressed through entailment alone might well seem to be a peculiarly "unloving" love, rather than one unmitigatedly "terrible." In *The Libation Bearers*, it is the chorus who utters this phrase, after Clytemnestra and her lover have killed Clytemnestra's husband, Agamemnon. As Franz's translation has it, the chorus cries that woman's "terrible love" can devastate even the bond of marriage.³⁷ Here the rendering of *απερωτος ερωσ* as "terrible love" adds a moral judgment to the proclamation, where "unloving love" might rather bring one to ponder the paradoxical nature of a love that leads to murder.³⁸ Given that *Adam Bede* dramatizes Hetty Sorrel's murder of her newborn child, it is noteworthy that Eliot would take the trouble implicitly to challenge the easy condemnation of another murderess's intentions.

"Unloving love" offers a valuable figure for the moral intricacy of *Adam Bede*, also nicely indicating the extent to which love in all of Eliot's work is paradoxical and complex. As the narrator puts it in *Middlemarch*, "There are many wonderful mixtures in the world which are alike called love, and claim the privileges of a sublime rage which is an apology for everything (in literature and the drama)" (207). This statement conveys a similar set of contradictions about love: as with "unloving love," signification of the feeling of love in language adds a level of complication. Not only are a number of different experiences "alike called love," but also this nominalization is a pretext for an affect—"sublime rage"—which may excuse any sort of behavior, at least "in literature and drama." On the one hand, Eliot's parenthetical aside can be read as a small joke with her reader, to the tune of "You and I know this is a feature of real life,

34. Interestingly, two standard English translations are similar: Loeb translates the phrase as "inordinate passion," and Lattimore as "desperate love."

35. *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon*, (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1889).

36. Eliot, *Adam Bede*, 249.

37. The entire line of Franz's translation reads, "*Selbst des Ehebund's Verein / kämpfet das Weib mit entsetzlicher Liebe danieder, / unter Menschen und Gewild!*" which translates roughly as "Even marriage's union / the woman overcomes with terrible love / among humans and wilderness!" Aeschylus, *Des Aeschylus Oresteia, Griechisch und Deutsch* (Leipzig: Hahn'schen Verlage-Buchhandlung, 1846), 176-177.

38. *A Greek-English Lexicon*, (Oxford: Harper & Brothers, 1863) notes that apropos of Aeschylus's phrase, "*απερωτος ερωσ*," "some Gramm. proposed *απερωτος* as *απανθρωποσ*." Seemingly suspecting textual corruption, these scholars guessed that Aeschylus must have meant that Clytemnestra's love is *απανθρωποσ*, or "inhuman, savage, unsocial, misanthropic." Wittingly or not, Eliot enters into this debate with her correction of Franz's translation.

but why not place the blame on fiction?”³⁹ On the other hand, why does Eliot offer this somewhat awkward proviso, if not to underscore the literary-referential nature of “love’s” effects? That is, it might be the very process of taxonomization, classification, as well as dramatization or narrativization that help produce the strictures which so bind “love” up that there is nothing straightforward or natural about it. And not only would love then be intractably bound with the convolutions of language and reference, but in the spirit of language it also then easily slips into its opposite (“unloving”) or comes to be mobilized as a rationalization “for anything.” It does seem, therefore, that the understanding of love in *Middlemarch* accords to the model proposed by aforementioned critiques of this novel. The nature of referentiality calls into question any stable notion of what “love” might mean, just as much as it suggests that this “sublime rage” might be mobilized to unscrupulous effect.

Dorothea’s Unloving Love

Dorothea is importantly the avatar of the novel’s own opinion of such matters,⁴⁰ though her position with regard to all knowledge and understanding is of course more restricted than the (limited) omniscient narrator’s.⁴¹ Unlike Austen’s work, in which free indirect narration creates a critical, ironic distance between narrator and heroine, *Middlemarch* maintains a strong connection—conflation even at points—between the narrator and its protagonist; even through the narrator’s occasional active critiques of Dorothea and Dorothea’s concomitant continual struggle to live up to the ethical ideals she and the narrative share, the novel maintains this closeness of purpose. This juxtaposition is crucial: it is in the developing girl whose main concern is ethical goodness that Eliot projects the crux of this ethical aporia that the narrator helps delineate. The development of an ethic in the novel parallels Dorothea’s personal growth, even, or especially, in the pitfalls both encounter. Specifically, it is within the character of Dorothea that *Middlemarch* demonstrates the way in which the sinthomosexual queerness that Casaubon embodies inevitably collides with the novel’s ethical sense.

Love and ethics are intertwined in *Middlemarch* from the start, in the novel’s presentation of Dorothea’s search for love as the attempt to find a husband who will help her become a better person. Of course, like Eliot’s later work, *Daniel Deronda* (and like Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady*), *Middlemarch*’s drama also begins as one of the misery of a mistaken choice in husbands by a willful young woman. Dorothea is idealistic and young, and has it in her mind that the Reverend Edward Casaubon, “would deliver her from her girlish subjection to her own ignorance, and give her the freedom of voluntary submission to a guide who would take her along the grandest path” (17). “It would be like marrying Pascal,” she thinks. Twenty-five years her senior, Casaubon responds to her ardent interest in him with what passes for zeal in a man with “the spare form and the pale complexion which became a student” (8). From the start we

39. The narrator is commenting in this moment on Rosamond, the vilified narcissistic girl of the novel, of which Eliot usually has one, so it may in fact be possible that there is no intended irony in the aside.

40. J. Hillis Miller, among others, points such a relationship out, suggesting that the novel echoes and more aptly articulates Dorothea’s feelings than she is able. J. Hillis Miller, “A Conclusion in Which Almost Nothing is Concluded: *Middlemarch*’s ‘Finale,’” in *Middlemarch in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Karen Chase (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 141.

41. David Kurnick discusses this distance, arguing that it produces Dorothea as a reader, unlike the writerly figure that is the narrator. See D. Kurnick, “An Erotics of Detachment: ‘Middlemarch’ and Novel-Reading as Critical Practice,” *English Literary History* 74, no. 3 (2007), 583-4.

see that Dorothea's understanding of her desires is fatefully distorted by her literary leanings. Not only is her fantasy of love quixotically fashioned as a relationship with the scientist and philosopher Blaise Pascal (who incidentally called marriage "the most perilous and lowest of the conditions of Christianity"⁴²) but she also frames her notion of love on fantasies of companionship with other great, deceased men in history such as the theologian Richard Hooker, and Milton. Love is a literary narrative for Dorothea at the beginning of the novel. In a novel that so rigorously destabilizes narrative authority, such a position offers few guarantees.

Dorothea's fantasies may derive from literature, but they nevertheless contradict the significations with which her community associates marriage. The narrator reports:

[P]erhaps no persons then living—certainly none in the neighborhood of Tipton—would have had a sympathetic understanding for the dreams of a girl whose notions about marriage took their color entirely from an exalted enthusiasm about the ends of life, an enthusiasm which was lit chiefly by its own fire, and included neither the niceties of the trousseau, the pattern of plate, nor even the honors and sweet joys of the blooming matron. (17)

Because her neighbors cannot conceive of a marriage shaped by "an exalted enthusiasm about the ends of life," they also cannot form any understanding for Dorothea's dreams of love. For the inhabitants of Tipton who are surveying Dorothea's decisions with such conclusions, love and marriage should be defined by the economic and cultural/political functions they hold. The normative gift-giving practices expected of marriage and the concupiscent rewards of "the blooming matron," are missing from Dorothea's conception and thus temporarily place Dorothea under the same judgment the force of which later only Casaubon will withstand. The fact that the neighbors' low opinions of Dorothea's desires are based upon the morbid orientation of these fantasies does not entirely exempt the neighbors, however, from the slight mockery of the narrator, implicit in the representation of their normative characterization of marital bliss as a trite interest in plate patterns.

Such a passage sets the tone of the complex interaction of the narrator with the formation of Dorothea's desires: while she must escape the mistakenly grim position toward love that the novel presents at the beginning, such a flight should not come at the price of loss of her deviant relationship to the norm. This is demonstrated in the narrative's apparent approbation of Dorothea's admiration of Casaubon's unconventionality. While noting that Casaubon refrains from complimenting her or exchanging pleasantries, Dorothea interprets this as evidence of his superiority over other men. On the one hand, it is clear that we are to note what Dorothea is willfully blind to, that this is not very nice behavior for a suitor, and is indeed quite a bad sign. However, the narrator also avoids the obvious conclusion, commenting that "Mr. Casaubon seemed even unconscious that trivialities existed, and never handed round that small-talk of heavy men which is as acceptable as stale bride-cake brought forth with an odor of cupboard" (20). The explicit sense of the statement is that there might be something admirable about conversational reticence. As Mary Ellen Doyle points out, the small-talk of such men might well turn anyone's stomach.⁴³ Yet though stale bride cake may cause digestive problems, the sharing of it with visitors after a wedding was a standard practice in Victorian England, and part of the

42. Blaise Pascal, *Letters*, trans. Mary L. Booth, vol. XLVIII, Part 2, *The Harvard Classics* (New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1909-14).

43. Mary Ellen Doyle, *The Sympathetic Response: George Eliot's Fictional Rhetoric* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1981), 140.

nuptial ceremonies.⁴⁴ Such a “triviality,” like small-talk, was presumably all too acceptable, the narrator must be implying, at least as far as their rate of being accepted suggests. Thus the narrator asks the reader both to admit our complacency before tradition and to consider its unpalatability. It is presumably no accident that the metaphorical registers Eliot calls upon here are cuisine and marriage.⁴⁵ As Gayle Rubin points out, both involve cultural interpretations of human needs; just as different cultures’ prandial likings in little way reflect basic nutritional requirements, so too are customs and practices around intimate relationships largely contingent.⁴⁶

Thus in its prevarication about Dorothea’s early, misguided attitude about love, the narrator sets up the expectation that this young woman’s trajectory of development will not necessarily lead her to coincide with the romantic and relational ideals of the members of her community. And indeed it seems that Dorothea’s ability to see a love beyond marriage and procreation is directly connected to her growing ethical sense through the novel. According to the ethic she eventually cultivates, everyone deserves a future, not just those whose sexual habits most literally produce future humans. Dorothea’s *Bildung* task in *Middlemarch* is, as Redfield puts it, “ethical task of overcoming narcissism” or the replacement of narcissism with compassion for others.⁴⁷ In this task, Dorothea seems for the most part to excel, after some practice. Her fellow feeling for others grows in stages, the first occurring when her marriage with Casaubon starts falling apart. Though she has from the start of the novel valued sympathy, she realizes that her previous policy of compassion towards others was more truthfully a projection upon them of her own feelings, and has led her unwittingly into her miserable marriage to Casaubon. At this point in the novel Dorothea learns “to conceive with that distinctness which is no longer reflection but feeling . . . that he had an equivalent centre of self, whence the lights and shadows must always fall with a certain difference” (146). Although this feeling for Casaubon is a clear step towards the ability to feel for an other without necessarily understanding their pain intellectually, a famous scene later in the novel shows that Dorothea’s compassion still has room to grow. The epiphanic moment of Dorothea’s sympathy in the novel is undoubtedly the often-cited daybreak passage, in which Dorothea comes to fear she has lost Will to Rosamond at the same time as she realizes she loves him.

Again in this moment her mind turns to the sympathetic insight she had had about Casaubon, that each self is a center of his or her own universe; this time Dorothea is able to consider Rosamond’s possible anguish with more generosity. “Was she alone in that scene?”

44. *Cassell’s Book of the Household: A Work of Reference on Domestic Economy*, vol. II (London: Cassell & Co., 1890), in the chapter on Weddings: “The custom of sending wedding-cake in small boxes has also gone out of date in good society, and few can regret that it has passed away. A very small piece of cake, which usually suffered a certain amount of squeezing in the past, gave little satisfaction to the receiver, and caused both trouble and expense to the sender. Those present at the wedding are expected to taste the cake there. Anyone who calls on the bride may be offered cake with afternoon tea, though the custom of offering this is also passing away” (207).

45. Joan Holloway has told me that another custom with bride cake was to eat it at the Christening of the firstborn child; if this is what Eliot has in mind, an added level of irony is in place. As in the rest of *Middlemarch* childbearing would be treated here with a combination of suspicion and ambivalent congratulation.

46. Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex,” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993). Of course, this becomes problematic when long histories of such conventions so unequivocally inform our cravings, as other chapters have pointed out.

47. Redfield, *Phantom Formations*, 142.

Was it her event only? She forced herself to think of it as bound up with another woman's life." Yet her revelation continues on, to show that this ability to divine and feel for the sorrow of another is insufficient to achieve Dorothea's aspiration to support the other. Looking out her window, she sees "a man with a bundle on his back and a woman carrying her baby; in the field she could see figures moving—perhaps the shepherd with his dog. Far off in the bending sky was the pearly light; and she felt the largeness of the world and the manifold wakings of men to labor and endurance. She was a part of that involuntary, palpitating life, and could neither look out on it from her luxurious shelter as a mere spectator, nor hide her eyes in selfish complaining." (544) In this moment, Dorothea realizes her interconnectedness with all others. Ethics seem here to be defined as the operation of sympathy that overrides feelings of difference or otherness; not only is her own life "bound up with another woman's life," but it is even tied to people she doesn't know, peasants whose ways of life are foreign to her own. Little as she may know about their experience, a common humanity links them inextricably. In this radical moment, no barrier can exempt another person from being considered human—neither class status, nor intelligence, nor vanity, nor jealousy.

Not only does Dorothea's ethical capacity grow in the novel through a kind of "unloving love," but this provides a space for a similar effect in the reader. Though this novel is famous for its relegation of its heroine to just the housewifely role from which Dorothea's strength of character has unto that point protected her, the narrative clearly presents this role as a point of regret. Toward the end of the novel, the narrator famously states: "Many who knew her, thought it a pity that so substantive and rare a creature should have been absorbed into the life of another, and be only known in a certain circle as a wife and mother. But no one stated exactly what else that was in her power she ought rather to have done" (576).⁴⁸ Thus impugning the social state for the lack of positions available to women,⁴⁹ *Middlemarch* also undermines the idea of marriage and reproduction as the height of female success.

Moreover, the reader is presented not with the conditional clause, "if it had been in her power," but rather with the grimmer caveat—"no one stated"—that limits the past subjunctive tense of this utterance to its most wistful thinness. As we all know, Dorothea does not, in either the present or simple past tense, become anything other than a wife and a mother; in her fate she is figured as an appendage of the same sort that Eliot regrets regarding the futural possibilities of

48. This is another oft-cited passage, unsurprisingly. Among the scores of critics who have considered it, one camp has been associated with a form of late-eighties feminism—see for instance Shirley Foster, *Victorian Women's Fiction: Marriage, Freedom, and the Individual* (London: Croom Helm, 1985); Richard D. McGhee, "To Be Wise Herself": The Widowing of Dorothea Brooke in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*," in *Joinings and Disjoinings: The Significance of Marital Status in Literature*, ed. JoAnna Stephens Mink and Jannet Doubler Ward (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1991); JoAnna Stephens Mink, "The Emergence of Woman as Hero in the Nineteenth Century," in *Heroines of Popular Culture*, ed. Pat Browne (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1987); but also see those who view this as part of Eliot's cultural critique, such as Edwin J. Kenney, "George Eliot: Through the Looking-Glass," in *Norton Critical Edition of Middlemarch* (1977); George Levine, "Introduction: George Eliot and the Art of Realism," in *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, ed. George Lewes Levine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

49. And: "Certainly those determining acts of her life were not ideally beautiful. They were the mixed result of young and noble impulse struggling amidst the conditions of an imperfect social state, in which great feelings will often take the aspect of error, and great faith the aspect of illusion. For there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it." (577)

writing and reproduction. Perhaps paradoxically, the same intentionality whose loss the idea of the death of the author seems so little to evince regret for becomes the source of protofeminist disappointment. (This may be compared to the problem of female agency in *Persuasion* discussed in chapter 1, as that which is both necessary and a source of the blockage of ethics of relational vulnerability.) The past subjunctive presents a retrospective wishfulness; it is a melancholic gesture toward the impossible future that was not and could not have been reached, and that in fact cannot even be imagined. As the narrator puts it when potential legatees are disappointed by Featherstone's first, and defunct, will, "One likes to be done well by in every tense, past, present, and future" (231). But while the reading of Featherstone's first will adds dramatic buildup for the second, the mention of Dorothea's alternate and impossible future has a more negative rhetorical function in the text: the past subjunctive operates in this sentence to enable critique, but cannot offer a utopian counterpoint to the reality of a woman's situation in the nineteenth century: "No one stated exactly what else that was in her power she ought rather to have done," because, one suspects, no one could imagine anything in her power to do. Witnessing Dorothea's imperfect fulfillment at an aesthetic distance, the reader seems to be in the perfect position to regret it and to feel for her, and in doing so to experience the same ethical encounter with the other that Middlemarch propounds at all points, which Eliot usually refers to as sympathy. Thus Dorothea is the character who properly produces a confluence of nonnormative love and sympathy. She represents the utmost possible success in a society such as her own and presents a way in which this response can flourish even in the face of sexually constrictive cultures. In spite of the regret with which this is conveyed in the narrative, its possible effect of proliferation of sympathy places a high value on challenging normative views of sexual life. Yet the conflicting desire that Dorothea not be an appendage—considering that appendage-status was in a way for Eliot a fact of futural possibility—might perhaps be a clue that such a queer ethic could not be conceived without contradictions.

Casaubon's Exile (Or, Middlemarch's Terrible Love)

Indeed, as we have noted, Casaubon spoils this narrative of an ethical universe that can be saved by an ethic like Dorothea's, or of an ethic a novel can straightforwardly convey to its readers. Here is a character whom, by the end, no readerly or narrative understanding can reach, much as Dorothea's first triumph in compassionate feeling was specifically directed toward Casaubon. By the time he dies, the novel has written him off as unworthy of the same fellow feeling that Dorothea's revelation seems to extend to all. Casaubon's banishment exposes the novel's ethical inconsistency, but the novel's representational strategies for Casaubon suggest that this inconsistency is a crucial way the novel contends with the schism between sovereign author and the dead author. Casaubon, unlike Rosamond, unlike the peasants working in the field outside of Dorothea's house, is not to be considered properly human. One way in which this is made manifest in *Middlemarch* is in the metaphors employed to describe him. As J. Hillis Miller points out, various of the novel's metaphors seem at times to collide with other ones, "fulfilling them, but at the same time contradicting them, canceling them out, or undermining their validity."⁵⁰ While Miller is interested in metaphors of vision and materiality, this dynamic also plays out in the register in which Casaubon is most often understood, that of his substance as biological material. For many of the characters who pronounce an opinion about Casaubon, this man is best described as dry, to the point where he should not really be considered biologically alive at all. He is "parchment code" (46) according to Sir James, with "no good red blood in his

50. Miller, "Optic and Semiotic in *Middlemarch*," 128.

body” (47); as far as Mrs. Cadwallader is concerned, his blood under a microscope is “all semicolons and parentheses,” and “he dreams footnotes” (47); for Will Ladislaw, Casaubon’s performance as a husband amounts to “sandy absorption of . . . [Dorothea’s] nectar” (152). In each instance of this sort, the implication is that Casaubon is so arid in nature that he is utterly devoid of the essence of human life.⁵¹ Rather than satisfying the sanguinary requirement of existence, Casaubon is considered to be a property of text. This set of metaphors also of course plays into the deconstructionist reading of the novel: a self represented through language is a self without center, without identity, just as words have meaning not in themselves, but rather only by virtue of their distinction from other words. And such an identity-less self is one which is easily considered disembodied.

However, a second set of metaphors used in reference to Casaubon considers this character precisely as a type of physical body, but one whose life force is nevertheless a problem: for instance, Ladislaw imagines Casaubon “groping after his mouldy futilities” (142); similarly, Celia considers “Mr Casaubon’s learning as a kind of damp which might in due time saturate a neighboring body” (192); Casaubon’s jealousy is comparable, the narrator states, to the “damp despondency of uneasy egoism” (146). In each of these examples, Casaubon is so far from the desiccation of the former set of metaphors that he is in fact damaged and damaging within the extent to which he is wet. Or, at least, all that he touches putrefies. Given that Casaubon is so insistently figured as text, the moldiness to which his productions are compared suggest that he is comparable himself to a rotting, spreading mold. That is, if he is to be considered as a physical life, it is neither a human one nor one that others consider worthy of existence. Given that *Middlemarch* was written over thirty years before the advent of antibiotics, Casaubon’s figuration as a mold-like property suggests that he is rather like a menace or infectious disease than its cure, something that grows unbidden—and certainly without the aid of sexual reproduction—and saturates its surroundings with its insidious presence and stench.

51. Casaubon’s aridity also comes up in a discussion Mrs. Cadwallader has with a neighbor about disease:

“Where can all the strength of those medicines go, my dear?” said the mild but stately dowager, turning to Mrs. Cadwallader reflectively, when Mrs. Renfrew’s attention was called away.

“It strengthens the disease,” said the Rector’s wife, much too well-born not to be an amateur in medicine. “Everything depends on the constitution: some people make fat, some blood, and some bile—that’s my view of the matter; and whatever they take is a sort of grist to the mill.”

“Then she ought to take medicines that would reduce—reduce the disease, you know, if you are right, my dear. And I think what you say is reasonable.”

“Certainly it is reasonable. You have two sorts of potatoes, fed on the same soil. One of them grows more and more watery—”

“Ah! like this poor Mrs. Renfrew--that is what I think. Dropsy! There is no swelling yet--it is inward. I should say she ought to take drying medicines, shouldn’t you?—or a dry hot-air bath. Many things might be tried, of a drying nature.”

“Let her try a certain person’s pamphlets,” said Mrs. Cadwallader in an undertone, seeing the gentlemen enter. “He does not want drying.”

“Who, my dear?” said Lady Chettam, a charming woman, not so quick as to nullify the pleasure of explanation.

“The bridegroom—Casaubon. He has certainly been drying up faster since the engagement: the flame of passion, I suppose.” (61)

The most impressive version of this contradictory set of metaphors for Casaubon comes from Dorothea herself, in her desperation just before Casaubon dies. She considers *The Key to All Mythologies* as “what might be called shattered mummies, and fragments of a tradition which was itself a mosaic wrought from crushed ruins—sorting them as food for a theory which was already withered in the birth like an elfin child” (331). Like the man, Casaubon’s work is both dry and damp: it is comparable to a shattered mummy or a fragment of a crushed ruin, but alternately, and equally, equivalent to a child with a birth defect. Again the contrast is between on the one hand iterations of iterations that are so far removed from the original life they signify that they have no connection to that life, and on the other hand a form of living that the novel suggests is inhuman. In the former case, a shattered mummy involves the broken wrappings that cover a body already dead; “fragments of a tradition which was itself a mosaic wrought from crushed ruins” increases the level of remove from life—the ruins of a civilization now dead are represented by a few broken pieces of their remains, which then connote a tradition further detached. The latter comparison invokes possibly even human-born life, but one that has failed expectations, is malformed from the start.

What is indicated with this metaphorical cacophony is both that Casaubon is so dried out, textually-mired, and confounded by iterations of iterations that he is effectively dead; at the same time as any life he may demonstrate is inhuman, foul, diseased, contagious, and deformed. It is as if as much as *Middlemarch* needs to figure Casaubon as dead, the novel cannot quite let go of the notion of him as a living being. Instead it insists that whatever form of life he may inhabit is so inhuman that we might as well consider it dead. And given that we have learned through Dorothea that the main requirement for ethical relations is a recognition of the humanity of the other for whom we have compassion, Casaubon is very logically exempted from this ethical behavior. What is interesting is that such a careful maneuver is undergirded by metaphorical inconsistency. Yet more than indicating narrative uncertainty, such incongruity is functional. As Miller points out in “Optic and Semiotic in *Middlemarch*,” metaphorical contradictions of this sort produce a situation in which narrative authority is undermined; this way, as Hertz similarly states, Eliot may repudiate the crisis of ethics the novel comes across (and so effectively veils).⁵² As we have seen, this crisis concerns not simply and generally the loss of the sovereign identity of author. Rather, the ethical crisis prompted by the loss of authorial authority centers upon sexuality and futurity: at the same time as the novel articulates a queer ethic, it exiles from this ethic the queer—or perhaps the “unheterosexual,” would be the better term⁵³—who fails to offer any futural possibility beyond the mold of which he is constituted, which immediately spoils all it touches.

Repoussoir, Ressentiment, and the Author Function

Why would it be necessary to go to such lengths to allow for an ethical breakdown? That is, why does the novel attempt to give sympathy to Casaubon, then take it away? Why does Eliot

52. For Hertz, however, this repudiation takes the form of a retrospective disavowal, which is what produces Casaubon’s exclusion. Hertz writes, “If, for example, one were to bring a drop of Mr. Casaubon’s blood into focus, one might see nothing but semicolons and parentheses. That is the possibility that is written into *Middlemarch* in the idiom of the sublime; but it is clearly not a possibility to be steadily contemplated by a working novelist—it must be repressed if books like *Middlemarch* are to be written at all. One sign of that repression is the recognition and exorcism of Casaubon.” Hertz, *George Eliot’s Pulse*, 41.

53. See Miller, *Jane Austen, or, The Secret of Style*, 16.

destabilize the author-function only to reestablish it? Henry James begins to give us an idea of how to answer such questions in his 1873 review of *Middlemarch*, within his particular admiration of Eliot's treatment of Casaubon:

Mr. Casaubon is an excellent invention; as a dusky *repoussoir* to the luminous figure of his wife he could not have been better imagined. There is indeed something very noble in the way in which the author has apprehended his character. To depict hollow pretentiousness and mouldy egotism with so little of narrow sarcasm and so much of philosophic sympathy, is to be a rare moralist as well as a rare story-teller. The whole portrait of Mr. Casaubon has an admirably sustained greyness of tone in which the shadows are never carried to the vulgar black of coarser artists. Every stroke contributes to the unwholesome, helplessly sinister expression. Here and there perhaps (as in his habitual diction), there is a hint of exaggeration; but we confess we like fancy to be fanciful.⁵⁴

What James appreciates most about Casaubon—which, even if he is correct, he incidentally does not duplicate in Gilbert Osmond, the despicable husband in *The Portrait of a Lady* who seems in many ways to be modeled after Casaubon⁵⁵—is the fact that the novel attempts to render Casaubon repellant but nevertheless worthy of compassion. For James this is a sign of Eliot's success as a novelist and as an ethical thinker. The artistry James esteems here is comparable, predictably to his typical metaphorical partialities, to the dexterity of superior portraiture: Eliot's talent lies in her ability to depict shades of grey, to paint ingenious strokes unequaled in more “vulgar” work.⁵⁶ The fact that for James Casaubon appears on Eliot's narrative canvas as “a dusky *repoussoir* to the luminous figure of his wife” is useful to the question of ethics: if Casaubon is comparable to a foregrounded object in a painting that makes the background appear more prominent, this effect mirrors the paradox of Celia's statement about him. Just as life of one sort may be, in Celia's estimation, happily eradicated in favor of life of another sort, so too might the object that appears most prominently to our eye actually somehow serve to compel us to look elsewhere.⁵⁷ Or put differently, that which is excluded might by virtue of its exclusion serve as a necessary bolster to that which is considered to be of value. Perhaps, for Eliot's universe to function properly, we need a Casaubon in order to have a Dorothea; or we need the possibility of the inhuman in order to be define what is human—classic *repoussoir* objects include, after all, drapes and trees. Of course James's point here is precisely that Casaubon is in fact portrayed with “philosophic sympathy,” but given that such narratorial compassion nevertheless produces an effect of “hollow pretentiousness,” “mouldy egotism,” and a “helplessly sinister expression” with “every stroke,” it would not seem that the severity of

54. Henry James, “Review: George Eliot's ‘Middlemarch’,” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 8, no. 3 (1953).

55. The least noted of which might be both characters' notable asexuality and lack of passion.

56. James, incidentally, uses the term “vulgar” about as frequently as Eliot uses the term “poor,” which may be reflective of the difference between each author's management of sympathy toward malefactors. See Strother B. Purdy, “Henry James's Use of ‘Vulgar’,” *American Speech* 42, no. 1 (1967); and Purdy, “‘The One Poor Word’ in Middlemarch.”

57. The other paradoxical effect *repoussoir* can have is to allow the viewer to experience simultaneously distance from the object of the painting, and inclusion in the painting, given that so often the foregrounded item is a curtain or other device to “hide” the position of the viewer. If we may compare Casaubon to a *repoussoir* in this context, the ethical position of the reader is again imperiled. Does Casaubon help us to distance ourselves or does it pull us in further?

James's own judgment of Casaubon is much leavened by such "philosophic" touches—the philosophic attitude comparable perhaps to being "bound in charity" to voice a compassion one does not actually feel?

Such a suspicion might also be confirmed through some of the metaphorical implications of *repoussoir*: the shadowing of one entity to reveal the brightness of another is one way to express the workings of *ressentiment*, the idea that within Judeo-Christian moral thinking, any positive self-conception can only arise from expulsion of an other.⁵⁸ This affect can, according to Nietzsche, become quite spiteful, particularly when someone extremely different is encountered, a situation which incurs in the man of *ressentiment* what Nietzsche refers to as "the venomous eye of *ressentiment*": "once they go outside, where the strange, the *stranger* is found, they are not much better than uncaged beasts of prey."⁵⁹ In this way, those claiming the highest morality can, according to Nietzsche, betray the most malicious hatred. Such a response does not merely constitute an affective episode for Nietzsche, but is rather a self-reinforcing and structurally bound pattern. It is thus a difficult mindset to move away from. Moreover, as Fredric Jameson has pointed out, "the theory of *ressentiment*, wherever it appears, will always itself be the expression and the production of *ressentiment*."⁶⁰ If this is the case, then as much as *Middlemarch* might try to express the folly and woe of a resentful and narcissistic life like Casaubon's—that is, his own formation in and through the bitterest and most unrepentant *ressentiment*—for the purpose of introducing a better possibility, in Dorothea, this critique must itself betray a certain amount of its own *ressentiment*.⁶¹

Ressentiment can also help explain the persistence of the author-function, because it is for Nietzsche explicitly connected to our belief in the notion of the subject. This belief is for Nietzsche a specious idea that persists in part simply because of its centrality to our grammar. In fact, he writes, "there is no 'being' behind doing, effecting, becoming; 'the doer' is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything."⁶² Similarly, just as we have at the same time begun, with George Eliot, to dismiss the centrality of the notion of the author, there is a way in which this idea endures. According to Nietzsche, the real reason for installing the doer behind the deed, the soul or subject behind the action is that we want to be able to place blame, to locate a subject who may be held responsible for what are in reality effects beyond the scope of any individual's personal influence.

The presence of a structure of *ressentiment* at the core of *Middlemarch*'s ethics would imply that the containment of antifuturity and untrammelled egotism in the figure of Casaubon operates to acquit the novel and other characters, as well as Eliot herself, of these accusations. Or more properly speaking, such *ressentiment* would work to ascribe to Casaubon accountability

58. "Slave morality from the outset says No to what is 'outside,' what is 'different,' what is 'not itself'; and *this* No is its creative deed." Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 36.

59. *Ibid.*, 40.

60. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 202.

61. And inevitably too, anyone who might try to point this out, as I do here, must be partaking of this effect, and so on, to the point of infinite regress. This presumably offers either an indictment of *ressentiment* itself, and the way it inevitably traps us in its ever-reverberating effects or an indictment of any theory that proposes to use this figure to explain such effects.

62. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 45.

for that which cannot actually be attributed to a willing subject.⁶³ As we have seen, Casaubon's chief deficiencies where the novel is concerned seem to revolve around his queerness and the stanching effect it seems to have on all forms of life and future. What seems thus to require the scapegoating action of *ressentiment* in *Middlemarch* might indeed be described as narcissism and the death drive, so grossly conflated in this case with the nonheterosexual who has also come to stand for these forces in so much contemporary discourse. However, at odds with such grossness is the fact that Eliot, the author who never had children, seems with regard to these features to have created in Casaubon a character who mirrored her.⁶⁴ Thus it is a peculiar sort of *ressentiment*, through which Eliot might be seen as impugning herself to any degree that she censures Casaubon.

One interesting effect of this is that the figure who is the most inhuman—dry, parchment paper, moldy, grotesque, and so on—is also the one to whom the most agency is attributed. On the one hand, the novel offers resolute decentering especially where Dorothea is concerned, offering a model of ethics by which subjects are less discrete beings than intersecting parts of a larger system. On the other hand, in the case of its most pilloried character, *Middlemarch* introduces the concept of the will. And where there is a doer assigned to the deed, it seems, there is in this novel also necessarily a dearth of humanity. Willing seems in this case to comprise no-saying. The fact that Eliot is in so many ways aligned with Casaubon suggests that any degree to which she may accept a sovereign authorial role is also the degree to which she ousts herself-as-author from her own ideals of ethics and humanity. The author-function is thereby deadened, drained of its blood and sinew just as the death-drive-oriented queer is not considered worthy of life.⁶⁵

Such dehumanization clarifies why it is Casaubon the novel chooses as its victim: for *ressentiment* is a cultural force, fueled and informed by hatreds and fears with historical, rather

63. It might be objected that Eliot herself renounced Christianity at an early age. However, *ressentiment* is not necessarily attached solely to the religiously devout, but rather emerges, in Nietzsche's view, as a structure of relations in response to the influence of Judeo-Christian ideology. And it could certainly be argued that Eliot retains a good amount of the Christian morality in which she was initially trained. In fact, in what appears to be a largely unsuccessful attempt to moderate his own tonal *ressentiment*, Nietzsche even wrote of Eliot, "G. Eliot. They are rid of the Christian God and now believe all the more firmly that they must cling to Christian morality. That is an English consistency; we do not wish to hold it against little moralistic females à la Eliot." Friedrich Nietzsche, "Twilight of the Idols," in *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: The Viking Press, 1968), 515. For a discussion of Eliot's religious beliefs, see Peter C. Hodgson, *Theology in the Fiction of George Eliot: The Mystery Beneath the Real* (London: SCM Press, 2001).

64. Numerous critics have pointed to the parallels between Eliot and Casaubon, including Hertz, *George Eliot's Pulse*; Welsh, "The Later Novels."

65. The coinciding of the sovereign figure with the outcast bears enticing parallels to Giorgio Agamben's figures of the sovereign and the homo sacer; in conversation with Karl Schmitt's notion of the need for a sovereign in times of exception, Agamben shows how such a situation necessitates both a conceptual scheme of exteriority and interiority such as in *ressentiment*, as well as a delineation of the inhuman human outside of political life (bios), which Agamben refers to as "bare life." See Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1985); Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998). Judith Butler also shows how "sovereignty" can arise precisely from suspension of the law, rather than from an originally willing subject. See "Indefinite Detention" in Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004).

than personal significance. Eliot did not invent the alignment of queerness with the death drive any more than Freud effected its alliance with narcissism; rather such alliances are pre-existing forms with which both explain the ways that *ressentiment* held sway in the nineteenth century and ruled the available paths of sexual and ethical existence (as perhaps it does to this day): we cannot maintain our own delusions of personal morality, sexual rightness, and desiring agency without defining an other who must be ejected from these possibilities. And as Nietzsche reminds us, the rules of grammar, if nothing else, require that there be a subject who enacts the ejecting. If *Middlemarch* must attain ethical futurity at the cost of expelling its most overt nonheterosexual, it performs penance for this cruel act in also maligning through obvious parallels the will that could produce this expulsion. “Willing” is paradoxically so caught up in projects of hatred whose coordinates originate outside one’s own command that the willing subject is, as *Middlemarch* suggests, no more a sign of human life than an arid manuscript or proliferating mildew.

Is there any kind of willing towards futurity in *Middlemarch* that escapes logics of negativity, heterosexuality, and narcissism? What *Middlemarch* offers, oddly, in a coincidental but lovely play on words, another kind of willing.

The Will to Queer Futurity

As we have seen, “sovereignty” seems in the case of *Middlemarch* to involve a crucial role of the will that nevertheless leaves little room for agency or responsibility with regard to the content of its decisions: the basis upon which values rest is for the most part external to their scribe. Not only can authorial sovereignty thus be seen in a different light, but so too can futurity: neither reproductivity nor writing are forms of futurity that the novel will commend. Both are bolsters for other forms of life, neither fully human nor fully inhuman, both suggest a culturally overvalued connection of agency between progenitor and progeny, and both too frequently result in symptoms of narcissism in the parasitic host. If nonreproductivity is denied from futurity, what does the novel offer in its stead? As indicated at the beginning of this chapter, the expulsion of Casaubon appears concomitant with the esteem for reproductive sexuality. That is, the novel’s banishment of the dried out, moldy, and altogether unsexual scholar seems to provide the negative definition of what is of value in *Middlemarch*, which would be symbolized by this “infantine Bouddha” (560) of Celia’s procreation. Of course, as has already been discussed, this particular value system is imputed to characters like Celia, whose moral standards are presented in the novel as narcissistic and small-minded. Freud’s explanation of maternal narcissism in fact fits Celia uncannily well: according to him, affectionate parents love their child because it is a carbon copy of themselves that they can worship without shame; such a child becomes, Freud writes, “His Majesty the Baby.”⁶⁶ The derision with which Celia’s adulation of her son is treated in the novel moves fairly imperceptibly between the narrator and Dorothea: while it is the narrator who delivers the stream of acerbic designations having to do with the baby—such as the “sacred arc, otherwise called a cradle” (370)—Dorothea is likewise presented as wary of Celia’s baby worship, if with the lesser venom. “To an aunt who does not recognize her infant nephew as Bouddha, and has nothing to do for him but to admire, his behavior is apt to appear monotonous, and the interest of watching him exhaustible.” (369-370). It seems that whether we want to consider Dorothea or the narrator the moral anchor of the novel, both are united in the view that regeneration should not be considered the highest human value.

66. Sigmund Freud, “On Narcissism: An Introduction,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1968), 91.

As we have seen, Casaubon apparently must be exiled in order to prop up the ethical system at hand, which involves the ideal of sympathy for other humans. Casaubon constitutes the limit-case of humanity, because he does not fit into the sexual order. Whether he is impotent or uninterested, dry or moldy, he is certainly isolated from the community of reproductive citizens in the novel who judge him. This chapter has suggested that in order to oust the death drive from its ethic of compassion and the subject's formation in otherness, the novel is compelled through the ethos of *ressentiment* to choose one of the stereotypical icons of anti-life forces by which to conduct this expulsion. The queerness and "unloving love" demonstrated by Eliot's life and oeuvre suggest that the novel would not attach an ontological truth-value to this association, a standpoint which *Middlemarch* substantiates in its presentation of a final form of futurity which does not hew to either side of the reproductivity and sexuality binary, within inheritance.

It would seem that the process of willing property surely constitutes a tribute to lineage, but the novel demonstrates a number of ways in which it might enact a queer futural desire. Neatly balancing out the twisted histories of Casaubon and Featherstone, both of whom use their wills to punish their family members, the novel ends with a little commented upon legal decision that seems to invert the malice of these reprobate men and to celebrate another type of entailment. When Sir James, who disapproves of Dorothea's second marriage, to Ladislaw, avows to Mr. Brooke that "He's not a man we can take into the family," Mr. Brooke answers that he could change his will so that Dorothea's children will not inherit his land, as the entailment rules of the time would generally dictate. Given that Sir James's own children would benefit were Mr. Brooke's entail cut off from Dorothea's children, the avarice implied in this wish causes Sir James to back down from the idea with shame. This appeasement is the first in a string of many, which lead in the final pages of the novel to a full reconciliation of Celia and Sir James with Dorothea, in spite of what they perceive as Dorothea's continuingly distasteful connubial preferences. In this brief concluding episode, the novel returns to some of the values we know are esteemed, in particular the sympathy for others that is borne of self-searching and self-abasement: Sir James can only agree to restore his family's relationship to Dorothea when he confronts his own limitations as a human and considers the needs of others, even those, like Ladislaw, whom Sir James cannot understand. Not only does the precisely structured return to wills and legacies—but this time as a suitable reward for goodness—indicate the worth the novel gives, finally, to lineage, but also we see that the novel's even more central ethical value, sympathy, is, once again, tied to reproductive capacity.

However, there are some important differences between valuing entailment and valuing procreation. Most immediately discernible are character developments that result: as a consequence of the decision to retain Dorothea's sons in Mr. Brooke's will, Mr. Brooke gets to be the one wealthy bachelor in the novel who isn't presented as dissipated or otherwise unworthy of human consideration: unlike the paradoxically bone-dry and moldy Casaubon, Mr. Brooke will leave a human trace through his endowments; and Sir James may prove his sympathetic capability and a less direct worship of procreation, when he chooses Dorothea's sons' inheritance over his own children's. Thus the small distinction between valuing one's offspring and valuing conscientious will-leaving may well be interpretable as a consequential move against narcissism. It is important to recall that sympathy is for Eliot what averts narcissism and the cult of individuality, just as her concurrence with the deflation of the author-position performs this evasion on a textual level. Childbearing, at least in Celia's model, which is the only one *Middlemarch* tenders for readerly examination at any length, is a narcissistic endeavor, while

Eliot's correspondence with Harriet Melusina Fay Peirce suggests that seen at face value this faculty is no more than a symbiotic relationship that impairs the host. Eliot thus questions the rhetoric of naturalness in the adulation of childbirth just as she strips this occupation of the kind of pride that Celia thinks it warrants. Rather, then, than opposing Casaubon's unworthy life to the child of the future as Celia does, it is more appropriate to posit as its converse value in *Middlemarch* entailment.

How might property inheritance function as a value or principle? Freud's work on narcissism is useful here, when he uses the idea of inheritance as a type of value that precisely defies narcissism. Freud's initial approach to the problem of narcissism is through his libido theory, which he struggled to refine throughout his career.⁶⁷ In this particular articulation of it, Freud states that our instincts seem to be divided between "hunger and love," that is, between self-preservation and the propagation of offspring:

The individual does actually carry on a double existence: one designed to serve his own purposes and another as a link in a chain, in which he serves against, or at any rate without, any volition of his own. The individual himself regards sexuality as one of his own ends; while from another point of view he is only an appendage to his germ-plasm, to which he lends his energies, taking in return his toll of pleasure—the mortal vehicle of a (possibly) immortal substance.⁶⁸

Thus we are all both narcissistic and otherwise in sexual or libidinal pursuits. Self-satisfaction has its recompense for the world in furthering the species, beyond our own existence. Freud takes his customary biologicistic tone in some of this explanation of the split between the individual and his or her progenerative capacity, reducing the human to a set of cells. He then switches to the speculative language of mortality and immortality, but in spite of this change of register, Freud remains within the realm of the intrinsic nature of the human organism.⁶⁹ What comes after the above quoted passage is thus a surprise: moving away from the realm of sexual behavior, Freud likens the posited "double existence" of the human to "the inheritor of an entailed property who is only the temporary holder of an estate which survives him."⁷⁰ Freud's text suggests that the most apt analogy to the libidinal split of interests comes not from organic life, but rather from inheritance law. The alternative to the self-centered pursuit of personal satisfaction and pleasure seems, according to this comparison, to be akin to entailment law. This analogy is telling in its revelation of Freud's great ambivalence about his theory of the libido, not only in terms of how it is organized—an issue on which Freud deliberated for much of his career—but also inasmuch as he figures the counterpart to egotism as set of legal rulings.⁷¹

67. "On Narcissism" predates, importantly, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in which the libido theory is significantly revised. Both texts articulate possible ways narcissism might be countered in human nature, however, and both suggest, like Eliot, that reproductivity is not the only manner in which this might occur. Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1968).

68. Freud, "On Narcissism," 78.

69. The difference between these two registers should not be made too much of, necessarily. Freud points out in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in a very Nietzschean moment, that science is no more and no less than another figurative language. Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," 60.

70. Freud, "On Narcissism."

71. While the close reading of analogies should hardly need justification, Freud provides one of his own a paragraph later when calling Jung to task for one of his metaphors. Responding to Jung's claim that Freud is wrong that the turning of the libido onto one's own ego can result in pathological dementia

This move importantly throws a wrench in the works of any ethical thinking about narcissism. If the immortal possibility beyond narcissism, which Freud would later term “Eros,” finds its metonymic counterpart in this particular calcification of reproduction in the law, then the alternative to narcissism is not exactly the heterosexual and normative activities that produce offspring, but rather the manmade iterations of the legal structures that operate to pass on property between generations. Thus the question of narcissism turns on a metaphor that abandons biology or organic origins, instead introducing tractable cultural forms as the materials *par excellence* for understanding the intersection of narcissism and ethics.

This abandonment of biology soon receives more explanation, when Freud’s misgivings or irresoluteness about the libido theory return in the next paragraph. Here he again employs legal metaphors to explicate his point, stating that though he is convinced the libido and ego make up two separate instincts, if he is wrong about this, it does not properly matter: “it is possible that this primordial identity has as little to do with our analytical interests as the primordial kinship of all human races has to do with the proof of kinship with a testator required by the Probate Court.”⁷² Here Freud’s second metaphor continues the previous analogy of entailment law, while also effecting a remarkable intervention. He points out that probate court, the court of law charged with inheritance cases, has no use for theories about, for instance, the consanguinity of all humans, when the issue at hand is establishing that one claimant is genuinely an immediate relation. Similarly for Freud, then, it may be a vain pursuit to ask about human libidinal origins, when their outcome is the pertinent matter. It would seem that in the metaphorical tale of fee-tail that Freud is spinning, a drama might occur in which the will in question is contested, a potential inheritor threatened with disinheritance. Through this drama, Freud accomplishes two effects: first, he wrests human behavior from human nature, disputing the philosophy that would consider them more than contingently hinged.⁷³ Second, he suggests that one potentiality of such a split is the negative consequence of rancor, suspicion, and schism.

Human nature is thus practically an obsolete issue, taken over as it is here by human-created specificities of the law, a position which brings up the concept of *Anlehnung* or leaning-on.⁷⁴ “Leaning-on” describes the way in which the sexual drive emerges from the same place as self-preservation, but diverges from it metonymically and metaphorically.⁷⁵ Jean Laplanche explains this as “a leaning of the drive, the fact that emergent sexuality attaches itself to and is propped upon another process which is both similar and profoundly divergent: the sexual drive is propped upon a nonsexual, vital function.”⁷⁶ As Freud shows, inheritance laws might seem

praecox, arguing instead that such a reversal could result in “the psychology of an ascetic anchorite,” Freud writes that this an “inept comparison” because the ascetic would in fact not necessarily turn his libido toward himself but toward God. *Ibid.*, 80.

72. *Ibid.*, 78.

73. This connects to Freud’s later point in “On Narcissism” about philosophical systems, which he claims are often produced by paranoiacs who are compelled to consider superegoic voices as exterior to them, thus maintaining a measure of primary narcissism.

74. I follow Jean Laplanche in using “leaning-on” as a translation of *Anlehnung* rather than Strachey’s “anaclisis” or Jeffrey Mehlman’s term, “propping.” Laplanche discusses this choice in Jean Laplanche, *Problematisques III: La sublimation* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1980), 56-69.

75. Jean Laplanche, “The Drive and its Object-source: its fate in the transference,” in *Seduction, Translation, and the Drives*, ed. John and Martin Stanton Fletcher (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1992).

76. Jean Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 16.

originally to have stemmed from biological truths about kinship; yet the practicalities of their enforcement in the probate courts require no such ordinary theories, and indeed show how radically far kinship rules deviate from any original source, such that the seemingly obvious human togetherness implied by kinship can devolve into the family feuds that fuel novels. Or, that is to say, economy, rather than Eros, may have come to rule that which manages to exceed narcissism. This seems notably a far cry from the generally liberatory role which leaning-on has come to play in discussions of sexuality: if the sexual drive is a matter of leaning-on, then it must always operate at a distance from the self-preservation from which it emerged. Once the object and aim of self-preservation are lost and exchanged for the new objects and aims of sexuality, all sexuality may be seen as equally “perverse” and all “perversion” as equal to ostensibly normal sexual objects and aims. Yet here Freud seems through the same theoretical means to have trapped himself in a corner regarding leaning-on. If the result of leaning-on is estrangement from any ordinary hope or design for the escape from narcissism through Eros, what possibility can there be for an other-centered ethics? Freud’s entire essay echoes this question in its seeming inability to locate a realm in which narcissism does not reign, but the bright side of leaning-on which he does not acknowledge is of course that if narcissism is contingent, it may be superseded.

Eliot, like Freud, seems to find in inheritance law an apposite counter to narcissism. However, unlike Freud, this opposition in *Middlemarch* offers slightly more redemption. In the face of a system in which unheterosexual behavior is condemned, the novel offers the redemptive possibility that the values in its place are just as contingent and arbitrary. With Mr. Brooke’s entailment, the novel presents a kind of futurity that is divorced from the blind adulation of heteronormative ideals of fecundity. It is still associated with primogeniture, but there is agency and choice involved in the way in which it is adjudicated between Mr. Brooke and Sir James. Similar to childbirth, this system relies on a vision of future generations, but it is not at all tied, as Freud’s discussion also suggests, to rhetoric of the natural, to overweening visions of infantine Buddhas. Instead it is a perversion of the natural: with a queer bow to the power of capital, *Middlemarch* suggests it in fact offers a less reified form of the will.

George Eliot’s Will

The *Illustrated London News* states that the will (dated May 6, 1880,) of Mrs. Mary Ann Cross, the wife of Mr. John Walter Cross, who died on Dec. 22 last, was proved on the 9th inst. by Charles Lee Lewes, the sole Executor, the personal estate, limited to the property she had a power of appointment over by virtue of a settlement, (dated May 4, 1880,) and under the will of Mrs. Mary Everard, being sworn under £40,000. By the settlement referred to not only was the property she then possessed settled, but also any she might thereafter acquire by the exercise of her literary skill. The testatrix bequeaths £5,000 to Miss Emily Clarke, £1,000 to Vivian Byam Lewes, an annuity of £100 for her life to Mrs. Caroline Bray, and an annuity of £40 for her life to her housekeeper, Mrs. Mary Dowling. The sum of £12,500 is to be set aside, in the names of her Executor and her husband as Trustees, and the income paid to Mrs. Eliza Lewes, the widow of Herbert Arthur Lewes, for life or during widowhood, and on her death or second marriage, as to one moiety of the capital fund for her son, George Henry Lewes, and as to the other moiety for her daughter, Marian Lewes. As to the residue of her property, the testatrix gives the same to the said Charles Lee Lewes, his heirs, Executors, Administrators, and assigns, absolutely.⁷⁷

77. “George Eliot’s Will,” *The New York Times*, March 4 1881.

George Eliot, née Mary Anne Evans, left the bulk of her estate to the children her longtime lover, George Henry Lewes, had with his wife, and these children's descendants.⁷⁸ Her new husband, John Cross, played a part in the inheritance solely as co-Trustee of the monies that would go to the widow of Lewes's third son, and her children. Much of Eliot's capital had come, it would seem, from her aunt, Mary Everard, who also had no children of her own to whom to will her possessions. This was to be added to any income Eliot had received from her writing.

Thus did Eliot queer her will, just as her use of the author function queers the will (and just as, some say, anyway, she queered her character, Will⁷⁹). Like her character Mr. Brooke, Eliot chose with her will to honor less the sanctity of accepted forms heterofuturity than all of the forms of new life to which she was personally, though not consanguinely, attached. Property is finally the odd and paradoxical symbol of the absolute authority of the will that coexists with its total dispersion in the past and future. While in no way connected to the personal, biological products of sex, it is absolutely sexual in the sense that it offers, in the case of Eliot's will just as in the case of Mr. Brooke's, a way of honoring relational ties—that of Dorothea and Will in *Middlemarch*, and the complex bonds between Eliot, Cross, Lewes, and Lewes's wife—that is otherwise unavailable.

It is significant that like Austen in *Persuasion*, Eliot turns in *Middlemarch* finally to private property as the key to all sexual and ethical mythologies. Yet rather than focusing as Austen does on the ways in which a culture of ownership has deprived the woman of the capacity to step outside the narcissistic script of the future it takes part in, Eliot presents a more hopeful notion. However, also significant, of course, is the fact that this queer futurity is not “voiced” through the character of the developing woman. Dorothea drops out of the line of queer futurity except as bearer of the children who will eventually gain from their uncle. This disappearance, like the novel's expulsion of Casaubon, signals the extent to which any future, even a queer one, might in fact need to be built, in Eliot's view, upon “shattered mummies, and fragments of a tradition which was itself a mosaic wrought from crushed ruins.” The young girl whose story ushers in a modicum of queer futural possibility, is in a way sacrificed to this path as much as is the narcissistic queer whose devotion to the death drive exempts him from humanity.

78. Margaret Harris and Johnston, eds., *The Journals of George Eliot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998)

79. Barbara Hardy points out, for instance, that imagery of children always appears in intimate moments between Will and Dorothea—this could either be interpreted as an unambiguous fertility symbol, or more plausibly, I think, as a suggestion of the relative freedom from “adult” sexual norms that their relationship accesses. Hardy, *Particularities*, 30.

Chapter 3
The Mysterious Residuum of Desire:
Wonder as a Queer Ethic in *What Maisie Knew*

What Maisie Knew and its heroine are different in many ways from the novels and heroines discussed to this point. Henry James's Maisie is too young to consider marriage with anyone, and her child-state renders her inevitably the "property" of others prior to and apart from any concerns about female self-determination. But like Austen's Anne and Eliot's Isabel, Maisie is a character who operates within the intermediate position of "girl" to call into question the nature of relationality, through her own oblique relationship to it. In many ways, Maisie's is a story of another era from the ones to which Austen and Eliot were responding—the theme of divorce, though of course not unheard of by the earlier Victorians, was not one which until the turn of the century could occupy the premise of a novel quite in the way it does in *What Maisie Knew*. The novel treats the subject in such a way, however, that it moves from what would appear at first to be a deliberation on the politics and parameters of marriage that we confront to this day in discourse about sexuality, to a far subtler revisioning of relationality, one which though limited in its own ways exceeds the possibilities imagined by Austen and Eliot as much as it perhaps exceeds the tenor of the contemporary discussion as well.

Henry James, Freedom, and Desire

In the latter half of the eighteenth century, Henry James's father, Henry James Sr., was involved in contentious debates regarding divorce.¹ These arguments found their way into national newspapers, and were as heated as current debates about gay marriage. And similarly to our recent debates, one great concern at the time was that changing rules of access to marriage would degrade the quality of this institution. James Sr. initially argued for the liberalization of divorce, the radical implications of which free love advocate Stephen Pearl Andrews latched onto so much that James retracted his views. James Sr. eventually landed at a far more conservative stance that marriage is a sacred tool of sociality, where liberalized divorce would too strongly favor the individual.

Henry James Jr. also considered these questions closely. In letters and reviews of the late eighteenth century, he was staunchly on the conservative side of the debate. Given the great preponderance of recent cases for James's queer and postmodern radicalism with regard to ideas about desire,² it seems important to remember how traditionalist were his views about marriage. For instance, he wrote in his 1865 review of Louisa May Alcott's novel *Moods* that marriage

1. Henry James, Horace Greeley, and Stephen Pearl Andrews, *Love, Marriage, and Divorce, and The Sovereignty of the Individual* (Boston: Benj. R. Tucker, 1889).

2. See for instance Wendy Graham, *Henry James's Thwarted Love* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); Eric Haralson, *Henry James and Queer Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Michael Moon, *A Small Boy and Others: Imitation and Initiation in American Culture from Henry James to Andy Warhol* (Durham: Duke University Press); John Carlos Rowe, *The Other Henry James* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

should be “inviolable,” except in cases in which “a man beats, starves, or otherwise misuses his wife.”³ He also congratulated his father on his later, more conservative stance. Of course, as Melissa Ganz points out, James’s fiction does approach the matter with more ambivalence. For Ganz, *The Portrait of a Lady* “struggles to resolve the tension between the liberal and the conservative positions in the divorce debates.”⁴ I would take this claim further and say that for James relationality and desire are more complicated than questions of the marriage tie or its dissolution could ever contain. The hinge of many relational issues for James seems not specifically a matter of the legalities of marriage or divorce, but rather more far-reaching questions about the nature of freedom: does being an individual mean being free from relationships or being free to form relationships? are we fundamentally separate from others or attached? how might attachments to others work in an ethos of freedom and individuality? is it possible to honor freedom of the self at the same time as we protect and care for others? As it turns out, this chapter will argue, James’s notions about freedom belie the conservatism with which he viewed marriage. While marriage and divorce for James were of synecdochal importance to weightier issues of ethics and desire, his conclusions about freedom end up throwing into disarray the very terms by which marriage debates were conducted.

James’s 1897 novel, *What Maisie Knew*, is central to this discussion because it thematizes the role of the child in issues of marriage, divorce, freedom, desire. On the face of things the novel asks how a divorce would affect a child. But by centering the narrative on this growing, but limited, consciousness (the famous narrative experiment that earned James accolades of “astounding cleverness” from even his detractors⁵), *What Maisie Knew* also asks how we come into our knowledge of sexuality, what happens to a child’s attachments to others if the mother-father-baby trio is sundered, and how we can understand freedom while still keeping in mind our early dependency.⁶

Questions of individual development and agency such as these have remained central to theories of desire. From Freud to recent queer theory, they seek to explain how natural is our connection to (or alternately our separation from) others. With the self-determination and individualism embedded in post-Enlightenment humanist ethics, it is difficult to envision ethical bonds to others without the modicum of agency that the notion of personal freedom allows for.

3. Henry James, “Louisa M. Alcott: Review of *Moods*,” in *Henry James: Literary Criticism: Essays on Literature, American Writers, English Writers*, ed. Leon Edel (New York: Library of America, 1984), 192.

4. Melissa J. Ganz, “‘A Strange Opposition’: The Portrait of a Lady and the Divorce Debates,” *The Henry James Review* 27, no. 2 (2006), 169.

5. For example, a reviewer for the *Manchester Guardian* wrote in 1897: “It is undoubtedly a work of art, but hardly one which we wish to hang on our walls.” Kevin J. Hayes, *Henry James: The Contemporary Reviews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 283.

6. One of James Sr.’s sticking points in his earlier stance in the marriage debate was children: while in his early stage of these debates he believed the law should not take an interest in relational matters between adults, he felt that where children were involved the law had a place. As he put it, his argument was for “freely legitimating divorce, within the limits of a complete guarantee to society against the support of offspring; because in that case you place the inducement to mutual fidelity no longer in the base legal bondage of the parties merely, but in their reciprocal inward sweetness or humanity. And this is an appeal which, when frankly and generously made, no man or woman will ever prove recreant to.” As Stephen Pearl Andrews was quick to point out, this position was odd: if we can trust people’s inward sweetness and humanity toward each other, then why should the child be exempt from such munificence? James, Greeley, and Andrews, *Love, Marriage, and Divorce*, 25-6.

What Maisie Knew was not the first novel in which James considered liberty. Nearly two decades before he wrote *What Maisie Knew*, James explored the question of freedom and relationality in the context of marriage in *The Portrait of a Lady*. *The Portrait of a Lady* concludes infamously, with its liberty-loving heroine apparently choosing to return to the prison of her mistaken marriage with Gilbert Osmond and “the house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation” in which they live together. When my father read this novel as a teenager he was so incensed at the ending that he rewrote it and stuck his revision in his copy of the book. As his version had it, Isabel chooses to leave Osmond for Caspar Goodwood, the suitor with whom Isabel has the most sexual chemistry. Here is their parting, as James wrote it (sadly my father didn’t save his version), just before the end of the novel:

His kiss was like white lightning, a flash that spread, and spread again, and stayed; and it was extraordinarily as if, while she took it, she felt each thing in his hard manhood that had least pleased her, each aggressive fact of his face, his figure, his presence, justified of its intense identity and made one with this act of possession. So had she heard of those wrecked and under water following a train of images before they sink. But when darkness returned she was free.⁷

You can imagine why a teenager would want to prolong this practically smutty moment indefinitely, rather than sending Isabel back to the sterile incarceration of her marriage. What is telling about this passage, besides the suffocating air of Goodwood’s sexual advance, is the dark freedom that meets Isabel’s escape from Goodwood. It is the “white lightning” of Goodwood’s masculine sexual force—the only ostensibly clear light of physical urges—that Isabel realizes presents the most binding yoke. Darkness, however muddy, offers Isabel the cover she needs to make choices not dictated by her body or her desperate unhappiness in her marriage, but rather by her now long-considered and much altered notion of what it means to be free. Whether critics see Jamesian liberty as European (MacComb), Lacanian (Jottkandt), de Tocquevillian (Watson), capitalist (Sanner), queer (Luciano, more or less), or as shadily undergirded by slavery and enslavement (Peiffer),⁸ there seems to be a great deal of agreement that James was a serious critic of normative, or individualist, or American notions of freedom, and rethought freedom extensively in his works, in particular in *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Bostonians*, and *The Ambassadors*.⁹ It is interesting that absent from most major discussions of Jamesian liberty, however, is the novel in which the notion of freedom comes up most strenuously, *What Maisie Knew*.

7. Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (New York: Norton, 1975), 489.

8. Sigi Jottkandt, “Portrait of an Act: Aesthetics and Ethics in *The Portrait of a Lady*,” *The Henry James Review* 25, no. 1 (2004); Dana Luciano, “Invalid Relations: Queer Kinship in Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady*,” *The Henry James Review* 23, no. 2 (2002); Debra MacComb, “Divorce of a Nation; or, Can Isabel Archer Resist History?” *The Henry James Review* 17, no. 2 (1996); Siobhan Peiffer, “Commerce and Freedom in *The Ambassadors*,” *The Henry James Review* 23, no. 2 (2002); Kristin Sanner, “‘Wasn’t all history full of the destruction of precious things?’: Missing Mothers, Feminized Fathers, and the Purchase of Freedom in Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady*,” *The Henry James Review* 26, no. 2 (2005); George Watson, “Tocqueville and the Burden of Liberty,” *The Hudson Review* 38, no. 3 (1985).

9. It should be clear from this review of criticism at any rate that there is no critical consensus on the theory of liberty that James was critiquing, except that he was dissatisfied with the ways in which his contemporaries understood it.

Perhaps this absence is in part because freedom seems like a joke in *What Maisie Knew*. Here are Maisie and her governess, Mrs. Wix, talking about liberty, when Maisie proposes that Mrs. Wix remain her governess even if Maisie ends up in the custody of her stepfather and stepmother, who are having an illicit liaison with each other:

“Stay on as my companion yes; stay on as just what you were at mamma’s. Mrs. Beale would let you!” the child proclaimed.

Mrs. Wix had by this time fairly sprung to her arms. “And who, I’d like to know, would let Mrs. Beale? Do you mean, little unfortunate, that you would?”

“Why not? if now she’s free.”

“Free? Are you imitating him? ... Free, free, free? If she’s as free as *you* are, my dear, she’s free enough, to be sure!”

“As I am?”—Maisie, after reflexion and despite whatever of portentous this seemed to convey, risked a critical echo.

“Well,” said Mrs. Wix, “nobody, you know, is free to commit a crime.”

“A crime!” The word had come out in a way that made the child sound it again.

“You’d commit as great a one as their own—and so should I—if we were to condone their immorality by our presence.”

Maisie waited a little; this seemed so fiercely conclusive. “Why is it immorality?” she nevertheless presently enquired.

Her companion now turned upon her with a reproach softer because it was somehow deeper. “You’re too unspeakable! Do you know what we’re talking about?”

In the interest of ultimate calm Maisie felt that she must be above all clear. “Certainly; about their taking advantage of their freedom.”¹⁰

Free, free, free? The term starts to sound meaningless in the course of its dizzying iterations. First it seems to denote, simply, “unencumbered by marriage”—free *of* the chains of another person. But then with Mrs. Wix’s proclamation that Maisie’s stepmother is “free enough,” we see a second meaning emerge: to be free is to be ignorant of rules of morality, in Maisie’s case, or in Mrs. Beale’s case, plainly licentious, flaunting the rules of morality. Once can be too free, at least according to Mrs. Wix’s narrow moralism: the freedom to pursue new partners is mere shabby whoredom. And then, taking a different tack, Mrs. Wix proclaims that freedom ends when it is improperly used: “nobody is free to commit a crime.” When finally Mrs. Wix challenges Maisie’s understanding of the entire conversation, Maisie is able to use the swirling signifier of their discussion tautologically, to evade her interlocutress’s imputations altogether.

What is clear in all this is that freedom does not have a transparent and undisputed value or signification in *What Maisie Knew*. As in *The Portrait of a Lady*, characters certainly desire it; just as Isabel asserts from the start that “I’m very fond of my liberty,” so too do all of Maisie’s parents and stepparents variously triumphantly pronounce their own freedom as well as Maisie’s, and question each others’. “I’m free—I’m free!” “You’re free—you’re free”... “He’s free, you know.” ... “He’s just a poor sunk slave.” ... “*Can you choose freely?*” “What had really happened was that Sir Claude was ‘free’ and that Mrs. Beale was ‘free’”... “She’s free—she’s free.” Not only is it unclear of what freedom consists, but accordingly the novel is also vague as to which of its characters “really” have it.

10. Henry James, *What Maisie Knew* (New York: Anchor Books, 1954), 214-215. References to the novel will hereafter appear in parentheses in the text.

While the meaning and location of freedom in the novel are ambiguous, a crucial function of freedom emerges from all of the discussions about it: freedom in *What Maisie Knew* involves the degree to which and the nature by which people are attached to each other. Freedom, as Mrs. Wix's indignant sputterings suggest, might involve immorality and even crime, if the attachments it permits are frowned upon. In some understandings of it, freedom is hindered by relational ties, at the same time as it is the condition of creating new relationships. Freedom, that is, is the capricious law of desire in *What Maisie Knew*.

This chapter asks, in part, what the novel's engagement with the idea of freedom tells us about desire. Maisie's response to her circumstances suggests that choice and love might be able to thrive in fact in the midst of confinement in others' nastinesses: *What Maisie Knew* is the story of a young girl born into "sordid intrigue...*partie carrée* ... terrible human imbroglio ... the dustheap and the dungheap ... grime and squalor," as one contemporary critic put it.¹¹ Maisie's parents divorce, have disastrously failed affairs, and neglect and abuse their daughter profligately. Yet unfree as she may be, rather than carrying on her parents' meanness or being too wounded to carry on at all, Maisie responds through "wonder," finding love, care, and safety in her circumstances. As James explained his plan for Maisie in his Preface:

instead of simply submitting to the inherited tie and the imposed complication, of suffering from them, our little wonder-working agent would create, without design, quite fresh elements of this order—contribute, that is, to the formation of a fresh tie, from which it would then (and for all the world as if through a small demonic foresight) proceed to derive great profit.¹²

On the one hand we are faced with what might seem to be a Pollyannaish figure: a girl for whom all turmoil ends up being a "glad game." The OED cites E.H. Porter's 1913 comment on Pollyanna, which suggests that "wonder" might simply be the property of optimistic little girls:

Her name is Pollyanna Whittier.... And what are the special ingredients of this wonder-working tonic of hers? ... As near as I can find out it is an overwhelming, unquenchable gladness... Her quaint speeches are constantly being repeated to me, and, as near as I can make out, "just being glad" is the tenor of most of them.¹³

On the other hand, a more serious idea may be at play. Maisie is not just glad; as she herself proclaims to Sir Claude, when he tells her that "Fear, unfortunately, is a very big thing, and there's a great variety of kinds": "She took this in with complete intelligence. 'Then I think I've got them all.' 'You?' her friend cried. 'Nonsense! You're thoroughly "game".'" (101) Regardless of her capacity of wonder, Maisie still registers the unhappiness of her situation, much as Sir Claude may scoff at this possibility. Yet "wonder" allows her to take what she is given and resignify it to her own ends. What James thus proposes through Maisie is the potential for a revaluation of values, such that familial patterns can change, such that much as one might inherit relationships and relational configurations, and much as early childhood might be formed wholly of complications that the child did not instigate, nevertheless it is possible for the child to emerge out of bad circumstances and work to change their meaning.

11. Hayes, *Henry James: The Contemporary Reviews*, 284.

12. Henry James, *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces*, ed. Richard P. Blackmur (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), 142.

13. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd ed., s.v. "Pollyanna."

This could be seen as the beginnings of a queer theory of desire. If there is a damaged, diseased, homophobic heterosexuality, constantly denying its losses and blindly harming others, for the James of *What Maisie Knew* another “agent” may nevertheless materialize from this steaming heap, an agent for whom such material reorganized can constitute something fresh, something different, something that defies the ugliness and meanness of the stuff from which it came. That Maisie’s revolutionary tool is “wonder” puts this in a different class from the anti-social queer theory that for instance Judith Halberstam propounds:

If we want to make the anti-social turn in queer theory, we must be willing to turn away from the comfort zone of polite exchange in order to embrace a truly political negativity, one that promises, this time, to fail, to make a mess, to fuck shit up, to be loud, unruly, impolite, to breed resentment, to bash back, to speak up and out, to disrupt, assassinate, shock and annihilate, and, to quote Jamaica Kincaid, to make everyone a little less happy.

It is as impossible to imagine Henry James recommending we should fuck shit up as it is to suppose that he might be impressed (any more than Foucault might)¹⁴ with the notion of bashing back or speaking up and out. Whatever the attractions and advantages of such a mode of rebellion, it would seem that Maisie offers its reverse. As if a prescient forewarning against the “negative turn” Halberstam cites, at each turn *What Maisie Knew* upends negative imaginings of the ways one might contest inherited forms of desire—anti-futurity, shattering, the death drive, to name the most prominent—and puts forward an alternate possibility: that freedom may be rethought as abundance without disavowing (indeed while better paying heed to) the interpersonal injuriousness of normative sexual regimes.

Antisocial Desires

Halberstam states that her exhortation follows a venerated line of queer theory, starting with Leo Bersani (*Homos*, “Is the Rectum a Grave?”) and continuing most recently and scandalously with Lee Edelman (*No Future*).¹⁵ Although Halberstam’s notion of “fucking shit up” seems to accord more to an idea of disrupting or changing the nature of the social than rejecting sociality altogether, she interestingly traces it to this grimmer school of thought. The set of writings to which she refers rejects claims that sexuality and desire are or should be seen as related to sociality. Instead, and usually following Lacan, desire is seen as more properly the ultimate evidence of the way in which we are separated from others.

Though Bersani has very interestingly reversed his position in more recent work,¹⁶ his early and more notorious claim was that sexuality is a tautology for masochism. That is, for the

14. It could be argued that Halberstam is working rather in the parameters of what Foucault referred to as parrhesia; she does, on the other hand, explicitly refer to “antisocial” theories as her inspiration. On parrhesia, see Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001). For Halberstam’s own discussion of her relationship to Foucault’s work, see Judith Halberstam, “Masculinity without Men (Interview with Annamarie Jagose),” *Genders* 29 (1999).

15. Also in this general school of thought are, for example, Judith Halberstam, as noted, as well as Lauren Berlant, David Halperin. See for example Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997); David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub, *Gay Shame* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

16. For the later developments in Bersani’s notion of desire, see Leo Bersani, “Sociality and Sexuality,” *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 4 (2000) and Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *Intimacies* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2008).

early Bersani, the origin and condition of possibility of sexuality is masochism: as infants, we are vulnerable and open to a barrage of stimuli. In order to endure this nearly overwhelming experience, “We desire what nearly shatters us.”¹⁷ Thus sexuality is born of the need to survive our separation from our mothers. However, Bersani laments, we tend to want to deny this state of matters, in order to reject the vulnerability and lack at our core. So we claim sexuality is about control (the mighty phallus) or sociality (our connections to others). Control is a chimera—it is only the fantasy of phallocentrism that we may have mastery over others, that we can negate the object of our desire; and the purported sociality of desire is only a matter of frenzied attempts to repudiate the lack forever at our core once we are split from others through language. In “Is the Rectum a Grave?” Bersani approached the political and queer theoretical implications of this argument, claiming that contrary to gay-positive politics, being homosexual is not in itself a political act: if it partakes of the same denials of the powerlessness at the core of desire, then it still endorses the current sexual system. The radical option that queers might choose to succumb to, he asserts in this essay, is masochism, the attempt to take up a position of pleasure toward the shattering at our core.¹⁸

At first glance it might seem that *What Maisie Knew* agrees with this in a way: Maisie very calmly accepts “the doom of a peculiar passivity” (95), and indeed manages repeatedly to transform pain and powerlessness into pleasure. Maisie is after all James’s “little wonder-working agent”;¹⁹ as many times as she is neglected and abandoned (which in small ways and large is her constant experience throughout the novel) she ever seems to find happiness. For instance, early in the novel she decides to stop acting as a messenger of her parents’ insults to each other by becoming practically mute; for this act of defiance her parents turn their insults to Maisie: “when, as a tribute to the successful application of her system, she began to be called a little idiot, she tasted a pleasure new and keen” (27). Yet Maisie’s position towards pain repeatedly brings her together with others. Rather than drive one toward antisociality, accepting the presence of pain, the novel suggests, would lead one to relationality.

What Maisie Knew calls antisocial hypotheses into question perhaps on an even larger scale with regard to another proponent of such theories, Lee Edelman. Just as this novel opposes the response to shattering that Bersani imagines as the apotheosis of queer radicalism, so too does it refuse Edelman’s definition of the child as one of our most fervently cathected cultural barriers to exposing the ruses of our social and sexual systems.

In *No Future*, Lee Edelman takes up the antisocial mantle with ferocity, writing that not only should we give in to our shattering, but queers should gladly take on homophobic vilifications that charge that homosexuals corrupt children and thus our future. The radical position, in this argument, is thus to reject the idea that the children are our future, as well as refusing the entire cultural imaginary that goes with this idea, namely the disavowal of the death drive that leads us to adopt the elaborate defense mechanism that is the story of reproductive desire. Instead, queers should welcome the chaos and psychosis involved in accepting the existence of the death drive: “queerness can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb

17. Leo Bersani, *The Freudian Body* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 40.

18. “Much of this now seems to me a rather facile, even irresponsible celebration of ‘self-defeat.’ Masochism is not a viable alternative to mastery, either practically or theoretically.” Bersani, “Sociality and Sexuality,” 648.

19. James, *The Art of the Novel*, 142.

one.”²⁰ Similarly to Bersani’s argument, then, is Edelman’s Lacanian premise that sexuality is shaped as it is in western culture—as a narrative of the accession of meaning and identity through reproduction—as a result of a deep need to disavow the lack at our core. In frantically defending the inviolability of children and the preciousness of their future, this culture also proclaims queers as the potential attackers of these avatars: “the freedoms of adults face constant threat of legal curtailment out of deference to imaginary Children whose futures, as if they were permitted to have them except as they consist in the prospect of passing them on to Children of their own, are construed as endangered by the social disease as which queer sexualities register.”²¹ The radical position this puts queers in is the one we should actively take on, Edelman says, with the now well-quoted exhortation, “Fuck the social order and the child in whose name we’re collectively terrorized; fuck Annie; fuck the waif from *Les Mis*: fuck the poor, innocent kid on the Net; fuck Laws both with capital ls and with small; fuck the whole network of symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop.”²²

Funnily enough, many years before he wrote *What Maisie Knew*, James evinced a similar, if more muted, misanthropy about children: “We are utterly weary of stories about precocious little girls,” he wrote in his review of Alcott’s *Moods*.²³ Yet of course for many novels and stories to come, his theme par excellence would end up being precocious little girls.²⁴ With *Maisie* we do not encounter in the child what Edelman sees as its symbolic weight: for James the child seems to stand not for the future, or for reproductivity, but rather the opposite. The child is an image of present-ness, as is clear in the novel’s description of *Maisie*’s response to shuttling between her two parents’ abodes: “In that lively sense of the immediate which is the very air of a child’s mind the past, on each occasion, became for her as indistinct as the future: she surrendered herself to the actual with a good faith that might have been touching to either parent” (27). It would seem that in *What Maisie Knew*, the narrative logic which for Edelman “terroristically holds us all in check”—the veneration of identity as a narrative of desire—is only associated with adults, who are always, in short, wrong.²⁵ Where the very air of a child’s mind is solely attuned to the present, the adults who ought to be “touched” by the trust this position involves seem rather not to notice it.²⁶ James is in this critiquing in the adult world the same problem Edelman sees, but the alternative James puts forth with *Maisie* is nearly opposite to Edelman’s understanding of the child.

There are times in the novel at which *Maisie* does seem to have a conception of temporality, yet these serve as radically different than the narratives of desire that her parents live. When *Maisie* asks Sir Claude whether he will visit her when she is staying with Mrs. Beale, she is, according to the narrator, at her most naturally childlike in wanting to ascertain her future.

20. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 17.

21. *Ibid.*, 19.

22. *Ibid.*, 29.

23. James, “Louisa M. Alcott: Review of *Moods*,” 189.

24. Alfred Habegger also points this out, claiming that James’s review of *Moods* is a sort of shaping of his literary response to a group of novels by women. Alfred Habegger, “Precocious Incest: First Novels by Louisa May Alcott and Henry James,” *The Massachusetts Review* 26, no. 2/3 (1985).

25. Edelman, *No Future*, 21.

26. There is also a curious use of “touch” throughout this novel, which this chapter will discuss later. How little adults are capable of being “touched” is crucial to the conception of freedom in *What Maisie Knew*.

“Though there were parts of childhood Maisie had lost she had all childhood’s preference for the particular promise” (79). In this case Maisie wishes her very beloved stepfather to promise to visit her soon, seemingly an attempt to secure Maisie’s own narrative of desire. I would argue, however, that this is more of a performative sense of the promise, as a seduction, and less of the constative sense: Maisie is perfectly aware that very few of the promises made to her eventuate in reality. Thus the pleasure of the promise is in the doing; it is an act that is either felicitous or infelicitous, but certainly not a description of reality or a truth.²⁷

In fact, in *What Maisie Knew* the immediacy the child experiences is associated with a different attitude toward truth: “She was at the age for which all stories are true and all conceptions are stories. The actual was the absolute, the present alone was vivid” (27). Stories here do not seem to involve the same temporalizing faculty that Edelman attaches to all narrative. Rather, for this “age,” everything is a story just as the present is all: childhood belies teleology at the same time as it embraces “stories,” in its capacity, at least in Maisie’s case, to mine the performative potential of seeming guarantors of truth.

Maisie also gives the lie to the innocence and incorruptibility with which Edelman’s imagined child is always necessarily associated: as Kevin Ohi points out, Maisie is more an illustration of polymorphous perversity than of erotic innocence, though she must contend with the expectation that children be innocent as well as with the fear that such an innocent child will be corrupted.²⁸

Although it might be said that the immediacy, performativity, and queerness associated with the child here is less a matter of what the child “stands for” (as Edelman is understanding “the child”—a cultural fantasy, an image) than a representation of the child’s consciousness, it also seems clear that James is at least purporting to call upon shared beliefs and knowledges about the child; if Maisie is not the image of the child, James would seem to be arguing that she should be. At the very least, this novel calls upon an alternative cultural narrative of the child, presenting a different set of queer options.

Thus while *What Maisie Knew* doubtlessly thematizes lack and shattering and certainly has to some degree a grim and critical view of sexuality as the adult world experiences it, the novel also comes to quite different conclusions about the potentialities of desire. Rejecting, it seems, all three antisocial positions that I have sketched—Halberstam’s social disruption, Bersani’s shattering, and Edelman’s death drive—*What Maisie Knew* instead presents ideas of ways in which what appears to be antisocial can actually set the stage for a more ethical form of desire. The rest of this chapter outlines some of those conclusions.

Desire, Separation, and Vulnerability in *What Maisie Knew*

The model of the psyche that Bersani and Edelman draw on tends to combine the works of Freud, Lacan, and Laplanche: for each of these writers, the infant and its development into an individual apart from the mother is the key to understanding subjectivity, relationality, and

27. On the performativity of the promise, see Shoshana Felman, *The Literary Speech Act: Don Juan with J.L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983).

28. Kevin Ohi, “Narrating the Child’s Queerness in *What Maisie Knew*,” in *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*, ed. Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004). Michael Snediker also uses Maisie among others to illustrate “the obvious fact that *there’s nothing queerer than childhood*.” Michael D. Snediker, *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 224 n. 54.

desire. Whether the division from the other that the child encounters is that of language as Lacan has it or involves the physical separation from the mother that comes with birth and the recognition that the mother's breast is only on loan, the human condition in these theories has individuation as its inevitable goal. *What Maisie Knew* offers an attempt to think through this process and its telos. Rather than proposing that we attribute a psychology to the character Maisie precisely, what I mean to suggest is that *What Maisie Knew* is a story of how the psyche might respond to a particular situation.²⁹

On the one hand, there is an acute division between Maisie and her formidable mother from early on, which Maisie soon has the words to testify to, in a conversation with Sir Claude. " 'Mamma doesn't care for me,' she said very simply. 'Not really.' Child as she was, her little long history was in the words; and it was as impossible to contradict her as if she had been venerable" (78). One interpretation could be that Maisie has simply individuated early, forced to do so by her circumstances. However, it seems rather that the novel wants the reader to gather the opposite, that Maisie is all the more given over to others, by virtue of being a child, by virtue of being (virtually) motherless. She is not venerable, but only speaks "as if" this might be the case. As James writes in his Preface, "The wretched infant was thus to find itself practically disowned, rebounding from racquet to racquet like a tennis-ball or a shuttlecock."³⁰ Much as Maisie is disowned, thrown up in the air, figuratively, the salient fact is that others are throwing her—as is the condition of every child, but to an even greater degree, Maisie is at the whim of the parents who provide her with her (albeit dismal) living situation.

As D.W. Winnicott put it, "There is no such thing as a baby."³¹ That is, for physical survival, every infant belongs to a dyad—"baby" is always actually baby-with-parent/caregiver. As alone as Maisie is, she too is always held to some degree by an adult. The situation of the child thus dramatizes the imprisonment of the human situation as much as it does connection: if freedom can be found in this milieu, then we will have a far different understanding of the potential of relationality and sexuality than that which is radically antisocial. Maisie surely recognizes the extent to which her life is a hostage situation:

the sharpened sense of spectatorship was the child's main support, the long habit, from the first, of seeing herself in the discussion and finding in the fury of it—she had had a glimpse of the game of football—a sort of compensation for the doom of a peculiar passivity. It gave her often an odd air of being present at her history in as separate a manner as if she could only get at experience by flattening her nose against a pane of glass. (95-6)

Again with recourse to a sports metaphor, oddly enough for James, Maisie is here the object in a game of which she plays no personal agentic part. Yet if Maisie knows that she must be peculiarly passive, she also finds a way to gain something by it—she is "present." When the novel explains that Maisie's sense of experience is as of viewing it through a glass, it is not immediately apparent whether we should take this as a kind of Plato's cave metaphor—that she will only gain truth when she can have first-hand access to experience—or if we should take a

29. Novels, just like case histories, offer stories of how the psyche works. Freud proposed just this throughout his oeuvre. See for instance his discussion of figurative language in Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1968) 60.

30. James, *The Art of the Novel*, 140.

31. Adam Phillips, *Winnicott* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 6.

Lacanian interpretation, by which we see the pane of glass as the inescapable distortion of signification and the system of meanings that we're all in. That is, are we to understand the linguistic side of maturation as coming into knowledge and truth, or as coming into certain alienation from reality?

What Maisie Knew in fact offers a great deal of commentary on language, both explicit and implicit, to help answer this question. For instance, Maisie's mother is figured as if she were covered in a scaly hide of language: "Ida bristled with monograms" (24). As well as showcasing Ida's desire for possessions and prestige and the flourishes with which she presents herself, this image also conjures the letter itself as prickly, dangerous. Ida, armed with the fundamental component of text, seems here a living incarnation of the wounding potential of language, the way in which it can touch others and hurt them. Again language would seem to be less a relationship with reality per se than a tool of performativity, whether used for good or for ill. Just as Maisie's fondness for the particular promise is more performative than constative, so too does she experience signification remove from reality as just another way her captivity to, and captivation by, others is played out.

When for another example Maisie is dreading her upcoming stay with Ida, "this would have darkened all the days if the ingenious Moddle hadn't written on a paper in very big easy words ever so many pleasures that she would enjoy at the other house. These promises ranged from 'a mother's fond love' to 'a nice poached egg for your tea'" (26). It seems that Maisie is truly comforted by her governess's promises, yet we know already that much as Maisie might reliably look forward to the poached eggs she might encounter at her mother's, what she will certainly not find in Ida is fond love. Again the promise performs its own seduction, infelicitous as it promises to be. The ironic distance between language and reality that Moddle's notes betray does not seem to compromise a sense of truth, but rather offers immediate human solace. Thus we have neither Plato nor Lacan, neither accessible reality nor exactly the sense of lack that comprises the imaginary.

Language is not an isolating system in *What Maisie Knew* as much as it is a set of blandishments and deceptions that function performatively. Whether it is her parents' promises or those of her governess, the language of others is for Maisie part of the complex production in which she is inextricably entwined. Maisie no more believes in the truth of the signification system in which she is lodged than she believes that her mother will exhibit fond love for her. Rather, what *What Maisie Knew* offers is more like Nietzsche's understanding of language as "an infinitely complicated dome of concepts upon an unstable foundation, and, as it were, on running water. Of course, in order to be supported by such a foundation, [this] construction must be like one constructed of spiders' webs."³² Language produces its own reality, one scarcely connected to that it purports to approximate. And Maisie is given over to the language that acts on her just as she is given over to the parents who tend to act through her.

James was clear that Maisie's gender compounds this situation. Not only is she as a child inevitably confined by her keepers in a way that stages the drama of human connections for better or for worse, but as a girl she is all the more dependent. James writes in his Preface:

I at once recognised, that my light vessel of consciousness, swaying in such a draught, couldn't be with verisimilitude a rude little boy; since, beyond the fact that little boys are never so

32. Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense," in *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870s*, ed. Daniel Breazeale (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1979), 85.

‘present’, the sensibility of the female young is indubitably, for early youth, the greater, and my plan would call, on the part of my protagonist, for ‘no end’ of sensibility.³³

James’s explanation leaves us to make our own conclusions about why it might be the case that little girls would be perceived as having greater sensibility, and as being more present than little boys. But if we consider merely the fact of Maisie’s dependence—the way that she is light enough and empty enough to necessarily sway in any proximate draught—we may surmise that the girl is all the more affectively vulnerable to others because she is so very reliant on them; just as the child is necessarily literally given over to the other, so too does the girl dramatize this situation all the more in the way in which phallographic culture positions the female as property (a container somehow suspended outdoors? James’s metaphor is mixed, but not disturbingly so, although I’m afraid I’m anachronistically picturing macramé). We might moreover see the girl’s capacity to be “present” through a Deleuzian / Guattarian lens as related to the way in which the girl is a site in our culture for the idea of intermediacy between identities: “girls do not belong to an age, group, sex, order or kingdom: they slip in everywhere, between orders, acts, ages, sexes:…The girl is like the block of becoming that remains contemporaneous to each opposable term, man, woman, child, adult.”³⁴ In the absence of the telos that identity provides—insofar as the girl is a particularly empty vessel—being present might be the only option. That is, without the promise of an identity the girl has little to look forward to or back upon. Barbara Johnson explains a possible developmental corollary to this in when she suggests that the goal of individuation by which most psychoanalytic accounts of development understand subjectivity is coded for men and boys, and automatically penalizes the girl (or “mama’s boy,” or proto-queer I might add) for whom the separation-individuation process has neither concrete rules nor real options.³⁵

What Maisie Knew also stages the position of captivity and captivation in the way Maisie is physically attached to all of her parents and their surrogates, who touch her endlessly. The men who are constant visitors in Maisie’s father, Beale’s house “pulled and pinched, they teased and tickled her; some of them even, as they termed it, shied things at her” (44), her parents and stepparents and governesses always greet her with “a fresh play of caresses” (113), and Maisie generally flies from lap to lap, from sets of arms to other sets of arms, held physically by the same caretakers who also grip her psychologically. Of course this is another instance of the inevitable connection between child and parent: a child must be held to survive. There is a slippage however between such caresses as tokens of affection and as necessary care being given. Moreover, such physical expressions of parenthood are not always friendly. Once again Ida takes the prize:

33. James, *The Art of the Novel*, 143.

34. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1987), 277. For more on Deleuze’s use of the girl, see Driscoll, “The Woman in Process: Deleuze, Kristeva and Feminism.”

35. “Mallarmé as Mother” in Barbara Johnson, *A World of Difference* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987). For more on this, see the Introduction. José Esteban Muñoz reminds us that even the seemingly most inclusive or oppositional identity narratives are also often disallowed for people of color, in his contestation of Edelman’s call for queers to refuse them: “It has been clear to many of us, for quite a while now, that the antirelational in queer studies was the gay white man’s last stand.” See Muñoz, “Thinking beyond Antirelationality and Antiutopianism in Queer Critique” in Robert L. Caserio et al., “Forum: Conference Debates – The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory,” *PMLA* 121, no. 3 (2006), 825.

“My own child,” Ida murmured in a voice—a voice of sudden confused tenderness—that it seemed to [Maisie] she heard for the first time. She wavered but an instant, thrilled with the first direct appeal, as distinguished from the mere maternal pull, she had ever had from lips that, even in the old vociferous years, had always been sharp. The next moment she was on her mother’s breast, where, amid a wilderness of trinkets, she felt as if she had suddenly been thrust, with a smash of glass, into a jeweller’s shop-front, but only to be as suddenly ejected with a push and the brisk injunction: “Now go to the Captain!” (123)

Rarely has the word “mother” been uttered as ironically as in *What Maisie Knew*: Ida grasps her daughter to her breast, but this is clearly more of a “bad breast” than a good one. Yet if Ida can be considered a “bad object” in a Kleinian sense, it is important to observe that if Maisie is thrust away from the breast that is so painful to hold in the first place, it is only to be propelled towards someone else. Whatever the intentionality behind the person who touches Maisie, she is always in someone’s hands.

Forms of Vulnerability in *What Maisie Knew*

Given that *What Maisie Knew* allows its reader immersion in the notion of being given over to the other, the realm at least of the child, what does it show us about that realm? Being bound to the other in this way means also being susceptible to their language, prejudices, affects, cruelties, happinesses, charms, and wounds, it seems from this novel. This develops in several major ways.

First, we are given over to the other’s language. *What Maisie Knew* importantly chronicles Maisie’s accession to language, which is incomplete and fragmentary, yet full of a certain kind of affective force. She rarely understands the entire import of what the adults around her say, but is patently involved in the machinations of language nevertheless. When Maisie tries to reproduce her parents’ mysterious airs on her doll Lisette, her usage—in both senses—reveals the degree to which the “mysterious residuum”³⁶ of language drives her, without her understanding:

There were for instance days when, after prolonged absence, Lisette, watching her take off her things, tried hard to discover where she had been. Well, she discovered a little, but never discovered all. There was an occasion when, on her being particularly indiscreet, Maisie replied to her—and precisely about the motive of a disappearance—as she, Maisie, had once been replied to by Mrs. Farange: ‘Find out for yourself!’ She mimicked her mother’s sharpness, but she was rather ashamed afterwards, though as to whether of the sharpness or of the mimicry was not quite clear. (42)

While Maisie has failed to discover the content of the constant secrets her parents dangle before her (and “If ever there was a writer who dealt with the secret, it was Henry James”³⁷), she has, more importantly picked up their well-honed capacity to generate such secrecy. It seems from

36. This is James’s term to describe the relationship between Sir Claude and Mrs. Beale, but it also seems well-suited to discuss language in the novel: “The relation between her step-parents had then a mysterious residuum; this was the first time she really had reflected that except as regards herself it was not a relationship.” (140) As we will see later, the part Maisie plays in her elders’ relationships with each other is crucial to the queer potentialities the novel puts forward.

37. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 290.

this that language is more a matter of hiding in order to create a secret than it is about finding in order to understand the secret that was already there.³⁸ Given that she must persist with the absence at the center of her parents' unknowable activities, given that questions seem not to produce useful answers, instead Maisie practices reproducing the affective exchanges that her parents do communicate. She is sharp in her mysterious answers to Lisette's imagined queries, but fittingly for a conversation with an inanimate object, the affect rebounds onto Maisie. Yet the affect's origin is "not quite clear," even to the narrator. Why might Maisie feel ashamed when she replicates so precisely her parents' messages?

One way we can think about the inscrutability and iterative force in language, as well as the shame, is through Jean Laplanche's theory of the enigmatic signifier. For Laplanche, the infant experiences an overpowering suffusion from the adults around him or her, which Laplanche describes as droves of messages that are given to or that settle on the infant but are altogether beyond his or her capacity for comprehension. This circumstance is according to Laplanche always distressful for the infant, since the messages exhibit an unknown and seemingly unknowable world.³⁹ Maisie's exchange with Lisette illustrates not only the discomfort of this experience of confusion and inundation, but also the way in which we all play a part in the enigmatic signifier's circulation. Communication—through language and gesture and so on—does not belong to Maisie or her mother in a proprietary or agentic way, but is rather more a matter of the unknowing transmission of affect, which was passed to us from places unknown anyway. Maisie for instance "encountered another emotion" (pleasure, it turns out) upon meeting Sir Claude for the first time; or when she spends time around her stepparents, flirting with each other, she "felt entrancingly the extension of the field of happiness" (61); similarly, waiting with Mrs. Beale to see Sir Claude, the weeks that go by are "flooded with a new emotion" (138). In each of these cases, emotion is neither agentic nor earned, not inherited or owned. Instead it is something of unknown origin that is shared between those who experience it. It is a thing to be come upon, as one might walk into a swarm of bees. It is like air or water, a natural force in which people dwell, unable reliably to predict its vagaries.⁴⁰

In the case of her pretend play with Lisette, Maisie tries out her mother's mysterious answers only to end up conveying instead Ida's sharpness. Is she ashamed of her sharpness? Perhaps, insofar as only mystery was consciously intended. Is she ashamed because she has mimicked her mother? Perhaps, insofar as in imitating her mother's mysteriousness, she has also identified and unintentionally critiqued the severe emotions it contains. Yet there is a third potential source of shame in Maisie's encounter with mystery, which also reveals another way in which our unavoidable imbrication with the other plays out. This source is what we can discern

38. I am paraphrasing Nietzsche: "When someone hides something behind a bush and looks for it again in the same place and finds it there as well, there is not much to praise in such seeking and finding." Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies," 85. But for Deleuze and Guattari the Jamesian secret is neither wholly content nor wholly form: "he raised the possibility of there being an infinite form of secrecy that no longer even requires a content and that has conquered the imperceptible. But he raises this possibility only in order to ask the question, Is the secret in the content or in the form? And the answer is already apparent: *neither*." Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 290.

39. Jean Laplanche, "Seduction, Persecution, Revelation," in *Essays on Otherness* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 171.

40. This would explain why Winnicott is so concerned about the depressed mother. See "Mirror-role of Mother and Family in Child Development" in D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1971).

from “Find out for yourself!”, that is, that there is an unspeakable something that Maisie does not yet know about that will eventually become a known (if still unspoken) part of her life: sexuality.⁴¹ Note the incredible circumlocutions that the notion of unspeakability produces in James, later in the novel when Maisie considers the depth of her parentless situation, as well as the state of affairs of all of her potential caregivers: “What she had essentially done, these days, had been to read the unspoken into the spoken; so that thus, with accumulations, it had become more definite to her that the unspoken was, unspeakably, the completeness of the sacrifice of Mrs. Beale.” (This is at a point in the novel after James had switched from writing longhand to dictating, a move that seemed to usher along with it a Germanic—and enigmatic—sentence structure and length, bizarrely, or perhaps all too unsurprisingly.) In order to even discuss the unspeakable, the novel must dance around it, producing more language yet little more meaning; here of course Maisie produces more unspeakability into even that which she “reads”: while she might find out the nature of the unspeakable from what is said, it turns out that the answer puts up another veil. Mrs. Beale has sacrificed completely, but what does this really mean? What it means is on the one hand what the reader knows: that Mrs. Beale’s sacrifice involves sex with a man who isn’t her husband—it is a sacrifice of her reputation. But Maisie’s interpretation rerenders this statement unspeakable: without knowing about its sexual nature, Maisie nevertheless reproduces the shame with which sexuality is treated in her culture.⁴²

Thus being given over to the other means not only being inside language that we do not fully understand, but also being inside cultural formations, such as those surrounding sexual desire, that are not of our making. The novel continually presents the way in which the structures of sexuality are passed enigmatically to children. For instance, Maisie’s parents conduct their flirtations in front of her, trusting, it seems, that she will not understand their import, as she indeed does not. Her father hints widely about his relationship with Maisie’s governess Miss Overmore (eventually to become Mrs. Beale) when Maisie finds out they have spent time together while Maisie was at her mother’s:

“Why, you little donkey, when you’re away what have I left to do but just to love her?” Miss Overmore hereupon immediately took her from him, and they had a merry little scrimmage over her of which Maisie caught the surprised perception in the white stare of an old lady who passed in a victoria. (39)

...

Miss Overmore declared to the child that she had been all the while with good friends; on which Beale Farange went on: “She means good friends of mine, you know—tremendous friends of mine. There has been no end of *them* about—that I *will* say for her!” Maisie felt bewildered and was afterwards for some time conscious of a vagueness, just slightly embarrassing, as to the subject of so much amusement as to where her governess had really been. (40)

41. Is this interpretation far-fetched? Cf. Harris W. Wilson, who argues that Maisie is offering up her virginity to Sir Claude at the end of the novel! Harris W. Wilson, “What Did Maisie Know?” *College English* 17, no. 5 (1956). Kevin Ohi claims, similarly, that the novel suggests an unspoken and unspeakable desire between Maisie and Sir Claude. Ohi, “Narrating the Child’s Queerness in What Maisie Knew.”

42. And thus illustrated also is the way a “discursive explosion” as Foucault puts it could so widely have been interpreted as a repression or suppression of sexuality. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

Maisie is suffused by sexuality, which she understands as merriness and amusement, but which she still knows contains a certain embarrassing vagueness. In Laplanche's terms, an enigmatic message has been implanted, but not translated.⁴³ This of course was one of the main horrors early critics of the novel identified, that, as James himself paraphrased later in his 1908 Preface, "nothing could well be more disgusting than to attribute to Maisie so intimate an 'acquaintance' with the gross immoralities surrounding her."⁴⁴ Yet as Laplanche might say, this is no more than a staging of the inexorable way in which sexuality is communicated to every child from the start.

Interestingly, contemporary critics were far less disapproving of what seem to me to be the more appalling of Maisie's circumstances. It is not only that Maisie spends her time around oversexed adults. These same adults also appear to mistreat her profligately. For instance, when Maisie won't tell Sir Claude about the conversation she has had with the Captain, Sir Claude becomes angry: "You were the perfection of a dunce!" and gives Maisie the silent treatment until he has sent her off back to Mrs. Beale. But his verbal ill-treatment is nothing next to the memory it sparks:

Nothing of this kind had ever yet happened to them, but it had no power to make her love him less; so she could not only bear it, she felt as she drove away—she could rejoice in it. It brought again the sweet sense of success that, ages before, she had had at a crisis when, on the stairs, returning from her father's, she had met a fierce question of her mother's with an imbecility as deep and had in consequence been dashed by Mrs. Farange almost to the bottom. (132)

Not only has Ida thrown Maisie down a set of stairs, but soon after this tale we learn that such treatment is habitual. In a train of thoughts in which Maisie considers Sir Claude's extended absence, it occurs to her how she might end it:

Didn't he fear she would be compromised? The perception of such a scruple endeared him the more, and it flashed over her that she might simplify everything by showing him how little she made of such a danger. Hadn't she lived with her eyes on it from her third year? It was the condition most frequently discussed at the Faranges', where the word was always in the air and where at the age of five, amid rounds of applause, she could gabble it off. She knew as well in short that a person could be compromised as that a person could be slapped with a hair-brush or left alone in the dark, and it was equally familiar to her that each of these ordeals was in general held to have too little effect. (140)

As if herself responding in advance to James's critics, Maisie reflects that she knows well about being hit and being abandoned and neglected, so why would it bother her to be a little "compromised"? Surely being tossed down stairs or struck in the face with a brush rates worse. But whatever the hierarchy of ills to which Maisie is subject, what these instances of maltreatment point to is Maisie's utter physical vulnerability. Not only is she necessarily open to others' language and sexuality, but she is also physically exposed to others, whether they want to touch, tickle or hug her, or whether they intend harm.

43. Jean Laplanche, "An Interview with Jean Laplanche by Cathy Caruth," *Postmodern Culture* 11, no. 2 (2001).

44. James, *The Art of the Novel*, 149. Neil Hertz interprets this as James's trepidations regarding his own treatment of Maisie, comparable to Freud's self-critique in the case of "Dora." Neil Hertz, "Dora's Secrets, Freud's Techniques," *Diacritics* 13, no. 1 (1983).

The observation of our vulnerability to the other is similar to the foundation of Bersani and Edelman's claims, insofar as the premise is the notion that desire is inducted through the trauma of our separation from the other. And for Laplanche (whom at least Bersani takes into account), this traumatic separation is revisited, reprised, in the traumas that follow, such that desire comes to have a complex temporal relationship to its origin: because enigmatic messages from the other are so completely incomprehensible for the infant, the scene is not fully realized as traumatic until a later time when the initial scene is revived by a new scene of trauma to which one must learn a livable response, or at the least bear witness. Thus is ushered in the strange temporality of trauma, *Nachträglichkeit*, or belatedness.⁴⁵ In *Nachträglichkeit*, trauma is a deferral, that is, the second trauma will be a belated revival of the first, yet at the same time trauma *in toto* is the motion of the second event of trauma reinterpreting the first, installing the pain of trauma only later.⁴⁶ The figure of a traumatic wound used to represent this inevitable imposition required for subjectivity indicates a penetration by indecipherable messages of the other, which lies at the origin of every being.

As noted earlier, being given over to the other occurs in numerous ways in *What Maisie Knew*: affective, sexual, and physical. While many of the ways Maisie is vulnerable to others result in her being hurt, for a theory of desire to come out of this we need to be careful how we understand this hurt. Bersani suggests there are two potential options: the fantasy of control and mastery with which heteronormative sexuality is so often associated (a way to deny the pain of trauma), or alternately the possibility of masochistically embracing our shattering (a way to accept the trauma that is at our core). Maisie does not respond either way, which is why I am arguing that she offers a third option. While *What Maisie Knew* indeed seems to outline a case of shattering at the core of desire, it tries to offer a response to the shattering that is neither phallogocentric nor masochistic. What the novel offers is double: first, a form of mute critique through "stupidity" and wonder and second, a form of agency in desire through "freedom."

Stupidity, Silence, and Wonder

Maisie is exceptionally vulnerable to the other, but although most of the adults in her life take advantage of this ("the mother patting the child into conformities unspeakable"), the novel draws a limit to her openness to assault. For instance, taking note of her treatment soon after her parents' divorce, the narrator observes that her parents "poured [evil] into her gravely-gazing soul as into a boundless receptacle" (27): while Beale and Ida see Maisie as a boundless receptacle, the "as" of the simile inserts the sense that she might escape this fate, without necessarily wholly refusing the metaphysics of substance on which it depends. Quickly fed up by her parents' use of her as a vehicle for their mutual derision, Maisie comes upon a way to derail them without exactly escaping the metaphorical realm in which she has been placed:

The theory of her stupidity, eventually embraced by her parents, corresponded with a great date in her small still life: the complete vision, private but final, of the strange office she filled. It was literally a moral revolution and accomplished in the depths of her nature. The stiff dolls on the dusky shelves began to move their arms and legs; old forms and phases [sic: should be *phrases*] began to have a sense that frightened her. She had a new feeling, the feeling of danger; on which

45. Laplanche has stated a preference for the awkward translation, "afterwardsness." See Laplanche, "An Interview with Jean Laplanche," paragraph no. 36.

46. See Sigmund Freud, "From the History of an Infantile Neurosis," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1968).

a new remedy rose to meet it, the idea of an inner self or, in other words, of concealment, She puzzled out with imperfect signs, but with a prodigious spirit, that she had been a centre of hatred and a messenger of insult, and that everything was bad because she had been employed to make it so. Her parted lips locked themselves with the determination to be employed no longer. She would forget everything, she would repeat nothing, and when, as a tribute to the successful application of her system, she began to be called a little idiot, she tasted a pleasure new and keen. When therefore, as she grew older, her parents in turn announced before her that she had grown shockingly dull, it was not from any real contraction of her little stream of life. She spoiled their fun, but she practically added to her own. (27-8)

Maisie's "stupidity" is born of her realization, which she painstakingly puzzles out, that she has been a pawn in the war of words between her parents. The first step thus in Maisie's reaction to the unpleasantness in her life is to locate its source and then refuse to participate in its furtherance. Stupidity is therefore a form of critique as well as an ethical stance. That its occurrence is simultaneous with the appearance of an "inner self" suggests that the novel wants to retain a model of agency and the self solely as a means to reject or combat the harmful ways of being with which one is inundated. Yet this inner selfhood is apparently synonymous with, or best described as, "concealment," so the novel does not suggest that individually-generated will is the ethical form of agency. Just as affect creeps up on Maisie from outside, so too does this "new remedy," which arises seemingly of its own accord. Agency seems here less a matter of self-generated personal will than the capacity, which comes from unknown quarters, to reevaluate the metaphorical effluvium in which one is steeped. In other words, if Maisie is like an infinitely capacious container, she finds a way to make productive use of this simile by closing herself.

This blockage is not an escape by any means, but changes Maisie's position in the circulation of signifiers of harm. She is still suffused with these messages, and in fact becomes a more direct target, but she is no longer in a position to cause injury. While the uncanny movement of Maisie's dolls would seem to cry out for a psychoanalytic interpretation—for instance that Maisie, in registering the onset of signification, simultaneously represses it, hence the feeling of "concealment"—on the other hand Maisie's stupidity seems to be a conscious pleasure. While *knowing* consistently has its charms in *What Maisie Knew*, willful ignorance is also powerful. This stance of mute unknowing brings more belittlement on Maisie's own head, but allows her to stop taking a part in the firing of her parents' verbal bullets. In a way then this might seem to qualify as Bersani's masochism—Maisie gladly incurs further pain (of being called a little idiot for instance) and gets pleasure out of it—but what would be missing in this assessment is the way in which Maisie's stupidity produces not only pleasure but also, at least insofar as Maisie is concerned, a relational détente, a reconfiguration of intersubjective interactions.

As Avital Ronell reminds us, there are countless forms of stupidity, with just as many corollaries, so it would be foolish to claim that stupidity per se is an ethical tool.⁴⁷ We see a relative of stupidity, one also with ethical consequences, in Maisie's wonder. As James describes this capacity in his Preface, Maisie "treats her friends to the rich little spectacle of objects embalmed in her wonder."⁴⁸ The embalming process that objects go through to transform from quotidian to brilliant brings to mind the concealment with which Maisie blocks her parents' verbal wars: in both cases a vessel is reshaped, with profound consequences.

47. Avital Ronell, *Stupidity* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2001).

48. James, *The Art of the Novel*, 146.

Likewise, embalming makes a dead thing temporarily wonderful through the funereal process of artificial revivification. Another expression for this process might be “revaluation of values.”⁴⁹ Maisie continually achieves this. For instance, when parted from her dear governess Mrs. Wix, Maisie is unfazed when she has no contact from Mrs. Wix: “Her very silence became after this one of the largest elements of Maisie’s consciousness; it proved a warm and habitable air, into which the child penetrated further than she dared ever to mention to her companions. Somewhere in the depths of it the dim straighteners were fixed upon her; somewhere out of the troubled little current Mrs. Wix intensely waited” (48). Rather than experience Mrs. Wix’s lack of contact as an abandonment and something to be saddened by, Maisie expands the communicative absence into a feeling of love and safety. In a move that seems like a form of reverse-paranoia, Maisie pictures Mrs. Wix’s silence as that of an onlooker who is peering forcefully at her. That Mrs. Wix’s eyesight is impaired is not a matter of scorn, as it is to all of Maisie’s parents’ friends who tease this woman’s glasses as much as they mock her lack of education; instead Mrs. Wix’s “dim straighteners” allow this lady all the more to focus intently on Maisie, in Maisie’s imagination. Vision itself is reconfigured such that lack of acuity makes for more concentrated a gaze, just as silence here becomes love.

Wonder operates similarly to stupidity insofar as it involves an unknowing attitude toward its object, which allows for a rejection of purported epistemological certainties. Instead of acting with certitude toward the events in her life, Maisie continues to be willing to suspend and undo the knowledges she has thus far attained. When her mostly absentee father tries awkwardly to be affectionate to the daughter he hardly knows, Maisie wonders at him, thinking, “What was this but splendid too—this still directer goodness of her father and this unexampled shining solitude with him, out of which everything had dropped but that he was papa and that he was magnificent?” (148) Maisie all too well realizes that this moment of affection is unprecedented, “unexampled,” in their relationship, and that her father is hiding something, but it is her father’s weaknesses that Maisie in fact responds to: “There was something in him that seemed, and quite touchingly, to ask her to help him to pretend—pretend he knew enough about her life and her education, her means of subsistence and her view of himself, to give the questions he couldn’t put her a natural domestic tone.” Where Maisie might respond with mutual alienation from her deficient father, instead she is touched by his intentions. “She had such possibilities of vibration, of response, that it needed nothing more than this to make up to her in fact for omissions.” (148) The novel specifically employs metaphors of physical contact—touch, vibration—to conjure Maisie’s wondering stance at her father, with the effect of highlighting the way she has reconstituted her relationship with him as one that has a certain tangible existence. He is splendid and magnificent precisely because he tries to pretend a relation that doesn’t exist. What he can pretend—an actual relationship—Maisie resignifies to actually conjure up performatively.

Maisie undoes certainty, through stupidity, through wonder; she is thus able to perform resignificatory acts. She transforms herself from a vessel for parental bile into a closed-off organism; silence turns into love as dim vision shows its capacity as a concentrated gaze; and

49. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989). The life affirmation that Nietzsche associates with revaluation of values would seem to preclude the comparison to embalming, but given that he considered all language to enact a sort of embalming effect on the thing-in-itself (Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lies”), and given that one way to effect the revaluation of values is by coining words (Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*), it would seem that even the most life-affirming of revaluation of values could come along with metaphorical death.

weakness and shifty behavior become the chance for touch and connection, just to name a few examples. In each case Maisie remains within the realm of signification she is given, and remains given over to the other, but rejects epistemological conviction while receiving unintended pleasures. What would happen if instead she were to act with certainty, without the buffer of ignorance that resignification presents to knowledge?

There is one such encounter in *What Maisie Knew*. When Maisie meets his father's paramour, the Countess, her immediate reaction is one of shock at the perception that this lady's face "was brown indeed": "She literally struck the child more as an animal than as a 'real' lady; she might have been a clever frizzled poodle in a frill or a dreadful human monkey in a spangled petticoat. She had a nose that was far too big and eyes that were far too small and a moustache that was, well, not so happy a feature as Sir Claude's" (157). Instead of Maisie's usual wonder, here her reaction seems closer to trauma. Rather than affording an opportunity for Maisie to reshape the metaphorical goods she is given, this event throws into disarray the very notion of metaphor. That the Countess "literally struck the child as more animal than a real lady," suggests that there is no longer even a division between literal and figurative, when it comes to race; the Countess's very face reaches out of Maisie's comparison of her to a monkey or dog and "literally" strikes Maisie. Maisie's casual dehumanization of the Countess constitutes a singular failure to recognize the same complex metaphoricity that has structured all of Maisie's perceptions until this point. Instead received knowledge seems to peek through Maisie's otherwise intuitive rejection of it. "[A]ll in a moment she had had to accept her father as liking some one whom she was sure neither her mother, nor Mrs. Beale, nor Mrs. Wix, nor Sir Claude, nor the Captain, nor even Mr. Perriam and Lord Eric could possibly have liked. ... There was something in the Countess that falsified everything" (159-160).

Compare Maisie's first meeting with Mrs. Wix: "she had struck her at first, just after Miss Overmore, as terrible; but something in her voice at the end of an hour touched the little girl in a spot that had never even yet been reached" (34). Not only does Maisie quickly reject her first impression of Mrs. Wix, based on this lady's ugliness, more or less, but she comes to love someone whom most of the adults in her life could not "possibly have liked." Even though her mother and father, as well as Mrs. Beale and all of these adults' friends seem to roundly detest Mrs. Wix, Maisie maintains her loyalty. The difference is of course the racist discourse in which Maisie is suffused. James himself presents the situation in his Preface as one certainly not warranting the warm glow of Maisie's wonder: "The facts involved are that Beale Farange is ignoble, that the friend to whom he introduces his daughter is deplorable, and that from the commerce of the two, *as the two merely*, we would fain avert our heads."⁵⁰ Why is Beale's friend deplorable? All the reader knows about her is that she is a wealthy American woman with fine taste, who is eager to be kind to Maisie, and of course that her skin is brown.

We see illustrated here that value systems and forms of treatment of the other are conveyed similarly to affect and to agency in *What Maisie Knew*: they are a "mysterious residuum" not always perceptible to those who are permeated by them. This is consonant with one of Laplanche's extended points about the enigmatic signifier, that moral values are relayed without our ever knowing it, and without our ever decoding them, just as are mysterious relations of sexuality.⁵¹ By taking on the mores of her elders without the critical filter of stupidity or wonder, Maisie falls prey to this added example of others' interpenetration of her. In this case

50. James, *The Art of the Novel*, 148.

51. Jean Laplanche, "Jean Laplanche talks to Martin Stanton," in *Seduction, Translation, and the Drives*, ed. John and Martin Stanton Fletcher (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1992).

the way in which values surround their subject rather than inhabiting each individual in a conscious or agentic sense does not justify the bigotry which it occasions, but rather expands the sphere of culpability. *What Maisie Knew* does not critique racial prejudice the way it critiques sexuality, instead furthering a hateful system of values, but it does give us the tools to discern what has occasioned this collapse. We see all the more the worth of Maisie's capacity to resignify/ reevaluate values here where it fails most profoundly.

Thus although Maisie does not avail herself of it at every moment and in every way ("Maisie "is no heroine, of course; she is what her unnatural life made her—weak, yielding, a little deceitful, feebly affectionate, but above all ignorant"⁵²), the faculty of critique—here demonstrated through "stupidity" and wonder—offers Maisie a way to respond to the significant imbrication with others that makes her so vulnerable. It is only when she unthinkingly takes on knowledge that she conveys messages as harmful as those of her elders. Maisie's capability to question and block the cruelties she faces allows for a modicum of agency in a world that seems otherwise driven by each person's exposure to the ruses of others.

"Freedom"

An important question that remains is how this set of observations about the novel applies to adults. Maisie is after all a child and her stupidity and her wonder seem clearly predicated on her age and naiveté. Even James makes this claim, in his Preface when he writes that "She wonders, in other words, to the end, to the death—the death of her childhood, properly speaking; after which (with the inevitable shift, sooner or later, of her point of view) her situation will change and become another affair, subject to other measurements and with a new centre altogether."⁵³ And if wonder is a property of childhood, is the same true of the exposure to the other by which the novel thematizes Maisie's attachments?

The adults in Maisie's life certainly seem to believe that antirelationality is their finest option. Over and over, they pronounce themselves and each other "free, free, free!" Maisie on the other hand wonders about freedom: is it all it is chalked up to be? When Mrs. Beale announces that she is free, and that Sir Claude is as well, Maisie cannot return her stepmother's delight: "'Yes, I know,' said Maisie; as if, however, independently weighing the value of that" (229).

A number of passages in the book highlight the difference of opinions between Maisie and others regarding freedom. For instance, when Sir Claude tells Maisie he is no longer attached to Ida:

[A]t last Sir Claude produced it. "I'm free—I'm free."

She looked up at him; it was the very spot on which a couple of hours before she had looked up at her mother. "You're free—you're free."

"To-morrow we go to France." He spoke as if he hadn't heard her; but it didn't prevent her again concurring.

"To-morrow we go to France."

Again he appeared not to have heard her; and after a moment—it was an effect evidently of the depth of his reflexions and the agitation of his soul—he also spoke as if he had not spoken before. "I'm free—I'm free!" (183-4)

52. Hayes, *Henry James: The Contemporary Reviews*, 285.

53. James, *The Art of the Novel*, 147.

For Maisie this is a reprise of the similar scene at which her mother announced her imminent departure and desertion of Maisie, yet though Maisie merely repeats Sir Claude's asseverations, it seems from her responses that her definition of freedom might not necessarily dictate abandonment. I would suggest that Sir Claude is not repeating himself in a dumbfounded way, but rather that his repetitions indicate his inability to compromise "freedom" with the stewardship of Maisie that his departure for France with her will involve. By agreeing, Maisie suggests that for her there is no conflict in the two ideas: for Sir Claude to be free means he may join with Maisie. Yet Sir Claude's reflections are deep and soul agitated perhaps because he sees this as a stark contradiction, which necessitates his renewed claim of freedom, as if to say it would effect the break that it claims.

Such an interpretation is consistent with the contrast between Maisie's views and Mrs. Beale's on the same topic. When Maisie asks how Mrs. Beale can plan to marry Sir Claude when he is already married to Ida, Mrs. Beale responds with her definition of freedom:

"He isn't—practically. He's free, you know."
 "Free to marry?"
 "Free, first, to divorce his own fiend." (239)

The obvious corollary to freedom for Maisie, once again, is the freedom to attach to another person. Mrs. Beale, on the other hand, is far more focused on the freedom to shed encumbrances, the freedom to detach from others. That is, the important goal for desire for Mrs. Beale is antisociality, as I have argued it is for Sir Claude, the freedom of lack. However, neither of these adults is able to achieve this, nor are they actually interested in breaking off all of their ties. Sir Claude cannot finally bring himself to abandon Maisie, but also is unable to leave Mrs. Beale (which turns out to be the condition for Maisie to stay with him); he then thrusts upon Maisie the purported freedom that he himself cannot seem to claim.

I never was in such a tight place: please believe it's only that that makes me put it to you as I do. My dear child, isn't that—to put it so—just the way out of it? That came to me yesterday, in London, after Mrs. Beale had gone: I had the most infernal atrocious day. 'Go straight over and put it to her: let her choose, freely, her own self.' So I do, old girl—I put it to you. *Can you choose freely?* (260)

It would seem that an ethic of desire that values the freedom of lack is only attractive in the abstract, and only conceivably tenable for other people. Sir Claude cannot manage finally to detach from anyone, just as the reader has witnessed Maisie's parents struggling to abandon her, in each case hinting around their wish until Maisie finally cuts the cord for them herself. The "tight place" Sir Claude is in suggests fundamental flaws to his attempt to claim a freedom constituted of lack.⁵⁴ Maisie's own discomfort at this situation acts to discredit his notion of freedom further:

The strangest thing of all was what had really happened to the old safety. What had really happened was that Sir Claude was "free" and that Mrs. Beale was "free," and yet that the new medium was somehow still more oppressive than the old. ...Her choice, as her friend had called

54. The "tight place" also evokes the vast array of pleasures Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick sees in anal thematics in James. See "Shame, Theatricality, and Queer Performativity: Henry James's *the Art of the Novel*." in Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*.

it, was there before her like an impossible sum on a slate, a sum that in spite of her plea for consideration she simply got off from doing while she walked about with him. . . . The only touch was that of Sir Claude's hand, and to feel her own in it was her mute resistance to time. (264)

Maisie still views freedom in scare quotes: it is somehow so oppressive and unappealing that when Maisie is anointed with its adjectival form, she feels newly subjugated, as if by mathematics. And it does seem an impossible math problem, freedom in *What Maisie Knew*: two divided (by one divorce) seems always to return not the answer of one which all of the adults promise, but instead a continuously multiplying figure, compiling governesses with stepmothers and fathers, as well as all of their countless paramours.⁵⁵ It is not that for Maisie "Math is hard!" as the infamous Barbie doll complained, but rather that the numbers don't appear to add up. As long as Maisie can avoid solving this problem, she does, but eventually the novel reaches a dénouement, and Maisie is forced to decide.

She threw herself upon the child and, before Maisie could resist, had sunk with her upon the sofa, possessed of her, encircling her. "You've given her up already, you've given her up for ever, and you're ours and ours only now, and the sooner she's off the better!"

Maisie had shut her eyes, but at a word of Sir Claude's they opened. "Let her go!" he said to Mrs. Beale.

"Never, never, never!" cried Mrs. Beale. Maisie felt herself more compressed.

"Let her go!" Sir Claude more intensely repeated. He was looking at Mrs. Beale and there was something in his voice. Maisie knew from a loosening of arms that she had become conscious of what it was; she slowly rose from the sofa, and the child stood there again dropped and divided. "You're free—you're free," Sir Claude went on; at which Maisie's back became aware of a push that vented resentment and that placed her again in the centre of the room, the cynosure of every eye and not knowing which way to turn. (274-5)

Perhaps Sir Claude has slightly revised his notion of freedom, or perhaps he is clinging to it all the more when he concedes in response to Mrs. Beale's "She's ours and ours forever" that no human may be owned. In a way his gesture performs only the truth, that Maisie is a child whom no one truly claims. Yet he is also intent to defend her against the unfreedom it implies. But after Sir Claude defends Maisie against this volley, Maisie is still "dropped and divided." Freedom as far as these adults are concerned is the impulsion of aloneness and the severing of ties. Yet attempt as they may to sever, Maisie is still the cynosure of every eye, attached through a network of visibility as she is scrutinized for her own act of freedom. Mrs. Beale, however, is enraged that another person might claim freedom, it would seem, and suggests in her own responses that Maisie's freedom threatens Mrs. Beale's own.

Have you been a hideous little hypocrite all these years that I've slaved to make you love me and deludedly believed you did?"

"I love Sir Claude—I love HIM," Maisie replied with an awkward sense that she appeared to offer it as something that would do as well. Sir Claude had continued to pat her, and it was really an answer to his pats.

"She hates you—she hates you," he observed with the oddest quietness to Mrs. Beale.

His quietness made her blaze. "And you back her up in it and give me up to outrage?"

55. On *Maisie's* mathematics, see Barbara Eckstein, "Unsquaring the Squared Route of *What Maisie Knew*," in *The Turn of the Screw and What Maisie Knew: New Critical Essays*, ed. Neil Cornwell and Maggie Malone (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1998).

“No; I only insist that she’s free—she’s free.”
Mrs. Beale stared—Mrs. Beale glared. “Free to starve with this pauper lunatic?” (277)

Mrs. Beale cannot imagine how Maisie’s eventual decision to stay with Mrs. Wix could possibly constitute freedom; her mocking response to Sir Claude’s suggestion is to interpret the entire conversation as personally injurious. Her response, that is, is to protest having been given up, abandoned as it were to the outrage of not being loved, as if this weren’t the harm she had inflicted on Maisie from the start. No longer exalting in her definition of freedom, Mrs. Beale is rather wallowing here in its injustice when it stops suiting her. Meanwhile Maisie performs her own understanding of freedom, which is to love whom and how she may.

Maisie’s Sovereignty

What Maisie Knew suggests through Maisie that love and desire do not have to be about shattering or death, just as freedom does not have to involve ridding oneself of encumbrances. While the adults around Maisie seem to believe that freedom is from each other, for Maisie the only way freedom works is as the freedom to substitute, indefinitely. Instead of lack, abundance. There are two ways that *What Maisie Knew* demonstrates this abundant freedom. First, freedom as individual sovereignty is available, if only to the extent that the novel envisions the “inner self”: as we have seen, this construct does not function as a truth of the soul, but rather as the possibility of refusing to harm another. Maisie, to the extent that she manages to be “stupid” before the other, frees herself from being an agent of harm.⁵⁶ (And to the extent that she does not manage this, she does do harm, as we have seen with the Countess.) Crucially, such a form of detachment from the other is wholly based on protecting the other from the very interconnectedness which this novel suggests is inescapable. Thus this “freedom” constitutes a response to inalterable imbrication with others.

The second type of freedom that we see Maisie avail herself of throughout the novel is what we might understand as the freedom to substitute. Throughout, as I have argued, we have seen that Maisie develops an inventive—or at least culturally oppositional—relationship to language. Rather than understanding language as having an indexical relationship to reality, Maisie has throughout experienced language as performative. This suspension of the truth value of language is what makes possible for her the critique and revaluation of values of her “stupidity” and wonder. Part of this understanding of language relies on the notion of metaphor: a word is only ever an approximation of a thing, a linguistic substitute. One word may be replaced with another. Freedom for Maisie functions similarly, in that Maisie’s attachments to others rely on (and rejoice in) infinite substitutability. The mathematics of Maisie’s freedom is perhaps algebra, in that arbitrary elements stand in for actual values.

The substitutions start as an imposition from outside, like so many of Maisie’s experiences: her parents legally sunder her original Oedipal triangle, which then rather than disappearing, expands into two triangles with Maisie at their apex. Parent-governess-child is the constitution of the first sets of triangles, and Maisie soon finds parental qualities in her new circumstances: “Parents had come to seem vague, but governesses were evidently to be trusted” (47). So Maisie comes early into the substitutions by which Freud imagines all desire’s eventual pathway when he writes, “The finding of an object is in fact a refinding of it.”⁵⁷ The object of

56. This formulation, “I am stupid before the other,” is from Ronell, *Stupidity*, 60.

57. Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, ed. James Strachey, trans. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 88.

desire is a metaphor, in Freud's view here, for the early experience of desire that was developed in infancy. Maisie's infancy involves multiple refindings.

Of course Maisie has come by her trust for her governesses somewhat "dishonestly," as the saying goes. For instance, Maisie's loving feeling of trust in this particular instance occurs as a response to one of the many "touches" to which she is subject: "Miss Overmore, giggling and blushing at the mention of Sir Claude, tells Maisie, "'He's not my sort, and I'm sure, my own darling, he's not yours.' And she repeated the free caress into which her colloquies with Maisie almost always broke and which made the child feel that *her* affection at least was a gage of safety" (47). The free indirect narration of the novel allows for full-flowing Jamesian irony, here as elsewhere: what Maisie experiences as affection and care might through another lens be viewed as a new form of neglect. Miss Overmore's free caresses are plainly using Maisie as a proxy while their intended object is still untouchable. In a way, then, if Maisie knows how to use substitution in the game of love, it is because she has learned at the feet of masters. And if Miss Overmore's caresses are intended for another, if Maisie is not their "real" object, does it matter? For after all, what is real is the extent to which Maisie derives plenitude from the objects her desire lands upon, rather than the indexical truth of the desire at hand.

In fact, we learn later that Maisie is perfectly aware of the extent to which the touches she receives are not about her. She is subject at one point, the narrator notes, to "the dim wonder of the fashion after which, from the first, such pats and pulls had struck her as the steps and signs of other people's business and even a little as the wriggle or the overflow of their difficulties" (163). If Maisie has wondered about this from the first, it would seem that she has never been under any illusions about the intentions behind any given caress. The wriggle or overflow that runs off others' difficulties and lands on Maisie is a type of embodiment of affect such that its intention disappears.

Mrs. Wix also trains Maisie in substitution. As we know, this lady's ugliness is no impediment to Maisie's love. Rather, "something in her voice at the end of an hour touched the little girl in a spot that had never even yet been reached":

Maisie knew later what it was, though doubtless she couldn't have made a statement of it: these were things that a few days' talk with Mrs. Wix quite lighted up. The principal one was a matter Mrs. Wix herself always immediately mentioned: she had had a little girl quite of her own, and the little girl had been killed on the spot. She had had absolutely nothing else in all the world, and her affliction had broken her heart. It was comfortably established between them that Mrs. Wix's heart was broken. What Maisie felt was that she had been, with passion and anguish, a mother, and that this was something Miss Overmore was not, something (strangely, confusingly) that mamma was even less. (34)

As Jean-Luc Nancy puts it, "It is the break itself that makes the heart."⁵⁸ Not only does desire seem to be formed on the basis of substitution, but love requires this metaphorical operation. Mrs. Wix's broken heart is precisely what allows her to be the most mother of any figure in Maisie's life.

It is unsurprising then that Maisie, faced with one of the hardest challenges to love imaginable, her mother, uses the same devices with which she has encountered love to this point.

58. Jean-Luc Nancy, "Shattered Love," in *A Finite Thinking* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 263.

When she meets her mother's latest lover, "the Captain," she insists that he avow his love for Ida:

"Say you love her, Mr. Captain; say it, say it!" she implored.

"Of *course* I love her, damn it, you know!"

At this she also jumped up; she had fished out somehow her pocket-handkerchief. "So do I then. I do, I do, I do!" she passionately asseverated. (129)

It seems here that through triangulation Maisie can create love where before there was only harshness and pain. (And if Ida can be loved through this then anyone can.)

What Mrs. Wix Knew

What Maisie Knew presents a world in which Maisie is literally, physically given over to others, but also vulnerable to their language, sexual desires, and affects. This does not imply a traumatic response, and does not mean Maisie is just a receptacle. Instead Maisie manages to critique what she is given, through wonder and "stupidity." Although these insert an element of agency into the imbrication of persons, the novel revises the notion of freedom such that freedom is not antisocial self-sufficiency, but rather the freedom to avoid hurting others as well as the freedom to substitute one relational tie for another. The performative philosophy of language that the novel explores through Maisie suggests the same metaphorical-epistemological realm that allows for this freedom of substitution. Therefore at the same time as one might come away from *What Maisie Knew* condemning divorce, the novel importantly extols infinite substitutability of attachments. Love thrives, this novel suggests, on the unbridgeable distance between signifier and signified, which also means that the object of love is not the truth of love but only the representation or performance of it; it is not so much lack or shattering that Maisie is attentive to, but instead a creative potential that opens up through them, as long as objects are treated with wonder instead of being concretized as truth.

Maisie at last chooses to remain with Mrs. Wix, and the two head back to England from France. On the steamer they exchange the last words of the novel, discussing their parting from Sir Claude:

"I didn't look back, did you?"

"Yes. He wasn't there," said Maisie.

"Not on the balcony?"

Maisie waited a moment; then "He wasn't there" she simply said again.

Mrs. Wix also was silent a while. "He went to *her*," she finally observed.

"Oh I know!" the child replied.

Mrs. Wix gave a sidelong look. She still had room for wonder at what Maisie knew. (280)

And there the novel ends. As usual, Maisie seems sanguine in spite of, or because of, her losses, but it is Mrs. Wix who particularly deserves attention here. It is not finally Maisie's wonder that the novel dwells on, in its parting dispatch, but rather Mrs. Wix's. As it turns out, even this moralizing little woman "still had room for wonder." If wonder is indeed the key to critique, the key to freedom in a world of mutual vulnerability (and we know Mrs. Wix already has the "stupidity" to suspend judgment), then the novel ends by adding a scene of this faculty's proliferation.

However the novel stops short of offering, in the end, the type of triumphal story of queer desire that this chapter has been suggesting. Perhaps Maisie's capacity for change seems to disseminate in an other, but it is Mrs. Wix, the comically ugly and unappealing moralist, in whom the vaunted faculty seems to flourish. And Maisie is, poignantly, tragically perhaps, left again by the parent she loves the most, to stay with this far less alluring woman.

This sad ending reminds the reader that substitution in the novel also means giving something up, a subtraction that goes along with the proliferation of possibilities. So the mathematics of desire isn't all about expansion. Freedom in *What Maisie Knew* seems to involve choosing one thing only to have to give up another. This is part of what the so-called negative turn in queer theory can help us with: understanding how desire might be formed by something rather sad, that involves letting go of early fantasies of wholeness and completion and safety. *All* desire is in this sense about melancholy, the way we are formed from our losses.⁵⁹ A queer form of desire, as the negative hypothesis puts forward, is one that acknowledges this loss instead of disavowing it, but *What Maisie Knew* indicates that such an acknowledgment does not necessitate antisociality. The form of desire that *What Maisie Knew* offers suggests that we don't have to fuck shit up, or fuck Annie, but rather that yielding to the inevitability of loss can allow for a gain. Mrs. Wix is stupefied that Maisie can look straight on at what she has lost and acknowledge it. The figure of the child is not in this version of desire the gleaming icon of futurity, but rather the emblem of a different possible response to loss as well as to desire, and the novel's conclusion suggests that such a psychic approach might also be passed on to others.⁶⁰

Nevertheless, the ending of *What Maisie Knew* offers a punch in the gut not necessarily anticipated by either the negative hypothesis or its detractors, including myself to this point:⁶¹ if Maisie has made the best choice, why does it feel so very sad? Reading Bersani and Edelman and the likes can feel good, because it is pleasurable, in a way, for a while, to tell people to fuck off. You can take your stupid damaged sick heterosexuality because my antisocial queerness is superior. But what happens when one's idea of desire is formed on the basis of something like Sir Claude? He is beautiful and charming and loving, after all, just weak willed, just prey to his own sexual demons (Ida, Mrs. Beale). Maisie might tell him to fuck off but she still might love

59. For one version of such a claim, see "Melancholy Gender / Refused Identification" in Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997). Whereas Snediker considers Butler's claim about melancholy as yet another iteration of the bad affect that seems to interest queer theorists so much, it seems to me that Butler's focus is rather the structural necessity of certain losses to the psyche, and ways disavowals of such losses can be injurious. See Snediker, *Queer Optimism*. Heather Love points out that many queer theorists find such questions politically treacherous territory: "Critics find themselves in an odd position: we are not sure if we should explore the link between homosexuality and loss, or set about proving that it did not exist." Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.

60. Such a notion has appeared in the register of queer theory as well. For instance, Tim Dean has articulated a similar response to Edelman's claims about queerness and the death drive in Tim Dean, "An Impossible Embrace: Queerness, Futurity, and the Death Drive," in *A Time for the Humanities: Futurity and the Limits of Autonomy*, ed. James J. Bono, Tim Dean, and Ewa Plonowska Ziarek (Bronx: Fordham University Press, 2008); also consider Ann Cvetkovich's lovely discussion of incest and queerness, in which she writes: "As someone who would go so far as to claim lesbianism as one of the *welcome* effects of sexual abuse, I am happy to contemplate the therapeutic process by which sexual abuse turns girls queer." Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 76.

61. Thanks are due to Dorothy Hale for pointing it out to me.

and only love the likes of him. That is to say, the iterative nature of performative desire means that what is powerful, what resonates, is repetition of what came before, which is so often what harmed one in the first place.⁶² To Mrs. Wix's credit, she also loves Maisie, but she does not have the incredible magnetism and stunning good looks—or, we might say more cynically, the heteronormative attractions—of Sir Claude. She is a moralizing older lady of a lower class than Maisie. She is also a joke, part of the comic relief in a book that would otherwise be too sad, so her stupefied response to Maisie at the end—her wonder—undercuts the feeling of radical potentiality of this affect. Suddenly where this chapter had argued there is a glimmer of hope and promise in a young girl with new capacities, instead we see an ugly and uneducated old lady and the sad child who must grow up under her care. And thus where we might have found potential, we instead see stupidity and waste.

One interpretation of this grim finale is that what the novel produces here is a version of the swift type of dismissal with which positive theories of queer desire are easily treated.⁶³ Suddenly wonder and muteness are embodied in an ugly old clown lady, whom we wouldn't personally want to follow anywhere, as if the novel can only offer so much endorsement of its model of queer desire before it rejoins its detractors jeering that it's pathetic and retarded. Why are the antisocial (or dead) queers the sexy ones? Because it's so much hotter and less pathetic to say "fuck off" than to say "I love you" to someone who is as broken as we are. After all, saying "fuck off" is just what Sir Claude and Maisie's other parents have done all along, in their abandoning way—to each other as well as to Maisie. The narration of *What Maisie Knew* retreats in the final moment even from its ironic distance to Maisie, like a camera slowly backing up and away from the *mise-en-scène*. The queer is no longer Maisie wondering at the beauty of something ugly, but rather that ugly thing approximating such wonder as if a dog imitating a human.

62. On this also see Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle."

63. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick discusses this response in "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," in Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*.

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