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## “Behind the Cotton Wool”: The Social Unconscious in Mrs. *Dalloway* | Marion L. Quirici

Marion L. Quirici earned her B.A. in English and Psychology in May 2008. She is now studying for an M.A. in English and Irish Studies at Boston College. This essay speculates on likely literary, artistic, and psychological influences on Virginia Woolf as well as deconstructs Woolf's representations of consciousness in the novel. The paper was awarded the Isabel Sparks President's Award at the 2008 Sigma Tau Delta Convention.

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Virginia Woolf's ambition while constructing Mrs. *Dalloway* was to construct a new form of consciousness, one that surpassed her modernist contemporaries. While working on *Jacob's Room*, Woolf was wary of the threat of Joyce, writing in her diary in 1920: “Joyce gives internals. His novel *Ulysses*, presents the life of man in 16 incidents, all taking place (I think) in one day. This, so far as he [Eliot] has seen it, is extremely brilliant, he says . . . I reflected how what I'm doing is probably being done better by Mr. Joyce” (*Diary II* 68–9). Indeed, Woolf was composing the short stories that would eventually become Mrs. *Dalloway* concurrent to reading *Ulysses* (*Diary II* 196).<sup>1</sup> Her reaction, however, betrays relief; she writes in September 1922: “I finished *Ulysses* & think it a mis-fire. Genius it has I think; but of the inferior water. The book is diffuse. It is brackish. It is pretentious. It is underbred, not only in the obvious sense, but in the literary sense” (*Diary II* 199). Undaunted, she can focus on creating something beyond the personal consciousness. Virginia Woolf was the first modern novelist to explore what I have termed the social unconscious: underlying psychological phenomena or internal experiences that are shared among the group, and which reflect a common human heritage.

Although the influence of Eliot and Joyce on her writing is indisputable (Dowling 11), Woolf's project differed in an essential way. While they sought to redefine literature primarily through cultural anthropology, she had another field at her fingertips: psychology. Eliot's theory of modernism, spurred by *Ulysses*, states, “Instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method”

(123). Yet even he had doubts about Joyce's method, which he revealed to Woolf in a personal conversation. As she writes in her diary:

Tom said 'He is purely a literary writer. He is founded upon Walter Pater with a dash of Newman.' I said he was virile – a he-goat; but didn't expect Tom to agree. Tom did tho'; and said he left out many things that were important. The book would be a landmark, because it destroyed the whole of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century . . . But he did not think that he gave a new insight into human nature – said nothing new like Tolstoi [sic]. Bloom told one nothing. Indeed, he said, this new method of giving the psychology proves to my mind that it doesn't work. (*Diary* II 202-3)

This confession on Eliot's part contradicts the praise he had bestowed upon Joyce in his essay "Ulysses, Order and Myth." The opinion he reveals above, similar to Woolf's, is that Joyce's style, despite its innovations, lacks profundity. The achievement of *Ulysses*, rather, was in "manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity" (Eliot 123). What Eliot saw as a triumph, Woolf considered irrelevant: there is little reliance upon mythic/epic forms in her novels. As a number of critics have previously established, her structures are instead based upon philosophical, artistic, and psychological concepts.<sup>2</sup> Prominent among these influences are the psychological theories of William James. Considering Woolf's connection to his brother, novelist Henry James,<sup>3</sup> and that she had two of his books in her library<sup>4</sup> it is quite safe to assume that Woolf was reading William James, and that her thinking and writing were influenced by his theories. James's relevance to Woolf's work has been discussed in the literature, but not to a great extent. Kumar, for instance, suggests that her concept of the "luminous halo"<sup>5</sup> was inspired by William James (14-15). It is interesting that neither Kumar nor Richter, in their treatments of James, go beyond his postulates about the fringe.<sup>6</sup> James's concept of substantive versus transitive states is also extensively explored in Woolf's novels. Consciousness, James says, is characterized by different paces: transitive and substantive states, like a bird's alterations of flights and perchings. He laments, "So inveterate has our habit become of recognizing the existence of the substantive

parts alone, that language almost refuses to lend itself to any other use” (James 38). Woolf makes it her purpose to bring to light those neglected moments of transition, as we will observe in my discussion of transference (below).

Woolf embraced some aspects of James’s theory, and rejected others, as she did with all of her psychological influences, resulting in a synthetic psychology that is all her own. For instance, she rejects James’s restriction of consciousness to the person, and as early as *The Voyage Out* we see instances of what I term transference, or the intermingling of consciousness among distinct characters: “The dreams were not confined to her indeed, but went from one brain to another. They all dreamt of each other that night, as was natural, considering how thin the partitions were between them” (qtd. in Johnson 149). Woolf’s amalgam of psychological influences helped shape her theory of modern fiction, which she was developing in the years preceding *Mrs. Dalloway*: “For the moderns, ‘that,’ the point of interest, lies very likely in the dark places of psychology . . . every feeling, every thought; every quality of brain and spirit is drawn upon; no perception comes amiss” (“Modern Fiction” 290–1). In “The Prime Minister,” almost as a response to *Ulysses*, we see for the first time in Woolf’s writing the deliberate revelation of a social unconscious: “And at once something seemed to happen to everyone as if their private concerns had been obliterated; and they were united, not by any kind of order. It was rather as if a train of gunpowder had been exploded round the table and produced a sudden uniformity of violent sound. The Prime Minister!” (“Prime Minister” 319). The idea born here finds full expression in *Mrs. Dalloway*.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf’s constructions of consciousness take on a very premeditated structure: she is careful to distinguish the personal consciousness; transference, or the psychological connections between characters; and the social unconscious, which underlies and connects all personal consciousnesses. In her portrayal of the personal consciousness, Woolf borrows from James’s theory of overtones, or the simultaneous registration of several levels of thought. Directly from the novel’s opening, we see three strands of awareness: Mrs. Dalloway’s attentiveness to her immediate

surroundings, her memories of Bourton, and her plans for the party that night:

Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself. For Lucy had her work cut out for her. The doors would be taken off their hinges; Rumpelmayer's men were coming. And then, thought Clarissa Dalloway, what a morning—fresh as if issued to children on a beach. What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her, when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air. How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course . . . . (*MrsD* 3)<sup>7</sup>

The above is one of many instances of overtones in the novel; it contains concurrent thoughts on present actions, empathy for another person, future actions, sensory perceptions, and memories. Other stylistic methods by which Woolf reveals the personal consciousness include using alternating perspectives, as Humphrey notes (*Dowling* 46–7). Woolf's true innovations, however, are in the illumination of the connectedness of people, and beyond that, the social unconscious that serves to unify individual characters as one culture.

The method of transference is essential to Woolf's construction of consciousness; it is the process by which the individual threads of the tapestry are bound. She meticulously draws the connections, which appear almost telepathic. Through a shift in narration, Peter Walsh seems to read Clarissa's mind while having a conversation: "But [my father] never liked anyone who—our friends,' said Clarissa; and could have bitten her tongue for thus reminding Peter that he had wanted to marry her. / Of course I did, thought Peter; it almost broke my heart too" (*MrsD* 42). Woolf also unites characters who are unfamiliar to one another and outside of each other's proximities. This is accomplished through the parallels between her two foils, Clarissa and Septimus. The two share some of their very thought content in common: "What she liked was simply life" (121), "He did not want to die. Life was good. The sun hot" (149). Woolf uses a "thread" metaphor to portray the connection between Hugh Whitbread, Richard Dalloway and Lady Bruton as they depart from lunch (*MrsD* 112). Beyond individuals, Woolf amalgamates

the group by using sensory events to capture the attention of several characters, and this momentarily unites them; the narration then flows without interruption from one mind to another. In one instance an aeroplane writing letters in the sky attracts the attentions of several citizens:

The sound of an aeroplane bored ominously into the ears of the crowd. There it was coming over the trees, letting out white smoke from behind, which curled and twisted, actually writing something! making letters in the sky! Every one looked up . . . . “Glaxo,” said Mrs. Coates . . . . “Kreemo,” murmured Mrs. Bletchley . . . . “It’s toffee,” murmured Mr. Bowley – (and the car went in at the gates and nobody looked at it). (*MrsD* 20–21)

The psychological connectedness of characters in *Mrs. Dalloway* heralds the social unconscious.

The function of the social unconscious is to expose common ground for humanity, beneath immediate awareness, and to provide continuity through the ages. The crowd in London responds to the passing of the Prime Minister’s car as a single entity:

There could be no doubt that greatness was seated within . . . the enduring symbol of the state which will be known to curious antiquaries, sifting the ruins of time, when London is a grass-grown path and all those hurrying along the pavement this Wednesday morning are but bones . . . . The face in the motor car will then be known. (*MrsD* 16)

In this passage and others, experiences seem to be felt by the city itself: “As a cloud crosses the sun, silence falls on London; and falls on the mind. Effort ceases. Time flaps on the mast. There we stop; there we stand. Rigid, the skeleton of habit alone upholds the human frame” (*MrsD* 49). Here the inhabitants of the city are equally impacted by the movement of a cloud across the sun, bound together to a life of habit. Beneath the superficial, observable bonds uniting the Londoners are the deeper historical continuities, reflected in the song of a beggar woman in the underground: “Through all ages—when the pavement was grass, when it was swamp, through the age of tusk and mammoth, through the age of silent sunrise, the battered woman . . . stood singing of love—love which has lasted a million years, she sang” (*MrsD* 81). The woman

is in the background, yet she indicates something eternal. Thus Woolf weaves a tapestry of consciousness in three manifestations: the personal consciousness, its transference among people, and an underlying social unconscious.

This three-layer edifice is consistent with Woolf's theory of modern fiction. She writes in 1939, "I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art" (Woolf, "A Sketch" 72). Though articulated late in life, this is an idea which Woolf had been developing from her earlier days as a writer, as we have seen. The resulting creation is a consciousness that is portrayed as something sacred, even immortal: "Since our apparitions, the part of us which appears, are so momentary compared with the other, the unseen part of us, which spreads wide, the unseen might survive, be recovered somehow attached to this person or that, or even haunting certain places after death" (*MrsD* 153). Woolf's social unconscious may appear to be borrowed from Jung's theory of the collective unconscious,<sup>8</sup> but nothing indicates familiarity with Jung prior to 1934.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, her idea differs in that she would have rejected the genetic implications. Virginia Woolf's social unconscious was her own unique development, and one that is essential to her reputation as one of the foremost writers of the twentieth century.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Virginia Woolf finished "Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street" on 2 September 1922 and was reading *Ulysses* at this time. She immediately began planning "The Prime Minister" (*Diary* II 196). It is dated 6 October 1922 (Dick 316), precisely a month after she reported finishing *Ulysses* in her diary (*Diary* II 199).

<sup>2</sup> Banfield and Lackey each demonstrate the importance of Russell's sensibilia and Fry's significant form. Abel distinguishes between the impact of Freud and Klein; Johnson outlines the influence of the psychologist Sully and psychical research as encountered through James Strachey; Kumar speculates on possible connections to Bergson.

<sup>3</sup> Woolf published a review of the letters of Henry James in April 1920. She writes in her diary, "I was driven, as with shut eyes, eyes being indeed so intent upon Henry James as to see nothing else" (*Diary* II 27). Later, in a letter to Lady

Ottoline Morrell, she allies herself with James as opposed to Joyce:

I do admire poor old Henry, and actually read through the *Wings of a Dove* last summer, and thought it such an amazing acrobatic feat, partly of his, partly of mine, that I now look upon myself and Henry James as partners in merit . . . I am now reading Joyce, and my impression, after 200 out of 700 pages, is that the poor young man has only got the dregs of a mind compared even with George Meredith. I mean if you could weigh the meaning on Joyces [sic] page it would be about 10 times as light as on Henry James'. (*Letters* II 548)

<sup>4</sup> *The Will to Believe, and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy and Human Immortality: Two Supposed Objections to the Doctrine*, both by William James (Washington State University).

<sup>5</sup> In her most frequently quoted passage, Woolf defines life in terms of consciousness: "Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; but a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end" ("Modern Fiction" 287-8).

<sup>6</sup> William James proposed that within the stream of consciousness, all definite, concrete images are surrounded by a fringe or halo of relations which color our perceptions in such a way that the same mental experience can never be had twice, even if the object itself is precisely the same:

The significance, the value, of the image is all in this halo or penumbra that surrounds and escorts it,—or rather that is fused into one with it and has become bone of its bone and flesh of its flesh; leaving it, it is true, an image of the same *thing* it was before, but making it an image of that thing newly taken and freshly understood. (James 46)

<sup>7</sup> From this point forward, the abbreviation *MrsD* will refer to Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, Harcourt 1925.

<sup>8</sup> Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961) defines his concept of the collective unconscious:

The collective unconscious is a part of the psyche which can be negatively distinguished from a personal unconscious by the fact that it does not, like the latter, owe its existence and consequently is not a personal acquisition . . . there exists a second system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals. This collective unconscious does not develop individually but is inherited. (Campbell 59-60)

<sup>9</sup> On 26 November 1934, the Huxleys introduced Woolf to Victoria Ocampo at a Man Ray photography exhibition. The two struck up a close friendship. "When they met, Ocampo had recently encountered Mussolini in Rome, Jung in Zurich, and was full of stories" (Lee 649).

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## Desire, Dètour and Disappointment in *The Story of an African Farm*

| Dalglish Chew

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“A confused, disordered story—the little made large and the large made small, and nothing showing its inward meaning” (Schreiner 135). Thus reads the description of Waldo Farber’s narration, at the behest of his “Stranger,” of his life story in Olive Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm*. Yet this description may well apply to Schreiner’s own novel, with its problematic constellation of agnostic, feminist and aesthetic concerns, and if indeed we consider this a metatextual moment of self-assessment, it may also suggest the ways in which the novel asks to be understood. For the description continues: “[i]t is not till the ‘I’ we tell of has ceased to exist that it takes its place among other objective realities, and finds its true niche in the picture. The present and the near past is a confusion, whose meaning flashes on us as it slinks away into the distance” (Schreiner 135). The conditions for textual meaning Schreiner outlines above thus invite a reading that takes into full account the contingencies of both the necessary annihilation of the narrating subject, and the positing of a post-narrative temporal space.

A pertinent model for such a reading may be found in Peter Brooks’ article “Freud’s Masterplot,” in which he argues for an understanding of plot as expressive of a Freudian “drive toward the end” (291). In my reading, Brooks’ model, which posits this “death instinct” as the operative desire in narrative, informs our understanding of Schreiner’s imperatives of the cessation of the “I” and an ending in post-narrative time. Moreover, he conceives of plot as “a kind of divergence or deviance, a postponement in the discharge” that mediates the “dilatatory space of the text” between beginning and end (Brooks 295). What Brooks argues for, then, is an understanding of the text in which the interface of plot’s genealogy in desire, and its desirous teleology, holds out the promise

of securing narrative in a hermeneutic loop. In this paper, I examine the deferrals of meaning in Schreiner's novel in the context of what Brooks terms "*détour*, the intentional deviance, in tension" and the "arabesque of plot" (Schreiner 292, 295). In addition, I assess the extent to which the teleological drive of the novel falters or succeeds in fulfilling its promise of an ending that enacts meaning "in full predication, completion of the codes in a 'plenitude' of signification," and the implications the disappointment or satisfaction this desire has on our understanding of Schreiner's novel (282).

The novel opens with Waldo agonizing over the "Tick-tick-tick" of the watch that for the child tolls the death of men from "all the long ages of the past" (Schreiner 3). As the "awakening" and the "stimulation into a tension" that marks the naissance of plot, this event sets up Waldo's desire to "read, read, read" and for books to tell him "all, all, all" in opposition to the Christian master narrative in which "Many, many, many" are "Dying, dying, dying" (Schreiner 64, 4). Interestingly, Brooks makes a germane argument for the "repetition by three" as constitutive of the "minimal repetition to the perception of series" and thus "the minimal intentional structure of action; the minimum plot" (Brooks 288). Thus at the core of Waldo's struggle is an incipient "death instinct," the ultimate desire for narrative meaning. To wit, the terror that Waldo experiences derives from "Eternity, eternity, eternity," or as Brooks terms it, "the fear of endlessness" epitomized in the interminable procession of Christian time that renders narrative meaning impossible (Brooks 296). Similarly, Lyndall expresses the same totalizing desire for meaning and signification when she declares that when she is grown up, "there will be nothing that [she does] not know" (Schreiner 12). Schreiner's postulation of a future post-narrative time, here figured as adulthood, thus holds out the promise of narrative closure and the fulfillment of desire.

However, what is set up as incipient *bildungsroman* is soon derailed by the appearance of Bonaparte Blenkins, who comes to dominate the rest of Part I of the novel. It is particularly telling that the con artist is "a man of God" and a consummate storyteller, qualities that make for a dangerous combination in Schreiner's feminist and agnostic narrative (36). Blenkins, whose entire history

is a fiction, claims to have written “a book of [his] travels,” and tells tall tales of his kinship with Napoleon Bonaparte and the Duke of Wellington (Schreiner 25). With his stories, he manages to “turn out the old Hymns-and-prayers, and pummel the Ragged coat, and get [his] arms round the fat one’s waist and a wedding ring on her finger” (Schreiner 45). Evidently, under the force of his calumny and deception, the inhabitants of the farm become no more than nameless stock characters in his gruesome play. Furthermore, if as Brooks argues, “verbs are . . . ultimately all versions of desire,” then one apprehends the extent to which Blenkins monopolizes textual authority for the actualization of his desires in the first half of the novel, since he constitutes at once the titular subject and agency of each chapter.

Blenkins so effectively writes Part I of the novel that his presence eclipses the children’s incipient narratives and circumscribes the textual latitude of their narrative desire. He exerts control over the children’s access to other texts through the application of the “simple rule” of “marvelous simplicity, of infinite utility, of universal applicability,” and keeps the books that belonged to Em’s father under lock and key (Schreiner 79). Moreover, his cruel destruction of Waldo’s machine crushes the boy’s dream of receiving money that would have gone to the purchase of books. In a terrifying moment of bodily inscription, Blenkins slits open Waldo’s shirt with a “pen-knife” and proceeds to whip him, etching on his body the wounds, as with a tree, “peeling the bark off, and looking carefully, you will see the scar there still” (Schreiner 97). The course of the expected *bildungsroman* is so derailed and perverted by Blenkins that the children, *tabulae rasae* as far as narratives go, are imprinted instead with the adult’s cruelty, for as Schreiner tells us, “the old dream little how their words and lives are texts and studies to the generation that shall succeed them” (28).

The entire episode of Blenkins’ sojourn at the farm thus constitutes a dangerously large *détour* and deferral of meaning, in which the tension manifested by Waldo and Lyndall’s frustrated desires builds to a boiling point. This pressure to crystallize narrative significance from the meaningless suffering the children undergo not only sets the stage for, but stakes its meaning on, the plot of Part II which must assimilate these elements and bring them to promised

closure with the “structuring force of the ending” (Brooks 283). To wit, the text continues to hold out for the children the hope of “a fictitious value” of that “for which [they] have suffered” (Schreiner 81). Lyndall likewise predicts their future acquisition of narrative authority, for “we will not be children always; we shall have the power too, some day” (Schreiner 94).

Yet one wonders if at this point the novel does not already postulate the impossibility of such a resolution, since beyond the circumscription of the children’s narratives, Blenkins’ machinations have the further effect of destabilizing the integrity and possibility of narration itself. His mendacious brand of narrative infects the farm and induces a deep pessimism in, and distrust of, the powers of fiction in the children, who have already “noticed . . . that it is only the made-up stories that end nicely; the true ones all end so,” that “[b]ooks do not tell everything” and “what you want to know they never tell” (Schreiner 14, 15). Otto, whose death is quickened by Blenkins’ ingratitude and deception, dies thinking “of the Earl, of Emilina, of the Baron,” characters from a novel he has not finished reading, and although he “could not go away without knowing whether that wicked Earl relented, and whether the Baron married Emilina,” he never finds out the end to the story (Schreiner 61–2). By demonstrating the possibility of death before the knowledge of satisfying resolution, the novel presents us with the specter of disappointed desire that will come back to haunt its own ending. Furthermore, having thus far sustained the integrity of plot with the possibility of its assimilation into a meaningful conclusion, the novel’s display of manifest mistrust in the narrated and the narratable underscores the unease of a novel already anxious about the teleological potentialities of its fiction.

It is on this shaky ground that Waldo and Lyndall must elaborate their respective plots in Part II of the novel. The obstructed desire of the novel’s opening makes its reappearance in Schreiner’s rewriting of childhood as “an unutterable longing, we cannot tell for what” (102). Paradoxically, Schreiner now identifies the desire with at once a proclivity for story-making, in the imagination’s “twisting, twirling, trying to make an allegory,” and its opposite, a nostalgia for a pre-textual moment before the troubling proposition that “k-n-o-w should be know, and p-s-a-l-m psalm” (Schreiner

107, 101). In my reading, the desire for a return to pre-narrative temporality corresponds with Brooks' understanding of the death instinct as "tending toward the restoration of an earlier state of things," while the turn to fiction serves the pleasure principle by enabling a "binding" of narrative tension "for its final elimination in the pleasure of discharge" (Brooks 292). To be sure, he argues that "the two antagonistic instincts serve one another in a dynamic interaction . . . which makes both end and *détour* perfectly necessary and interdependent (Brooks 295). Hence narrative is "always trying to work back through time to that transcendent home, knowing of course that [it] cannot. All [it] can do is subvert, or perhaps better, pervert time" (Brooks 299). This is precisely what Schreiner does when she opens Part II with the declaration that "in the world to come time is not measured out by months and years. Neither is it here" (101). In the postulated "here," the author subverts Christian time in favor of the agnostic narrative temporality of "Times and Seasons," a seven chapter subversion of God's seven day creation of the world, which reorients the events of Part I and offers "the possibility . . . of 'meaning' wrested from 'life' at the end of narrative," where "all is meaning-full; nothing is small" (Brooks 296, Schreiner 118).

Having laid out the troubled course of narrative desire thus far, we now turn our attention to Waldo and Lyndall's enactment of *détour* in Part II of the novel. The arrival of Waldo's stranger accelerates his hitherto obstructed entry into textuality. First, the Stranger, who "watched more the face than the carving" and "read his glance," thus figures Waldo as a locus of legibility and uncovers an "inexhaustible mine" of meaning (Schreiner 123, 135). What follows is an education in the aesthetic dynamism of labor by which narrative may be produced, for "[the] love of beauty and the desire for it must be born in a man," but "the skill to reproduce it he must make" (Schreiner 134). In the startling moment of Waldo's maturation, it seems to the Stranger "as though a curious little tadpole which he held under his glass should suddenly lift its tail and begin to question him" (Schreiner 123). It would appear that contact with the Stranger releases Waldo's narrative from its larval latency and, freeing it from the objectifying gaze, returns it to the full agency of subjectivity. Last but not least, the book the Stranger

hands to Waldo, which we are to understand is Herbert Spencer's *First Principles*, as "a centre round which to hang [his] ideas," thus substitutes an agnostic, humanist ground of reference for the transcendental signifier cast off in Part I of the novel (Schreiner 137).

While Waldo makes some headway in plotting meaning on the narrative path and actualizing his desire, Lyndall's narrative presents more complications. She returns from school with a highly atomized view of human nature, in which "[we] shall find nothing new in human nature after we have once carefully dissected and analyzed the one being we shall ever know—ourselves" (Schreiner 164). Although she, like Waldo, has arrived at establishing the self as locus of meaning, she is faced with the impossibility of meaningful production via labor. The result is an intrinsic dishonesty to her narrative, which Waldo notices, for her "words were no confession, no glimpse into the strong, proud, restless heart of the woman. They were general words with a general application" (Schreiner 184). If Waldo's relationship with the leaves of books is likened to the fashion in which the "lover feels the hair of his mistress," one can only imagine the dearth of possibilities open to Lyndall in her relationship to textuality (Schreiner 76). That the only result from Lyndall's pursuit of textual meaning has been that "[she] read, and epitomized what [she] read," suggests that she has merely internalized the ultimately self-limiting masculine discursive structures of texts available to her (Schreiner 182). These constitute "the narrow walls that shut [her] in," which at once heighten, but circumscribe the expression of, feminine narrative desire (Schreiner 152).

To wit, the patent dishonesty of her declaration that "I am never miserable and never happy" underscores the prohibition against the expression of her desire, and locks her in narrative stasis (Schreiner 152). There exist only two instances of her honest expression of desire. In the first, she cries, "I want to love! I want something great and pure to lift me to itself" to Otto, who is himself prematurely dead and therefore silent and excluded from the narrative possibilities of plot (Schreiner 209). In the second, she writes an unfinished letter to her Stranger, which leaves off mid sentence, "and then I shall be—" (Schreiner 247). Like the "higher part" of her

nature that remains unnarratable in the discursive structures of a masculine text, the predicate of her narrative cannot be expressed except in ellipsis (Schreiner 204).

Lyndall is painfully cognizant that the only labor open to her is the maternal one, which is likewise the only narrative genealogy open to her, for “[we] bear the world and we make it” (Schreiner 160). Plot is not possible except when coded in her body, whether through childbirth or through “pain and time, which trace deep lines and write a story on a human face” (Schreiner 207). Ultimately, Lyndall’s declaration that “[men] and things are plastic; they part to the right and left when one comes among them moving in a straight line to one end” (Schreiner 184) belies her perverted conception of narrative and the misadventure of desire, for “the straight line” is “the shortest distance between beginning and end—which would be the collapse of one into the other, of life into immediate death” (Brooks 292). Her insistence that “[l]ife is too short for might, we must have certainties,” demands premature signification without the necessary *détour* and its concomitant narrative possibilities (Schreiner 163). It is for this reason that her plot is curtailed abortively in premature death, what Brooks terms the “short circuit” and the “im-proper death” (Brooks 296, 292).

Although I have considered Waldo and Lyndall’s narratives separately up till this point, it has not been to finally conclude that one has achieved narrative success while the other has not. In my reading, Schreiner does not accord restorative ending to either of her protagonists, and it is also for this reason that I have deferred a discussion of Waldo’s ending. Beyond this point, the helpfulness of Brooks’ model for my purposes leaves off, for it does not provide an adequate vocabulary for a discussion of Schreiner’s restless conclusion. Admittedly, Brooks’ postulation of incest as “a discharge indistinguishable from death, the very cessation of narrative movement” may well lend itself to a framing of Lyndall’s death as the necessary prohibition against Waldo’s desire for her and the “temptation of short-circuit” (Brooks 297). Furthermore, such a reading of Lyndall’s narrative also feeds into his conception of the “subplot” that serves to “[ward] off the danger of short-circuit, assuring that the main plot will continue through to the right end” (Brooks 292). Yet I depart from Brooks in this matter for the reason

that to read Lyndall through these lenses would require concede the subsidiary status of her plot to Waldo's, and would essentially figure her as the novel's sacrifice at the altar of Waldo's hermeneutic closure. Not only would such a construal be violently at odds with Schreiner's feminist concerns, there remain clearly inassimilable elements that trouble the repose that Waldo seems to find at the end of the novel, the problematics of which I will discuss briefly here.

First, the only narrative Waldo actualizes, to which we are allowed access, is an unfinished letter that firmly locates its anchor in Lyndall as referent, for Waldo writes that "[w]henver anything has happened I have always thought I would tell it to you. The back thought in my mind is always you" (Schreiner 221). Furthermore, his claim of helplessness, that "[he] shall never do anything," but will instead "take [her] work for [his]," severely undermines the labor behind his narrative, and indeed the very narrative of labor of which he writes to her (Schreiner 230). Finally, at the end of his letter, "the wind, which had spent its fury, moaned round and round the house, most like a tired child weary with crying," an image which disarms his narrative and returns him to the infantile futility of his childhood crying to God (Schreiner 230). Most indicative of all, the possibility presented by Lyndall's 50 pounds, an echo of the hoped—for 50 pounds that Waldo would have received for his machine, is no longer a possibility he can entertain, for "the time was when [he] would have been very grateful to any one who would have given me [him] a little money, a little help, a little power of gaining knowledge" (Schreiner 265). Schreiner further complicates matters by appending "[w]ell to die then," with "life is delicious; well to live long" because "great men blossom into books" and "the world of men too opens beautifully, leaf after leaf" (Schreiner 268, 269). Waldo dies not with pathos, not clutching a feather from the bird of Truth, but with the utter bathos of chickens roosting on his body, and will never "blossom" into a "book." In no way then, can Waldo's narrative be read as the fulfillment of desire, or the achievement of Brooks' "goal of quiescence" (Brooks 292).

Pursuing the application of "Freud's Masterplot" to *The Story of an African Farm* to its logical end, one would be forced to conclude that the absence of an organizing conclusion precludes

the integrity of narrative meaning. The inassimilable events of the novel that can neither be “construed as promise and annunciation” nor “enchained toward a construction of significance,” would be excluded completely in a hermeneutic that locates meaning in the secure parentheses of beginning and end (Brooks 283). Yet I would suggest that it is precisely in the restless and inassimilable elements of plot that the significance of Schreiner’s narrative resides. Waldo and Lyndall constitute a hyphenated term in the author’s testing of the limits of a discursive framework inadequate to her narrative desire, while the precise points at their plot fails to double back on itself in hermeneutic closure reveal the forces in opposition to her feminine, agnostic text. Against the backdrop of these forces, the absence of a satisfying end is itself meaningful, for it remains to stubbornly signify the present impossibility of scripting such an ending.

In the final estimation, we may best judge Schreiner by her own belief that “the attribute of all art, the highest and the lowest, is this—that it says more than it says, and takes you away from itself” (Schreiner 133). By arousing narrative desire and leaving it restless and dissatisfied by refusing to let the troubled plots of her protagonists sublimate completely in a “proper” end Schreiner ensures that *The Story of an African Farm* continues to stir in the reader “a thousand meanings and suggests a thousand more” (Schreiner 134).

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## Writing Engagement: Textuality and Morality in *The Quiet American*

| Dalglish Chew

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“L’écrivain ‘engagé’ sait que la parole est action” (“The engaged writer knows that words are action”), declared French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre in his manifesto *Qu’est-ce Que La Littérature?* (qtd. in Maclachlan 116). The relationship he elucidates between textuality and commitment to action is crucial to our understanding of Graham Greene’s novel *The Quiet American*, in which the conflation of romantic intrigue, ideological clash, and the horrors of war in French Indochina of the early 1950s, forces Greene’s narrator Thomas Fowler to renegotiate his involvement in the conflict that escalates around him. In his case for the novel as “auto-criticism of discourse,” Douglas Kerr has already noted that it is “much concerned with reading and writing and the relation of both activities to reality” (96). The narrator Thomas Fowler is a reporter who resists the responsibility of committed authorship by insisting on having no opinions. His rival in love, the eponymous quiet American Alden Pyle to whom apparent agency and action belong, imbibes texts rather than writes them, and proceeds to inscribe tragedy on a country that he fails to read accurately. The two men are not the only characters for whom textuality is intimately tied to questions of reality. Phuong, excluded from the English language, receives the Occident in pictures, and is in turn as illegible to the two men as her country is to theirs. Intertextual references intersperse the narrative, while the act of writing, whether by the American correspondents or in telegrams between spouses, lies under Greene’s constant moral scrutiny. However, I share neither Kerr’s pessimism that representations of writing in the novel suggest a “fall of language,” nor his belief that the novel’s attitude toward writing is one of skepticism (102). In the nuanced morality that Greene develops in his novel, authorial authenticity is contingent on existential commitment, and it is each character’s particular relationship with textuality, both authored and received rather than

a catch—all failure of language per se, which in turn defines the morality and authenticity of their *engagement*.<sup>1</sup>

In the opening chapter of the novel, Fowler recalls Baudelaire's "L'invitation au Voyage," in which the poet lyricizes the Orient and its "douce langue natale" ("soft native language") (Greene 13).<sup>2</sup> We hear this language of the land when, taking refuge in a watch tower after an abortive drive back to Saigon from Phat Diem, Fowler listens to the silence of the Vietnamese landscape and notices that it "[becomes] full of sound: noises you couldn't put a name to—a crack, a creak, a rustle, something like a cough, and a whisper" (84). Tellingly, Pyle's uncomprehending presence is enough to render this voice mute, as Fowler notes that "[n]ow that Pyle was with me, I didn't hear the noises" (85). Clearly Vietnam has a voice and a story to tell, and it is one that is accessible (albeit not always comprehensible) to Fowler, but not to Pyle.

The heated exchange that ensues between the two men reveals the extent to which Pyle's relationship to the texts he receives and attempts to actualize defines both his misguided idealism, and its action on Phuong and her country, both of whom remain incomprehensible to him to the end. Pyle is a man of action who "had read a lot of books" and "never saw anything he hadn't heard in a lecture-hall" (Greene 13, 23). Schooled in ideological abstraction uninformed by indigenous realities, Pyle barges into "Phat Diem in a kind of schoolboy dream," and when under attack in the watch tower, behaves "like a schoolboy watching a demonstration in the laboratory: he didn't seem personally concerned" and ultimately walks right into his death with "schoolboy gaiety" (Greene 154, 98, 172). York Harding is the source of the texts that Pyle uses to guide and justify his actions, and is the subject of Fowler's scathing irony precisely because he traffics in "what doesn't exist" (Greene 89). The resulting conception of Vietnam that underlies American involvement is one of stubborn unreality: Pyle, "absorbed . . . in the dilemmas of Democracy and the responsibilities of the West," lives in Harding's world of "[i]sms and ocracies," of "the magic sound of figures: Fifth Column, Third Force, Seventh Day," from whose safe, abstracted vantage point the war is only "picturesque" (Greene 10, 87, 17). As Fowler points out to him, "if you live in a place for long you cease to read about it,"

and it is precisely Pyle's indiscriminate assimilation of received texts that prevents him from forming any meaningful narrative of his own. His relationship to textuality is one of passivity and receptivity, and points to a lack of any authentic personal discourse. For all his *engagement*, Pyle remains a mere vehicle for the disembodied "voice of Democracy," armed with a "parrot cry about the threat to the individual soul" (22, 89). In the Sartrean conception of existential morality, Pyle has relinquished his individual freedom to *mauvaise foi*, or as Marjorie Grene in "Authenticity: An Existential Virtue" puts it, "enslavement to an 'objective' truth or a consuming passion" (266).

Close inspection of his courtship of Phuong reveals the same generalizing and objectifying tendency in microcosm. Pyle's political naiveté is mirrored by an equally maladroit idealism in matters of love and romance. His knowledge of sex derives from books like "The Physiology of Marriage" or the "Kinsey Reports," and Grene has Fowler draw the parallel between Pyle's views on interpersonal relationships and international politics, by ironizing that "[p]erhaps he was studying sex, as he had studied the East, on paper" (Greene 96, 21). That such an abstract ingenuousness guides his desire for marriage with Phuong, which as Fowler notes is merely another form of involvement, should prove diagnostic of the quality of Pyle's *engagement* whether interpersonal or international (Greene 21).

Another important distinction surfaces when one compares and contrasts the two men's treatment of Phuong. For Pyle, Phuong never becomes more than "a flower," an object of no agency on whom he presumptively inscribes the need for his protection or his brand of happiness (Greene 93). In the same way that inauthentic "objective truth" justifies his involvement in the geopolitical conflict, his desire for involvement with Phuong is predicated on her objectification, and the destruction of her individual subjectivity. Pyle is able neither to read Phuong nor understand her, to the extent that his marriage proposal has to be translated for him by Fowler, his rival (Greene 68). In contrast, the latter is skeptical of romantic involvement, since he realizes that "[t]o be in love is to see yourself as someone sees you," and that in such a context any act "is no more than playing a part to an audience of two" (Greene 103). Fowler's observation about love echoes Sartre's concept of "The

Look” in which “the dependence upon the other which characterizes the individuation of a particular ego is simultaneously denied” (“Jean–Paul Sartre (1905–1980): Existentialism”). Such is the objectifying dynamic that underpins Pyle’s relations with Phuong: in deferring his subjective freedom to objective truth, he not only enacts inauthentic existence for himself, but in doing so denies her subjectivity as well. The instability of such a performance gives Pyle an insubstantial identity that “simply [goes] out like a picture on the screen when the lamps of the projector fail” (Greene 99). Fowler’s interactions with Phuong, however, are informed by recognition of her individual discourse, and he consciously avoids “inventing a character” for her because “[o]ne never knows another human being” (Greene 124). Even if Fowler does not always understand the text that Phuong represents, his recognition and the desire for comprehension are undeniable. He wants “to read her thoughts, but they were hidden away in a language I couldn’t speak,” and recalls the “first tormenting year when [he] had tried so passionately to understand her” (Greene 124, 132). Such recognition is more than can be said for Pyle, for whom she remains an idealized “flower” object that would wilt the moment “reality didn’t match the romantic ideas he cherished” (Greene 93, 66).

Consequentially, Pyle’s inability to write himself in an authentic manner defines his action on both Phuong and her country as an objectifying force that writes over their subjective reality with an abstract unreality. His relationship with texts in the novel is one of unquestioning acceptance as objective truth, as in the case of York Harding; idealized incomprehension, as in the case of Phuong; or an utter lack of awareness, as in the case of Vietnam. His false reading and false writing determine him “an eternal brother who [doesn’t] understand,” and his words never become more than mere parroting of “what [his] father meant by the same words,” formed as they are “spelt on old tombstones” (Greene 24, 82). Inauthentic textuality in life hence marks him for death, and it is with dark irony that Greene should choose a book to be Fowler’s murder weapon from which he reads an absurd poem in the light of his window, the signal to the Viet Minh agent that forecloses Pyle’s murder (Greene 169). Ultimately, Pyle allows received texts to falsely determine him and in turn determine others, “[seeking] escape in the fiction of a

supporting cosmic morality,” an act that situates him squarely in the immorality of disrespect for existential freedom (Greene 267). In allowing himself to be written, he becomes no less inauthentic or flawed than the plastic moulds he imports for General The’s destructive uses. As Fowler tries to imagine what object the mould could have been used to shape, he realizes that “this was not how the object itself would look: this was the image in a mirror, reversed” (Greene 120). Synthetically formed in a mould of York Harding and Kinsey, Pyle fails to actualize organic text, and is defined only by negation, a crime in the eyes of Greene’s existential ethic.

Even if Pyle’s crime is the inability to write, the act of writing is by no means an assurance of authenticity, since Vietnam is under threat by more than one attack of false discourse. Religion (and Sartre’s existentialist ethic again proves instructive here) represents another fiction that attempts to articulate Vietnam. The bizarre Caodaist faith has statues depicting “some noble sentiment Sun Yat Sen was inscribing on a tablet,” while the Caodaist Pope “worked his prophecies with a pencil in a movable lid” (Greene 79, 80). Whether written by Sun Yat Sen or a Pope, the Caodaist faith exemplifies *mauvaise foi*, in that it “compromises freedom by affirming values that are in some sense ‘transcendent’—that is given independently of human subjectivity” (Kimball 236). Fowler compares it to making “a cage for air with holes,” with “doubts left open to the weather and creeds opening on innumerable interpretations” (Greene 79). The inversion of “with holes for air” is interesting, since it suggests that it is the air that the cage is constructed to apprehend, a venture as doomed to failure as an attempt to write reality in the language of religion. Fowler has no desire for such bad faith, because it is mere “play-acting,” a simulacrum estranged from authentic representation (Greene 80).

The threat of inauthentic writing not only comes from within but also without. The novel is narrated by a reporter and is very much concerned with the role of *rapportage* in the representation of conflict. The act of writing is clearly not enough if it is not authentic, which is Fowler’s criticism of the American correspondents, who approach the subjectivity of the conflict they are covering from a position of patent unreality. Pyle’s countrymen are “full of sour cracks against the French, who were, when all

was said, fighting this war,” shielded by “boyish” and “immature cynicism” in the relative safety of the American terrace in the Continental (Greene 15, 16). The horrors of war are a mere abstraction to them, and Pyle’s schoolboy naïveté is replayed here in their flights over the battlefield, from which they are “delivered safely and noisily back, like a school-treat” (Greene 15). Granger, who writes “Highway to Hell,” an “account of Road 66” without ever having been “near their stinking highway” and doesn’t “care what the colour of the river is,” is representative of such inauthentic writing that is as removed from reality as Pyle’s ideals are (Greene 28, 56). Granger recalls Stephen Crane, who “could describe a war without seeing one” and bullies the French colonel presiding over the press conference for numbers of the French dead, who to the colonel were “his men who were dead . . . not numerals as they were to Granger” (Greene 28, 56). Fowler criticizes their false *rapportage*, noting that “truth is closest to real danger,” and that “if one writes about war, self-respect demands that occasionally one shares the risks” (Greene 40, 140). Even though the American correspondents “write” the war, they come no closer to apprehending neither the subjectivity of the conflict they falsely represent, nor the truth of their own involvement therein.

Not only is the authenticity of American correspondence called into question, the very potentiality of *rapportage* as a representational form is cast in doubt under Greene’s nuanced hand. After all, if York Harding is only “a superior sort of journalist,” then clearly reporting is not an existentially authentic mode of writing (Greene 160). Fowler admits early in the novel that to be a reporter is to “[think] in headlines,” a tendency that crops up repeatedly in the narrative (Greene 13). After surviving the night in the watch tower, he remarks how “men of [his] profession would make only two news—lines out of all this night,” while having actually experienced it, he is incapable of such a reductive approach to subjective and individual experience (Greene 104). His direct involvement reveals to him the emptiness of *rapportage* that cannot truly represent his subjectivity, which sticks out as “the only strange thing” in what would otherwise be “a common-or-garden night” (Greene 104, 105).

Up to this point I have discussed Fowler's character only in opposition to examples of inauthentic writing, but further discussion of *rapportage* and the centrality of textuality to the novel's existential ethic demands detailed analysis of Fowler's own narrative, which to be sure, is not static but shifts under the circumstantial pressures that events bring down to bear upon him. At the heart of Fowler's relationship with writing is a contradiction: he is represented by Greene as a sort of proto-existentialist, with a sensibility for authentic subjectivity that the Americans lack in contrast, but one that stubbornly refuses to acknowledge that "human existence is always already committed, or to retain a more literal translation of [Sartre's] term, engaged" (Maclachlan 114). It is in the context of this paradox that I will interpret the question of our narrator's authorship, and the paradigm shifts he undergoes in a trajectory toward true *engagement*.

In comparison with Pyle and the American correspondents Fowler is, if not a proto-existentialist as I have suggested, then at least attuned to the difficulties of freedom and Sartrean authenticity-as-morality. Death is the existentialist's great equalizer, the ultimate negation against which the value of all human action is weighed. Fowler's declaration that "Death was the only absolute value in [his] world" and that it "was far more certain than God" is indicative of an awareness, if pessimistic, that it is the enactment of agency in the face of mortality, not any transcendental set of values, which will determine the morality of his choices (Greene 36). He shows an innate recognition of existential responsibility and a suspicion for Sartrean *mauvaise foi*, which merely attempts to "escape responsibility" and "justify what [one] does in terms of external or 'objective' standards imposed upon [one] from without" ("Existentialism"). As such, he is aware of the falseness of belief in the fictional "fable of the changeless and the permanent" (Greene 36). That his recognition of death is a precursor to existential authenticity should become clearer in comparison with the irredeemably unaware Pyle, who is "incapable of imagining pain or damage to himself," and who Death eventually catches unawares (Greene 53). Fowler states that he "came east to be killed," and the setting of the war does in fact amplify the existential crisis he must face, by reminding him how "simply and anonymously death came"

when he follows the soldiers into the canal full of corpses (Greene 44). Far from achieving the death he “wanted to get over,” Fowler must, as we discover, come to terms with his existence as man condemned to freedom, and find an authentic mode in which to author it (Greene 95).

Echoing the concerns in the quote from Sartre that I began with, Fowler very early on states that he “preferred the title of reporter. [He] wrote what [he] saw. [He] took no action—even an opinion is a kind of action” (Greene 20). I have already begun to elucidate how the limitations of reporting-as-writing in achieving existential authenticity are crucial to our understanding of Fowler’s changing relationship with the text he enacts. In the beginning, it appears that retreating into the role of a reporter represents an attempt on Fowler’s part to distance himself from the existential immediacy that war and Pyle’s romantic intrusions impress upon him. If Pyle is guilty of channeling the Voice of Democracy and the Caodaists of playing God, then Fowler is in the beginning no less guilty of attempting to seek refuge from responsible existence in the role of a reporter. Maintaining that as “a reporter, [he] had no real opinions about anything” becomes akin to the opium that he smokes to “calm the nerves and [still] the emotions” (Greene 64, 9). It is “the human condition being what it was”: the fact of existence being *de facto engagé*, and the writer who knows that words are action, that Pyle attempts to efface when he stubbornly insists “I’m not involved. Not involved” (Greene 20).

Fowler’s attempt to write his involvement as an objective reporter is an untenable one however, as events conspire to force him to confront the subjectivity of his experiences and push him ineluctably toward making the choice that will articulate commitment. The instability of reporting-as-writing quickly collapses under the acceleration of both the geopolitical conflict and Pyle’s rivalry for Phuong. In the key watch tower scene, where the illusion of his reporter’s objective distance shatters in confrontation with death, he confesses that while he “had believed [he] was tough and unimaginative, all that a truthful observer and reporter should be,” he had really been “a frightened fool” (Greene 99). Fowler’s confession of emotion in a time of crisis begins to reveal the hollowness of the opiate escapism that writing-as-reporting has

hitherto afforded him. The memory of the crying guard becomes an indelible reminder of individual suffering because “always, everywhere, there is some voice crying from a tower” (Greene 110). Elsewhere, he is so haunted with the memory of “a little curled body in a ditch” that he has to “shut [his] eyes—that helped to keep the pain away” (Greene 100). The suffering individual particularizes and subjectivizes the conflict for him, which makes it increasingly difficult to remain uninvolved. Its immediacy is impossible to ignore, and greatly reduces the space in which neutrality can be negotiated because silence and lack of opinion become callous accomplices to the pain that he cannot countenance. The shift toward subjectivity in the experience of conflict is accompanied by an equally marked change in his writing of conflict. Hitherto a stubbornly objective reporter, impersonal *rapportage* quickly gives way to a series of three personal letters: the first to the Managing Director, the second to his estranged wife, and the third to Pyle. They delineate an increasing honesty, as writing regains the authenticity of action. His first letter is prompted by the revelation that he has been promoted to the position of foreign correspondent, a position that requires his return to Britain. In the letter he is unable to confess to subjective “private reasons” for fear of the objectifying judgment of the Other, in this case his colleagues in the Press Club (Greene 64). His second letter to his wife, in which he requests for a divorce, is markedly more authentic, and expresses sentiment for and commitment to Phuong, *engagements* previously anathema to him in his role as an uninvolved reporter. Her reply hits home when it makes him realize that he had “[prided himself] on being *dégagé*, the reporter, not the leader-writer,” and yet “what a mess [he had made] behind the scenes” (Greene 110). The artifice of the reporter is revealed to be mere role-play, a façade for the reality that he has always been, despite his best attempts, *engagé*. The shift into existentially authentic writing is completed in the third letter to Pyle in which he once again lies, but this time lying takes on existential value: it becomes the *parole* of an *écrivain engagé*, in that he takes full responsibility for the committed action it entails. He recognizes that “to scratch [the cruel phrase] out, [he] had better tear the whole letter up,” and in not doing so, Fowler retains the integrity of his authored text (Greene 112). Even when the lie is

discovered by Phuong and Pyle, Fowler does not retreat from moral responsibility but states that “the offender was too obviously myself,” and admits to his “obvious” but previously deferred involvement in “[wanting] to keep her” (Greene 123).

From this point on, reporting-as-writing fails to constitute a viable textual form for Fowler’s narrative. The first bicycle bomb incident prompts a slew of headlines from his colleagues making fun of the affair, because “‘Bicycle Bombs’ made a good headline” (Greene 134). In contrast, Fowler is “the only one to write that the bombs were a demonstration on the part of General Thé,” even with the knowledge that it was “not news,” a move that turns *rapportage* into *engagement* (Greene 134). In a meeting with Trouin, the French Captain tells Fowler prophetically that “[o]ne day something will happen. [He] will take a side” (Greene 143). That “something” is the catastrophic bombing near the Continental, in which the world as Fowler knows it “inexplicably [breaks] into pieces,” which proves the final tipping point that cements his textual metamorphosis (Greene 152). The combination of the revelation that Pyle’s “Third Force” is responsible for the bombing, and the horror of seeing the suffering individuals around him: a woman “with what was left of her baby in her lap” who has the absurd modesty to cover it “with her straw peasant hat,” and the “legless torso” of a trishaw rider, push Fowler toward the imperative that Monsieur Heng describes it later: to “take a side, if [he] is to remain human” (Greene 154, 166). The failure of reporting-as-writing to articulate authenticity is complete: Fowler realizes that the day of the bombing when he says “I am the Press,” that he has in fact forgotten his card (Greene 153). Like the mirrors that fly toward him and collapse at the moment of the explosion, the narrative that Fowler has hitherto written as *rapportage*, in which he has reflexively performed the role of a reporter who is “not engage[d],” shatters under the weight of the existential responsibility to take action (Greene 88). When Dominguez reminds him to send a cable follow-up on the bomb, Fowler has completely forgotten about it, and realizes that “being there on the spot,” he “can’t think of the thing in terms of a cable” (Greene 167). With the crisis, Fowler ceases to think like a reporter, and begins to think like an individual, whose narrative the form of *rapportage* is no longer sufficient.

One final comment remains to be made about the evolution of Fowler's textuality and the significance it has for the form that Greene's novel takes. It is under the promptings of Vigot, a French detective who reads and quotes Pascal's *Pensées* and appears to know the truth about Fowler's *engagement*, that Fowler begins an accounting of the events that lead up to Pyle's death. The reader, without knowledge of Fowler's involvement in the murder, has no reason to believe that the narrative is any more than *rapportage*, yet when Fowler ends by saying he "wished there existed someone to whom [he] could say that [he] was sorry," we realize that we have been reading a confession (Greene 180). Kerr rightly identifies the narrative as "the confession Fowler declined to make to Vigot," but Fowler does not, as Kerr suggests "[turn] away with extreme skepticism from language, especially writing" (102, 103). The turn that Fowler has made is rather a reorientation of his narrative mode, a move out of *rapportage* and into *engagement*, a move that affirms rather than denies the importance of committed writing. It seems to me that Kerr has things in reverse when he suggests that the confessional discourse discredits direct intentionality and is authenticated only by "the falsification of other forms and genres of writing" (103). Far from discrediting direct intentionality, the development of Fowler's narrative from *rapportage* that avoids action into confession that accounts for action restores intentionality to its centrality in authentic writing. Fowler's narrative is not authenticated in negation by the falsification of the other texts in the novel, but by his existential commitment of his authorship. That other narratives, whether Pyle's or that of American correspondents, should prove false, is an ineluctable consequence of *mauvaise foi* and irresponsible writing, not a general "fall from language" (Kerr 103). In contrast, Fowler arrives at the "instrumental use of language" that "equips the prose-writer to *reveal* the world," and writes the truth that has been hitherto obscured by the deferment of existential responsibility (Maclachlan 115). In the evolution of the discourse from *rapportage* to confession, *parole* is restituted with the instrumentality of *action*, the *écrivain* reconciled with *engagement*, and Fowler actualizes his authentic existential text which we realize, at the end of the novel, is the one we have just read.

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 Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Italicized to retain the meaning of “active involvement” in the nominal form of Sartre’s original French “engagé” (which I believe informs Greene’s use of the selfsame) which is diminished in literal translation to the English “engagement.”

<sup>2</sup> I have chosen, from several translations, William Aggeler’s *The Flowers of Evil* (Fresno, CA: Academy Library Guild, 1954).

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## A Study in Success: Doyle's Depictions of Detectives and Mormons in *A Study in Scarlet*

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In their 1887 holiday annual, publishers Ward, Lock & Co. bestowed quite a Christmas gift upon their Victorian readership: the publication of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's first Sherlock Holmes story, *A Study in Scarlet*. Reviewers and readers alike received the novel warmly and, hungry for more tales about this clever detective, cleared the way for Doyle to develop one of the most famous fiction franchises in literary history. Though today it may not be as popular as his later Holmes creations, *A Study in Scarlet* makes for a fascinating study in popular literature of the late Victorian era. Part detective yarn and part historical romance, Doyle's novel actually contains two stories in one: while Part One introduces readers to the rational crime-solving methods practiced by Holmes and pits the private detective against the bumbling inspectors of Scotland Yard, Part Two deals with the Mormon settlement of Utah and tells a tale of treachery and vengeance explaining the motive behind the murders Holmes investigates. Doyle's exploration of these two seemingly unrelated topics illuminates common Victorian conceptions concerning both the London detective force and Mormonism. Through its combination of captivating storytelling and adherence to popular opinion regarding two prominently discussed issues of the day, *A Study in Scarlet* appealed to a broad spectrum of readers and pioneered the pathway toward success down which future Sherlock Holmes stories were sure to follow.

Upon its original publication in *Beeton's Christmas Annual*, reviewers lauded *A Study in Scarlet* for its thrilling plot and "the

preternatural sagacity” of its hero. In addition to complimenting Doyle on his mesmerizing writing style, a critic for *The Glasgow Herald* touts his portrayal of Sherlock Holmes as “a scientific detective” (“Annuals” 63). “He has not trodden in the well-worn paths of literature,” wrote a reviewer in *The Scotsman* praising Doyle’s “genius,” “but has shown how the true detective should work by observation and deduction” (“Christmas” 64). In the novel, Holmes uses his deductive powers to solve two murders that have left the police completely baffled. Though well intentioned, Scotland Yard inspectors Gregson and Lestrade fall far short of the high standard Holmes sets by his own intuitive example. While they are “quick and energetic,” Holmes scorns them for being “conventional—shockingly so” and “as jealous as a pair of professional beauties” concerning their individual professional reputations (Doyle 24). Most of the theories and advances they make on the case are motivated more by their desires to remain one step ahead of each other for the sake of their professional rivalry than any brilliant deductions they have made regarding the evidence, which naturally turns their leads into dead ends. Though it is Holmes who solves the case and ultimately apprehends the murderer, Gregson and Lestrade receive all the credit in the public announcement regarding the capture while Holmes is merely mentioned as “an amateur” who has “shown some talent in the detective line, and who, with such instructors, may hope in time to attain to some degree of their skill” (127). Doyle’s unflattering portrayal of government-employed detectives as inept and publicity-hungry bunglers serves not only to characterize Sherlock Holmes by contrast and provide comic relief through their incompetence, but also reflects commonly held beliefs regarding the real detectives of the Metropolitan Police Force in late nineteenth-century London.

According to *History of the Metropolitan Police Service*, the public’s faith in London’s police and detective forces was severely shaken by an onslaught of bombings during the 1880s, most of which were organized by the Irish nationalist group known as the Fenians. In 1884, they managed to bomb the Criminal Investigations Department and headquarters of the Special Irish Branch, which had been formed specifically to deal with Fenian threats. Scotland Yard’s apparent inability to “protect its own

offices . . . did much to lower the reputation of the Metropolitan Police,” especially when combined with the “successful explosion of Fenian bombs under London Bridge, in the Tower of London and in the House of Commons the following year” (“Fenians”). Defenders of the detective force argued that dynamiting was a relatively new phenomenon and suggested that the public should be lenient when judging detectives’ handling of such “abhorrent and anti-human” crimes. However, the failure of the police to apprehend such “abnormal criminals” encouraged critics to judge the force even more harshly rather than grant detectives any grace (“Detectives and Their Work” 136). Such an embarrassing “lack of success in tracing crime” during this time period led one journalist of *The Saturday Review* to label the detective force as “a feeble sham” (“Detectives (1884)” 177, 179). “The plain truth,” he laments, “is that the business of detecting crime is very badly done in London, save when the criminal is a dull-witted brutal rough or a reckless dissipated rogue” who “talk[s] incautiously about his affairs in the hearing of associates, especially female associates, who can betray him at will.” Instead of relying on the analysis of clues and evidence to solve cases, the writer claims that the common detective “rarely knows more than can be got by the treachery of one knave to another, or, failing that, can be wormed out of some woman in the knave’s secret, her tongue having been first of all loosened either by jealousy or drink” (178). Detectives’ associations with such unsavory characters, especially with women who drink and keep company with criminals, further tarnish the reputation of the police force in this writer’s eyes. Though such methods are satisfactory – perhaps even necessary—for handling what the journalist identifies as “low-class crime,” they render the police “impotent” when trying to solve a case of “high-class crime” committed by “a clever fellow” who “takes no woman into his confidence, and limits his partnership in crime to one or two men as wary and secretive as himself” (178). While Holmes associates with people from “the most different classes of society” in his work, he distinguishes himself by using such testimony in conjunction with his own acute observations as guides to finding solid evidence rather than relying solely upon the hearsay of petty criminals and fallen women (Doyle 17). When

compared with his real-life counterparts, Holmes indeed seemed an intellectual superhero.

The idea of the brilliant, intuitive detective was introduced to the Victorians long before the creation of Sherlock Holmes through the detective heroes of Doyle's literary predecessors, such as Edgar Allan Poe's Monsieur Dupin, Charles Dickens's Inspector Bucket and Emile Gaboriau's Monsieur Lecoq. Inspired by such fiction, the "popular idea of the Scotland Yard detective"—as one writer reports in *The Saturday Review*—became quite idealized:

In virtue of an almost occult power, he can follow up the thinnest 'clue' and track the most tortuous villany to its source. He is supposed to be a being of preternaturally sharp wits, who devotes his superhuman intelligence to the discovery of hidden crime, all for the modest salary of three or four guineas a week. ("Detectives (1884)" 178)

Many journalists realized that such expectations of ordinary detectives were highly unrealistic and often emphasized how "unreal" fictional detective characters seemed. One writer points out that Inspector Bucket "triumphs" in *Bleak House* "because the author is determined that he shall triumph, and . . . the wearisome iteration about his fat forefinger and the inspiration he derives is something very like abuse of a novelist's privilege." Similarly, when English detectives were instructed to study Lecoq's methods as described by Gaboriau, the journalist writes that such a suggestion "was as absurd as it would have been to suggest to men of science that they should study Jules Verne," and declares that to "'reconstitute' a crime according to the system . . . followed by M. Lecoq would be impossible or, at all events, as impossible to men of ordinary intelligence as the feats of a calculating boy are to ordinary arithmeticians" ("Detectives (1883)" 558). The appeal of such fictional detectives clearly lay in their extraordinary deductive powers, even though it seemed impossible for such analytical and observational skills to transfer to real detectives of the Criminal Investigations Department. While Doyle certainly capitalized on the superhuman aspect by creating a detective "to whom Edgar Allan Poe's Dupin was a trifler, and Gaboriau's Lecoq a child," ("Annuals" 63) he strove to demonstrate how rational and logical Holmes's methods were. He makes it clear in *A Study in Scarlet* that it is a

combination “of study” in addition to “natural talent” that makes Holmes so successful in “the detection of crime” (Doyle 22). By showing that Holmes’s skills can be learned and imitated—though perhaps not to the level of brilliance Holmes himself attains—Doyle offers the common detective realistic hope for improvement in his profession.

At the end of *A Study in Scarlet*’s seventh chapter, Sherlock Holmes successfully apprehends the man responsible for the murders he has been investigating, Jefferson Hope, much to the delighted surprise and confusion of Dr. Watson and the Scotland Yard inspectors. Rather than explain the murderer’s motives directly, Doyle dives rather abruptly into Part Two of the novel, “The Country of the Saints.” He presents Hope’s early history with the two murder victims, Enoch Drebber and Joseph Strangerson, as a self-contained story set apart by his use of the third-person omniscient narrative voice (the rest of the novel is, of course, related in the first person from Dr. Watson’s perspective). Although Part Two was generally ignored in most of the reviews written immediately after its publication, the novel’s pre-publication announcement from Ward, Lock & Co. noted that “the entire section of the story which deals with early events in the Mormon settlement is most stirring, and intense pathos is brought out in some of the scenes” (Rev. in *Publisher’s Circular* 4–5). Doyle’s choice to use the early days of Mormonism as a historical setting is an interesting one, especially since many Victorians felt that Mormonism was a “sensual and materialistic creed” that “degrades and debases its adherents to its own level” (“Amongst” 714). Through his literary treatment of the Mormons as members of a diabolical cult, Doyle reveals common prejudices held against the religion and its followers during the final decades of the Victorian era.

Doyle opens “The Country of the Saints” with intensely bleak descriptions of the uninhabited American wilderness. He presents this “region of desolation and silence” as “an arid and repulsive desert” whose natural wonders are symbols of the land’s “barrenness, inhospitality, and misery” (69). The grim danger of this setting mirrors the ominous nature of its Mormon settlers. Though the Mormons initially appear to offer life and salvation as

they rescue stranded pioneer John Ferrier and his young adopted daughter Lucy from certain death in the desert, they stringently demand that the Ferriers adopt the Mormon religion. Their menacing warning that it would be far better for the Ferriers' "bones [to] bleach in this wilderness than that [they] should prove to be that little speck of decay which in time corrupts the whole fruit" (78) foreshadows the drastic consequences that await them when they resist the Mormons' attempts to force Lucy into a polygamous marriage years later. Although Doyle also shows the Latter Day Saints to be industrious people who adapt to their harsh environment and turn it into a prosperous and beautiful settlement, he uses the savage wilderness as a constant reminder of the underlying barbarity and blasphemy of the Mormon creed.

Many reports from those who visited Salt Lake City during the 1870s and 1880s likewise contain grand descriptions of Utah's natural landscape and its strange mixture of beauty and savagery. "Cañons—now gloomy and savage, then radiant in verdant beauty—run up into the mountains," recalls one journalist in *The Leisure Hour* ("Amongst" 710). He also describes "[h]uge masses of rock, torn and splintered into grotesque shapes" that "seem to have been fashioned by the fantastic caprices of *genii* rather than by the unaided operations of nature." This unnatural and monstrous influence of "*genii*" on the environment—albeit only in the writer's imagination—is a strange reflection of the Mormons' effect on a land whose "luxuriant fertility is entirely due to careful cultivation and to artificial irrigation" (711). While he concedes that their ability to prosper in such a hostile environment demonstrates their resourcefulness and perseverance, he argues that choosing such a poor spot for their settlement "has been a costly blunder, notwithstanding the boasting of the Mormons and the extravagant praises of their inconsiderate admirers" because its upkeep is so labor-intensive (712). In a later article for *The Leisure Hour*, Reverend Alfred Rowland further comments on the Mormons' "admirably planned" artificial irrigation system, which provides an ample water supply for both individual gardens and the "luxuriant trees" that "fringe" the main streets. He also notices that "many of these trees are changing from bright green to yellow, because the roots are getting deep enough to strike the alkaline soil which

underlies the surface of the whole valley—a type, we thought, of Mormonism itself, whose last condition morally is worse than its first” (34). Through such a concrete metaphor, Rowland manages to turn even the Mormons’ engineering and agricultural achievements into illustrations of their blasphemy.

The “resemblance between the hydrography of [the Mormons’] territory and that of Palestine” provided further natural material for drawing metaphors, this time comparing the Mormons’ situation to the Israelites’ condition in the book of Exodus (“Amongst” 711). While the Great Salt Lake whence Salt Lake City took its name was a fascinating tourist attraction as “an excellent place for nervous bathers, as it would require both skill and effort to drown,” the Mormons imbued their “Dead Sea of America” with greater significance (Rowland 35). For the Mormons and their few sympathizers like James W. Barclay, whose article “A New View of Mormonism” attempted to defend the religion, the alkaline lakes were just one example of many major similarities between the Mormons and the Israelites:

Like the Israelites, they had left a country of persecution; they had crossed in safety a trackless desert; they had been miraculously preserved in the midst of many dangers and supported through numberless privations; and now they had come into a land which curiously enough possessed several remarkable geographical features common to Judea. (170)

Though Doyle does not specifically mention such geographical similarities in *A Study in Scarlet*, he very clearly depicts the Mormons’ conviction that they were God’s chosen people through the use of solemn, biblical language, both in their elevated manner of speaking—which seems quite ominous when contrasted with the Ferriers’ and Hope’s more natural, almost hokey Western dialect—and their use of biblical terminology, such as referring to their destination as “Zion” during their migration across the wilderness and calling non-Mormons “Gentiles” (78, 89). While such similarities validated the Mormon religion in the eyes of some, to others they seemed only to deepen Mormonism’s stigma as a perversion of Judaic Christianity.

Polygamy, however, was definitely considered the most extreme

and irreconcilable tenet of Mormonism. “The women seemed to me to have a depressed and dejected air, with nothing of the brightness and buoyancy of happy wives and mothers,” writes one Gentile journalist for *The Leisure Hour*. He also reports that the issue of polygamy caused division amongst the Mormons as some “protest that polygamy ought never to have been introduced, and must be at once abandoned.” According to a statement from George A. Smith, the church historian and “first councillor of the president” in the 1870s, “It was only when Joseph Smith’s wife got old and ugly, that a second revelation came authorising [sic] him to take another wife” (“Amongst” 714). Barclay also notes in his article for *The Nineteenth Century* that the Mormon Confession of Faith encourages both monogamous and polygamous marriages, revealing that Mormons were not as uniformly insistent on polygamy as common assumptions may have led Victorians to believe (167). Doyle certainly did nothing to dissipate this myth regarding the Mormon faith, as the necessity of a polygamous marriage becomes the issue that drives the “Avenging Angels” to sanction murdering John Ferrier and kidnapping Lucy so that she must become one of either Drebber’s or Strangerson’s wives instead of marrying Hope, the Gentile with whom she has fallen in love. “Whether it was the terrible death of her father,” Doyle dramatically concludes, “or the effects of the hateful marriage into which she had been forced, poor Lucy never held up her head again, but pined away and died within a month,” thereby inspiring the grief-stricken Hope to devote his life to avenging the Ferriers’ deaths (107). By using and exaggerating this most blasphemous of doctrines, Doyle engages his readers’ sympathies for Hope and reveals that the murderer is a defender of morality rather than a cold-blooded killer. Hope’s ultimate fate further seals his image as a righteous hero, as he dies from a burst aneurism “with a placid smile upon his face, as though he had been able in his dying moments to look back upon a useful life, and on work well done” (122). Instead of forcing the law to punish Hope, Doyle allows him to die a natural death, fully satisfied with all he had accomplished. Drebber and Strangerson, therefore, are shown to be “two villains of the deepest cast,” and their deaths become deserved consequences for their evil ways (“Beeton’s” 63). While this ending may seem unconventional because it hails the murderer as a

hero and his victims as the true criminals, Doyle ensures that each character receives his conventionally just reward through death.

Although *A Study in Scarlet* was often praised for its “ingenuity,” Doyle clearly stands by conventional values and old-fashioned skepticism regarding Mormonism and the efficiency of the London detective force (“Christmas” 64). He reveals and endorses common prejudices against these often-ridiculed groups, offering no hope of redemption for the former and only a slim chance of improvement for the latter. By supporting widely accepted arguments regarding these two contentious issues—issues which continue to spark controversy even now—Doyle ensured *A Study in Scarlet*’s popular appeal among contemporaneous readers and initiated a series whose legendary popularity continued throughout the twentieth century and still remains strong today.

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# The Captivity Narrative Monopoly: John Smith and Mary Rowlandson

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The history of American literature is rife with ubiquitous archetypes, from the daring and cavalier frontier hero to the strong-willed yet chaste female protagonist. While many of these prototypical characters have risen to prominence through popular fiction, their origins are actually steeped in what is likely the first and best example of uniquely American *non-fiction*: the Indian captivity narrative. From the earliest pioneer days of John Smith and Mary Rowlandson to the post-revolutionary melodramas of Abraham Panther and Jane McCrea, captivity as both an idea and a genre has been a conduit for enduring American mythos to take form—yet the pantheon of captivity literature has been entirely monopolized by the genre’s forerunners, Smith and Rowlandson, at the cost of eschewing narratives from all other periods of early American history. Many of these forgotten literary pieces feature substantial and substantiated ethnographic information detailing America’s formative years, and the post-revolutionary narratives in particular use dramatic elements that put their 1600’s counterparts to shame—but the new wave of American captives could never manage to eclipse the mythology of Smith and Rowlandson that forged not only a literary genre, but a nation as well.

As much of early American history was dominated by the clash of civilizations between British colonists and Native Americans, the captivity narrative found its way into conflict after conflict, in each instance serving a different political or social purpose. Writers emerged both to defend the Native Americans and to rebuke them, some having experienced full transculturation in captivity while others had likely never met an actual Native American in their lives. The stories of people like John Smith and Mary Rowlandson

encapsulated a period of colonial history during which the captivity narrative genre was at its most educational, providing accurate and useful information on a culture that was largely written off by past authors in the genre as merely savage. The shamelessly fictional tales of Jane McCrea and Abraham Panther, conversely, were used to propagate sentiments of post-colonial America by employing the captivity scenario as a literary backdrop. In both cases, the works of those who built on top of the narrative styles of John Smith and Mary Rowlandson have seemingly fallen by the wayside, consigned to historical archives while the foundational authors have found lasting enshrinement in popular culture. The reason for this is quite simple, though: the popularity of the captivity narrative genre was never due to its potential as a cultural bridge or as a dramatic literary framework. Rather, it was a vehicle for the earliest American authors to carve out distinct literary tropes and burn their own images into the history of the New World. As such, John Smith became the perennial male captive while Rowlandson became the female—whatever quality can be ascribed to their writing is purely coincidental to their legacies.

Smith is likely the most famous captive of them all—a larger-than-life soldier, sailor, author, and explorer. Both in history and popular culture, his reputation precedes him—the man who cut through the Atlantic to discover the New World, established the first permanent English settlement on the continent, and survived multiple captivities inside and outside of America. His experiences with the Powhatan Confederacy, however, are what made him a household name; specifically, his affiliation with Pocahontas. The story of his salvation at her hands has echoed throughout American history as an archetype unto itself, with no less than six different cinematic adaptations. But it is the original text, written by Smith himself, which is the most telling of all.

From the very start of his *General History of Virginia*, Smith assumes the role of the gallant leader. Writing of himself in the third person, Smith states, “[W]hen his Barge could passé no farther, he left her in a broad bay out of danger of shot, commanding none should goe a shore till his returne” (83). He puts himself in danger for the sake of his men, emanating a sense of bravery and steadfast conviction for the reader to admire. Even when in over his head,

Smith does not shrink back from consequence: “finding he was beset with 200 Savages, two of them he slew, still defending himself . . . yet he was shot in his thigh a little, and had many arrows that stucke in his cloathes but no great hurt, till at last they took him prisoner” (83). It is difficult to imagine a more heroic figure than one who will accept 200:1 as an acceptable ratio in a fight, then battle to the point of incapacitation while taking wounds dealt to him as “no great hurt.” According to historian William McPeak, it wasn’t even the Native Americans who forced Smith’s hand—rather, the weather simply became too cold for him to continue surviving in flight from his pursuers (36). Aside from discrediting the prowess of his pursuers as cause for his capture, this little fact frames Smith’s heroics even further; it took a battle with the nature itself to bring him down. White notes in his writing on Smith as a novelist that Smith’s challenges are usually characterized by “Smith’s marginal status (it is almost always Smith against everyone else)” and “by the extremity of the conflicts (he is almost executed, and he has to draw weapons on other Englishmen)” (15). It is during the near-execution mentioned, in fact, that Smith’s most infamous myth is born.

At the climax of his narrative, Smith writes, “[The Native Americans] being ready with their clubs, to beat out his braines, Pocahontas the Kings’ dearest daughter, when no intreaty could prevaile, got his head in her armes, and laid her owne upon his to save him from death” (Smith 88). Such is the foundational passage of the Pocahontas legend, and one of the most memorable scenes in all of early American literature. “Called America’s Joan of Arc by some for her virtue and her courage to risk death for a noble cause,” write William Rasmussen and Robert Tilton, “Pocahontas has even been revered as the ‘mother’ of the nation, a female counterpart to George Washington” (1). Her encounter with Smith vaulted Pocahontas into the upper echelons of white society, as she fulfilled the ideal image of Native Americans: one who was willing to break rank against her people when push came to shove. Kathryn Zabelle Derounian–Stodola writes of the Native Americans’ bipolar characterization by colonists, where, “Simply put, the ‘bad’ Native American was a barbarian. Alongside this Native American, there also exists the image of the ‘good’ Native American, who opposes

what the ‘bad’ Native American represents, often siding . . . with the values of white society” (52). In the spirit of this characterization, Pocahontas was positioned opposite her own father, the conductor of Smith’s aborted execution, and further delighted readers by swinging Powhatan to her side as well. Smith had managed to obtain survivor status through mere stoicism—the accolades would practically write themselves upon his return.

But what was the purpose of it all? Smith came to America as the son of a farmer, the textbook military man and man of the people. Gordon M. Sayre describes much of Smith’s work as an endeavor to promote New England as “a land of opportunity for English colonists” (61). Smith sought to project an image of a heroic protagonist in the midst of exploring a fertile, yet mostly unknown country, where any obstacle could be overcome with enough determination—even a foreign culture. As savage as the natives may appear—and as many of his fellow colonists may have been “slaine” and “gauld” at their hands (84)—there is always a path to victory for the worthy to find, even in the unlikeliest of sources, such as a courageous and defiant Native American princess. Yet while this story has risen to iconic status in America, its veracity remains dubious at best.

According to numerous scholars, Smith’s entire brush with death may have been an elaborate ruse. Some critics have cast doubt on whether the mock execution occurred at all, given that Smith had never mentioned such an event in any of his other accounts between the time of his capture and the publishing of his *General History*. According to Dr. William M.S. Rasmussen, Curator of Art at the Virginia Historical Society:

Through much of the late 1800s, New England historians, intent on discrediting the South’s efforts to formulate an impressive history of its own, concluded that debunking the legend of Pocahontas would cause the ‘Virginia aristocracy’ to be ‘utterly gravelled.’ These historians ultimately succeeded in casting serious doubt on whether a rescue had ever taken place. (2)

Even giving Smith the benefit of the doubt does not ameliorate all the issues. Pauline Turner Strong, for one, posits that the aborted execution was likely an initiation ritual by the Native Americans

to bring Smith into their own culture—sort of a rite of passage. If true, Smith was not in any real danger, as Powhatan had no design to kill him at all. But as far as Smith was concerned, the simple explanation for his survival is that “almightie God (by his divine providence) had mollified the hearts of those sterne Barbarians with compassion” (88). If Strong’s theory holds, Smith’s ethnography is largely worthless outside his superficial documentation of Native American ritual, and his narrative becomes little more than self-aggrandizing fiction. Yet his reputation in popular culture is practically unblemished by this possibility.

The general public, by and large, continues to view Smith as the rough-and-tumble frontiersman portrayed oh-so-accurately in Disney’s acclaimed 1995 animated film *Pocahontas*. Earlier this year, in fact, the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Smith’s journey to the New World was celebrated with a reenactment of his journeys on a replica of his shallop (Cooper 32); a testament to his iconic historical status. And it really isn’t difficult to understand why: his narrative combines captivating settings and captivating characters to form a captivating experience, both literally and figuratively. White writes, “Smith would perhaps like to tell the story of colonization as something of a romance, a battle between good (English) and evil (natural environment, Native Americans)” (15–16). By casting the story in such well-worn territory, Smith ensures his captivity narrative has the broad appeal of a typical novel, with the added novelty of subject matter. This combination, augmented by the historical importance of his exploits, ensured a narrative that would not be topped for at least fifty years—until 1682, when Mary Rowlandson burst onto the literary scene and revamped the narrative genre entirely.

Rowlandson is widely credited as the captivity narrative’s flagship author, her story more widely disseminated and studied than any other. This is in no small part due to the fact that her story, along with its preface from firebrand minister, Increase Mather, standardized much of the genre’s literary tropes. From the sudden and dramatic attack on Lancaster that became the framework for future narrative beginnings, to the vulgar and base transculturation necessitated by survival, Rowlandson’s *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God* is a seminal work with a multi-pronged purpose. The highly religious nature of Rowlandson’s narrative is plainly obvious to the

reader, along with her unmincing characterization of her captors, and the coalescing of these aspects formed one of the most enduring archetypes of American literature: The Hunter-Predator Myth, characterized by Richard Slotkin through Derounian-Stodola as “a paradigm of personal and collective history that can be discerned as an informing structure throughout Puritan and (with modifications) in later American literature” (42). In a way, Rowlandson was writing on behalf of every facet of her personal identity: as an American, a Puritan, a Christian, and a woman. Thus, her unstated goal was to justify all of them, and in doing so, she unwittingly standardized the female literary voice for these narratives.

Rowlandson begins her narrative with a bang, as within the first three sentences, the Native American raid is already underway. She writes how “several houses were burning, and the smoke ascending to heaven” (Rowlandson 137). This is quickly followed by a flurry of deaths at the hands of the Native Americans, with “these murderous wretches . . . burning, and destroying [everything] before them” (137). In less than a paragraph, Rowlandson has already established two main thrusts in the captivity narrative genre—the unprovoked nature of the capture and the unyielding savagery of the captors. This is her unspoken justification of colonial expansionism, an element of her story that Mather no doubt encouraged: portrayal of the Native Americans as “hell-hounds, roaring, singing, ranting and insulting, as if they would have torn our very hearts out” (137). This was a group unworthy of the land they occupied, savages unable to do anything except persecute and destroy—“yet the Lord by his almighty power preserved a number of us from death” (137). And thus, Rowlandson reveals her next intention: the glorification of God through preservation under duress.

Even a cursory glance at Rowlandson’s narrative inundates the readers with religious propaganda, a reflection of both her Puritan beliefs and the intent of those who backed her work. She would have us believe that, while exhorting a captive companion not to try and flee, she happened to open her Bible to Psalm 27: “*Wait on the Lord, be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart, wait I say on the Lord*” (145). She dwells on her lack of Christian companions during captivity, “mourning and lamenting: and my spirit was ready to sink”—but all of that is alleviated as she reads

more scripture, which implores her to “*Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and He shall sustain thee*” (152). There is little doubt in the minds of literary critics that Mather’s hand was heaviest when it came to religious inserts such as these, seeking to instigate a religious revival amongst the Puritan populace in the wake of raids such as the one on Lancaster. This emphasis on religion would find its way into countless other narratives to follow Rowlandson’s in popular literature, but few quite as fervent and none as impactful. Even those narratives bereft of religion, such as those of Mary Fowler and Isabella McCoy, take one major cue from Rowlandson: the archetype of the persevering female.

Puritanical embodiment aside, Rowlandson’s narrative helped to establish the most pervasive mythological aspect of all female captivity narratives—preservation of virtue and self. Rowlandson survives her hardship without intervention until the moment of her release, using her own willpower and adaptive skills to her advantage. She consumes Native American food despite “the blood about [her] mouth” (148) and even begins to stand up to her captors near the end of her narrative, writing that when Philip’s maid “asked me to give her a piece of my apron . . . I told her I would not . . . with that my mistress rises up, and takes up a stick big enough to have killed me, and struck at me with it, but I stepped out [of the way]” (156). She molds herself perfectly to the form of a hero under duress, not only surviving captivity, but also gaining the respect of her captors along the way. As she prepares to return home, Rowlandson writes how she had Native Americans “shaking me by the hand, offering me a hood and scarf to ride in; not one moving hand or tongue against [my departure]” (171). Having swayed her captors in a manner eerily reminiscent of Smith, Rowlandson seals her place in epic colonial literature, becoming its iconic female protagonist.

The mythos embodied by *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God* is no accident: Denise Macneil argues that Rowlandson’s narrative parallels the so-called “heroic cycle” in both structure and content, which has contributed greatly to her enduring appeal as a colonial author and captivity survivor: Her conformity to the heroic cycle “illustrates Rowlandson’s place as a cultural hero, capable of furnishing the raw materials necessary for the formation and

emergence of the American frontier hero from within the Narrative” (626). To wit, Rowlandson became one of the first iconic Americans by way of her archetypal struggle amongst the Algonquin, paving the way for future authors to copy her formula; a formula Derounian–Stodola and James Arthur Levernier have tagged as “an overall mythic structure of capture–initiation–return” that “became the norm for the form” (629). And though future writers would take to her formula in droves, few people executed it with such authorial totality.

According to Macneil, Rowlandson acts the part of the hero to a fault, even if it is in a passive form—by conforming to her captivity as she does, her ordeal is transformed. The “call to duty” of the heroic cycle is satisfied by Rowlandson’s quick acceptance of capture at Lancaster, “maintaining her presence of mind, even though many around her are despairing” (Macneil 628). By this, she assumes the heroic mantle of responsibility in securing the safety of her children, succeeding in negotiations with her captors as others fail in her midst. Once that is secure, her goal becomes that of regeneration, a return to normalcy from the dark “other”—world she now inhabits as a captive. During it all, the focus is not so much on Native American culture, but rather on Rowlandson’s ability to adapt to and survive it. After spending the majority of her removes gaining the respect of her captors, Macneil believes that “Rowlandson does return transfigured[,] and with a lesson to teach . . . [she] realizes that society and culture, both in the category of outward things, are of secondary importance to the experience of the individual” (640–641). This attitude is far removed from traditional ideologies at the time but very much conducive to the heroic cycle, and it helps to explain why Rowlandson’s story, along with John Smith’s, remains popular even centuries after its original publishing.

Smith and Rowlandson typify the earliest stages of the captivity narrative genre, where the basic mythos and modus operandi had yet to be established. As such, they had the opportunity to shape the genre as they saw fit, and most all captivity narratives written afterwards conformed to a majority of what they standardized. Under critical examination, however, they still leave much to be desired. Though both Smith and Rowlandson evoke a sense of frontier grandiosity, their stories are bogged down by plodding plot

structure and highly questionable authorial intent. Should one look through the vault of captivity narratives past the seminal authors, one will find many pieces that are far more accessible to the average reader. James Smith, for example, provides an entire ethnography geared towards colonial perspectives in the back of his narrative, giving an accurate and critical breakdown of Native American culture for the reader to reflect on. If a reader wants a sweeping, dramatic tale of mythological proportion, Jane McCrea's tale of tragic romance and the Panther Captivity's intriguing brand of fiction provide far more thrills than anything written in the 1600s. So why then, have they been relegated to the literary dustbin so quickly? Because they did not *create*.

There is a simple reason why almost every child in America knows who John Smith is, even if the particulars of his time with the Virginia Company have been watered down in popular culture for the sake of plot digestibility. The same reason accounts for why Mary Rowlandson's narrative appears in nearly every published compilation of early colonial literature. The two authors accomplished something that nobody else could: establish the American mythology. That is not to say the authors who followed them failed for lack of talent or effort—Smith and Rowlandson simply came to the table first. In the world of literature, an archetype can only be established once, while all subsequent tales following a similar formula are doomed to description through the lens of the established foundation. All epics even vaguely reminiscent of Homer are described as “*Odysseys*,” just as stories of surreal distortion will inevitably be labeled “*Kafkaesque*.” And in this manner, all captivity narratives from the 1700s onward, male or female; religious or secular; passive or aggressive; are condemned to languish in the shadows of Smith and Rowlandson. For in the American mind, they are nothing but derivatives.

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## “Leap From the Boat”: *Moby Dick*’s Call for Rebellion

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When thinking of American Renaissance writers who call for rebellion against the law, most would think of Thoreau, the man who told his countrymen that if a law “requires [them] to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law” (Thoreau 1863). Although his protests were much more subtle, Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* also contains calls for rebellion against the law, the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 in particular.

The narrator of *Moby Dick* explicitly warns against searching for hidden meaning when looking at the white whale. Ishmael tells us:

So ignorant are most landsmen of some of the plainest and most palpable wonders of the world, that without some hints touching the plain facts, historical and otherwise, of the fishery, they might scout at *Moby Dick* as a monstrous fable, or still worse and more detestable, a hideous and intolerable allegory. (Melville 172)

Yet Ishmael’s warning is just as ineffective as the one Mark Twain would write little more than twenty years later, that, “Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot” (Twain 27). Just as readers continue to debate the motive, morals, and plot in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, they’ll continue to search for the allegories contained in and surrounded by the giant white whale. The warnings become almost a dare, which seems to be their intent all along.

While the personal letters of some of Melville’s contemporaries, including Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, are full of protests against slavery, Melville’s personal letters during this time somehow avoided that most controversial of topics. Even when Melville wrote

to his close friend and father-in-law Judge Lemuel Shaw, who spent the era hearing cases on fugitive slaves and segregation, the topics of slavery and African Americans went unmentioned (Simpson 19). Melville even resisted from debating slavery in his letters to Nathaniel Hawthorne, his conservative friend who once wrote that emancipation would only bring about “the ruin of two races which now dwelt together in greater peace and affection it is not too much to say than had ever elsewhere existed between the taskmaster and the serf” (Foster 13–4). (Charles H. Foster writes that just as Melville did not follow Hawthorne artistically, it would be a false assumption to assume that he echoed Hawthorne politically [6]). Yet to conclude that Melville was either pro-slavery or ambivalent because of this silence is to exclude some important data. Melville wrote to Hawthorne, decrying the “ruthless democracy” of America (Foster 13). His letters also included a frustration between writing what he wanted to write versus writing a piece that would allow him to sell enough books. While he composed *Moby Dick*, Melville wrote to Nathaniel Hawthorne, “What I feel most moved to write, that is banned,— it will not pay. Yet, altogether, write the other way I cannot” (539). It seems then that Melville is up to something in this work, implying something that he cannot say outright. If Melville had no interest in the issue of rights for African Americans, then why did he include so many African Americans in his works, including *Moby Dick*? Even his anti-slavery fellow writers, such as Emerson and Thoreau, would fight for African Americans and speak of them as a whole, but rarely would write of them in their works as individuals (Simpson 19). Melville creates a novel that can easily be seen as representing the United States in 1850, and then incorporates several African-Americans as primary characters in the story. To ask the reader not to seek an allegory is asking far too much of us.

Alan Heimert strengthens the argument for allegory in *Moby Dick* by showing how the *Pequod* represents the United States at the time of Melville’s writing. On board the *Pequod* are “thirty isolatoes—all, Melville remarked, ‘federated among one keel’” (501). At the time Melville began *Moby Dick*, there were thirty states. Also represented on the *Pequod* are a sample of types of Americans, in what can almost seem a male-only, American version of Noah

and the Arc. Starbuck seems to be the calculating Yankee, Stubb has the quintessential Western spirit (Heimert points out that Stubb's speeches refer to "broad footed farmers" and "old Orleans whiskey"), and Flask, hailing from Martha's Vineyard, represents the New Englander (Heimert 502). White Americans are not the only ones aboard the *Pequod*, of course: "Stubb's squire is an Indian; Starbuck's comes from the Pacific Islands, and Flask, perched precariously on Daggoo's shoulders, seems, like the Southern economy itself, sustained only by the strength of the "imperial negro" (Heimert 502). With this basis, *Moby Dick* is set to analyze the American way of life.

### Equality

Melville inserts a theme of equality throughout the text, presenting the idea of color indicating a natural supremacy as a false and unnatural notion. Of Queequeg, Ishmael reasons that, "a man can be honest in any sort of skin" (Melville 34) and sees "how elastic our stiff prejudices grow when love once comes to bend them" (Melville 58). In perhaps the most egalitarian episode of all, Ishmael thinks, "Come; let us squeeze hands all round; nay, let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness" (Melville 323). After developing his friendship with Queequeg, Ishmael presents equality amongst races as a natural fact.

Melville further undermines the racial hierarchies of the period by upsetting the privileging in the prevailing dichotomies. Sidney Kaplan argues that with *Moby Dick*, Melville destroys the dichotomy of white as pure and black as evil (328). Sidney Kaplan compares the courage and bravery of Daggoo against the much smaller, less brave Flask, which he believes is a deliberate attempt to challenge the assumptions associated with black and white skin (327). Melville again stresses this point in the chapter "The Whiteness of the Whale," when he argues that although white can symbolize pureness and majesty, it can also hold the potential of terror when in the absence of such positive qualities. "This elusive quality it is, which causes the thought of whiteness, when divorced from more kindly associations, and coupled with any object terrible in itself, to heighten that terror to the furthest bounds" (Melville 160).

The equality that brings races together aboard the *Pequod* also conjoins their fates. In *Moby Dick*, survival and death are not individual occurrences, but instead the fate of one becomes the fate of another. As Ishmael and Queequeg work connected by the monkey-rope, each man's fate depends upon the other. Ishmael states, "I saw this situation of mine was the precise situation of every mortal that breathes . . . he, one way or another, has this Siamese connexion with a plurality of other mortals" (Melville 255). This connection between two men across racial boundaries is not restricted to Ishmael and Queequeg, but also exists between Ahab and Fedallah. "Ahab seemed an independent lord; the Parsee but his slave. Still again both seemed yoked together, and an unseen tyrant driving them" (Melville 401). The most striking example of this is, of course, the end: "They were one man, not thirty . . . all the individualities of the crew, this man's valor, that man's fear; guilt and guiltlessness, all varieties were welded into oneness" (Melville 415). The line between men and races grows blurry; fates become interdependent. One race cannot betray another without destroying itself as well.

### **The Fugitive Slave Act**

During Melville's writing of *Moby Dick*, racial tensions came to a boiling point over the Fugitive Slave Act. The Act was a part of the Compromise of 1850, initiated by Senator Henry Clay as an attempt to provide territorial and legal concessions and hence, to avoid civil war. The Fugitive Slave Act decreed that all runaway slaves in the North were still the rightful property of their owners in the South and must be returned to them. Northerners who disobeyed this law could be fined \$1,000. In *Moby Dick*, it's said that "of all mortals, some dying men are the most tyrannical" (366), and one wonders if this might be a stab at Senator Clay, who initiated the Fugitive Slave Act at 70 years of age and died less than two years after its passage into law. To Foster, the characters of *Moby Dick* directly correlate with figures of the period: Ahab represents Secretary of State Daniel Webster, a staunch advocate of the Fugitive Slave Act; Ishmael represents Robert C. Winthrop, Webster's close associate (25-7). Yet to have such direct representations seems too daring for a writer so worried about scaring away readers. Instead of presenting caricatures

of actual figures, *Moby Dick* seems to represent instead the types of personalities present in America in 1850. The characters do not represent the major political figures involved in the passing of the Fugitive Slave Act, but the everyday men responsible for abiding by it, and in essence, for providing its power.

The chapter “Fast Fish and Loose Fish” illustrates the creative and artificial ways that men determine ownership of something that never belonged to them. The ways of determining this in the whaling industry are whether the desired property qualifies as a fast-fish or a loose-fish: “A Fast-Fish belongs to the party fast to it . . . . A Loose-Fish is fair game for anybody who can soonest catch it” (308). The chapter details legal battles over ownership, but the narrator undermines these battles with the line, “Possession is half of the law: that is, regardless of how the thing came into possession? But often possession is the whole of the law” (309). Slaves came into “possession” due to a gross injustice of the natural order. Instead of focusing on that, the Fugitive Slave Act was only focused on slaves merely being possession, period. Possession was the whole of the law. The battle of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 focused the battle not on rights, but on artificial definitions of ownership, turning people into mere loose or fast fish. Melville directly correlates this idea to human rights: “What are the Rights of Man and the Liberties of the World but Loose-Fish? What are all men’s minds and opinions but Loose-Fish” (310)?

The bottom line of the Fugitive Slave Act was money: the money value that slave owners attached to slaves, the high fee charged to Northerners who aided escaped slaves. This issue of humanity boiled down to dollars. Consider Stubb’s uncertainty whether to save Pip or to save the captured whale that “would sell for thirty times what [Pip] would” (321). The narrator comments “that though man loves his fellow, yet man is a money-making animal, which propensity too often interferes with his benevolence” (321). That man was a “money-making animal” whose wallet “interferes with his benevolence” was the basis which Clay’s hope for the success of the Fugitive Slave Act relied: that threatened fines would ensure Northerners would choose their money over another’s freedom. The reader knows that Stubb’s indecision is appalling; that to compare the life of a man against a dollar figure is unthinkable. Yet more

unthinkable to our time is that this was the idea that the senators and congressmen who passed the Fugitive Slave Act banked on when they passed the act into law. Ishmael tells us not to “blame Stubb too hardly” because his ideas were “common in that fishery” (322). Ishmael’s defense of Stubb seems shocking; perhaps Melville shows us how truly revolting it is to defend an idea merely because it is common.

The novel does not only comment on the immorality of the Fugitive Slave Act, but also implicates Northerners who do too little to assist escaped and freed slaves, allowing no real haven in America for African-Americans. This is largely accomplished through the character of Pip, who prays, “Oh, thou big white God aloft there somewhere in yon darkness, have mercy on this small black boy down here; preserve him from all men that have no bowels to feel fear” (151).

Pip leaps from the boat the second time to find himself alone in the “masterless ocean” (224), where he was the “loftiest and brightest” castaway (321). Floating on the sea offers Pip a taste of independence and freedom that he did not know aboard the *Pequod*. Yet he barely tasted freedom before he met “the awful loneliness of such a heartless immensity” that befell him (321). When the ship came to reclaim Pip, he was forever damaged by the experience: “The sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul” (321).

Even though Pip is not enslaved on the ship, nor is he free on the water, his journey replicates that of an escaped and recaptured slave. On the *Pequod*, Pip lives among men who remind him of his dollar value and treat him as property. He leaps to the sea on which he becomes the “loftiest and brightest” castaway in a “masterless ocean” (224), but succumbs to the “awful loneliness.” When he’s snatched by the boat again, he’s never the same. Says Ahab of Pip: “Ye did beget this luckless child, and have abandoned him, ye creative libertines” (392). This could be directed toward the Northerners, who did too little to protect or assist the escaped slaves.

The idea of “the awful loneliess” of freedom is found in historical texts as well. In his *Narrative of the Life*, Frederick Douglass associates his newfound freedom with a similar loneliness. “I was

once again seized with a feeling of great insecurity and loneliness. I was yet liable to be taken back, and subjected to all the tortures of slavery . . . the loneliness overcame me. There I was in the midst of thousands, and yet a perfect stranger” (2120). Douglass’s experience occurred prior to the Fugitive Slave Act, so one imagines how much more estranged escaped slaves would feel in the North after the passage of the Act. The Fugitive Slave Act would mean “awful loneliness” for any escaped slave in the North, as long as the North obeyed the law. Such mental strain could damage even the strongest of people, just as it did Pip, and the obedient North would be partly to blame.

### Call for Rebellion

*Moby Dick* portrays a nation whose notions of racial supremacy are based on unnatural assumptions and whose laws consist of creative, immoral definitions of property. While Foster contends that this creates an “anti-slavery fable,” it adds up to much more. With mindless, doomed obedience being a core theme throughout the novel, rebellion becomes the even larger one.

Melville began massive revisions of *Moby Dick* in 1851, after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in September of 1850. Foster cites a late addition to the text, Father Mapple’s sermon, that supports the argument of the novel addressing the indecency of the new law (17). As he closes the sermon, Father Mapple says:

Delight is to him, who . . . kills, burns, and destroys all sin though he pluck it out from under the robes of Senators and Judges. Delight,—top-gallant delight is to him who acknowledges no law or lord, but the Lord his God, and is only a patriot to heaven. (54)

More than just preaching equality or decrying slavery, Father Mapple calls for rebellion against unjust laws passed by the government.

The text yields more examples that strengthen the argument of the novel as an instigator of rebellion and a condemnation of mindless obedience. The faithful Starbuck thinks of Ahab and tells himself, “I disobey my God in obeying him!” (420). Starbuck’s earlier quelled rebellion could have prevented the tragic end of the story. As he reasons, “Is heaven a murderer when its lightning strikes a would-be murderer in his bed . . . ? And would I be

a murderer, then, if—and slowly, stealthily, and half sideways looking, he placed the loaded musket's end against the door" (387). Starbuck's religious beliefs prevent him from firing; this hesitance ensured that Ahab's mad plan would prevail to the tragic end of the thirty men on the ship. Similarly, Northern obedience to the Fugitive Slave Act could likely prevail to the tragic end of the thirty states in the union. Melville writes, "*Stick to the boat*, your true motto in whaling; but cases will sometimes happen when *Leap from the boat*, is still better" (Melville 320). Almost all of those aboard the *Pequod* met their doom because of Ahab's mad plan. It did not matter whether they obeyed Ahab because they agreed with him or did so despite their own hesitance, they met a tragic end all the same. It did not matter why they obeyed, only that they did. One survived, of course, so that their story can be told as a cautionary tale back on land. It would be the story of egalitarian relationships amongst races being destroyed by mindless obedience to a mad plan. When *Moby Dick* was published, Americans were deciding how to react to the mad plan of the Fugitive Slave Law, whether they would obey or rebel. *Moby Dick* seems a strong vote for the latter.

If the story serves as an allegory of racial relations in America, though, its end is an especially tragic one. Ishmael survives on the floating coffin of Queequeg; the white man survives because the black man does not. As long as the mad plan survives as law, the story offers little hope for African Americans, who cannot know freedom in either the South or North. The story places responsibility in the hands of Northerners, whose duty it is to resist the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Melville's message to Americans seems similar to Thoreau's: Break the law. Be a patriot only to heaven, and leap from the boat.

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## Narrative Contradictions in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*

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Set in Canada during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, *Alias Grace* is a fictionalized account of the events surrounding the murders of Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery in 1843. Combining fictive narrative with historical documentation, the novel focuses primarily on the controversial figure of Grace Marks, the alleged murderess convicted at age 16 and sentenced to life in prison despite remaining questions about her participation in the crime. Margaret Atwood's retelling of the infamous tale follows Marks's self-account as told to Dr. Simon Jordan, a psychologist hired to judge whether or not she should be granted amnesty and released from jail after almost 30 years of incarceration in various prisons and asylums. Using three distinct narrative strands—the first person narration of Marks, the third person omniscient narration of Jordan, and the authoritative narration of the public sphere—Atwood gives voice to a host of divided attitudes about Marks's complicity in the murders by characters of varying professions, social classes, and levels of authority. This ongoing dialogue exposes a full spectrum of personal and public opinions as well as the motivations for these opinions without favoring any single explanation. As the contradictions accumulate, and the opinions and motives of an increasing number of individuals are called into question, it becomes clear that the reader's quest for reliability is a futile endeavor—that the only truth about Grace Marks's story is that there is no truth. As the novel progresses, the reader is challenged to imagine in place of narrative reliability a system in which the fundamental unreliability of the narrators and characters actually captures a very reliable human experience.

Ironically, Marks often appears to be the most mentally sound and reliable of all the characters throughout her first person narrative. She is able to recount all but the most immediate events

leading up to and following the two murders with astonishing precision and richness of detail, and her story sounds both feasible and complete despite its obvious lack of an alibi. Although she is in jail, her behavior as a prison inmate is impeccable, and her strict sense of morality is consistently upheld throughout her narrative. Even so, she undercuts her reliability in various ways.

To start, she consistently reaffirms her suspicious inability to account for her part in the murders, an exclusion she blames on an inexplicable void in her memory. She suffers a break-down the night before she meets with Jordan to recount the day the murders occurred, explicitly calling attention to the gaps and inaccuracies of her memory. Her customarily self-assured voice falters, growing hesitant and panicky, and she uses incomplete sentences, exclamations, and self-incriminating questions—all textual signals of unreliability. “Was I crouching behind the kitchen door . . . crying?” she asks herself. “Did I say I wished [Nancy Montgomery] was dead? Oh no. Surely I did not say that. Or not out loud . . . . It might have happened” (Atwood 296).

Furthermore, although Marks claims she is perfectly sane, she spent over a year in an asylum before arriving in prison. In one of the first passages in the book, she recounts a number of hallucinations connected to the murder, such as the bloodied figure of Montgomery pleading for mercy. This description coupled with the strange voices she often claims to hear and the bizarre and gory dreams she describes to Jordan indicate that Marks does not fit neatly into a model of psychological normality.

Beyond Marks’s incongruous self-representation lie several other contradictory representations proposed by other characters. Some, like Mrs. Moodie, believe she is insane. Others, like Dr. Bannerling, believe that “she is an accomplished actress and a most practiced liar” (Atwood 71). Yet others, like the group headed by Reverend Verringer, believe she is the blameless prey of circumstances beyond her control. As a classic example of conflicting multiperspectival descriptions that cannot be reconciled, the reader knows that one or more of these parties must be uninformed or untrustworthy; however, lacking the necessary omniscient informant to discern which, the reader is forced to discredit all accounts. It is these

collisions between mutually exclusive representations that establish the unreliability of many characters in *Alias Grace*.

The second narrative strand operating in this novel is the third person account of Jordan. Although he continuously asserts that “he is both sane and normal, and he has developed the rational faculties of his mind to a high degree,” he engages in behaviors that contradict all three claims by demonstrating a number of discrepancies between his actions and statements (Atwood 142). For example, he admits to having hired prostitutes as a young man attending university, but defends his behavior by arguing that this enabled him to explore and better understand the human condition, a practice essential to his profession (Atwood 75–76). Nevertheless, he betrays his sexual preoccupation with the idea by consistently imagining the women he encounters throughout the novel in degrading circumstances akin to prostitution.

In addition, Jordan contends that “the difference between a civilized man and a barbarous fiend—a madman, say—lies, perhaps, merely in a thin veneer of willed self-control” (Atwood 142). Consequently, when he later surrenders to a married woman’s sexual advances, he not only challenges previous assertions of his gentility and decorum, but also contradicts his own definition of sanity, thus implicitly exposing the unreliability of his observations. His ignorance of the contradictions in his own life challenges his authority to pass judgment on Marks, and his opinions are discredited accordingly.

In addition to these counts against him, Jordan also exhibits what narrative theorist Greta Olson calls a “situation-related prejudice.” He desperately aspires to offer “something novel, some new discovery or cure” to the field of psychology which will place within his reach the financial means necessary to open a private asylum (Atwood 56). Consequently, his interactions with Marks are largely self-interested, motivated neither by compassion nor altruism. When the brilliant cure he hopes to discover does not readily reveal itself after a few months, Jordan quickly grows restless and finds paying attention to Marks increasingly difficult. Since he views Marks as a “goal or accomplishment” to serve his own interests, his observations are not conducive to an accurate evaluation of Marks’s condition (Atwood 291).

The third narrative strand represents the authoritative and typically “reliable” discourses of history found in newspapers, letters, books, and legal documents. Although this third voice is not conventionally “human,” the unification of its parts (all originating in the psyches of various individuals) creates of a body of discourse with a pseudo-consciousness that interacts effectively with the other narratives. Discrepancies acting as textual signals of unreliability emerge that both contradict and reinforce other opinions throughout the novel, and similar to the other human narrators, it is neither a source of absolute knowledge nor above scrutiny. According to Magali Cornier Michael, this authoritative narrator in *Alias Grace* acts as an equalizer by “undermining any clear distinction between different kinds of texts—in particular, between texts that western culture traditionally has authorized (such as official documents and published texts) and those it has devalued (such as oral tale)” (425).

One example of this interaction between authoritative unreliability and traditional narrative unreliability appears in the written confessions of Marks and James McDermott, her supposed consort in the murders. Although these two confessions represent written historical “fact,” both are questioned and contradicted by other characters and historical documents in the novel. For example, in his testimony, McDermott accuses Marks of seducing him to serve as a tool in her plot: “. . . but she looked so handsome, that somehow or another I yielded to the temptation” (Atwood 369). Even so, other accounts, such as that by William Harrison written for the *Newmarket Era* in 1908, question whether this recorded confession is actually what he said and whether he is entitled to make such claims given his own flawed character:

There certainly did not appear to be anything in [Marks’s] personality that would be likely to develop into an embodiment of concentrated iniquity that McDermot tried to make her out to have been, if he ever uttered one half of the statements attributed to him in his confession. His disregard for truth was well-known. (Atwood 183)

Marks’s confessions, on the other hand, are admittedly fabricated. She openly acknowledges her conflicting assertions: “I can

remember what I said when arrested, and what Mr. MacKenzie the lawyer said I should say, and what I did not say even to him; and what I said at the trial, and what I said afterwards, which was different as well" (Atwood 295). Consequently, the validity of both written testimonies is undercut, crushing the notion that authoritative historical discourses are somehow superior to fictional discourses by placing both on the same plane of unreliability. This serves as a reminder that all so-called authoritative documents are created by human beings whose "factual" claims are motivated by their own dispositions and motives, much like fictional characters in a novel.

Given the conflicting accounts and representations, none of which are deemed accurate with any degree of certainty, the reader is to conclude that since all the narrators and characters in *Alias Grace* are inherently unreliable, the novel itself is an unreliable representation of the events surrounding the murders of Kinnear and Montgomery. I believe, however, that this observation provides a very limited understanding of the text. Consequently, Bruno Zerweck's proposition that narrative unreliability arguably represents an extremely *reliable* depiction of "the highly problematic human position with regard to cognitive, epistemological, and even ontological certainties" is particularly relevant (163). This assertion suggests that no character or narrator is capable of revealing an absolute and objective truth because all humans experience and interpret the world differently. Similar to the phenomenological processes of cognition at work in a reader's naturalization of texts, each person's horizon of experience collides with various external stimuli to create a multiplicity of possible realities. Thus, following Brian McHale's thesis that contemporary literature has demonstrated a definite shift from an "epistemological dominant" to an "ontological dominant" in recent years, perhaps the purpose of these internal conflicts in *Alias Grace* is not to "highlight the unreliability of the fictional narrator" but instead to shed light on a "growing awareness of a lack of an ideologically and socially accepted counterpart of an unreliable teller, a 'reliable' reporter of events" (Zerweck 163). By this interpretation, the reader may come to understand that the revelation of "truth," both narratively and otherwise, is an impossible challenge because all human beings are

inherently unreliable. As a result, “the premises helping to constitute the unreliable narrator have collapsed altogether” (Zerweck 163).

Applied to the text, the signs of unreliability in *Alias Grace* do not symbolize actual unreliability as one might expect in a more stable system, but instead symbolize the reliability of this representation of unreliability as a human condition. Although the novel lacks any explicit textual evidence of this association, the paradox presents itself intrinsically in the adapted definition of reliability as a function of unreliability, indicating that “the meaning of any term employed in discourse is determined by its difference from a set of elements *not present* in that discourse” (White 137). According to theorist Richard Barney, this contradiction in terms suggests that:

Language is also divided against itself. The rules that govern its structure are inconsistent, thus creating a text that at the simplest level is contradictory and that at the most complex level states the impossibility of its own unity. (179)

Thus, *Alias Grace* fails to produce a stable, unified meaning due to this erosion of the “purity of each binary term,” thereby demonstrating “their interdependence and ultimate interchangeability—their ‘indeterminacy’ or ‘undecidability’” (Barney 181). The novel cannot be categorized as reliable or unreliable because it is both—the unreliability implicitly evokes reliability, and this reliability cannot exist in the text without the preceding unreliability. This leads the reader to a moment of aporia in which no decision can be made in either direction. Since the reader can no longer distinguish between unreliability and reliability without inherently evoking and involving the other, the novel exists in a state of deconstruction.

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# Lillian Hellman and Marxism: A Historical and Philosophical Approach to *The Little Foxes*

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In 1928, President Herbert Hoover declared, “we in America today are nearer to the final triumph over poverty than ever before in the history of any land” (United States), extolling the success of American capitalism, perhaps in contrast to the extensive famine occurring in Soviet Russia. In the spring of the next year, the committee of the President’s Conference on Unemployment reported that the economy was “balanced,” the situation “fortunate,” and the momentum “remarkable” (Mitchell 25, 26). Yet, within six months the stock market would crash, plunging America (and the world) into a Great Depression that would last until World War II (Mitchell 3, 25; Moss and Wilson 208). America—that great bulwark of *laissez-faire*, capitalist ideology—had stumbled.

Into this picture steps Lillian Hellman and her 1939 play *The Little Foxes*, which Richard Moody describes as being understood by its contemporary audience to be “an attack on predatory capitalist morality” (Moody 342). Hellman’s left-leaning politics should not surprise modern readers. Moss and Wilson explain that:

During the 1930s, in the throes of the Great Depression, the failure of capitalism to protect the people from the ravages of poverty and exploitation called into question the wisdom of the system, and communist ideas grew more popular, especially among American liberals and leftist intellectuals. Several writers . . . showed communist sympathies. (208)

Indeed, it was in these years that the Communist Party in America (the CPUSA) would exert its greatest influence. The CPUSA became a powerful force in state politics, specifically in California, Michigan, Minnesota, New York, Washington,

and Wisconsin, reaching its zenith in 1939 with nearly 100,000 members (Klehr, Haynes, and Firsov 9–10). Fittingly, Hellman herself held party membership between 1938 and 1940 (Watson 136). Her involvement became such that she held evening parties to generate political discussion, and once even visited the Soviet Union (Skantze). That said, Hellman was not a radical revolutionary hoping to overthrow the American government. Moss and Wilson surmise that she “probably was merely a liberal activist” (208). Watson confirms that she would eventually wake up to the “sins of Stalinism” and change her political views (137). Still, a combination of historical forces and her Marxist ideology surely influenced her 1939 writing of *The Little Foxes*. This paper seeks to outline those forces and reveal the Marxist message implicit in the text, namely that black Americans and poorer white Americans would unite to overthrow capitalist oppression.

Aside from the broad historical influences on Hellman, she was also heavily influenced by her own family. In fact both her father’s and mother’s sides of the family “closely resemble the leading southern social classes: the bourgeois capitalists and the feudalistic aristocrats” (Watson 133). Her mother’s side, particularly, “represented the heartless capitalists of the South and elsewhere, who were driven by greed and ambition” (133). Her great-grandfather, Isaac Marx, was a profiteer during the Civil War (134), meaning he bought supplies made scarce by the war (such as salt) and sold them at shamefully high rates (138–139). Hellman’s grandmother, Sophie Marx, grew up in a household in which her brothers would often “scheme and talk of money” (134). In contrast, her father, Max Hellman, vigorously opposed the unethical Marxes, and did so in front of Lillian. Watson asserts that he “sympathized in good Marxist fashion with the proletariat, as would his daughter later” (135).

Ironically, Hellman herself took a historical approach to *The Little Foxes*, spending copious hours researching Southern history and culture and compiling this extensive research into a 108–page book (Moss and Wilson 205). A similar, though necessarily smaller–scale, study yields useful knowledge. The postbellum South, or New South, saw the old (now slave–less) plantation system fall away, replaced by a surge of manufacturing (particularly of cotton)

known as the “Industrial Revolution” (Eatman 70). Accordingly, the New South saw the rise of a class of Southern businessmen—the bourgeoisie, in Marxist terms—and the subsequent decline of the Southern aristocracy (203; Eatman 70–71). Marx and Engels speak of the “bourgeois society . . . sprout[ing] from the ruins of feudal society”—a situation easily analogized to the New South (10). Capitalizing on the post-war poverty and new influx of available black workers, Southern businessmen offered “grossly reduced wages” in intolerable working environments at a time when Northern businessmen, experiencing an economic depression, were contending with worker malcontent, leading to Northern investment in Southern mills (Moss and Wilson 204–205).

One need not scan *The Little Foxes* meticulously to notice the fruits of Hellman’s research. The fall of the Southern aristocracy is evident in the opening act; when William Marshall, the Northern businessman, mistakenly calls the Hubbards “aristocrats,” Ben promptly corrects him: “But we are not aristocrats” (10). The family goes on to inform Marshall of their aristocratic roots, specifically of the plantation Lionnet. Eventually, Ben explains the downfall of the aristocracy: “Well, sir, the war ends. Lionnet is almost ruined, and the sons finish ruining it. And there were thousands like them. Why? Because the Southern aristocrat can adapt himself to nothing. Too high-toned to try” (12). Alluding to the struggle between the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie, Ben then proclaims victory:

Our grandfather and our father learn the new ways and learned how to make them pay. They work. They are in trade. Hubbard Sons, Merchandise. Others, Birdie’s family for example, look down on them. To make a long story short, Lionnet now belongs to us. Twenty years ago we took over their land, their cotton, and their daughter. (12)

Indeed, late in the play, Ben makes a chilling prediction, claiming, “there are hundreds of Hubbards sitting in rooms like this throughout the country. All their names aren’t Hubbard, but they are all Hubbards and they will own this country some day” (76).

That the Chicago capitalist Marshall is even in the South brokering a deal to build a cotton mill is perfectly in-keeping with the age. Consider the reference to Northern strikes in Act II, as Ben

quotes Marshall as saying, “what about strikes? That’s all we’ve had in Massachusetts for the last three years” (46). The research for this paper has not uncovered any specific notable Massachusetts strike, but it is interesting to note that several famous strikes, including the Pullman strike of 1894, occurred in this period of history (Pullman).

As one reads through the play, the only thing that seems out-of-place is the atmosphere. The Industrial Revolution was a time of economic boom, of prosperity. Cotton mill owners “were hailed as the salvation of society, and public enthusiasm for economic expansion continued to prevail through the beginning of the twentieth century” (Eatman 72). Why then does Hellman portray the Hubbards, who should be the “saviors” of the South, as such greedy, repulsive, back-stabbing people? Eatman explains that Hellman “is far more concerned with the moral crises fostered by rapid industrialization than with the benefits of economic progress (72).” Indeed, Hellman’s departure from a historically accurate atmosphere calls attention to itself and serves as a major focus of the play; to Hellman, the industrial boom is not the blessing of capitalist saviors but the curse of immoral oppressors.

This rebuke of capitalism, in addition to Hellman’s political connections and the general ideological spirit of the time of *The Little Foxes*’s writing, provides ample justification to read the play through a Marxist filter. Does Hellman’s criticism of Southern capitalism parallel with Marx and Engels’s criticism of the bourgeoisie in *The Communist Manifesto*? It has already been noted that the Southern capitalists, in history and in the play, rose to prominence in a class struggle with the aristocracy just as the bourgeoisie overcame the feudal lords. Though true, such a statement is oversimplified. According to Hegelian philosophy, a strong influence on Marxist philosophy, thesis and antithesis clash to form a synthesis. Thus, the bourgeoisie did not so much overcome the feudal lords as much as they were synthesized out of the struggle between the feudal lords and the serfs. Accordingly, the Southern capitalists were synthesized out of the struggle between the aristocracy and the slaves (Eatman 137).

Another similarity between Marx’s view of the bourgeoisie and Hellman’s view of the Southern capitalist is in the treatment of workers. Marx and Engels describe the workers’ plight:

Masses of laborers, crowded into the factory, are organized like soldiers . . . . Not only are they slaves of the bourgeois class, and of the bourgeois state; they are daily and hourly enslaved by the machine, by the overlooker, and above all, by the individual bourgeois manufacturer himself. (17)

They go on to explain that after “the laborer [has] received his wages in cash . . . he is set upon by the other portions of the bourgeoisie, the landlord, the shopkeeper, the pawnbroker, etc.” (17).

Admittedly, *The Little Foxes* has no industrial workers as characters, so examining their treatment is difficult. Still, the workers do exist in the background, mostly in relation to three different renderings of the oppressive Hubbard family. First, the Hubbards initially earned their wealth by “charging awful interest to poor, ignorant niggers, and cheating them on what they bought” (59). Second, in Act II, Ben boasts of the cheap labor he can offer Marshall. Horace promptly exposes the nasty reasoning behind Ben’s boast: Ben would play the white workers against the black workers to exploit them both (46). Third, at the end of the play, Regina disarms Ben: “you couldn’t find twelve men in this State you haven’t cheated and hate you for it” (75).

Most telling is how Marx and Hellman both view capitalism as a destructor of the family unit. Marx and Engels charge the bourgeoisie with having “torn away from the family its sentimental veil” and “reduced the family relation to a mere money relation” (12). This reduction of family to a means of business is a clear theme running throughout Hellman’s play. Consider, for example, the beginning of the play, in which Ben feigns interest in his sister’s economic welfare only to have her retort back with her understanding of his selfish motive: keeping control of the cotton mill in the family. His response: “That’s cynical. Cynicism is only an unpleasant way of saying the truth” (20). Later in the act, Regina extorts her brothers, holding out on her investment for a larger share of the profits (21). To convince Oscar to give up part of his share of the profits to Regina, the siblings plan to marry Oscar’s son Leo to Regina’s daughter Alexandra. One is reminded of Marx and Engels’s statement, “Do you charge us with wanting to stop the exploitation of children by their parents? To this crime we plead

guilty” (28). Marriage as a business tool is not a new concept for the Hubbards. Seeking to protect Alexandra, Birdie bemoans her own marriage:

My family was good and the cotton on Lionnet’s fields was better. Ben Hubbard wanted the cotton and Oscar Hubbard married it for him. He was kind to me, then. He used to smile at me. He hasn’t smiled at me since. Everybody knew that’s what he married me for. Everybody but me. Stupid, stupid me. (59)

How can one help but notice the parallel in *The Communist Manifesto*? “The bourgeois sees in his wife a mere instrument of production” (28). Additionally, the capitalistic Hubbards have no ethical barriers against committing crimes against their own family members. Leo, Oscar, and Ben pounce on an opportunity to steal from Horace (34, 50). Perhaps the most damning of all, Regina murders her husband because he was preventing her from investing in the cotton mill (and claiming a share of the profits) (65–66).

Moving away from the two parallel perceptions of the bourgeoisie/Southern capitalists, reading the play through a Marxist filter also reveals similarities in how both Marx and Hellman see the future. Heavily simplified, Marx believed that the bourgeoisie would eventually become so elitist that it would alienate itself from society, inciting the proletariat to become a revolutionary class that would overthrow the bourgeoisie. The proletariat would ensure a classless society before giving up their political and social power to anarchy—not the chaotic anarchy of today’s perception, but the anarchy of a communistic utopia (Marx and Engels 12–32).

Though Marx explicitly states his predictions, Hellman obscures hers. After writing the play, she explained her purpose in writing the play: “I merely wanted to say: ‘Here I am representing for you the sort of person who ruins the world for us’” (qtd. in Moss and Wilson 210). By this, she seems to imply that she wants to expose the evils of capitalism, but not necessarily predict any sort of Marxist revolution. Still, the ambiguous ending of the play, to be discussed later, at the very least leaves the door open for a possible Marxist interpretation. Given the rampant Marxism throughout the play, such an interpretation is likely correct.

Consider the comments made by the characters in the play

who represent the oppressed—the proletariat—or who represent the lower middle class, which Marx and Engels argue is an initially conservative and non-revolutionary group that becomes more revolutionary as it becomes more intertwined with the proletariat. Horace, a rather un-ambitious life-long “small-town clerk” (65), qualifies as lower middle class. Fittingly, as the oldest of those characters, he is the most conservative. He objects to his brother-in-law’s schemes, as evidenced by the anger and sarcasm he expresses during the discussion of the low wages the Hubbard’s cotton mill would offer (46). Despite his contempt, he seems perfectly content to do nothing. In fact, “nothing” is about all he ever does. This passive resistance seems appropriate early in the play; for example, he ignores requests to buy in to the cotton mill scheme in the Hubbards’ numerous letters (20), and he even refuses to take part when directly confronted (49). However, his final actions are less excusable. He catches Leo, Oscar, and Ben in a flagrant crime against himself, but he refuses to prosecute them (63–65). He condemns what they do, but when given the chance to stop them, he chooses not to.

This same sort of refusal to act is condemned by Addie, a black cook and representation of the proletariat. Addie is slightly more revolutionary than Horace in that she recognizes that someone must stand up to the corrupt capitalists, though she is not willing to stand up herself, perhaps because she feels inadequate to resist. This recognition is first seen in Act II, when she secretly warns Horace that the Hubbards were trying to broker a marriage between Leo and Alexandra (38–39). Instead of protesting herself, she relies on Horace to do so for her. Early in Act III, Addie expresses what is perhaps the single-most insightful line in the play: “Well, there are people who eat the earth and there are people who stand around and watch them eat it. Sometimes I think it ain’t right to stand and watch them do it” (59). As the Hubbards’ servant, Addie is cognizant of their underhanded deeds; she knows of Birdie’s marriage woes, for example (61). Though Addie knows of the problem and knows that someone must react, there is no indication throughout the play that Addie ever proactively does anything to hinder the Hubbards. As Eatman put it, “she too ‘stands around and watches’ while they [the Hubbards] despoil” (72).

The youngest character in the play—and most revolutionary—is Alexandra, the daughter of Horace and Regina. Considering the influence Hellman’s father had on her own life, one wonders if Alexandra is partially representative of Hellman herself. Regardless, Alexandra’s victimization throughout the play allows us to easily classify her as among those oppressed by the bourgeoisie. Not only does her mother attempt to marry her off in a business deal, but she also sends her on a journey to Baltimore alone—a journey that Regina previously deemed too dangerous for a young girl to make alone (26), but that became necessary to ensure Regina’s share in the cotton mill. Alexandra is portrayed as a young girl who wants to resist the capitalists. When Alexandra sees her father lying dead, she stands against her mother. All but accusing her mother, Alexandra states tensely, while moving toward Regina, “what was Papa doing on the staircase?” (75). As the play closes, the scene becomes even more tense, and Alexandra more defiant. She disregards her mother’s wishes and asserts that she will not come with her mother to Chicago (78). When Regina threatens to “say no” (to force her to come), Alexandra challenges, “Say it, Mama, say it. And see what happens” (78). And when Regina admits that she will not make Alexandra stay with her, Alexandra finally speaks her mind:

You couldn’t, Mama, because I want to leave here. As I’ve never wanted anything in my life before. Because I understand what Papa was trying to tell me. All in one day: Addie said there were people who ate the earth and other people who stood around and watched them do it. And just now Uncle Ben said the same thing. Really, he said the same thing. Well, tell him for me, Mama, I’m not going to stand around and watch you do it. Tell him I’ll be fighting as hard as he’ll be fighting, some place where people don’t just stand around and watch. (78)

After this outburst, Regina displays weakness, asking her daughter to be her friend, and to sleep in her room (79). Alexandra maintains her defiant air, asking: “Are you afraid, Mama?” (79). Addie walks over and joins Alexandra, and the curtain falls (79). Though the message of the scene may change based on the acting and the staging, the Marxist progression of the lower bourgeoisie joining the proletariat seems to be present within Hellman’s work. Indeed,

“Hellman foresaw a union of the enlightened bourgeoisie and the proletariat in the American South” (Watson 143).

This union of blacks and moral whites to overcome the capitalists never occurred, and Alexandra—or at least those she represents—lost the fight. As Barlow notes, such would have been known by the play’s contemporary audience: “They knew what the consequences of that loss spelled in terms of human misery” (163). Barlow goes on to reason what that knowledge meant to the audience: “Hellman makes explicit that the responsibility for genuine change is lodged squarely with the audience. It is they who must conceive a way to fight the cupidity symbolized by the Hubbard clan” (163). It is they who must succeed where Alexandra failed. Perhaps in the depths of the Great Depression, such an outcome seemed reasonable, even likely. Hellman writes as a member of the Communist party who had visited the Soviet Union; she writes as a product of her father’s stand against her family’s questionable business practices; she writes as an American disillusioned with capitalism due to the profiteering she saw in history and due to the economic disaster that eventually ensued. Further examination of her work reveals just how much Marxist thought influenced her own. Conventional history has the industrial revolution in the New South bringing jobs and prosperity to a war-ravaged region, but a historical and philosophical approach to *The Little Foxes* reveals the other side—the dark, gritty underside that Hellman sought to expose—and the message—the audience’s responsibility to unite against capitalism in its moment of weakness.

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## The Elusive Mirror: The City, the Gaze, and the Self in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Man of the Crowd*

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The concept of the Self remains an elusive subject in early American literature, particularly when examining the nuances of the individual within the modern city. Because urbanity itself refuses a clear definition, the character who embraces the city, dubbed the *flâneur*, continues to be an object of intense study in literary criticism. This character bases his identity on the city, removing himself from the scene of passers-by while simultaneously blending into the sea of the crowd. Therefore, this *flâneur*, this stranded individual, faces the danger of becoming lost within his world, since in the city one cannot be alone and yet, is always solitary. In Edgar Allan Poe's short story, “The Man of the Crowd,” the unnamed protagonist faces this very situation, as his intense observations of the city dwellers spark his recognition and eventual pursuit of the peculiar man of the crowd. The protagonist's relentless chase of the human embodiment of the city, in this case London, resembles much of the individual's search for the Self, and the man's blank stare at the story's conclusion signifies the entire mood of the city—*es lässt sich nicht lesen*. Poe's city, the man of the crowd's gaze, and the protagonist's Self will not allow themselves to be read, and if the *flâneur* sees himself in the man of the crowd, then he is therefore a man of the city. The inability to read these three entities reflects the very nature of the city and its citizens: they consistently pulsate with life, but the concept of the Self is one of the unsolvable mysteries that will not allow itself to be solved.

Poe's London is remarkably modern as the *flâneur* of the story examines the rich cultural divides, the crowded streets, and the isolation from others that he feels so acutely. Cities as a whole are collections of memories their dwellers bring with them, and Poe's

London establishes its livelihood on the shared experiences of its inhabitants (Jukes 42). Although Poe's London may be a product of the nineteenth century, it is also surprisingly modern in "The Man of the Crowd," first published in 1840. This supposition is evident in the story's protagonist since he, upon recovering from an illness, actively observes the various classes that pass by the D-Coffee-House. As he muses, "At first my observations took an abstract and generalizing turn. I looked at the passengers in masses, and thought of them in their aggregate relations" (Poe 122). As the *flâneur* surveys the crowd outside of the D-Coffee-House, he is at once separated from and is part of the mob. Although this claim is physically true—the protagonist is seated inside, but at a bow window—the people outside interest the *flâneur* because of individuals' relation to one another, as if they are simultaneously one and many. As seen with his initial interest in the general mob, the protagonist first recognizes the crowd as one, related mass, as he notices the passengers' "aggregate relations." By distinguishing a massed entity as opposed to the distinct individuals he later describes, the protagonist is inside and outside of this connected, yet undistinguishable, sea of people.

Poe's London continues to possess an air of vagueness even when the *flâneur* expounds upon the city's diverse residents. As nineteenth-century literature was becoming increasingly urbanized, "The Man of the Crowd's" classes are distinctly part of the city, as the narrator reads gentlemen, clerks, pick-pockets, gamblers, and a hodge-podge of the city's less reputable inhabitants (Whalen 77). Although the latter group piques the *flâneur's* interest somewhat more than the respectable classes, the fact that he notices these groups on an individual basis further demonstrates the pulsating nature of the city itself; it presents itself as both one distinct mass and many distinct entities. As the narrator continues, "Soon, however, I descended to details, and regarded with minute interest the innumerable varieties of figure, dress, air, gait, visage, and expression of countenance" (Poe 122). In his close scrutiny of such characteristics, the *flâneur* attributes external expressions and behaviors with the internal nature of people. In short, he believes the external appearance represents the internal nature of the Self.

The concentration on the external brings into focus another important factor of the city and the *flaneur's* later quest to find his Self: the ever-present gaze, which is first evident in this particular scene at the D–Coffee–House. Although the gaze has already been indirectly addressed in the protagonist's quiet observations of both inside and outside the coffeehouse, it is also prevalent in the people whom he watches. Throughout this short sequence, the narrator describes the gaze of others in their distinct groups. For instance, he notices the Jewish peddlers “with hawk eyes flashing from countenances,” the young women shrinking away “more tearfully than indignantly from the glances of ruffians,” and the drunkards “with bruised visage and lack-lustre eyes” (Poe 124). In addition to taking interest in his sights, the *flaneur* also studies the gazes of others, which somehow are interrelated in this city scene. The Jewish peddlers watch their potential customers as a predator would its prey; the young women avert their gazes from the suggestive looks of lecherous men; and the soused individuals survey their situation with a dim, filmy torpor. Although most people go through their life without really seeing, individual sights do mean something to someone in the world, or, in this case, the city (Elkins 57–58). These three instances of the gaze emphasize both the interconnectedness and the distinctness of the city because of the universal use of seeing and the sights belonging exclusively to these groups.

The protagonist, therefore, notices so much in regard to people of the city because he studies almost every group's gaze, its class and as he says, each and every face; the *flaneur* sees the city, but it is not until his own gaze falls on one man that he begins to see himself. Although he places much emphasis on the individuals in the crowd's countenance and history, the *flaneur's* focus centers on one man—the man of the crowd. As the protagonist exclaims, “suddenly there came into view a countenance . . . which at once arrested and absorbed my whole attention, on account of the *absolute idiosyncrasy* of its expression. Any thing even remotely resembling that expression I had never seen before” (Poe 125; emphasis added). This one man of the crowd, whose features and bearing are utterly unlike anyone else in the mob, constructs himself as absolutely idiosyncratic—he relies on nothing to build an identity.

The protagonist's fixation on this visage of absolute idiosyncrasy brings into the foreground the fogging of this one being for his observations of the man of the crowd provides no coherent definition of a Self. Furthermore, the man of the crowd—a man within, without, among, and so on—cannot be entirely or absolutely idiosyncratic because of his association with the mob. The narrator refers to this character as *the man of the crowd*. The man, much like the *flâneur*, bases his existence on the crowd's presence and its pulsation of life. To claim that he is absolutely idiosyncratic indicates that the *flâneur* believes this man to be a sort of mirror of himself, since both are within and without the mass of the city as well as unique in their ability and inability to blend into the crowd.

Despite the man of the crowd's absolute idiosyncrasy, Poe's protagonist still attempts to describe the "vast" characteristics of this remarkable figure. The *flâneur* gives the reader many descriptions of the man, as he muses, "there arose confusedly and paradoxically within my mind, the ideas of vast mental power, of caution, of penuriousness, of avarice, of coolness, of malice, of blood-thirstiness, of triumph, of merriment, of excessive terror, of intense—of extreme despair" (Poe 125). Although these traits conjure up the image of a criminal, another perspective of this man is also viable: he appears to be a mixture of the mutual sentiments and experiences of the city dwellers (Reynolds 233). The city itself, especially Poe's modern London, carries the same variety of characteristics as the old man. It advises caution, advertises avarice, emits coolness, relishes malice and blood-thirstiness, shouts triumph, and instills an overwhelming sense of despair. Since the man of the crowd embodies these diverse traits, he is more or less a human symbol of the city and if he can be defined as a criminal, then the city also projects a sort of criminality. Additionally, the classes that the *flâneur* notices earlier in the story share these representations, especially through the medium of the gaze. As the protagonist points out, the Jewish peddlers maliciously watch the crowd, the young women avert their gaze in despair from the carnal looks of the men, and the drunkards' clouded gaze mixes a plethora of emotions and hardships from city life. The singularity of the man of the crowd reveals that he embodies *all* of these characteristics,

causing him to associate more with the city in general than with a certain group.

The narrator proceeds to describe the man of the crowd's physical apparel in an attempt to classify the latter's social status. To this effect, the *flaneur* once again cannot place a firm grasp on the object of his attention for the man's ragged appearance immediately cancels itself out with the remnants of finer accessories. As the narrator describes, "my vision deceived me, or, through a rent in a closely-buttoned and evidently second-hand *roquelaire* which enveloped him, I caught a glimpse both of a diamond and of a dagger" (Poe 125-126). This utter classlessness, which further blurs the man of the crowd altogether, piques the narrator's interest. The *flaneur* engrosses himself completely in discerning the classes of the others in the streets of London, but the man of the crowd defies even this clear definition. Because of this peculiarity, the *flaneur* loses his ability to classify this individual within the mass and the man's contradictory physical appearance emphasizes the complexity of the gaze that concentrates solely on the external. The man's external features, either facial or physical, speak more than verbal conversation ever could but his affiliation with the crowd veils his complex internal story.

Alfred Kubin, the illustrator of Georg Müller's German collection of Poe's stories, attempted to capture the man of the crowd's complex nature through the character's physical appearance. Kubin's *The Man of the Crowd* 1910, emphasizes the singularity of this man who remains inside the mass in the London streets: compared to the other city-dwellers, the man is a giant, with his head and shoulders extending past every individual's head (Hayes 234). He walks with the crowd in the same direction, and in doing so the viewer can see only a somewhat blurred and darkened profile. The man of this crowd contains no clear facial expression, and his gaze is averted from everyone else in the scene. He is the darkest figure in the mob, forcing one's eyes to focus exclusively on this character. Like the *flaneur* of the story, the man of the crowd captivates the viewer. However, this very vagueness of Kubin's illustration demonstrates the fluid, ever-elusive nature of this particular individual. He moves with the crowd, therefore being a part of it—but his astonishing height and darkened presence further

distances him from the rest of the passers-by (234). As with the *flâneur*, the man lives among the crowd, neither actively participating socially nor passively observing. Kubin's physical portrayal of the *flâneur's* description of the man of the crowd parallels the latter's difficulty in painting a verbal picture of the character.

The narrator's fixated gaze on the man of the crowd awakes in him a desire to pursue his silent companion, not only because of these peculiar city traits but also because the man serves as a mirror into the *flâneur's* Self. The protagonist, in an effort to discover more of this individual to whom he feels so affiliated, relentlessly pursues this character throughout London. Through his gaze toward the old man, the narrator also notices that he himself can be seen and consequently, takes great pains to conceal himself from the man's detection (Berger 9). If the reader is to think of this man as the *flâneur's* mirror, then the narrator's desire for concealment is of great interest. As he confesses, "During the hour and a half, or thereabouts, . . . it required much caution on my part to keep him within reach without attracting his observation . . . . At no moment did he see that I watched him" (Poe 127). The protagonist's concern about detection demonstrates that he is conscious of his own gaze, and attracting the sight of the man of the crowd would hinder his quest to receive a definitive picture of this man, this mirror. The phrase, "attracting his *observation*," also indicates that the *flâneur* seeks to avoid the man's study of the former, which, given the circumstances, seems to express the narrator's own vague notion of the Self. Additionally since the protagonist intentionally conceals his physical appearance from the man of the crowd, the criminal persona sometimes attributed to the latter can also apply to the former. Despite this cause for concealment, the *flâneur* successfully follows the man of the crowd unheeded through the labyrinth of London unnoticed—whether by the *flâneur's* merit or the man's refusal of acknowledgement is indeterminable.

The man of the crowd's foray into the city life further displays that he establishes his identity on the city itself, much like the *flâneur*. As with the narrator's detailed observations of the masses, the man wanders through the city donning different attitudes as he stumbles through various areas of London. The man strolls more slowly while among the throng of the crowd and his demeanor, as

the narrator observes, becomes more uncomfortable and indecisive. Consequently, the man of the crowd, interestingly enough, finds more energy when walking down an abandoned alleyway, apparently more invigorated in isolation. As the *flâneur* notices, “he rushed with an activity I could not have dreamed of seeing in one so aged, and which put me to much trouble in pursuit. A few minutes brought us to a large and busy bazaar, . . . where his original demeanor again became apparent, as he forced his way to and fro, without aim . . .” (Poe 126–127). Upon seeing the man of the crowd’s unexpected energy, the *flâneur* notices another facet of the old man’s character: the unpredictability of his aim in wandering. The man takes a more passive demeanor when among the crowd, the entity with which the narrator affiliates him. Although the man maintains this aimless wandering for an indefinite amount of time, this journey accurately reflects the differing attitudes of the city and its inhabitants. The man of the crowd and the *flâneur* always wander but each excursion brings them to the changing nuances of city life either within the masses or down mainly deserted alleyways. Because of the aimlessness of this journey through the city, which itself is vague, both the man and the *flâneur* have a veiled sense of the Self as a whole.

Further indication of the man of the crowd’s reliance on city life comes into light when he and his pursuer trek to the less desirable part of London, the slums. Although the man struggles through the seas of the crowds in the main part of London, he nonetheless veers toward the part of the city where one finds the most hellish inhabitants and where intemperance abounds. Although often considered a blemish to London’s thriving cultural scene, such an area is necessary to Poe’s city and the slum’s very resemblance to Hell attracts the man of the crowd. The protagonist in his usual role as the active observer describes with minute detail this particular setting, stating, “The whole atmosphere teemed with desolation. Yet, as we proceeded, the sounds of human life revived by some degrees, and at length large bands of the most abandoned of a London populace were seen reeling to and fro” (128–129). The sight of these depraved Londoners still presents an image of a crowd, although different from the one of which the man usually finds himself. The man finds his Self in all aspects of the city from

the more respectable venues of the coffeehouses to the deplorable hideouts that are the gin palaces. If the man of the crowd is in fact the *flaneur's* mirror, then the reader can assume that the latter's situation is somewhat similar to the man's. In short, both entities live off of all aspects of Poe's London, especially its dark corners from coffee houses to gin palaces.

This supposition is quite possibly one of the few clear statements in "The Man of the Crowd," which is an especially prevalent implication during the story's climax. After chasing the man of the crowd for two full days—a feat impossible for a man recovering from an illness—the protagonist finally demands himself to be seen. The exhaustion and frustration the *flaneur* experiences are evident in his words, as he recalls, "I grew wearied unto death, and, stopping fully in front of the wanderer, gazed at him steadfastly in the face. *He noticed me not*, but resumed his solemn walk, while I, ceasing to follow, remained absorbed in contemplation" (129; emphasis added). Although the man's vacant stare shadows the narrator's firm decision to directly look at his Self, this resolution in itself is a remarkable feat for one who has hitherto been so adamant about his concealment. The protagonist's desire to gaze intently into the old man also indicates that the *flaneur* wants to be seen as well and the fact that the man of the crowd fails to notice him further adds to the claim that the protagonist's Self resembles the city: vague, indefinite, and constantly transformative. This way, the *flaneur*, the man of the crowd, and the city are interrelated; because both characters stand apart from the crowd in which they sustain their living, neither man can have a clear identity. The Self of the lost city-dweller who bases his identity on his surroundings, therefore, cannot possess a clear definition. In dedicating his life to the particulars of city life and its inhabitants' history, the *flaneur* loses a sense of the Self that he unconsciously desires.

As the man of the crowd continues on to his regular haunts, the *flaneur* attempts to grasp an understanding of the peculiar nature of this strange entity, finally coming to the conclusion that has made itself known throughout the story: that the Self will not let itself be read. As the narrator closes his story, "This old man . . . refuses to be alone. *He is the man of the crowd*. It will be in vain to follow; for I shall learn no more of him" (129). The *flaneur* realizes that this man

will not present a sharp picture of himself for such a portrait cannot exist if he is *of* the crowd. The crowd, as the narrator has noted, is at once one gigantic mass and a conglomerate of individuals belonging to distinct classes. Since the man of the crowd and the *flâneur* remain in the center of activity from their participation on the cusp of the city circle, then the Self constantly fluctuates between center and edge—much like a heartbeat. As the narrator continues, “The worst heart of the world is a grosser book than the ‘Hortulus Animæ,’ and perhaps it is but one of the great mercies of God that ‘*es lässt sich nicht lesen*’” (129). If the city, the gaze, and the Self are a part of the *flâneur* and the man of the crowd, then the mercy that the protagonist praises condones the fact that these three objects do not let themselves be read—*sie lassen sich nicht lesen*. Overall, the *flâneur* sees in himself a man who unceasingly wanders London, visiting all aspects of the city while remaining alone in his contemplations and observations. With this contradictory nature—being alone in a crowd—Poe’s protagonist remains a blurred representation of a foggy city.

The complexity of the issues discussed provides a compelling pathway to a character’s realization of the Self. Along with the city and the man of the crowd’s blank gaze, the *flâneur*’s answerless quest for the Self contains many questions that readers cannot directly answer such as the explanation of what exactly constitutes an identity. The *flâneur*’s conclusion at the story’s end—*es lässt sich nicht lesen*—accurately reflects his own nature, as he draws from his city, its inhabitants, and the man of the crowd in his Self’s construction. Additionally, the man of the crowd, in his mindless wanderings, establishes the notion that being *of* the crowd is neither in the center of activity nor exclusively on its edge. Rather, the man’s and the *flâneur*’s identities constantly shift with their city and therefore cannot be read with any finality. The man of the crowd is exactly as he presents himself: a man who lives off of the city’s thriving society and cannot notice the *flâneur* who relentlessly pursues the elusive mirror of his Self.

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## From Subject to Subjectivity: Reconciling Postmodernism and Autobiography in Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* and Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red* | Lindsey Warren

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In “The Fiction of Postmodern Autobiography: Adrienne Kennedy’s *People Who Led to My Plays* and *Deadly Triplets*,” Deborah Thompson grapples with the ambivalent relationship between postmodernism’s emphasis on “universal textuality” and the very personal nature of autobiography (75). William Spengemann focuses on “poetic” or fictional autobiographies that seem to defy the entire premise of the genre. Juliana Spahr also addresses the changing genre of autobiography in her discussion of Lyn Hejinian’s *My Life*; Spahr notes that postmodernism’s “delegitimization of essentialist conceptions of the subject” seems at odds with autobiography’s focus on the individual (140). Spahr’s argument, however, is that Hejinian’s text effectively challenges notions of the lyric “I” and the centrality of personal experience so fundamental to traditional forms of both lyric poetry and autobiography through its emphasis on reader interpretation. Another postmodern work, albeit a rather different one from Hejinian’s text, that complicates the role of personal experience in both poetry and autobiography is Anne Carson’s *Autobiography of Red*, which retells the myth of Herakles from the monster Geryon’s perspective; Carson’s text is at once a novel, poetry, and a “fictional autobiography” that chooses not its author, but a mythological character, as its focus. Despite the varied differences between Hejinian and Carson’s texts, reading *Autobiography of Red* against Spahr’s interpretation of *My Life* suggests that both challenge traditional notions of autobiography in that they manifest a theoretical awareness of the genre of autobiography itself, and that they embrace subjectivity over notions of a definitive

subject by inviting readers to find individual levels of meaning within the text. Bob Perelman notes that “while not a traditional autobiography, *My Life* does not belie its title” (72). Despite the obvious fiction of the work, I would argue that the same can be said of *Autobiography of Red*; in its self-awareness of its own complex authorship and genre, Carson’s text lives up to its title as a work inherently concerned with autobiography and proves, in the words of Thompson, that postmodern “‘fiction’ and ‘autobiography’ are simulacra of each other” (75).

Perelman’s claim that *My Life* is “not a traditional autobiography,” would prove difficult to refute. In his book *Metaphors of Self*, James Olney defines autobiography as “a magnifying lens . . . it is the symptomatic key to all else that [the author] did and, naturally, to all that he was” (3-4). In these definitions, one feature of autobiography stands out above others: namely, the notion that an autobiography should relate its author’s life to the reader. Readers of both *My Life* and *Autobiography of Red* would most likely agree that neither text provides this “symptomatic key” of understanding the author’s life, and as a result, either text’s classification as an autobiography seems dubious. Olney does, however, acknowledge the place for a “poetic” autobiography that does not revolve specifically around the author’s life, but rather on “the artist who . . . treats his own experience as representative and symbolic . . . [of] the whole integrated psyche of mankind” (621). Olney cites lyric poetry, particularly Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, as a paradigm of this genre. Olney’s theory, however, does not actually allow for an autobiography that is entirely fictional. William Spengemann, on the other hand, recognizes autobiography’s “apparently increasing tendency to assume fictive forms in the modern era” (xiii). Spengemann cites *David Copperfield* and *The Scarlet Letter* as prime examples of poetic autobiography. Spengemann identifies these works’ defining autobiographical characteristic not as “biographical facts,” but as a desire to “possess the self consciously,” and to reconcile “the self [the protagonist] knows or wishes to know, and on the other hand, the self that knows or seeks to know” (119-20). This definition is especially apt for postmodern poetic autobiographies, in that it seems to imply the work’s self-awareness in creating autobiography.

As a result, scholars hardly dispute *My Life*'s classification as an autobiography; Carson's text, however, seems much more difficult to classify as a result of its merging of genre. Monique Tschofen argues that "technically, *Autobiography of Red* is not an autobiography, nor really is it, as the subtitle suggests, a 'novel in verse'" (Tschofen). Indeed, *Autobiography of Red* resists classification as an autobiography, though its awareness of genre does point to it as a text highly concerned with autobiography. The title of the text actually implies that the text belongs to three distinct genres, that of the novel, poetry, and autobiography itself. Though Spengemann addresses one of *Autobiography of Red*'s problems of classification by reconciling fiction and autobiography, the problem of its postmodern aesthetic still remains. Carson's text, as a non-traditional narrative, does not "express and reflect its maker [or even its protagonist] . . . at every stage of his development" as Olney argues it should (3). I argue that the work's inherent similarities to *My Life* in terms of these textual gaps and the theoretical concerns they share place them in a position bridging postmodern poetry and autobiography, despite both texts' refusal to "express and reflect" their makers' personal experiences.

Juliana Spahr effectively reconciles all of these problems, at least in terms of *My Life*, through her article addressing the genre of "postmodern autobiography." In setting down some of the basic characteristics of the postmodern autobiography, Spahr notes that a postmodern autobiography is just as concerned with "the *conventions of representation* as with the representation of a particular subject" and with "the possibilities and limitations of the genre through which that subject is constructed or made manifest" (141—emphasis mine). Though Hejinian chooses a title that definitively suggests autobiography in the traditional sense (in later years, Bill Clinton would choose the same title for his autobiography), the text of *My Life* is defiantly nontraditional, and Hejinian chooses to "not present a distinct persona" in a genre that traditionally focuses on the author (Spahr 142). Rather, Hejinian's text, as a "prose poem," deconstructs and blends the distinct genres of poetry and prose in ways similar to other postmodern works like Williams' *Paterson* and the prose poems of the Language poets (Hejinian included). Reading *Autobiography of Red* against *My Life*, and against Spahr's

observations about the postmodern autobiography itself, would seem to alleviate some of its problems of classification and to draw out similarities between two texts that are radically different, yet share the same postmodern aesthetic in their rejection of a definitive lyric “I.”

Moreover, Deborah Thompson’s observations about the postmodern autobiography are helpful in understanding *Autobiography of Red* specifically, because of the postmodern autobiography’s tendency to “add slashes between [or otherwise integrate] ‘postmodernism’ and ‘fiction’” (62). *Autobiography of Red* obviously focuses on a mythological character in its reinterpretation of the myth of Geryon and Herakles; Geryon is truly what Spahr calls the “constructed subject” so common to the postmodern autobiography precisely as a result of his fictiveness (140). Additionally, Tschofen notes that the character of Geryon, as a “composite pieced together from fragments” of Stesichoros, acts as a metaphor for the text itself in its various frames; combining this notion with the Tschofen’s observation that *Autobiography of Red*, if considered a novel, is a Künstlerroman, it seems that the text itself is also coming of age or relating its autobiography through its own self-awareness (Tschofen). In this way, autobiography and the postmodern aesthetic seem to intersect almost naturally.

Spahr notes that this self-awareness of form and genre is another major feature of the postmodern autobiography (141). In *My Life*, Hejinian manifests this awareness through her inclusion of the subject of literary theory with her poetry; Spahr terms the resulting text “a theoretically astute poetics” (141). This is perhaps most evident in the final chapter of *My Life*, which begins, “In the afternoon until five I sat in the room reading theory while eating a dish of carrots” (161). This juxtaposition of the mundane with the intellectual and theoretically informed recurs throughout the chapter. The text makes leaps from everyday images of mopping “linoleum tiles” to theoretically informed phrases like “the reduction of expression to experience,” and “Language R is parallel to Language E” (162, 163). In this way, Hejinian’s work incorporates theories of writing into the writing itself and provides one of the few truly autobiographical moments of the text, in which Hejinian reflects upon her actual self as a Language writer. However, the idea

that this autobiographical moment is presented through the subject of literary theory, which a layperson might find opaque, reflects Hejinian's refusal to make her autobiography a clear representation of her own experiences.

*Autobiography of Red* shares this sense of textual self-awareness with *My Life*. Within the narrative itself, Carson suggests a theory for writing and reading a postmodern autobiography: "On the cover Geryon wrote *Autobiography*. Inside he set down the facts . . . . He followed Facts with Questions and Answers" (37). *Autobiography of Red*, with its several appendices and layers of text, generally follows this pattern. The "Facts" portion of Carson's text might be seen as the second "Red Meat" chapter, entitled "Fragments of Stesichoros"; "Fragments" contains portions of Geryon's life as related by Stesichoros, including descriptions and events. Both Stesichoros' and Geryon's summaries of "facts" begin with the same sentence: "Geryon was a monster everything about him was red" (9, 37). Following "Fragments of Stesichoros" is Appendix A, "Testimonia on the Question of Stesichoros' Blinding by Helen," and Appendix C, "Clearing up the Question of Stesichoros' Blinding by Helen," both of which together are analogous to Geryon's "Question and Answer" passage entitled, "Why did Herakles kill Geryon?" (37). Carson's text as a whole follows the theoretical pattern established by Geryon's autobiography in the narrative, and like *My Life*, also becomes an example of a "theoretically astute poetics" in its thematic concern with genre (Spahr 141).

A similar instance of *Autobiography of Red*'s astute sense of textual self-awareness, applicable also to *My Life*, appears in the interview with Stesichoros after the narrative. The interview begins: "One critic speaks of a sort of concealment drama going on in your work some special interest in finding out what or how people act when they know that important information is being withheld" (147); in both works, the information being withheld, or the minus device, is the narrative connectors. To a certain degree, both works may be said to exhibit what Bob Perelman calls "literary parataxis" (60). Hejinian's work certainly exemplifies parataxis much more than Carson's; *My Life* is disjunctive both on the sentence level and in terms of its larger scheme of organization. Within each chapter, each of Hejinian's individual sentences "gains its effect by being

placed next to another sentence to which it has tangential relevance” (Perelman 61). In terms of parataxis in *My Life*, Perelman notes that, despite the obvious “paratactic organization,” the text is held together “through recurrent attention to specific areas of memory,” supporting the notion that it should be read as an autobiography (72). Craig Douglas Dworkin describes Hejinian’s parataxis on a larger level by relating each chapter to a section of a “nineteenth-century pieced quilt” (59). In terms of narrative parataxis, Hejinian serves as a model for Perelman and other scholars because of the sheer number of narrative leaps her text makes.

Though certainly not the paragon of parataxis that is *My Life*, *Autobiography of Red* displays some disjunction in the face of narrative. Though within the individual chapters the sentences flow together to create plot, many of the chapters as a whole, specifically in the narrative describing Geryon’s childhood at the beginning of *Autobiography of Red*, come together like Dworkin’s patchwork quilt. A more apt metaphor than the quilt for Carson’s text, however, would be a series of photographs providing snapshots of moments in Geryon’s life; the narrator explicitly states that “[Geryon’s] autobiography . . . had recently taken the form / of a photographic essay” (60). In an appendix, Carson also describes Stesichoros’ fragments as “a tantalizing cross-section of scenes,” a portrayal that applies to *Autobiography of Red*, as well (6). Earlier in the text, as well, Geryon’s autobiography had taken the form of a sculpture, based around a tomato (35). The contrast between Geryon’s sculpture, a cohesive unit that he “glues” together, and the disjunctive series of photographs that later become his autobiography, accurately describes parataxis in *Autobiography of Red* (35); though each chapter serves as an individual snapshot of Geryon’s life, all the chapters of the narrative come together to create a cohesive whole, glued to one another through character and plot.

A major effect of the parataxis featured in both works is that, in order to create meaning in the face of disjunction and absent information, the reader must make his or her own connections between lines and chapters of text; this is perhaps the most effective way in which both poets embrace subjectivity in the face of genres that emphasize the personal experience of the author or speaker. The notion that the previously-mentioned “special interest”

referenced by the narrator in *Autobiography of Red*'s "Interview" appendix is concerned with "how people act" in the face of missing information, rather than with what the poet or author is actually withholding, indicates that the text is much more concerned with reader-based interpretation than a knowable subject (147). Spahr addresses this feature of *My Life* by referring to it as "an autobiography of multiplicity," not only as a result of its multiple editions but also the numerous possible interpretations for readers (141). Thompson acknowledges that "'experience' is textual and contextual, [and] dependent on prior fictions," and, as a result, readers are able to fill in the missing details of the paratactic autobiography with their own experiences (62). The following lines from Hejinian exemplify an opportunity for reader-based interpretation: "But a word is a bottomless pit. It became magically pregnant and one day split open, giving birth to a stone egg, about as big as a football" (8). The nonsensical nature of this utterance resists easy interpretation; it is unclear specifically what "word" (if any) the speaker is referencing, and what the antecedent for the ambiguous pronoun "it" is. Perhaps more than in any other place in the passage, the intrinsic ambiguity of language is most obvious in the line "a word is a bottomless pit," which acknowledges the possibility of multiple interpretations of a single idea or sentence, and implies the "pregnancy," or fullness, of meaning.

A similar passage in *Autobiography of Red* that revolves around parataxis, as well as an awareness of writing, appears in the postcards Geryon writes from Buenos Aires; the postcards describe the collective profession of all the German residents of the city. In each postcard, however, the "profession" of the Germans in Buenos Aires changes based on the recipient: for Geryon's sportscaster brother, they are "soccer players"; for his philosophy professor, they are "psychoanalysts"; and for his mother, an incessant smoker, they are "cigarette girls" (82, 83, 85). These postcards provide a perfect model for reader-based interpretation of a paratactic text; just as when the reader of *Autobiography of Red* or *My Life* creates connections in the face of disjunction, the details in the postcards change based on the interest of the recipient. In both texts, the opportunity for reader collaboration rails against Olney's idea that a poetic autobiography should "weave together personal allusions"

to “become, in effect, an autobiography of and for Everyman” (261). Not only do these texts question the importance of personal experience to the genres of lyric poetry and autobiography, but they also reject the very existence of an “Everyman” through the emphasis placed on multiplicity within each text.

In addition to this intense ambiguity of language and the reader’s resulting role in constructing the text, another consequence of parataxis relevant to the reconciliation of postmodern poetry and autobiography is the lack of a narrative structure. Again, this certainly seems more apparent in *My Life* than in *Autobiography of Red*. While *My Life* appears to have one speaker throughout the poem, assumed to be Hejinian, she ironically gives us few details about her life. A single, omniscient narrator also seems to recount the narrative within *Autobiography of Red*, a text presenting itself as Geryon’s autobiography yet told in the relatively impersonal third person; the identity of this narrator, however, is uncertain. Carson complicates the possible identity of the narrator through the presence of other artist-figures within the various frames around the romance, like the “scholarly trappings of Essay, translated Fragments, Appendices,” and the interview between Stesichoros and “I,” presumably a manifestation of Carson herself (Wahl 181). The interview is especially relevant to an investigation of the personal in the text in that the only place the lyric “I” appears is *outside* the narrative. The idea that a text presenting itself as an autobiography, even if only by title, filters its protagonist’s experience through several different frames of reference suggests an embrace of subjectivity similar to that of *My Life*.

In presenting several possible narrators for her romance, the narration of Carson’s text tells as much about what Spahr calls the “conventions of representation” as the represented characters themselves (141). According to Thompson, a “celebration of voices at the margin” is essential to the postmodern autobiography (61). The rejection of a “knowable” universal experience in favor of these marginalized voices is another manifestation of *Autobiography of Red*’s avoidance of a transparent presentation of the personal. Within the text, Carson acknowledges the various ways authors have represented her protagonist: “There were many different ways to tell a story like this . . . . If Stesichoros had been a more conventional

poet he might have taken the point of view of Herakles” (5–6). As a result, *Autobiography of Red* consists not only of Geryon’s story as Carson seeks to tell it, but also of the history of authors’ representations of Geryon. These lines also call the reader’s attention the idea that “there were many different ways to tell as a story like this,” embracing subjectivity through theme as well as through form. This is perhaps one of the most compelling reasons to read *Autobiography of Red* in light of its title; the inclusion of other authors’ modes of representation acts as the ultimate rejection of a voice of experience within the text. Carson’s interpretation of the myth becomes part of the history she describes, and the text ultimately focuses not on Geryon, but on frames of reference and subjectivity among readers and writers.

Though Anne Carson’s *Autobiography of Red* and Lyn Hejinian’s *My Life* confound genre through their simultaneous concern with poetry and with autobiography, the lyric “I” of personal experience so important to both genres is notably absent. Rather than present their texts as authoritative personal stories, both poets encourage readers to create numerous, subjective interpretations through the varying levels of gaps within each narrative. Spahr asserts that *My Life*, and the genre of postmodern autobiography as a whole, is concerned with “conventions of representation” through its emphasis on reader involvement (141); Carson’s work fits within this model through its self-conscious exploration of representations of both its main character and the genre of autobiography itself. Perhaps most importantly, both texts effectively escape what Marjorie Perloff calls the lyric impossibility that “poetry,” and I would argue autobiography as well, “might deal with anything outside the enclosed self” (174). Like *My Life* in its acknowledgement of the multiple possibilities for both representation and interpretation, *Autobiography of Red* complicates the conventions of its genres, shifting lyric poetry and autobiography’s focus from concerns of a central “subject” to postmodern notions of “subjectivity” and readerly interpretation.

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