

MODERNISM'S GIFTS

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This dissertation argues that the work of Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, Jean Rhys, and Stevie Smith exemplifies the reappearance of “themes of the gift” hailed by anthropologist Marcel Mauss in his 1924 essay, *The Gift*. Their stylistically diverse treatments of themes such as hospitality, friendship, reciprocity, sympathy, sacrifice, and charity reflect on the contemporary fate of the ethics of generosity under the conditions of capitalism and invite us to reconsider what counts, or should count, as generous in the modern age. In so doing, their work manifests conceptual affinities with anthropological, psychoanalytic, and philosophical discourses on the gift, exchange, and subjective and symbolic “economies,” while also making distinctively literary and feminist contributions to this interdisciplinary corpus. I argue that by conjugating the challenges of formal innovation and social transformation, their novels make not only recuperative but also speculative gestures. On the one hand, they work to salvage those material and immaterial “gifts” that defy normative notions of economic necessity, from the “favors” that Stein’s heroine grants her friends in *Ida: A Novel* (1941) to the many “offerings” made in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), from the masochistic letters that circulate in Rhys’s *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* (1930) to the human knack for suffering in Smith’s *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936). On the other hand, they codify the conditions and conventions propitious for gifts with the potential to disrupt the social and sexual status quo. Insofar as the new forms of engagement and community toward which they look are furthermore figured as critical responses to money, the predominant ground of exchange, their texts enable us to reevaluate the

ethical and political stakes of modernism, as well as its notoriously troubled relationship to the market. Thus, I argue finally that the texts of Stein, Woolf, Rhys, and Smith, in revealing so many gifts to be universally constitutive of and yet unique to the subject, work to resolve a tension between a desire for social equality and a radical suspicion of abstract ideals of equivalence, while nevertheless conceding that the possibility of resolving this tension may be confined to the world of fiction.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Rebecca Colesworthy earned her B.A. in English and Women's Studies from Brown University in 2000 and received honors in English for her undergraduate thesis, "A Renaissance of the Reader: Addressing History in H.D.'s Post-war Prose." After graduating, she worked as a research assistant for three Brown faculty members: Professor Carolyn Dean in History, Professor Mary Ann Doane in Modern Culture and Media, and Professor Elizabeth Weed at the Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women. She moved to Brooklyn, New York, in the fall of 2001 and shortly thereafter joined the staff of the National Council for Research on Women, a nonprofit network of feminist research, advocacy, and policy centers. In fall 2003, she entered the Ph.D. program in English at Cornell. A recipient of a Jacob K. Javits Fellowship, she completed her M.A. in May 2006 and her Ph.D. in August 2009.

*For my mother, Pamela Colesworthy,
my father, David Prospect,
and, of course, Scott*

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PREFACE

In his conclusion to *The Gift*, originally published as *Essai sur le don* in *L'Année Sociologique* in 1923-1924, Marcel Mauss hailed the auspicious reappearance of “themes of the gift” in contemporary European society (68). In so doing, he not only registered what he saw as a widespread return to a communal ethos at odds with the individualism typical of modern western culture and legal systems, but also presaged the centrality of concepts of the gift and exchange – not to mention the centrality of *The Gift* – to twentieth-century French thought. In the following study, I argue that the work of Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, Jean Rhys, and Stevie Smith exemplifies the “salutary revolution” to which Mauss paid witness (68), while also demonstrating the extension of its reach beyond the borders of both his home country and his home discipline of anthropology. Through readings of four of their novels, as well as a number of their essays and autobiographical writings, I argue that these authors’ stylistically diverse treatments of themes of the gift – including hospitality, friendship, reciprocity, sympathy, sacrifice, and charity – share conceptual affinities with the interdisciplinary corpus inspired, at least in part, by Mauss’s essay.

Modernism would hardly seem a fitting site to seek avatars of generosity, characterized as it has been by a determination to salvage the figure of the exceptional individual amid threatening social forces, a discomfort with the Victorian orthodoxy of self-sacrifice, and a profound suspicion of the possibility of helping without harming. Yet if the texts considered here largely reinforce these caricatural presuppositions, they also ask us to reconsider what we mean by generosity. Where Stein, Woolf, Rhys, and Smith invite us to use our imaginations – and where I in turn invite my reader to use his or hers – is with respect to the question of what counts, or should count, as generous under the conditions of modern capitalism. Indeed, the

“gifts” to which my title refers are diverse in kind, from the “favors” that Stein’s heroine grants her friends in *Ida: A Novel* to the many “offerings” made in *Mrs. Dalloway*, from the masochistic letters that circulate in Rhys’s *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* to Pompey’s knack for suffering in Smith’s *Novel on Yellow Paper*. Whereas for Mauss the gift was a thing – an objective entity endowed with a spiritual power – the multifarious gifts considered here are by turns immaterial and material, personal and interpersonal, literal and metaphorical.

But while this study breaks with the letter of Mauss’s essay, it nevertheless preserves the spirit of *The Gift* in arguing that the texts of Stein, Woolf, Rhys, and Smith share an understanding of the subject as a being bound by systems of exchange that exceed commerce and for which the laws of political economy cannot account. As the media of exchange within these systems, the gifts considered here can appear, from a capitalist standpoint, to be superfluous, insignificant, or irrational.¹ And yet, in the context of these writers’ work, they are rendered fundamental to the life of the human as such. For although the myriad affects, abilities, gestures, and impulses that I have filed under the heading of “Modernism’s Gifts” defy normative notions of economic necessity, they prove to be central to the various “economies” that constitute the subject and in so doing play a prominent role in dictating his or her needs and desires.

Analysis of these gift economies, I argue, provides a critical framework for reassessing the ethical, social, and political stakes of modernism as well as its notoriously troubled relationship to the market. In recent years, the canonical treatment of modernism as an assemblage of movements and figures united in their

¹ Amid his effort to cull the definitive properties of gifts and giving from sociological studies in his introduction to *The Question of the Gift*, Mark Osteen “tentatively propose[s]...that the essence of the gift is superfluity itself” (27).

“hostility to the market” has undergone significant revision.² Feminist and materialist critics especially have challenged the traditional view that modernism routinely favored production over consumption, autonomy over commitment, and art over commerce.³ “Modernism’s Gifts” furthers and complicates this line of criticism by arguing that the compensatory gestures made by *Ida: A Novel* (1941), *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* (1930), and *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936) – that is, their efforts to salvage the many gifts negated by capitalist ideology – are figured in part as critical responses to the privilege enjoyed by money as the universal equivalent *par excellence* in market society.

Money is an object of some ambivalence in the work of Stein, Woolf, Rhys, and Smith. As the dominant medium of exchange, it is indispensable and, for women in particular, can mean the difference between being reduced to an inferior object – indeed, the commodity *par excellence* – and gaining recognition as an equal subject. Yet as a fetishized abstract ideal, money has the power to foster acquisitiveness, to neutralize differences, and to colonize the imagination absolutely – to replace all creative endeavors with chrematistic ones. Thus, attending to the disparate functions and figurations of money in the fiction and non-fiction of my focal authors allows for a finer understanding of the nature of the hostility and anxiety toward “the market”

² While the citation comes from Fredric Jameson, it is important to note that he has also been one of the critics to refute this characterization of modernism. In *A Singular Modernity* he argues that the definition of aesthetic autonomy in terms of art’s dissociation from non-art – “the sociological or the political,” “the morass of real life, of business and money, and bourgeois daily life” – does not descend from Kant’s critical philosophy, but instead marks the mystificatory success of “ideologists of the aesthetic” (176). The “ideology of modernism” codified by critics such as Clement Greenberg in the middle of the twentieth century, dictates aesthetic modernism’s radical opposition not to the market, but to “culture” – that is to say, mass culture. Because the realm of the aesthetic is also “cultural,” the split between art and non-art occurs as a differentiation *within* culture. For Jameson’s discussion of modernism’s hostility to the market, see *Postmodernism* 304-305.

³ See, for example, Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking* and *Shopping with Freud*; John Xiros Cooper, *Modernism and the Culture of Market Society*; Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*; Tamar Katz, *Impressionist Subjects*; Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism*; Michael Tratner, *Deficits and Desires*; Jennifer Wicke, *Advertising Fictions* and “Mrs. Dalloway Goes to Market.”

that does arise in their work and which tends to arise even amid spirited encomia to the joys of commodity consumption and serious reflections on the importance of financial independence. What their work contests, I argue, is not exchange per se, but the predominant ground of exchange. In revealing commercial transactions to be but one manifestation of exchange, they oppose the popular treatment of money as if it were the only common ground, as if it were the only means of relation in the modern age. Hence, their critiques of the money economy do not translate into disengagement from public life, but are instead coextensive with creative efforts to reconceptualize the terms of our engagement, to reimagine how and why we relate to one another – to fantasize ways of making gifts, in all their irreducible diversity, our common currency.

The task of reimagining relation introduces various dilemmas, both at the level of narrative and at the level of narration. By exploring the ways in which my focal authors conjugate the challenges of social transformation and literary innovation, I argue that the gestures made by their novels are not only recuperative, but also speculative. They wishfully project into the future not so much because they are themselves gifts (although this is a claim that I will make with respect to *Ida*) as because they codify the conditions and conventions propitious for gifts with the potential to disrupt the social, as well as the sexual, status quo. If, as Woolf suggests in *A Room of One's Own*, the proper circumstances must be in place in order for a gift to flourish, then the novels here inscribe the circumstances necessary to the cultivation, expression, and presentation of so many gifts. Troping on Mauss's subtitle, we might say that the poetics and logic of each of the four novels on which I focus realizes the form and reason for new practices and styles of exchange.

"Modernism's Gifts" thus finds in the work of Stein, Woolf, Rhys, and Smith a prolific reserve of imaginative and critical thinking about the fate of the gift in the modern money economy. While analysis of the gift economies operative in their work

helps to illuminate the varied ethics and politics of modernism, their texts also make distinctively literary and feminist contributions to the largely androcentric structuralist and post-structuralist discourse on the gift, from Claude Lévi-Strauss's analysis of the "exchange of women" to Derrida's readings of Charles Baudelaire and Edgar Allan Poe, among others. To be fair, what I have called androcentrism is often empirically and historically justified insofar as theorists such as Lévi-Strauss and Derrida, in the cases I have cited, are writing about cultures and cultural artifacts in which women have traditionally appeared and served as objects. Nevertheless, by casting women as desiring subjects and participants in exchange, the writers here help us to demystify and think beyond the long-term limit of structuralist and psychoanalytic theories alike – that is, the riddle of femininity.

If a vestigial trace of youthful identity politics played an initial role in my selection of texts by four women writers, "Modernism's Gifts" – to my delight – is in the end far from being a study about either *The Woman Writer* or, for that matter, womanly virtue. I have already stressed that the gifts considered here and the impulses behind them are neither "good" (at least not in any orthodox manner) nor homogeneous. Arguably, heterogeneity is the keynote of the study as a whole, for the sociohistorical and class backgrounds of Stein, Woolf, Rhys, Smith, and their heroines are as disparate as the styles and the stakes of their texts. Of course, there are certain affinities among these authors and among their works. Thus while the novelistic heroines of chapters 2 and 3 are – like their authors – two of Anglo-American modernism's premier hostesses, the female protagonists considered in chapters 4 and 5 are – also like their authors – two of its quintessential guests. Yet insofar as the work of all four authors attests to the subject's oscillation between these two postures, the opposition between well-to-do hostesses and unfortunate guests tends to break down. Moreover, the fact that not only their female but also their male characters are figured

as beings bound by systems of exchange that well exceed the control of any individual – the fact that gifts are rendered the property of women and men – means that the opposition between the “feminine” and the “masculine” ultimately suffers a similar fate. It is in response to this deconstructive aspect of their work – far more than their identification as “women writers” (a disputable label in itself) or their particular politics – that I hazard the term “feminist” to refer collectively to the wide-ranging visions presented here.

My first chapter establishes a broad theoretical context for the project by exploring commonalities and disparities among the “modernist turn” in Anglo-American literature, the “return” of the gift discerned by Mauss, and the structuralisms of Lévi-Strauss and Jacques Lacan. In Chapter 2, I argue that Stein’s surreal *bildungsroman*, *Ida: A Novel* models an altruistic practice of “favors without favoritism” that rests upon what her work figures as a necessary division between money economies and gift economies, if one which ultimately proves impossible to maintain in the modern age. Chapter 3 juxtaposes Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* with *A Room of One’s Own* in order to argue that while the novel establishes the conditions of an alternative mode of hospitality that would subvert rather than support the hierarchical status quo – and in so doing imagines a gift immeasurable by money – the subversive potential of this alternative is undercut by the fact that money constitutes its material and conceptual ground. Chapter 4 reads against the grain of Rhys’s naturalistic materialism to argue that *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, by revealing “dispossession” to be an attribute all experience, works to imagine the possibility of sympathy between sexually and class divided subjects while nevertheless relegating this possibility to an unforeseeable future. In my final chapter, I argue that Smith’s *Novel on Yellow Paper* revamps the conventional novel of manners to prescribe an ethics of finitude that renders the recognition of our fundamental helplessness crucial

to our ability to help the other as such. Yet in suggesting that this critical reflection can slip all too easily into apathetic complicity with injustice, the text also reveals the dangerous limitations of this particular ethics and raises a question that goes to the heart of this study: indeed, if the texts explored in the previous chapters inevitably invite us to ask whether modernism's gifts could flourish outside of fiction, then Smith's novel urges us to evaluate the equally important issue of whether they should.

CHAPTER 1

A “Passion for the Gift”: Anthropology, Psychoanalysis, and the Modernist Novel

I.

In her 1956 memoir, *Shakespeare and Company*, bookshop proprietor and central fixture of cosmopolitan Left-Bank life Sylvia Beach recounts her first encounter with the then unknown Ernest Hemingway:

I looked up and saw a tall, dark young fellow with a small mustache, and heard him say, in a deep, deep voice, that he was Ernest Hemingway. I invited him to sit down, and drawing him out, I learned that he was from Chicago originally. I also learned that he had spent two years in a military hospital, getting back the use of his leg. What had happened to his leg? Well, he told me apologetically, like a boy confessing he had been in a scrap, he had got wounded in the knee, fighting in Italy. Would I care to see it? Of course I would. So business at Shakespeare and Company was suspended while he removed his shoe and sock, and showed me the dreadful scars covering his leg and foot. (78)

I begin with this anecdote because it is representative of the “passion for the gift” – a term I have somewhat perversely borrowed from Lévi-Strauss, who uses it to describe the potlatch practices of aboriginal cultures¹ – that I take to be characteristic of modernist literature. Why choose this particular act of generosity? After all, *Shakespeare and Company* is teeming with examples of benevolence – not only that of Beach, but also that of James Joyce’s frequent financial savior Harriet Weaver (or “Saint Harriet”), Janet Flanner, and Annie Winifred “Bryher” Ellerman, among others. As Beach takes care to show, the “philanthropy” of Bryher in particular was especially vast and varied, ranging from her patronage and emotional support of artists (most of all H.D.) to her donation of the “most valued ornament” in Beach’s shop – a bust of

¹ See *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* 54.

William Shakespeare, its “Patron Saint” – to the rescue of “dozens of Nazi victims” during World War II: in all, she “has done more than anyone knows to maintain international contacts throughout the wars, and to keep together her large family of intellectuals, who are dispersed in many countries” (102-103). Why, then, focus on this little exchange between Beach and Hemingway?

What distinguishes this story is the way in which it not only documents Beach’s hospitality but also encodes the conditions of that hospitality. In this respect, it is exemplary of the work of the four writers on whom I focus here: Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, Jean Rhys, and Stevie Smith. Across their work, these writers use innovative storytelling strategies and stylistic techniques to ground the possibility of noncommercial forms of exchange and to mythologize the advent of their own passions for the gift – that is, their passions for conceiving gifts and forms of relation that exceed the domain of the market. Admittedly, Beach’s story is far more straightforward than most of the writing I will consider in the following chapters. Yet it is precisely for this reason that it holds appeal, for what it captures in its simplicity is a mood, a basic presupposition: *one gives*. It is, in some respects, as simple as that.

In *Minima Moralia*, amid the catalog of tolls taken by the market on human impulses and personal relationships, Theodor Adorno observes, “We are forgetting how to give presents” (42). Modernist literature, I will argue, reminds us how, not by advocating a return to a phantasmatic premodern or “primitive” past, but by charting criteria for gift rituals appropriate to the present. In this respect, my authors do not “remember” lost or abandoned practices so much as they invent new practices befitting the conditions of modernity and especially the throng of formerly obscured subjects born on its watch – namely, women. Through their literary praxes, these writers answer questions such as: What counts as a gift? What function should the gift serve? What form should the relation between a donor and recipient take? Who

deserves to be a recipient? What does it mean to be generous? Is generosity an inveterate impulse or an acquired taste? Is it a universal trait or limited to a select few? What motivates magnanimity? Is altruism ever pure? Should it be? What differentiates the gift from other forms of exchange?

How, then, does modernism convert generosity into a narrative technique? To provide one example and set the stage for my overarching argument, I want to look briefly at the passage with which I began, and specifically its final three lines. After Hemingway has told Beach that his knee was wounded while “fighting in Italy,” the passage proceeds: “Would I care to see it? Of course I would. So business at Shakespeare and Company was suspended while he removed his shoe and sock, and showed me the dreadful scars covering his leg and foot.” If business at the shop is suspended, how is it suspended? What carries the authority to make it “so”? What has happened is that Beach and Hemingway have come to an agreement: “Would I care to see it? Of course I would.” If, as critics such as Adorno and Walter Benjamin have argued, market society conceals its “visible sores” in part by exiling the signs of our mortality, then the contract forged by way of this verbal exchange means bringing those sores into relief, exposing the “dreadful scars” that are otherwise obscured (*Minima Moralia* 42). That Beach later describes Hemingway as being endowed with a “storyteller’s gift” is especially fortuitous, both because it begins to indicate that the “gifts” at stake in this study are not the sole property of women and because it recalls us to Benjamin’s claim that the banishment of dying from “the perceptual world of the living” in the modern age is coextensive with the decline of the craft of storytelling (“The Storyteller” 151). Benjamin’s storyteller “borrowed his authority from death,” which is “the sanction for everything that the storyteller can tell” (151). As “the deepest shock in individual experience,” the event that most resists collectivization, death is the incommunicable something – the Thing – with respect to which all other

experience is rendered communicable: in escaping speech, It gives speech its authority (158).

As the residue of injuries sustained while serving as an ambulance driver during World War I, Hemingway's scars are a testimony to our capacity both to inflict and to endure suffering, to harm and to help the other. They are, at base, a sign of our implication – for better *and* for worse – in a vast network of relations, of a fundamental connectedness that is the source of both our vulnerability and our authority. In consenting to see the scars, Beach not only enters into a new relation, but also acknowledges this element of preexisting relation. Suspending business does not entail transcending constraints placed on the individual by the market, but removing those constraints in order to see what they conceal.

II.

In order to elaborate the connection between the dominance of the market and the concealment of relation, I want to turn to the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan and specifically to the link drawn in his work between the spread of capitalism and the ascent of the ego. In his seminar of 1969-1970, Lacan refers to the ego as the “little master” (30). As such, it is modeled, in our time, on the “modern master, whom we call the capitalist” (*XVII* 30-1). This formula allows us to contextualize and ground his description of the formation of the “*I* function” in his classic essay on the “mirror stage” from 20 years earlier in the *Écrits*. There, Lacan argues that the identity of the subject is forged by way of a fundamental misrecognition: by identifying with the totality reflected in the mirror, a form given to him from without, the infant “assumes” a specular image at odds with his being – that is, with the fact that he is “still trapped in his motor impotence and nursling dependence” (76). The ideal ego (Freud's *Ideal Ich*) for which the subject mistakes himself “situates the agency known as the ego [*moi*]” substituting a mirage of totality for the *corps morcelé*, the “fragmented body”

of the drives (76, 78).² As “the finally donned armor of an alienating identity [*l’armure enfin assumée d’une identité alienante*]” – a phrase that confirms Freud’s suspicion that “there must be something added” to the autoerotic instincts of the child in order for the ego to develop since no “unity comparable to [it could] exist in the individual from the start” – the ego is “orthopedic” in the full etymological sense of the term.³ Its initial formation and ongoing fortification is corrective, but the restoration of order it affords is always illusory. Amid “the shattering of the *Innenwelt* to *Umwelt* circle” in the mirror stage – that is, the introduction of an irremediable disjunction between the “inner world” of the subject and his external reality, the imaginary, that follows from it, squaring the ego’s account (“*la quadrature...des récolements du moi*”) becomes impossible: the difference can never be made up. Another way of framing the problem would be to say that the inadequation of the subject to the ego – the difference between what are rather coarsely classified here as inner and outer worlds – can only be resolved in or by way of fantasy. In other words fantasy is our primary means of engagement with the world. But why is this so?

Lacan suggests that the end of the mirror stage is marked by the transformation of the “specular *I*” into the “social *I*” (79). This “moment” of transformation coincides with the inauguration of a dialectic that “tips the whole of human knowledge into being mediated by the other’s desire, constitutes its objects in an abstract equivalence due to competition from other people, and turns the *I* into an apparatus to which every instinctual pressure constitutes a danger, even if it corresponds to a natural maturation process” (79). The mirror stage, in a sense, prepares the subject for participation in a society colonized by the doctrine of competitive individualism. The market, I would argue, is what renders the “specular *I*” the basis of the “social *I*” – what recommends

² For the original French see *Écrits* 93-100.

³ Lacan, “The Mirror Stage,” 77; Freud, “On Narcissism: An Introduction,” 77.

the mirror as the best figure for the social link, the means of exchange between the individual and society.⁴ The phantasmatic orientation instituted by the mirror stage is not “natural,” but casts what may remain of “nature” for the Lacanian subject as the enemy. Dispossessed of self-knowledge, alienated from a desire that can no longer be called one’s “own,” caught up in a fetishistic attachment to the object and a persistent fear of losing it to others – the modern master as characterized by Lacan is perhaps best summed up by a description that Julia Martin, the heroine of *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, gives of her first lover, the well-to-do Neil James: “He was anxious because he did not want to love the wrong thing” (115).

Ensuring that economic development serves as the template for individual development, that *homo economicus* is firmly established as the end at which humanity aims, requires yet another “added something” (to borrow Freud’s terms), something more even than is required for the formation of the ego: “The very normalization of this maturation is henceforth dependent in man on cultural intervention” – an “intervention” that we might call ideology (in an Althusserian mode) or fiction or myth. While the term “fiction” is probably the most forgiving and least defamed of the three, “myth” begins to acknowledge the debt that Lacan owed to anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. So, too, does the example he offers of such an intervention – “the fact that sexual object choice is dependent upon the Oedipus Complex” (79). Lacan suggests that the Oedipus complex does cultural work: it “normalizes” the developmental process whereby desire comes to be identified with the desire of the other – in this case, the alignment of the son’s desire with that of his

⁴ In *The Regime of the Brother: After the Patriarchy*, Juliet Flower MacCannell argues that under the conditions of Enlightenment modernity, equality is imaginable on the condition that the ego – namely the white male European ego – constitutes the “principle of the collective,” a principle according to which the other is at once forsaken and reduced to a reflection of the selfsame (17). Made in the universalized image of the Brother – the avatar of humanity and political participation under the triumvirate of *liberté*, *égalité*, and *fraternité* – the modern group is libidinally bound “by negating difference: that is its moral and social contract” (30).

father. Whether the Oedipus complex makes preexisting incestuous desires seem normal or ensures that Oedipal development remains the standard in practice is unclear. What matters, for my purposes, is that Lacan grants this fiction the power to determine object choice even if its efficacy in channeling the libido cannot be guaranteed. If the myth of Oedipus also has a kind of explanatory power, then it is because it duplicates a basic system of relations whereby the Other (for example, the Father) sets the standard for desire and competes for the object of that desire (for example, the Mother), a system that “The Mirror Stage” suggests is supported and exacerbated by capitalism.

The question of the particular work that the Oedipus complex is presumed to perform in the mid-twentieth century, when Lacan wrote “The Mirror Stage,” is made all the more difficult to answer in the wake of critics’ claims that Freud instituted the Oedipus complex as a “universal” standard for development at a time when it and the exogamic exchange of women subsequently mandated by the threat of castration, the paternal “No,” were already inconsistent with individual lived experience and what Lévi-Strauss referred to as the “social state.” Lévi-Strauss notoriously argued that despite the emergence of market society the exchange of women “has...maintained its fundamental function” of “ensuring the existence of the group as a group”: “the rules of marriage and kinship are not made necessary by the social state [but] are the social state itself” (62, 481, 490). Because woman is “a natural stimulant” and not just “a sign of social value,” she retains the status of “the supreme gift among those that can only be obtained in the form of reciprocal gifts” (62, 65). In other words, by straddling the divide between culture and nature, woman is a site where the referential bond between symbol and thing holds up: she is the last true gift, an anchor amid a sea of floating signifiers – or so it seems.

While her significance as the tie that binds the masculine group is “natural” rather than arbitrary, the “guarantee” upon which the prohibition of incest and the rule of reciprocity that govern exchange rests is, according to Lévi-Strauss, “fiduciary” (478). Thus Jean-Joseph Goux argues that in Western society the acts of renouncing or sacrificing one object (the mother, the sister) and acquiring another (a wife) are “completely dissociated”: “there is never in fact any socially recognizable reciprocity” (“The Phallus” 67). Goux attributes the virtualization of reciprocity to “the emergence of a monetary structure in exchange” with the initial rise of the Greek marketplace (69). According to Goux, “the monetary regime introduces a *split* which has the same logic as that which introduces the most open or ‘fiduciary’ forms of the exchange of women” (emphasis added 69). The Lacanian phallus – the “symbolic instrument” that supplements castration (the radical loss of biological or organic “integrity”) and governs psychic and libidinal exchange, of which the exchange of women is one imaginary manifestation – is symptomatic of this split (61, 62).

Despite the credence that Lacan gives to the Oedipus complex in “The Mirror Stage,” he also suggests that it comes to serve a “normalizing” function and emerges as a standard at a moment when it lacks referential authority – which is not to say that its idealization and propagation via so many institutional channels (from the academic to the mainstream) did not have and do not continue to have practical effects. In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan states that the “Freudian field is a field which, of its nature, is lost” (127). This field is the field of the unconscious, which he defines as “the sum of the effects of speech on a subject,” where the subject is in turn constituted “out of the effects of the signifier” (XI 126). That he defines the subject as being affected by speech and as an amalgam of effects produces some ambiguity: to be affected, a subject must already be in play, and yet the subject is only effects. There is no subject prior to the introduction of language, but the primordial

moment when the subject as such is born (so to speak), when the Symbolic “englobes” him, remains untraceable (*III* 81). The subject appears only as a vanishing point, the hole at the center of a knot where so many signifying chains converge, which is also to say that the subject is that which ultimately “disappear[s] from the chain of what he is” (*VII* 295). Because the loss of the Freudian field is “irreducible,” the “the cause of the unconscious” – the generative brush with an absent Other, the missed encounter that sets repetition in motion and compels the subject on a quest for the roaming *objet a*, the cause of desire – is “a lost cause” (*XI* 128).

Hence, the condition of “having” the phallus which distinguishes the masculine position for both Freud and Lacan is not tantamount to satiety, completeness, or plenitude: it does not mean having enough, but grounds a form of identity expressed in a dialectic of acquisition and loss, a dialectic exemplified for Lacan in the “comedy” of sexual exchange – boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl.⁵ This form of identity, indeed this form of life, admits to a fundamental lack, the fact that the lost object appears to be elsewhere, attainable as some other replica of the Mother, the Neighbor’s Wife of biblical fame, or whatever ideal is called upon to serve as the socially sanctioned stand-in for the absent Other, the Sovereign Good – which is also to say the good that would finally guarantee sovereignty. It is with respect to this Other that all other others are rendered interchangeable, substitutable – equal in their failure to be the Thing itself – at the level of the unconscious. As I have suggested, this lack, the absence of the Other, might also be conceived in terms of a failure of reference: it attests to the dehiscence of the phallus – a signifier “destined to designate meaning effects as a whole” within the “intrasubjective economy of the subject”⁶ –

⁵ See “The Signification of the Phallus”: “the intervention of a seeming [*paraître*]” – for example, the feminine “masquerade” – to mask the absence of a signifier that would mediate relation between the sexes has the effect of “completely project[ing] the ideal of typical manifestations of each of the sexes’ behavior, including the act of copulation itself, into the realm of comedy” (582).

⁶ “Signification of the Phallus” 579.

from the biological organ. This claim should not be confused with nostalgia for a time when phallus and organ were equal, but denotes the increased difficulty of putting faith in their equivalence, an equivalence that was always fictitious in nature.⁷ Kaja Silverman makes this point in *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* by aiming to “isolate[e] a historical moment at which the equation of the male sexual organ with the phallus could no longer be sustained,” a moment when the organ could no longer be mistaken for the cause of “having” the phallus and which she suggests is more or less coincident with the *fin de siècle*.

III.

Goux’s provocative claim that psychoanalysis and the symbolic structure it discerns in western society obey a monetary logic raises an important question: does Goux’s specific variety of economism do justice to the project of psychoanalysis, particularly as it is reformed by Lacan under the influence of structuralism? And if, as Gilles Deleuze has argued, all of the structures or “systems” delineated by structuralism (from Lévi-Straussian anthropology to Lacanian psychoanalysis, from Althusserian Marxism to Foucauldian epistemology) are “virtual” – they have a “reality” that “does not merge with...any present or past actuality” – then can we say that not only

⁷ Although Freud may have given H.D. the impression that “book means *penis* evidently” – that “as a ‘writer,’ only” was she “equal in the uc-n [unconscious], in the right way, with men” – he dissembled in suggesting that the hospitality of the Symbolic to men was a product of any natural or biological right (Letter to Bryher, 15 May 1933). Jean Rhys seems to me to come closer to the “truth” posited by psychoanalysis when she recalls thinking that God was a book. In her autobiography, *Smile Please* (a title that ingeniously encapsulates the irreducible breach between the object and the other), she writes: “Before I could read, almost a baby, I imagined that God, this strange thing or person I heard about, was a book...I could see the print inside but it made no sense to me” (20). The fact that Rhys could not yet read accounts for its illegibility, but its failure to make sense could be read two other ways: adopting a method of autobiographical analysis typical of Rhys criticism, we might argue that it anticipates a culturally conditioned failure of communication – that is, the failure of Rhys and her protagonists to gain recognition within certain value systems. But we could also take another route: in suggesting that God, the Book of all books, is nonsense this passage points toward the groundlessness of the Symbolic and signification, for it suggests that the idea of God primarily serves the function of a limit. We could go farther, for such a reading would suggest that the nonsensicality of Rhys’s heroines puts them on a par with the divine. That is to say that they – like Dora, another object of exchange – attest to the persistence of a surplus, a remainder that resists submission to the rationality of the master and thus (as I will argue in my reading of *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*) threatens his undoing.

psychoanalysis but structuralism in general is reducible to or explicable in terms of this economism (“Structuralism” 178)? Is money to blame for structuralism? Is there something about money that produces the “split” that Goux identifies or is there something about language, which Deleuze claims “is the only thing that can properly be said to have structure” (170)? Do economic conditions give rise to linguistic structures, or is economy – and the money economy in particular – the best metaphor for conceptualizing (if not an expression of) these structures?

Because it is not only my tendency but also that of the writers and works with which I engage here to give structuralism the benefit of the doubt – to suppose the primacy of some structure in conditioning human subjectivity and keeping total self-knowledge out of reach – the answers to these questions will not be foregone conclusions. Part of my project entails calling on the theoretical resources of both materialism and structuralism in order to explore how modernist writers differentiate between historical and structural forces of necessity in their attempts to outline “rules” of social engagement beyond the ethos of mastery supported by capitalism. “Rules,” according to Deleuze, are the means by which the “actualization” of any structure “is necessarily carried out” (179). Insofar as these rules shape alternative gift economies, the thinking at play in their texts is, in a sense, economistic. Yet in differentiating between capitalist and other forms of exchange their texts also insist that our concept of economy is not to be absolutely colonized or delimited by capitalism and the notions of the individual and the collective propagated by political economy. In this respect, their work participates in the project that Simon Jarvis undertakes in his essay, “The Gift in Theory,” the aim of which is to “offer some resources for rethinking the nature of economism” – that is, “the dogma that the real and fundamental unit of social ontology is the self-interested exchange, and that all other ways of thinking about exchange are myths, fantasies, ideologies or irrelevancies” (204). For Jarvis,

this means exposing the theological roots of political economy: he brilliantly demonstrates how the fantasy of the free gift comes to occupy the place formerly held by God and in so doing mystifies the uneven accumulation of surplus value under capitalism. Economism allows us to feign that all is fair when all is clearly not fair. Not only Lévi-Strauss – who famously concluded *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* by relegating “a world in which one might *keep to oneself*,” in which one might escape exchange, to an “equally unattainable past or future” (497) – but also Kant and Derrida belong to this tradition.

While no less concerned than Jarvis with bringing an historical perspective to bear on philosophical thought and different modes of knowledge production, I want to begin with the premise that the work of Lévi-Strauss, in discerning the possibility of a noncommercial ethics of exchange where Beach does in the passage with which I began – that is, *within* market society – is born of a certain critical impulse which is also operative in the work of the writers considered here. Their own production of fictions that locate the conditions for women’s recognition as subjects rather than their idealization as objects at the center of capitalism in turn puts them in the company of Lacan.

Lacan’s identification of the elementary structures of kinship with the Symbolic is generally interpreted as a sign of his collusion in a regime of compulsory heterosexuality. Thus, in a footnote to *Antigone’s Claim*, Judith Butler credits Kaja Silverman with being “distinctive among Lacanian theorists for insisting that the law of kinship and the law of speech ought to be considered separable from one another” (84, n.6). For Butler and Silverman, the presupposition of their inseparability carries the risk of universalizing the Oedipus complex: if this myth serves any normalizing function, then it is because Lacan follows Freud and Lévi-Strauss in helping to normalize it. But Lacan also underscored the inability of this myth to explain

femininity in general and hysteria in particular. Notably, while the hysteric is feminized, this position is not solely the “privilege” of women: “Many men get themselves analyzed who...are obliged to pass through the hysteric’s discourse, since this is the law, the rule of the game” (*XVII* 33). What does it mean to privilege hysteria? Is Lacan merely substituting one ideal of femininity for another? If Lacan endows the hysteric with a privilege it is because she bears the truth of the master, which is “that the master is castrated” (103). One need not venture beyond the myth of Oedipus to discover this truth: in blinding himself – a gesture tantamount to the castration complex (for Freud) and the concomitant introduction of the Name-of-the-Father (for Lacan) that put an end to the Oedipus complex – he repeats an initial signifying cut, for Oedipus has been, as we know, “blind” to the truth from the start. Blindness, or castration, constitutes the condition of the position he occupies as a master, who it should be clear is never truly the master of his own fate, within a particular discourse – that is, the master’s discourse.

The master’s discourse structures interpersonal address, which is the primary form of the social link. Within this schema, the master signifier designates the subject for another signifier, a “you” that is subordinated, like the Hegelian slave, to the ego. In privileging the discourse of the hysteric over that of the master, Lacan enacts what he describes as “a revival of the Freudian project upside down” (12). In the same seminar where he equates the modern master and the capitalist, Lacan rebukes Freud for abstracting from the speech of his patients evidence of *Penisneid*, or penis envy: “Why did he substitute this myth, the Oedipus complex, for the knowledge that he gathered from all these mouths of gold, Anna, Emma, Dora?” (97). With respect to the case study of Dora in particular, Lacan argues that Freud “covers with his prejudices” the “truth...that she embodies as Dora” (94). How does Dora embody the truth of castration? Lacan argues that the price of mastery is not only intrasubjective

but also intersubjective: the master not only represses the body of the drives, but is “only able to dominate by excluding her” – that is to say, by excluding femininity or sexual difference (97). Her otherness must be disavowed in order for the status of the master – a category that includes her father, Herr K, and of course Freud – to be maintained. She reappears from beyond the pale, but only in the guise of an object, the *objet a* (the phantasmatic cause of desire) and a phallic object exchanged among men. Jean-Michel Rabaté has argued that “this is precisely what Dora refused”: “She could not bear being excluded from the institutions of the gift and the law,” which is also to say that she could not tolerate participating in them *as* the gift rather than as its bearer, a subject under the law (90).⁸ In taking “the law” of the master as The Law, Freud cast Dora as the Echo to his Narcissus.⁹ By contrast Lacan, in drawing on the work of Mauss and Lévi-Strauss and adopting what Rabaté calls a “more systematic view of exchanges,” turned this law on its head, thus exposing the other side (*l’envers*) of psychoanalysis, what is forsaken in the interest of upholding the masculine – or, as Irigaray might say, *homosexual* – link instituted by the master’s discourse as the only possible form of social contract. This turn – a perspectival shift that is not unlike that which permits the suspension of business at Shakespeare and Company – permits Lacan to see the law of the master in a different light. The exclusion of difference also translates into a failure to circumscribe or encompass, to account for difference: in other words, women are not outside of discourse, but “are less enclosed” by it (55). That does not mean, however, that they have “no gift for it” (55).

⁸ Rabaté focuses on Seminar IV, *La relation d’objet*, a seminar little discussed by Anglo-American critics because it has yet to be translated into English.

⁹ It is a description that applies to his treatment of female subjectivity in general insofar as he strove to establish some symmetry between the masculine and feminine positions, defining them respectively as having and lacking the phallus, and presumed that feminine desire, like masculine desire, aimed at some *thing* – a “what” rather than a “whom.”

For Lacan, the unconscious is a reserve whose true value is knowable only by way of the speech that issues from the hysteric's "mouth of gold." We cannot help but detect some irony or at least some conflict at play in this rhetoric. On the one hand, this figure appears to smack of a certain nostalgia for presence, for a signifier worth its weight. On the other hand, the truth designated by the speech of the hysteric registers the fundamental impossibility of saying the whole truth: "the only way to evoke the truth is by indicating...that it cannot be said completely" (*XVII* 51). To continue Lacan's economic metaphor: the speech that issues from their mouths is gilded insofar as it testifies to the absence of the Other, of a Symbolic gold standard. Another way of stating the paradox – one that incorporates a term for which Lacan was routinely taken to task by Derrida but which nevertheless points toward their kinship as critics of sovereignty and, more specifically, as critics of the sovereignty of the ego in Western society¹⁰ – would be to say that "full speech" is that which issues from and indexes the split subject. For Lacan, it is only in the hysteric's discourse that this subject – that is, the subject as such – speaks. As Rabaté argues with respect to Seminar IV, Lacan, in returning to Freud, demonstrates "a more generous appreciation of Dora's gifts" (91). These "gifts" are immaterial – they include her love for her impotent father, her desire to support him in his castration, her help in illuminating the Freudian field – but they are far from worthless. Or, rather, they are worthless only from the perspective of the master's discourse, a system that privileges the illusion of authority over a

¹⁰ A logic similar to Lacan's underlies Derrida's suspicion that there may be no "worse violence than that which consists in...demanding that one *give an account of* everything" ("Passions" 25). And yet this violence underwrites democracy as we know it: democracy – at least "a certain determined and historically limited concept" of it – rests upon "the concept of a subject that is calculable, accountable, imputable, and responsible," which he elsewhere describes as "present and present to itself" ("Passions," 29; "Provocations," xxxiv). It is an illusion, but one under which we are called to respond as citizens, impossible to satisfy though the demand to say "the whole truth, nothing but the truth" may be.

confrontation with the underlying relations that sustain it – that privileges paper money over gold.

In revealing the insufficiency of an institutional, androcentric structure of exchange, Dora could be added to the list of women here who have a gift for discourse and whose work opens onto an alternative discourse of the gift. Despite his missteps in his analysis of the case, Freud had a hand in securing her place on this list by choosing for his patient, Ida Bauer, the pseudonym “Dora” – which not only resonates with the French *d’or* (hence, the “mouths *of gold*”) but also, as Rabaté reminds us, is “the Greek word meaning ‘gifts’” (Rabaté 92). My intention, however, is not to argue that Stein, Woolf, Rhys, and Smith are hysterics. Rather, like psychoanalysis under the aegis of the Lacanian return to Freud, the works considered in the following pages in effect write new laws (of kinship, of hospitality, of friendship) by outlining conditions that would foster otherwise buried gifts and prohibited social ties, ties rooted in the expression and recognition of differences within and between subjects. My aim is to decipher the various ethics of generosity at play in modernist literature – particularly the novel – and to map the intra- and intersubjective economic structures upon which they rest.

IV.

Why the novel? In *How Novels Think*, Nancy Armstrong argues that the “history of the novel” is the “history of the modern subject”: they are “quite literally, one and the same” (3). Armstrong argues that the British novel emerged in order “to formulate a kind of subject that had not yet existed in writing” – a subject whom we know as “the individual.” Once formulated, she argues, the individual “proved uniquely capable of reproducing itself” – in no small part because “its” desires and capacities, unlike those of its feudal forebears, were imagined to be “independent of social position” (3, 28). But if the individual is uniquely capable of reproducing itself then it is ultimately

because the novel is uniquely capable of reproducing *itself*. Drawing on the Derridean concept of the “supplement,” Armstrong argues that the novel facilitates the reproduction of the individual by demonstrating *how* the subject can become an individual, the very individual that he subsequently and retroactively imagines he always wanted to be. In other words, the novel is a “rhetorical additive” that demonstrates how to incorporate the “rhetorical power” it conveys: by establishing the rules for translating writing into subjective depth, it teaches you how to be yourself (28). Both here and in *Desire and Domestic Fiction* – where she reveals our proverbial heartstrings to be ideological effects – Armstrong in effect reverses this logic, exposing interiority to be little more than a fiction, a modern myth.¹¹

Linking her discussion to Lacan’s in “The Mirror Stage” we might say that the novel, for Armstrong, provides a general template for other forms of “cultural intervention” and is potentially the most efficacious tool in building a class of bourgeois individuals in the modern era. The first novel to which she turns, Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, certainly fits the bill for the kind of intervention that could normalize the maturation process set in motion by the mirror stage: according to Armstrong, Defoe “represent[s] Crusoe’s insatiable desire for property as a sequence of defensive maneuvers designed to preserve his life and belongings from imaginary predators” (35). While the specific contours and constitution of the individual at stake in the British novel change, the process of individuation consistently depends on techniques of disavowal and the rhetorical conversion of aggressiveness toward the other into a defense against him or, in the case of the nineteenth-century novel, her. For the “imaginary predators” and threat of barbarism that dictate the terms of the

¹¹ For Armstrong, this reversal – the reversal of the relationship between the subject and discourse – is the “signature move of all the major strains of poststructuralism” (29). Hence in “What feminism did to novel studies,” she suggests that “feminists influenced by poststructuralism read fiction as one, if not the major, cause of women’s confinement to the household and forms of service associated with motherhood” (107).

social contract and submission to the state in Defoe's novel also appear in Victorian fiction, but take the form there of monstrous, menacing women: "Victorian fiction characteristically used gender – the illusion of sexual difference – to maintain the illusion of inclusiveness. Once a novel recast the inassimilable features of masculinity as a woman, it could then proceed to cast out those features without sacrificing either the fantasy of universal man or the belief that certain human qualities were by definition outside the limits of Western culture and therefore less than human" (103). According to Armstrong's logic, the hero of the British novel, at least until the turn of the twentieth century, was the very individual whom Freud identified as the hero of all novels: "His Majesty the Ego."¹²

I want to take a cue from Armstrong and read the modernist novel as productive and performative and not simply reflective and mimetic. This is not to say that the performances enacted by the texts considered here were or have been efficacious or, to use J.L. Austin's term, felicitous. Rather, I want to suggest that modernist fiction practices a kind of wishful thinking. *How* it thinks marks a critical turn in the history of the novel and the subject outlined by Armstrong – a turn that I consider inseparable from what Marcel Mauss saw as the widespread effort "to rediscover a cellular structure" in post-World War I European society like that which regulated archaic societies (*The Gift* 68). This effort was discernible for Mauss in the establishment of new institutions, especially different components of the incipient social welfare state and the legislation of funding for unemployment, pensions, and other forms of insurance. Such institutional transformations coincided with the reappearance of "themes of the gift," which included a concern on the part of society for both the rights of the individual and the good of the community, and a sense of both the freedom and constraint that have always been "inherent" in gifts and the

¹² "The Relation of the Poet to Day-dreaming" 51.

contracts forged by way of their exchange (68). Together, he argued, they signaled a “salutary revolution,” a turn away from the “brutish pursuit of individual ends” – which is “harmful to the ends and the peace of all” and “rebounds on the individual himself” – and a “return” to “the law,” which I take to be the law of exchange (68, 77). What is the nature of this return? In claiming that the individual will eventually pay for his brutishness, Mauss suggests that a law of exchange governs our lives whether or not we acknowledge it. The danger posed by contemporary “egoism” and “individualism” – to which the return to the law provides one check – derives from their excessiveness (69). In order to avoid the destruction that inevitably follows from privileging either the self or the other too much, Mauss recommends a “moderate blend” of egoism and altruism, of defensive acquisitiveness and liberal expenditure (69). In this respect, *The Gift* provides yet another check against excessive individualism and works to further the very “salutary revolution” to which it calls attention. The success of Mauss’s effort to “rediscover” a structure of exchange that would serve as the basis of peaceful coexistence *and* explain the ego-shattering experiences of the recent World War can at the very least be measured in *The Gift*’s influence on Lévi-Strauss – no doubt his most indebted disciple – and on the fields of anthropology, sociology, and philosophy, among others. What, then, is the relationship between the return of the gift and the turn taken by the modernist novel?

Modernist literature not only provides ample evidence of the gift’s return, but also participates in a larger transnational and interdisciplinary critique of the tenets of individualism and what Mary Douglas, in her foreword to *The Gift*, refers to as the “impoverished concept of the person” at the heart of English liberalism (x). Such a claim may sound farfetched, particularly when propounded at the beginning of a study that promises to deal with *A Room of One’s Own*. Virginia Woolf was, after all, the preeminent member of a group whose primary concern, at least according to Raymond

Williams, was protecting the “sovereignty of the bourgeois individual” (“The Bloomsbury Fraction,” 165). What text could demonstrate this concern more fully than *A Room of One’s Own*, a manifesto on the necessity of privacy and reflective distance from the madding crowd to the expression of one’s own “gifts,” as well as the enjoyment and evaluation of others? My aim in revisiting *A Room of One’s Own* – which Woolf’s narrator takes care to classify as a “fiction” – and all of the other fictions considered here, from Beach’s recollection of her first encounter with Hemingway to Stevie Smith’s “foot-off-the-ground-novel,” *Novel on Yellow Paper*, is to bring into relief the still largely overlooked structure that underlies the often self-proclaimed individualism of modernism. My project – to trope on Lacan’s apt formulation – is a revival of the modernist project turned upside down. What intrigues me is why an essay on the indisputable benefits of freedom and solitude concludes with a twofold enjoinder to “face the fact, for it is a fact, that there is no arm to cling to, but that we go alone and that our relation is to the world of reality and not only to the world of men and women” (114). According to what logic is the ideal of contemplative freedom enjoyed by the woman writer while sitting in a room of her own atop a comfortable financial cushion suddenly converted into the inescapable fact of our radical helplessness and isolation? How can this “fact” be of a piece with the “fact” that we are nothing but bound by “relation” – by our relation to the world of reality (a world of inherently valuable things in themselves) on the one hand and by our relation to the world of men and women (a hierarchical world of standardized, mediated values)? How can we account for this apparent contradiction?

The fact of being ineluctably implicated in such relations constitutes the insistent other side of a notion of independence grounded in the possession of property, property which is material in the case of *A Room of One’s Own* (500 a year and a room with a lock on the door) but which may also consist of immaterial things,

such as the dignity and rights with which so-called “members of the human family” are endowed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, or the “self” over which the individual is presumed to exercise control according to a liberal ideal of self-possession. What accounts for the other side of such an ideal is the logic of the gift. In order to explicate this claim and provide an example of how the modernist novel incorporates this logic, thus hailing the return of the gift, I want to turn briefly to a text beyond the practical, but not the conceptual, boundaries of this study: James Joyce’s *Ulysses*.

In his short essay “Ulysses, Order, and Myth,” T.S. Eliot argues that Joyce, in writing his epic, sought to take “a step toward making the world possible for art” (130). How Joyce undertook this feat is as noteworthy as the temporality of Eliot’s suggestion that the literary work, in making the world possible for art, retroactively posits its own conditions of possibility. The world as it is – “an immense panorama of futility and anarchy” – “offers very little assistance” to the artist in the way of order or form (130). But *Ulysses* was not created ex nihilo: by using the Odyssey as “foundation” for his own text, Joyce was able to “manipulate[e] a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity” and thereby give “a shape and significance...to contemporary history” (130). Linking Eliot’s argument to Mauss’s, I would argue that Joyce appropriated from the Greeks what the present failed to offer – that is, the gift, by which I mean both themes of the gift (such as hospitality, paternity, rivalry, homesickness) and the economic structure that underlies its circulation. As the term circulation already implies, this structure – which corresponds to the paths traveled by Odysseus and Leopold Bloom in their respective narratives and to the common path of those narratives – is circular. This structure conforms to *oikonomia*, or the law (*nomos*) of the house (*oikos*). This law, as Derrida notes, dictates the return – of the gift, of the master – “to the point of departure, to the origin...to the home”

(*Given Time* 7). It is not just that the structure of the Odyssey is economic, but that the structure of economy is “*odyssean*”: Greek myth and metaphysics circle the same object, the same origin, the same idea of selfhood.

Odysseus, as Tracy McNulty has demonstrated, “is often read as a figure for the dialectical recovery of identity”: he leaves home only to find himself an unwitting host to “usurping suitors” upon his return (*The Hostess* xiii). The suitors represent “a sinister (but merely temporary) dispossession of mastery, which is regained when he expels the strangers and retakes possession of what is rightfully his” (xiii). The involuntary nature of his hospitality registers the threat posed to the host by his “potential interchangeability” with the guest (xii). This potential has an etymological parallel in Latin, in which the term *hostis* means both “host” and “guest.” But it is also the consequence of a conceptual problematic according to which the identity of the host – the nominal master of his domain – can only be constituted with respect to an outside or at the very least the idea of an outside, a guest not unlike Crusoe’s imaginary predators in Defoe’s novel. The self-possession of the host paradoxically depends upon the threat of dispossession – or, from another angle, the promise of dispossession made by his etymological identification with the guest. It is for this reason that Derrida can claim that the master “enters his home thanks to the visitor, by the grace of the visitor” (*Of Hospitality* 125). Nevertheless, their interdependence does not translate into symmetry, at least not within systems such as the master’s discourse which are closed, or function *as if* closed. Odysseus successfully slays his rivals: the host ultimately transcends the guest.¹³

¹³ The master differentiates himself from and claims supremacy over so many others, but only by negating the Other that insistently challenges his autonomy from within. Drawing on Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, McNulty argues that “the stranger or other is really ‘reactivating’ what is fundamentally a psychic encounter by modeling the ‘stranger inside’” – that is, the Other (xxv). What supports this accidental encounter – from the Hebrew Bible to Pierre Klossowski’s *Laws of Hospitality* – is femininity: “the feminine contests the autonomy of the host by giving voice to the alterity within personhood, functioning as the internal marking of the Other” (xxv). The hostess is, as McNulty

The various theorists and critics on whose work I have thus far drawn collectively suggest that recent history is distinguished by two phenomena: on the one hand, an overvaluation of the semblance of “having” which is the legacy of individualism, and on the other a sense of irrecoverable loss – what Georg Lukács might refer to as “transcendental homelessness.” What is missing is the symbolic cord – the myth – that would artificially connect them and attest to the necessary link between them, their fundamental interdependence: however triumphant its finale, the myth of Odysseus nevertheless reveals dispossession to be the condition of self-possession, castration the condition of mastery. Eliot claims that a “foundation” like the Odyssey had never before been used by novelists because it had “never before been necessary” (130). What has become necessary, what the modern world lacks, is just that – a perceptible foundation, a law that would make manifest the relation between these modalities of subjectivity. In dispensing with a conventional “narrative method” in favor of what Eliot calls the “mythical method,” Joyce in effect answered an exigent demand to bind the two poles of human experience.

Ulysses is one example of how modernist literature takes shape in response to a moment when the ideals that had anchored traditional fictions – such as the phallus that gave the Oedipal masculine subject his authority – had become *incredible*. I would argue that Joyce’s epic, despite its classicism and its loyalty to the structure of the Odyssey, also helps along the process of the destabilization of such ideals. In the “Ithaca” chapter, Leopold Bloom enjoys a homecoming replete with a scene of backyard micturation with Stephen reminiscent of another Freudian myth: in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud traces one of the first acts of “cultural conquest” – the control of fire – to a “homosexual competition” to see which primal

ingeniously suggests, the “host-es”: she welcomes the id, It, the Thing or *das Ding*, playing host to the drives, which the ego, despite itself, can never fully master.

man could tame “the natural force of fire” by “putting it out with a stream of his urine” (n. 4, 42-3). Of course, the surety of Bloom’s homecoming, as well as gender norms in general, is problematized in *Ulysses*, not least by the novel’s conclusion with the “Penelope” chapter. We could hardly say that Bloom has regained mastery of his domain or, for that matter, that Molly constitutes his most precious possession. After all, Molly Bloom is not your average Angel in the House.

The turn to her perspective in the concluding chapter of *Ulysses* is but one way in which the text suggests to me that the crisis in foundations with respect to which modernism is so often defined did not simply present artists with a problem. This crisis, I will argue, also presented an unprecedented opportunity: an opportunity to conceive systems capable of accommodating and supporting those forms of desire, agency, value, and relation – in sum, those *gifts* – excluded by so many closed systems, from the circular economy of the Odyssean epic and the self it models to the human community that, according to Armstrong, Victorian fiction helped to circumscribe. The texts in this study reveal the illusory nature of these systems’ closure and treat this revelation as an invitation to rethink the grounds of community, even to think a community without a common ground.

This thought can be fleeting. In a novel such as Rhys’s *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* – a text unlikely to prompt words like “hope” or “change” in even the most perverse game of free association – it is barely perceptible. Detecting it, though, enables us to flesh out Rhys’s economism by revealing the dependence of *all* of her characters on the symbolic recognition continually denied to her heroines. Without reducing the poverty plaguing her heroines to a figure for some other psychological drama, I will argue that Rhys upholds dispossession to be a fundamental attribute of the subject as such and in so doing embeds an immanent critique of mastery where critics tend to see only what her heroines see: the insurmountable impasse of class

division. In other words, Rhys's male and female protagonists are more similar than either they or critics are prone to admit. At stake in the admission of this *formal* similarity – the common fact of being blind, especially to our own blindness – is the possibility of recognizing the formerly excluded and objectified other as a subject, a being blind like me. But it is also what makes relation, beyond a certain point, impossible. If recognition of my own blind spot is what allows me to see the other, then it is also what continues to obstruct my view. Hence, the removal of the impasse imposed by the imaginary constraints of narcissism brings into relief a structural limit to relation, an impasse that necessarily remains insurmountable. It is because of this residual impasse that the community toward which *Mackenzie* looks must be understood as lacking a common ground. Put somewhat differently: the ground shared by its members, the thing they have in common, would be lack.

In order to clarify this point further and take a step toward explaining my polymorphous use of the term “gifts” (to signify forms of desire, agency, value, and relation) I want to draw on Goux's concept of “symbolic economies.” Symbolic economies are value systems, but they also provide a structure for bringing things – or people – into relation. As Goux notes, they institute a hierarchy between “an excluded, idealized element and...other elements, which measure their value in it” (*Symbolic Economies*). The “measuring object” functions as a general equivalent, an “ideal standard external to exchange” which by dint of its exclusion enables comparison among otherwise perceptibly different entities (4). It is the Good that must be banned such that other goods might circulate within what is thus a closed system. Money is the primary but by no means the only example of such a Good. Other examples would include the Oedipal Father who sets the standard for the masculine subject within a patriarchal regime, the transcendental signified that guarantees the transmission of meaning within logocentrism, or the Mother to whom

no wife can quite measure up. It is with respect to such Goods – whether emblemized by Milton’s Bogey in *A Room of One’s Own*, by the abstract idea of money in Gertrude Stein’s critique of FDR and the New Deal in *The Saturday Evening Post*, or the matrimonial fantasies peddled by the fashion papers in *Novel on Yellow Paper* – that the texts here register distrust, uncertainty. Although the foundations and ideals they cast into doubt vary, they all pose some challenge to the idealism supported by these various symbolic economies. To adopt the term forsaken as the original title of Wyndham Lewis’s 1937 novel *Revenge for Love*, we might argue that they share a suspicion of “false bottoms.” For what is this image of an exceptional Good that is made to serve as a common ground if not a “false bottom”?

While the writers here share Lewis’s distaste for false bottoms, their texts also manifest some discomfort with what Michael Levenson has referred to as modernism’s “uncanny sense of moral bottomlessness” (5). We should recall that the ideals that ground symbolic economies also serve an ethical function: if the phallus is revealed to be missing from its place once its veil is removed, then there is no guarantee of equality among the men to whom it is supposed to lend support. If it is revealed that there is nothing about woman that renders her the natural object of masculine desire, then there is nothing to ensure reciprocity, to stop peaceful exchange from slipping into war. But the question remains: is that such a bad thing? What arbitrary injustices might be redeemed if a gap is thus wedged between the symbolic and the imaginary? The challenge to which the novels here implicitly respond is how to think equality without taking recourse to yet another false bottom, how to foster an ethics of exchange without resorting to ideological violence or the sacrificial logic of mastery. Its difficulty derives for Stein in particular not from the fact that there is no bottom, but from the fact that there are – if I may extend the metaphor one step farther – *too many* bottoms.

In her lecture, “The Gradual Making of The Making of Americans,” Stein notes that since a young age, she was driven by a “passion for knowing the basis of existence” in “everybody,” for knowing “everything that was inside them that made them that one” (136). This epistemological passion had ethical ramifications: driving this determination to discover the ontological makeup of any given individual was an impulse “to help them change themselves to become what they should become” – to help them realize what she eventually called their “bottom nature” (137). It is worth lingering for a moment over this passion. Certainly we can grant that children are curious creatures. Yet how many children are driven by a passion not only to learn about everybody, but also to *help* them? Or might the point be that only a child is capable of sustaining this passion, is equipped with the courage to pursue a task that may yield no return, for who can say that one will end up helping at all? Is it only from the perspective of adulthood that this passion comes to seem peculiar? Is it only with maturity that one learns to set aside such improbable tasks? One cannot possibly help *everybody* – at least, not by using such a tedious empirical method of engaging with them one by one by one.

Without implying that Stein’s self-proclaimed passion for helping each and every other realize his or her “bottom nature” should serve as a standard for measuring the success of any of the novels here, I want to argue that this formula aptly describes the impulse behind the culture of modernism at stake in this study. The abstract character of Stein’s language – her curiosity about “everything that was inside them that made them that one” her desire to “help them change themselves to become what they should become” – is symptomatic of the structural problem before her: how does one account for the whole without sacrificing the singularity of its parts? The passion that turns this theoretical question into a problem to be confronted by art, in writing, is what I have called a passion for the gift. Notably, the term “gift” assumes a dual

connotation in this context, for while it may refer to the help that Stein would supposedly like to give everybody, it also alludes to the bottom nature of the subject. While this nature is tantamount to the peculiar property that constitutes the unique gift of the individual, the actualization of this gift would not be possible if it were not for some added support: we depend on others for our most precious possession, our most personal property – our “nature.” We become ourselves there where we are least ourselves, where we are dispossessed.

We can thus discern the difference between the offering made by modernism and the help doled out by Victorian fiction. In revealing dispossession to be *the* fundamental attribute of the subject, modernism in effect deconstructs the ideology of individualism that Armstrong suggests is typical of its forbears. The novels here recuperate those elements of the subject that are rendered inassimilable to normative ideals of masculine identity and by extension humanity, and recast them as gifts – indeed, as the distinguishing marks of the human. Though these gifts – from the penchant for granting favors in Stein’s *Ida* to the masochism of Rhys’s characters, from Mrs. Dalloway’s hospitality to the knack for suffering that Pompey identifies as the “gauge of life” in *Novel on Yellow Paper* (236) – are feminine by tradition, they are not the sole property of women. Rather, the four novels treated here all reveal supposed differences between men and women to be differences within the subject as such. But this raises an important question: why focus on the work of four women writers? In making gender a principle of selection am I not undoing the work that these writers have done to “undo gender”?

V.

As my earlier discussion of Joyce implied, there are men who would potentially qualify for inclusion in this study for various reasons. E.M. Forster – a self-proclaimed “individualist” belonging to the “fag-end of Victorian liberalism” whose

novels, by his own account, stress “the importance of personal relationships and the private life” – is no doubt the most fitting candidate (*Two Cheers for Democracy* 67). The tension in his work between an imperative to “connect” and a sensitivity to the sociohistorical conditions that bar connection is certainly echoed here. Indeed, like Forster, who famously hoped that he would “have the guts” to betray his country if he “had to choose between [that] and betraying [a] friend,” so the writers here tend to cast their lot with Antigone rather than Creon (78).

In arguing that modernism revamps the novel to suit anti-totalitarian, anti-identitarian forms of social organization, thus bringing the resources of literature to bear on the task of re-envisioning community, public life, and the grounds of belonging, this project dovetails with a number of recent studies¹⁴ and enables us to draw a crucial distinction between the notion of the gift at stake in this study and that which Mauss delineated. Whereas Mauss insisted that the gift was an inevitable expression of “that ‘basic imperialism’ of human beings,” the novels here aim to avoid repeating the violence of what we might call benevolent imperialism, examples of which would include the criminal kindness that Peter Walsh observes in Hugh Whitbread in *Mrs. Dalloway* and the sinister hospitality shown to the unbearably hapless heroine of Rhys’s first novel, *Quartet*. That is not to suggest that they do not echo Mauss’s suspicion of our inveterate impulses. On the contrary, they all lend credibility to the pronouncement of Beckett’s anti-hero Molloy that philanthropic acts are fundamentally aggressive: “Against the charitable gesture there is no defence” (24). And yet this threat only makes it all the more exigent to *give* the other a prize typically reserved for the altruistic donor rather than the recipient – that is, space. In

¹⁴ See for example, Jessica Berman, *Modernist Fiction, Cosmopolitanism and the Politics of Community*; Christine Froula, *Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Avant-Garde: War, Civilization, Modernity*; Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities*; and Rebecca Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation*.

working to conceive gifts that secure room for the individual – room to write, to think, to dream, to desire, to live – *without* sacrificing or subjugating the other, the novels here often suggest that the most generous gift may be privacy. For privacy, they insist, is not necessarily a given, but the precious possession for which we all ultimately depend on others. Moreover, as Woolf takes care to demonstrate in *A Room of One's Own* and as we are reminded every time a Rhys woman is approached by a stranger – whether to take advantage of her apparent hospitality or just to affirm her misfortune by offering his two cents about her condition – it is a right traditionally denied to, or we might say withheld from, women.

It is because of their longstanding exclusion from exchange and structural analysis of exchange, and because of their endowment with political and economic rights during the interwar period that historically frames my discussion here, that I have chosen to focus primarily on texts written by women. In casting women as either goods or the Good, the elementary structures of kinship leave “no room for her person” – to cite Lacan’s analysis of the seemingly paradoxical treatment of woman as a degraded object of exchange and an idealized Object of Courtly Love under feudalism (*Ethics* 147). Crafting novels at a time when women had long since taken to the streets – as shoppers, suffragettes, laborers, social reformers, and the most prominent of “public women,” prostitutes – the writers here suggest that the Lévi-Straussian fiction of exchange is quite simply outmoded, *passé*. The question is what form of social contract would make room for her person, allow her to come into relief and participate in exchange as a subject. What would allow women the “space of relaxation” that Lacan claims has been afforded to men as the privileged addressees of prohibitions and other “collective, socially accepted sublimations” (99). Of course, sublimations such as the incest taboo (which keeps the Mother at bay) and Courtly Love (which relegates the Lady to the moral high ground of the symbolic function)

also reinforce heteronormativity – whether they do so successfully or not is another question.

The challenge is to think a form of relation between men and women that would permit for difference without reducing the latter to an object (a thing to be possessed) or raising her to the status of a comparably inhuman Other (the Thing that takes possession). Or rather, the challenge is to recognize that one is *also* prone to becoming an object for others and driven by impulses in excess of any ideal of personhood. While one of the central topoi of *A Passage to India* might be summed up by the question of whether an Englishman and an Indian can be friends – a question to which novel woefully answers “not yet” – this study will return on occasion to the question of whether men and women can be friends. This question also runs the risk of sounding outmoded, *passé*. Repeatedly taken up by the culture industry, it has tended to presuppose the same heterosexual norms that I want to undermine here. But however frivolous the question of the possibility of friendship between men and women may sound after so many misbegotten iterations, it is worth remembering that the question only presents a theoretical and practical problem as of a certain historical moment, once her authority – at least in name if not always in deed – is no longer confined to domestic and cultural spheres of influence. Aristotle grants that there may be friendship between a husband and wife, but it inevitably “involves superiority” since they are “unequals,” of “different excellence and function” (211). Can there be a “perfect friendship” between a man and a woman like that which Aristotle claims “good men” can enjoy, a friendship whereby “each loves the other for what he” – or she – “is” (205)? Can a woman prove that she is “worthy of love and so [win] his trust” (206)? Can they “be friends for their own sakes,” thereby treating friendship and one another as ends in themselves (207)? What forms of exchange across difference are possible beyond negotiation of the sexual contract?

The centrality of these types of questions to this study reveals one of the reasons why I have not included readings of, for example, Joseph Conrad – despite the testimony of his work to the impossibility of replicating the Odyssean homecoming under the conditions of modernity and his explicit association of art with a noncommercial tradition of gift exchange. In his Preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus,'* Conrad famously declared that “the artist appeals to that part of our being which is not dependent on wisdom; to that in us which is a gift and not an acquisition – and, therefore, more permanently enduring” (50). His description of art as a supplement that animates the subject, as the gift that fosters our gift, recalls Stein’s account of her *bildung*, in which she traces her writerly ethic – her compulsion to account for everybody – back to her childhood passion for helping others become what they should be. Nevertheless, when Conrad proclaims that the artist “speaks to...the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity...which binds men to each other, which binds together all humanity,” I am not convinced that the interchangeability of “men” and “humanity” is merely idiomatic or figurative. As one of the two characters in Woolf’s essay “Mr. Conrad: A Conversation” remarks, “there are no women in his books” (312). Or as his interlocutor, the aptly named Penelope, suggests, there are women, but they “are either mountains of marble or the dreams of a charming boy over the photograph of an actress” (312). As figurative vehicles – woman as matter or woman as idea, impenetrable monolith or luminous figment – these two types are differently ungraspable, but equally phantasmatic. Either way, women are where Marlow suggests they “should be” and where he needs to believe they should be in *Heart of Darkness* – “out of it” (80).

My decision to focus on texts written by women does not derive from appreciation for their “realism” or essentialist presuppositions about the superiority of their capacity to represent women as subjects. Yet even if this decision is justified by

the argument that their work diversifies, complicates, and modernizes the field of gift discourses and practices by making significant literary and sometimes feminist contributions to it, in making women the bearers of the primary novelistic “gifts” under consideration here, I run the risk of falling in line with another strain of scholarship on the topic, one which claims that “in a modern, capitalist nation, to labor with gifts (and to treat them as gifts, rather than exploit them) remains a mark of the female gender” (Hyde 108). How feminist critics in particular have viewed the exceptional position of women with respect to political and economic institutions varies: for difference feminists such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, it can constitute a liberatory flight, a collective refusal of commodification, and a decision by women to “enjoy their own worth among themselves.”¹⁵ For others, the association of women with gift rituals simply reinforces a sexist ideology of separate spheres that restricts feminine authority to the cultural domain, thus denying women access to full social, political, and economic participation as rights-bearing citizens. Thus Mark Osteen notes that “the more common feminist response has been to interpret women’s association with gifts as a sign of oppression” (19). The tension between these two responses then opens onto questions about power, such as: Is cultural authority a legitimate form of power? Should it be? What political ends are actually served by the presupposition that it is or is not? Far from being confined to feminism, these questions intersect with a wide range of debates, some very specialized (on topics such as the importance of redistribution versus recognition to social justice) and some very general (on topics such as the responsibility and reach of the state). In this respect, they are indicative of how analysis of the gift will help me on occasion to illuminate elements of the different “politics” of modernism.

¹⁵ Irigaray, “Commodities among Themselves” (198). See also Irigaray’s “Women on the Market” and Cixous, “Sorties.”

The issue of whether the feminization of the gift marks women's witting escape or violent exclusion from the social order echoes Woolf's discussion of the "outsider" in *Three Guineas*: there, possession of the right to earn a living constitutes the difference between being banished by and being proudly incommensurable with English society. The gendered posture of the outsider becomes a vantage point from which to exert influence on the public sphere – it is "from that difference...that our help can come" – only after economic independence has been assured and sexual equality has been won in a conventional political register (103-104). In suggesting that help comes from difference, Woolf in effect revises what counts as help – indeed, as a gift. Each of her three petitioners has requested only a guinea. In sending each one a guinea and a letter – and not just any letter, but a footnoted polemic on patriarchy, imperialism, and capitalism – her responses are excessive and (as any attentive reader can attest) are certain to take a significant amount of time away from other obligations. That, of course, is precisely the point. The value of the gift and its transformative potential derive from the fact that it throws business off course, overrunning the routine boundaries of exchange. The charitable donation of a guinea would have sufficed, but for that reason it would not have been a gift.

What is most important about *Three Guineas* for the immediate purposes of my argument is its suggestion that these two positions – one that entails having money and thus being equal to men, and another that entails being different and thus having the potential to help transform the still hierarchical world of men and women – are occupied by the same subject. For Woolf, the "double vision" of the outsider, an individual who is "both in and out,"¹⁶ clearly hinges on a degree of financial stability and class privilege shared by Gertrude Stein and their respective heroines but far less

¹⁶ The term "double vision" appears in a wide variety of texts, from her brief 1924 essay, "Joseph Conrad" (from which the citation here is taken) to the diary she kept up until her death in 1941. See "Joseph Conrad," 304.

familiar to Jean Rhys, Stevie Smith, and their female protagonists. This contrast has the welcome effect of underscoring the practical as well as the conceptual limitations of the white middle-class feminism for which Woolf has long served as an icon, particularly among literary critics.

Rhys especially brings into relief the peril of conceiving women's subjectivity beyond their status as goods as an extension of buying power. As we know, shopping was crucial to women's entrée into the public sphere during the nineteenth century; moreover, suffragettes in Britain and the U.S. during the early twentieth century frequently leveraged women's status as the primary buyers of the household to argue that their competence as consumers – their economic savvy, their parsimonious decision-making – would translate into competence at the polls.¹⁷ Without disavowing the efficacy of this move as a political strategy, I would argue that Rhys poses a sharp challenge to the sway that such an ideal of consumer citizenship has held over the feminist imaginary. The ramifications of this challenge extend well beyond feminism and the particularity of the “feminine” subject: given the claim made by many contemporary critics that ethical and political choice have been reduced to consumer preference for this product or that product – to the detriment of both ethics and politics – it would seem that the importance of thinking concepts such as freedom, equality, and agency beyond those options afforded by the ideology of the free market has increased with time. Arguably then, the questions raised by Rhys's work have only grown in urgency: at what cost do we uphold “having” as the condition of social participation? What happens to the credibility of speech without money to back it? What form would ethical engagement take if the subject were dispossessed of mastery? Does the emphasis put on self-possession as the condition of responsibility

¹⁷ See Alice Blackwell, “Woman Is Buyer,” and Margaret Finnegan, *Selling Suffrage*, esp. Ch. 1, “Consumer Culture and Suffrage Ideology.”

in effect constrain the field of possibilities for responding to the other? While Rhys's work invites reflection on these questions – many of which Woolf, to be fair, also foregrounds – it also testifies to the limitations of embracing dispossession as either an ethos or a figure. The poverty of protagonists such as Julia Martin in *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* is to be taken seriously: dispensing with the novel's materialism in favor of a metaphorical reading of her existential plight would be a mistake. But the novel also makes another claim: the fact that not everyone can afford to buy the benefits of social recognition – the illusion of autonomy, a sense of privacy, a feeling of self-possession – makes it all the more imperative that we offer these benefits freely. In this respect, the text lends support to Patricia Williams's insistence that "Society must give rights away" – namely, "the rights of privacy, integrity, and self-possession" (164).

But how can this claim be reconciled with the critique of identity and the mirage of selfhood on which so many of the stakes of this study rest? The answer is simple: it cannot. Then why hold onto it? Because if we did not, the text suggests, there would be no end to the demands made on feminine hospitality. This return to a liberal ideal of identity indicates the practical limit to the kindness that Julia as well as the other female protagonists here are willing to show to strangers. Julia reserves the right to say "no" – to the relentless advances of the out-of-towner in the London tube, to the salacious propositions of the unknown that follows her home. The fact that she is not necessarily heard on these and other occasions constitutes further evidence of the impossibility of mastery, the slipperiness of intention: just as our help may only cause harm, so might our call for help go altogether unanswered or be answered in a way other than we wish. As we know, a plea for a guinea may garner a letter.

VI.

Because we are all implicated in systems of exchange that exceed the control of the individual, the writers here suggest, authority is a social phenomenon, a consequence of an intersubjective agreement or contract. There is a contradiction here: in order for this contract to be forged, in order for me to give you authority, we must presuppose that you and I are already discrete entities. And yet, this presupposition is undercut by the fact that your authority and my authority, the identity of you and I, depends upon the formation of a contract. We are already entangled in a relation of mutuality and yet only affirmation of this mutuality – only a gift, a response, a gesture of recognition – will ensure that you and I are endowed with the freedom and security that should be our due. In offering these different configurations, I am essentially circling the aporia at the center of numerous theoretical critiques of sovereignty and ipseity, including those of Derrida and McNulty. But we need not stray far to find a neat summary of the problem I want to sketch. E.M. Forster describes it thus:

Psychology has split and shattered the idea of a 'Person,' and has shown that there is something incalculable in each of us, which may at any moment rise to the surface and destroy our normal balance. We don't know what we are like. We can't know what other people are like. How, then, can we put any trust in personal relationships, or cling to them in the gathering political storm? In theory we cannot. But in practice we can and do. Though A is not unchangeably A or B unchangeably B, there can still be love and loyalty between the two. For the purpose of living one has to assume that the personality is solid and the 'self' is an entity, and to ignore all contrary evidence.

(Two Cheers for Democracy 77-78)

A may not equal A. B may not equal B. The fact that there can be love and loyalty *between* A and B even though we cannot be certain of their respective identities may be a miracle, a practical necessity, a sign of foolishness – or all three. For Forster, our limited knowledge of ourselves and others seems like it should undermine our ability to “put any trust in personal relationships,” even if it does not. For the writers here,

the recognition of our personal limitations, of our own untrustworthiness beyond a certain point, is precisely what raises putting trust in the other to the level of an ethical imperative.

While *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* is especially demonstrative of this logic, the work of the other authors here evinces a similar rationale. Stein's essay, "The Gradual Making of The Making of Americans," is not only exemplary in this regard but also helps to illuminate tensions that will be in play throughout this study. In the essay, as noted above, Stein recalls her childhood passion for discovering the "bottom nature" of each and every individual and helping them to become what they should become. But how can one be certain of what anyone "should" become? Although becoming what one should become involves undergoing a change, it is the articulation and communication of what one already is – one's bottom nature – that makes manifest what the end should be. To summarize using Forster's cast of characters: A can only know what B should become and help B to become it if B is unchangeably B, if B is able to tell A what B is, *and* if A understands. Stein's formula makes sense only if the ontological ground of the self is not a moving one and if the self-identity of both persons is assured.

Hence, the moment that Stein suggests that the "bottom nature" of an individual, though it may be completely specific to that individual, nevertheless consists of "thoughts and words" shared by everybody, she implicitly encounters a problem (138). While the available stock of thoughts and words is finite, the communal treasury from which we all draw is capable of "infinite variations" (138). For this reason, the bottom natures of people are "endlessly the same and endlessly different" from one another (138). Not only are A and B the same and different, but so too are A and A and B and B. The words and ideas that make up our bottom nature change as a function of time. Stein alludes to this fact when she describes how she

would help others to change: “The changing should of course be dependent upon my ideas and theirs theirs as much as mine *at that time*” (emphasis added 136). As a being situated in time and open to the influence of others, the subject occupies the intersection of two different axes of relation, one temporal and one social. How then can we become what we should become? What should we become? How would we know? Answering the imperative to become ourselves appears to be impossible, for we become most ourselves there where we become least ourselves – where we are divided between past and future, between giving to and taking from others.

This presents a number of empirical dilemmas: if total knowledge of the other is the precondition for helping, but the other is always in flux, then when does the acquisition of knowledge end and the process of helping begin? How can one know what one should become if the basis of our existence is variable? How can one begin to hope to communicate her nature to the other and how can the other begin to hope to understand? What if A and B do not share the same thoughts and words? If becoming what one should become can be defined as the asymptotic approach of that point where the subject splits, does the process of helping ever come to an end?

If these questions are strangely familiar it is no doubt because at some level they begin to outline some of the many ways in which the “personal relationships” to which Forster assigned such importance can fail, as well as some of the dramatic and comedic plots that follow from those failures. Pursuing the deceptively simple claim that A is not unchangeably A to its logical conclusions can indeed make the fact that A and B ever manage to have a conversation seem miraculous. Nevertheless, in my reading of “The Gradual Making of The Making of Americans,” the changeability of A and B – the fact that we are situated at the intersection of so many circuits of exchange – is precisely what renders mutuality an ideal we are *obligated* to pursue. Insofar as our ideas, our words, and our time are shared, Stein suggests that we consist

of nothing but “knowledge” of and for the other. We are already giving and taking, even helping and being helped, whether we intend to be or not. Nevertheless some people, individuals like Stein, have “a passion” for knowing everything, for helping everybody to *change*. But how can one institute change if we are changing all the time? How can one change change? What differentiates the change born of a passion for change from the (ex)change that always constitutes us?

As I noted earlier, Stein remarks that the former “should of course be dependent upon my ideas and theirs theirs as much as mine.” For Stein, of course, all subjects consist of different combinations of the same ideas. This is verifiable – a fact she found to be empirically supported by data she gathered while running psychological tests as a college student under the tutelage of William James. But in dictating that different ideas *should* be given equal weight and that they should play equal parts in exchange in order for true change – change for the better – to happen, she implies that not all ideas are necessarily to be counted equally, which means moreover that the subjects whom they constitute are not to be counted equally. Stein offers no hint as to why equality among everybody is lacking despite the constancy of exchange. I argued above that what differentiates an open symbolic economy from a closed symbolic economy is the absence versus the presence of an ideal or general equivalent by which to measure its constituent parts. What extra something intervenes in the everyday flow of words and ideas in order to render some subjects worthy and others unworthy of consideration and inclusion? Is it the narcissism of the ego which makes some individuals more desirable than others, the capitalism of the master which renders some gifts more marketable than others? What obscures the fact that we are at base “endlessly the same”?

Instead of an answer to these questions, Stein offers a rule: everybody should count equally. By imposing this guideline, she in effect counters one false bottom

(whatever standard makes us seem unequal) with another false bottom (a standard intended to correct inequality). Hence the equality at which she aims by way of the imperative to count different ideas equally is not the equality that we actually share at base. A displacement has occurred. At bottom, the subject is heterogeneous, split between past and future, giving and taking: in other words, our bottom nature is a knot of differences. This subject is not the same one Stein calls upon us to respect. In order to demand that the ideas of each person be taken into account equally, Stein must presuppose the reconsolidation of identity. The triumphant return of the person is signified here by the characterization of ideas as personal property rather than shared resources. The neat division of ideas between “mine” and “theirs” admits to a shift: Stein has recast the differences *within* the subject as differences *between* subjects. While she thereby reproduces the sacrificial logic of mastery, according to which internal division is negated in favor of an illusion of consistency, she does not do without also acknowledging the failure of identity to account for the subject in her diversity. In other words, she does not abide by the ideal of personhood blindly. For the logic of mastery is undercut by the language she uses to describe the foundation of fair exchange.

“The changing” – which I have suggested is tantamount to fair exchange – “should of course be dependent on *my ideas and theirs theirs as much as mine*” (emphasis added). This single line of pentameter troubles the ideal of mastery it nominally upholds (through the use of possessive pronouns like “mine” and “theirs”) by retaining a trace of the divided subject. This trace, I want to argue, is perceptible in the imperfect repetition of the first half of the line upon its reversal in its second half. The substitution of “theirs as much as mine” for “my ideas and theirs” has the effect of clarifying the meaning of the first half: it is now clear that the two sets of ideas are to be weighed equally. Yet I am less interested in what these two phrases do at the level

of signification than I am in what they do at the level of form and in how the form assumes a special significance in its own right in the context of the essay. Although the number of words that make up each half of the pentameter varies, the two parts remain fundamentally equal, for both have the same syllabic count of five. Not only that, but in having the same trochaic rhythm (/ U / U /), they *harmonize*. In sum, this moment of poetry amid prose – this strange fit of passion – accomplishes quite a feat, one worth emphasizing since it is to provide the code for our ethical conduct. We should recall that according to the grammar of the sentence, these two phrases are supposed to tell us the conditions of “the changing.” What these ten syllables do and what the text by which they are framed thereby suggests that we “should of course” do is strike a balance: they achieve equality between two discrete units while also paying homage to their respective internal variations.

Insofar as this bit of text can be read as an allegorical formula for realizing social equality, we can link this balancing act to two others. The balance struck between appreciation for external differences and appreciation for internal differences translates into a balance between two different notions of the subject and, consequently, a balance between two different modes of relation. What Stein models in this moment is a balance between recognition of the self and other as subjects crisscrossed by competing impulses and bound by a network of relations on the one hand, and recognition of each as an autonomous person with a fixed identity on the other. While the former dissolves boundaries, admitting our capture by a network of relation that far exceeds the individual, the latter reinforces boundaries, confirming our capacity to engage and disengage from relation as we please. Help, the text suggests, comes from assigning equal importance to both – to the differences within the subject and the differences between subjects – at the same time. We must then wonder: Can the poetic justice achieved by Stein’s singsong pentameter be transposed into social

harmony? Can a gift speak to both modalities of the subject? In other words, is help, as Stein defines it, possible outside of poetry, beyond the immediacy promised by the frozen present of poetic discourse? What becomes of this balance under the duress of narrative time? How might the novel be better equipped in other ways to reveal our fundamental incoherence and insist that every individual be given her due – that is, be recognized as having just “as much” to give?

I have lingered over this brief moment in Stein’s text because it is, in my view, emblematic of the ways in which the novels here perform the ethics they describe and prescribe. Moreover, the emphasis it places on balance, in its form and content, exemplifies the centrality of motifs of equality, fairness, and justice in the work of all four of my authors – particularly insofar as their work at once counters the hegemony of some ideas (and the subjects to whom they “belong”) over others and suggests that we ultimately belong to ideas far more than they belong to us. This ideal of balance furthermore provides a template for my own attempt to negotiate between seemingly incongruous claims about where their texts stand – and where I stand – with respect to the question of sexual difference in particular. I follow their lead in trying to give equal credit to the differences within and between subjects, to draw out the ways in which their work deconstructs gender norms by ascribing traditionally “masculine” and “feminine” attributes – not least, a passion for the gift – to both male and female characters, while nevertheless affirming a certain sexual asymmetry, often but not only for strategic sociohistorical reasons, such as when the narrator decides to remain an Outsider in *Three Guineas*. I similarly suspect that it is from their difference that the help of these writers can come – not only the difference of their work from that of their male predecessors and contemporaries, but also their differences from one another. The diversity of their styles – that the poet Robert Nichols was sure that Woolf wrote Smith’s *Novel on Yellow Paper* continues to baffle me – and of their

heroines is testimony to the impossibility of measuring them or their work by any single ideal of femininity. The same applies to their politics: my discussion of Stein's critique of the New Deal in chapter 1 should make clear that anatomical womanhood will not figure in my argument as a platform for progressive politics. (Indeed, I remain convinced that "Patriarchal Poetry" is an encomium rather than a jeremiad and that Stein sought to fix a place for herself in the paternal pantheon of artists – a feat which the hanging of her portrait by Picasso in the Metropolitan Museum of Art has perhaps helped to assure.)

While insisting on these points I also want to contend that their work offers important counterpoints not only to discourses explicitly focused on the gift but also to a recent spate of theoretical work by critics such as Eric Santner and Judith Butler which argues that the possibility of ethical engagement in the modern world hinges on what Santner (following Walter Benjamin) calls "attentiveness" – attentiveness to the singular injuries and pleas of the other as well as our common vulnerability. For critics such as Santner in *Creaturely Life* and Butler in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, the work of Franz Kafka is exemplary, both attesting to the fundamental exposure that defines the human condition and illustrating some of forms that the demand for attentiveness might take. In focusing their narratives on the experiences of women, the writers here add to and variegates the field of forms from which critics routinely draw. At stake in this study is not only the question of what women give, but also the question of what women want – of what gift they seek from their exchanges with others particularly amid their emergence as public figures. Rejecting the Victorian dictum that the ethics of femininity should be an ethics of self-abnegation, the generosity of women indefatigable, their work suggests that answering the singular appeal of the female subject may sometimes mean leaving her alone. In so doing, they invite us to ask of modern fictions – as feminist critics of the invisibility and indolence

enjoyed by the *flâneur* have¹⁸ – if alienation does not have its benefits and if those benefits are equally available to women. After all, is Baudelaire’s poem “*À une passante*” as tragic as Benjamin (and Proust before him) would have us believe? Is it demonstrative of “the stigmata which life in a metropolis inflicts upon love” (“On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” 169)? How might the passerby feel upon discovering this stranger, standing still amid the roar of the street, staring at her legs and drinking from her eyes? Is it any surprise that she may not appear to be eager to give him the time of day? Or to cite an example from *Mrs. Dalloway*: when Peter Walsh, imagining himself a buccaneer, follows a woman all the way home, how relieved must she be to make it safely inside her front door?

While I draw on a range of theorists and see the writers here making distinctive contributions to a number of theoretical discourses and debates, my overall approach to the literature and culture of modernism is, in a sense, anthropological. In attending to the unique notions of the gift and peculiar rules of exchange operative in their work, I may occasionally appear to be – as Lévi-Strauss suggested Mauss was – too willing to indulge the ideas and fantasies born out by their work, to lend credibility where it is not necessarily deserved. If I should seem to be more of a sympathizer than a critic at times, it is because I am as invested in elaborating the idiosyncrasies of the various modern myths and belief systems at play here as I am in demystifying them. While the first gesture may open me to the charge of idealism, the second puts me in danger – as Woolf suspected she was in *A Room of One’s Own* – of making “too much of the importance of material things” (106). As the citation from Woolf already suggests, this gesture is supported by the texts at hand. They are in different ways representative of “the attitude of modernity” that Foucault identified as the legacy of

¹⁸ See, for example, Rachel Bowlby, “Walking, women and writing”; Elizabeth Wilson, “The Invisible *Flâneur*”; Janet Wolff, “The Invisible *Flâneuse*”; Deborah Epstein-Nord, “The Urban Peripatetic”; and Susan Buck-Morss, “The Flâneur, the Sandwichman and the Whore.”

the Enlightenment in his reading of Kant with Baudelaire (309). He defines this attitude as a critical relation to contemporary reality, a “critique of what we are” – or “critical ontology” – that “is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them” (319). What we are, the writers here suggest, is beings bound by our historical time and place and determined to some degree but not unchangeably so by material conditions. Thus my reading of “The Gradual Making of The Making of Americans” suggests that it becomes our personal responsibility to ensure that different ideas are weighed equally because exchange is constant but there is no guarantee of its evenness. This formula offers a hint of the extent to which capitalism can serve as not only the material ground but also – on occasion – the symbolic ground with respect to which the writers here conceive the gift. The orientations of their texts vary: while for Rhys the market constitutes a force to be negated so that enduring symbolic bonds might be forged by way of exchange, for Woolf it furnishes an imaginary for thinking the plenitude of yet untapped feminine “gifts.” Yet for Woolf no less than for the other writers here, the world of business – of competitive individuals, mediated values, and fixed identities – no matter how far its reach, can account for only part of human experience.

CHAPTER 2

Favors without Favoritism: Gifts, Sales, and Gertrude Stein

I.

In the previous chapter, I argued that Gertrude Stein's self-proclaimed youthful passion for helping others to realize themselves in "The Gradual Making of the Making of Americans" was shaped by an ideal of equality typical of the writing considered in this study. In the lecture, this ideal was doubly thematized in her egalitarian concern with helping "everybody" and in her insistence that the exchange of ideas between the helper and the helped – between Stein and her beneficiary – should be even. Without using the formula for ethical engagement winnowed from that text as a blueprint for interpreting Stein's work, I do want to suggest that a similarly democratic altruistic attitude informs and provides the content for her 1941 text, *Ida: A Novel*. Through its characterization of Ida, the novel models a practice of what I call "favors without favoritism." This practice, I argue, is made possible by Ida's assumption a certain style of socializing and relating to the world – a style that the text also exemplifies in its peculiar, abstract rhetoric.

While it is the style of *Ida* and its heroine that ultimately interests me here, I want to frame my discussion of the novel with respect to two pieces of Stein's non-fiction from roughly the same period: *Picasso* (1938) and "Money" (1936). Ida's generosity depends on her careful and unapologetic avoidance of socioeconomic realities to which the narrative only dimly alludes by way of brief portraits of poverty and greed – problems that are all but indiscernibly linked by the text to the Great Depression and which figure more generally as effects of the universality of the money-form. Through readings of *Picasso* and "Money," I sketch the historical

context that *negatively* determines Ida's ability to help everybody – or almost everybody – in *Ida*. In so doing I argue that these texts do not enable us to decipher the novel as much as they complement it. When juxtaposed, “Money” and *Ida* in particular strike a balance – a balance between money and the gift, material and ideal, egoism and altruism – on which Stein's work suggests that the wellbeing of the subject and the social body depends.

In order to begin to establish some conceptual and historical context for my reading of *Ida*, I want to turn now to *Picasso* and to Stein's reflections there on one gift in particular – that is, Picasso's portrait of Stein. Picasso began to paint the portrait in 1905, shortly before he undertook *Les Femmes d'Alger* and she started work on *Three Lives*. After finishing the painting the following year, Picasso made a gift of it to Stein, who recalls in her homage to the painter, “he gave me the picture and I was and I still am satisfied with my portrait, for me, it is I, and it is the only reproduction of me which is always I, for me” (*Picasso* 8). Stein suggests that the significance of the painting is twofold. On the one hand, the portrait has successfully captured her essence – or her “value,” to borrow a term from Stein that she in turn borrowed from painters like Picasso. In her 1946 interview with Robert Haas, Stein deploys this term to distinguish her style of “realism” from that of her literary predecessors, declaring that while she was writing *Three Lives*, she “was not interested in making the people real but in the essence or as the painter would call it the value” (98). On the other hand, the gift figures as a kind of private pact, an enduring sign of friendship and of their shared commitment to revising traditional art forms to capture the inherent value of modern life. But while the painting was always a source of satisfaction for Stein, it was not always so for others. In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, her nominal narrator suggests that when Picasso originally gave the portrait to Stein, nobody liked it “except the painter and the

painted” (6). Of course, by the time of *The Autobiography*’s composition, as “Alice” reports in her typically chatty manner, the painting had become – like the painter and the painted – “so famous.”¹

In *Picasso*, Stein makes clear that the painting had become not only famous, but also, as we might have expected, quite marketable:

A funny story.
One day a rich collector came to my house and he looked at the portrait and he wanted to know how much I had paid for it. Nothing I said to him, nothing he cried out, nothing I answered, naturally he gave it to me. Some days after I told this to Picasso, he smiled, he doesn’t understand, he said, that at that time the difference between a sale and a gift was negligible. (8)

Picasso’s smile implies that if this story is “funny,” then it is primarily so at the expense of the rich collector, whose financial wealth is countered by a lack of understanding of the difference between the past and the present. What distinguishes them is, of course, the commercial value of Picasso’s work: if the difference between a sale and a gift used to be negligible then it is because Picasso gave Stein the portrait at a time when he would have garnered close to nothing for it. Yet the abstract character of his language points to a far broader historical phenomenon. What has occurred since “that time” appears to be not just the emergence of a paying public for that one gift in particular or for Picasso’s work in general, but a shift in the difference between

¹ Stein received significant attention soon after her move to Paris in 1903. Although a degree of fame came quickly, financial success came much later, in 1933, with the publication of *The Autobiography*. Originally abridged and serialized in *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The Autobiography* promptly became a bestseller upon its publication and, along with Stein’s lecture tour of the States the following year, cemented the author’s status as an American icon. Stein’s non-fiction from the years immediately following *The Autobiography*’s publication bears the mark of its success, repeatedly returning to the question of the impact of publicity and the emergence of (or desire for) a paying public on the process of artistic creation and the value of the artwork. This question gains particular prominence in “What Are Master-pieces and Why Are There So Few of Them” (a lecture given in 1936) and *Everybody’s Autobiography* (published in 1937). Stein’s philosophical reflections on identity in *The Geographical History of America or The Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind* (published in 1937) also bear on this problematic, although the line of inquiry pursued there extends far beyond the phenomenon of celebrity to offer what is truly a philosophy of mind.

gifts and sales as such, a shift of which the change in the commercial value of the painting – a gift – constitutes one example.

The implied universality of this shift has ramifications for how we interpret the function of the collector in the story. For the collector, the salability of the portrait is a given: looking at the painting promptly arouses his desire – not for the painting itself, but for its price. Its desirability is tantamount to its value in the eyes of another; the painting is worth as much as someone else was willing to pay for it. Of course, he is not unjustified in presuming that Stein paid for the painting. We should recall that the meeting between Stein and the collector is not a meeting between such ostensibly disparate types as a producer and a consumer, but is in fact a meeting between two collectors and thus between two competitors. Indeed, Stein owed much of her own early fame after moving to Paris in 1903 to the gallery she amassed with her brother, Leo, at 27 Rue de Fleurus. What is noteworthy, then, is not that an art collector should automatically ask the price of a painting – thus viewing the world as if through a shop window – or that he should ask such a question of Gertrude Stein. Rather, what is noteworthy is how Stein renders his perspective typical, even representative, of the present and, in so doing, registers the predominant role played by the market in governing social relations. Although forcefully implied by the collector's wealth (his possession of money that could be spent on the painting) and shock ("nothing he cried out"), as well as Picasso's wry assessment of his surprise, the salability of the painting is never explicitly acknowledged. By treating it as the given of the story, Stein in effect identifies the viewpoint of the collector with the present of the narrative, as well as the discursive present of its telling, the narration. In suggesting, furthermore, that the change in Picasso's commercial status is emblematic of a more widespread change – a change formulated here as the radicalization of the difference between gifts and sales – the text implies that what is given for the collector, and thus for us, is not

simply the salability of the portrait, but the seeming universality of capitalist exchange and the ideology of economism that supports it.

Simon Jarvis defines the ideology of economism, which he takes to be coextensive with the emergence of the modern discourse of political economy, as “the dogma that the real and fundamental unit of social ontology is the self-interested exchange, and that all other ways of thinking about exchange are myths, fantasies, ideologies, or irrelevancies” (“Gift in Theory” 204). This ideology maintains that the free gift, the donation or acquisition of something for nothing, is impossible because it falls beyond the bounds of “a model of reciprocity” that corresponds to both “a modern morality of duty” and “an archaic ethos of debt.”² In other words, the ideology of economism finds ethical reinforcement in a rule of reciprocity that reduces duty to debt.³ This rule is, in effect, operative here in the form of the dialogue

² Jarvis argues that the notion of the free gift is actively *prohibited* by way of slogans like “no free gifts!” and “no free lunch!” In “The Gift in Theory,” he suggests that political economy disguises its own status as ideology by a trick of what he calls “prescriptive reduplication,” a negative theodicy that serves to reinforce the nominally fixed opposition of gifts and exchanges. This theodicy declares that “there are no free gifts, and, what is more, there ought not to be either” (215). The tendency of political economy to take recourse to prescriptive reduplication reveals the extent to which it is not simply descriptive, but is “haunted by the problem of legitimation,” indeed by the same problem of legitimation that haunted commentators on usury (215). Political economy must answer the question of how exchange can be fair and generate a surplus for one party. In other words, the problem it faces is how to justify the uneven accumulation of surplus value. Prescriptive reduplication provides a solution by recasting surplus value as the free gift, which befalls *homo economicus* like a reward (disbursed by God or nature) for maintaining the separation of gifts and exchanges – that is, for practicing devotion to the ideology of pure interestedness. Political economy makes surplus value “disappear as a moral problem” by holding a higher power responsible for its distribution (215). In other words, it washes its hands of the moral dilemma posed by surplus value under the pretense that the dilemma is and ought to be handled by cleaner hands. For Jarvis, the centrality of the strict separation of pure interestedness and pure disinterestedness – of the free gift and exchange – to the secular discourse of political economy admits to its “theological prehistory” (215). Economism in effect replaces the Jansenist motto “There shall be no free gifts but God’s” with the slogan “There shall be no free gifts but surplus value” (213, 216).

³ Consideration of the cultural and etymological coimplication of duty and debt has a long philosophical history – a history that includes Kant, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Benveniste among others, and which Derrida outlines in a footnote to his essay, “Passions: ‘An Oblique Offering.’” He surmises there that “pure morality must exceed all calculation, conscious or unconscious, of restitution or reappropriation. This feeling *tells* us, perhaps without *dictating* anything, that we must go beyond duty, or at least beyond *duty as debt*” (133). Such pure morality, such responsibility fully expunged of calculation, would be the morality of the free gift. For Derrida – unlike Marcel Mauss – the gift, by definition, is the free gift, which he classifies as “the very figure of the impossible” (*Given Time* 7). Jarvis argues

between Stein and the collector: “Nothing I said to him, nothing he cried out, nothing I answered.” What are we to make of Stein’s manner of participation in this back-and-forth? Whereas Picasso historicizes the collector’s disbelief, Stein appears only to turn the constraints put on the imaginary by the predominance of commercial exchange to her advantage, in effect using the exceptional status of the gift as a means of proving her own exceptional status. Not only has Stein snagged the free lunch, but she is not exactly shy about brandishing her steal. Might we not read a touch of smug entitlement in her claim that “naturally” Picasso gave *her* the painting, as if she were trying to encourage the jealousy of her competitor? True though this remark may be, its superfluity has the effect of turning their tit-for-tat exchange (“Nothing I said to him, nothing he cried out, nothing I answered”) into a weighted game of one-ups-manship (“naturally he gave it to me”). Indeed, by emphasizing the naturalness of Picasso’s generosity toward her, Stein in effect underscores the justice of her own good fortune. As her early appreciation of the painting retroactively confirms, Stein was a natural choice to serve as its subject and its beneficiary: her windfall was well deserved.

This reading of her response to the collector’s disbelief suggests that if Stein’s “funny story” is funny, then it may well be so in two respects, at least from her perspective. Not only does Stein, like Picasso, harbor an understanding of the present in relation to the past, but she also made off with something for nothing. She understands that the difference between a sale and a gift used to be negligible and stands to gain from the fact that it no longer is – whether that gain takes the form of material or symbolic capital. As I suggested above, Stein need not sell the painting in

that Derrida, in upholding the impossibility of the gift and self-consciously departing from a Maussian tradition that embeds the gift in exchange, joins another tradition, “the tradition of economism: the tradition in which only what is in no way contaminated by exchange counts as a gift” (“Gift in Theory” 211).

order to profit from its accrual of commercial value: its renown and marketability, if parlayed properly, can already guarantee her prestige. But regardless of what makes the story funny, the joke is consistently on the collector, whose riches can buy neither critical insight (the ability to conceptualize the gift) nor the painting (the gift itself). In this regard, he is doubly left out of the loop, excluded from the circle of gift-giving to which Picasso and Stein – whose laudatory text ultimately figures as a kind of counter-gift – belong.

Yet we need not go so far as to impute this more sinister undertone to Stein's framing of the anecdote as a funny story in order to foreground the duality of her position as a mediator between the collector and Picasso. Picasso, like *Picasso*, does not merely memorialize a time when the difference between a sale and a gift was negligible, but testifies to the survival of a type for whom sale is not all – that is, “a creator” (50). Amid the domination of the present by the seeming universality of the market and the concomitant reduction of the gift to a mere phantasm, the realm of creation serves as a refuge for a conception of the gift as an entity whose value is immeasurable by any abstract ideal, of a gift free from the rule of reciprocity that governs the scene of sale. That is neither to claim that art escapes commodification nor to claim that Stein disparages commerce. To argue the former point would be to deny a reality of which *Picasso* is well aware; to argue the latter would be to fall back on a well-worn antagonism between modernism and the market which I hope to complicate by examining the importance of both gift and money economies to the wellbeing of the subject and the social body for Stein. As the collector's visit to Stein's house should remind us, Stein is literally at home in the realms of both commerce and creation. The crucial point is that while art may be valued as a commodity (like Stein's portrait) it may also be valued as a gift (like Stein's portrait). In other words, art – like the “I” of Stein's story and the portrait, which is “always I,”

at least to Stein – may be viewed from two angles, that of commerce and that of creation, both of which are available here to Stein and Picasso.

Stein unapologetically reserves a critical understanding of the contrast between the present and the past for a relatively small international community of artists, a privileged coterie of creators endowed with the capacity to realize “what is contemporary when the contemporaries do not yet know it” (50). That they should have a certain *savoir* about the contemporary status of sales and gifts is to be expected, for creators – as we may have guessed – have a “gift,” which implies that every act of creation, every work of art, is a gift. Whether Picasso had sold the portrait to Stein or given it to her, it would still be a gift, which is to say possessed of an inherent value. Creators, furthermore, do not all have the same gift, for “Picasso’s gift is completely the gift of a painter and a draughtsman” (5). This gift, I want to suggest, does not correspond to a special skill or talent (such as masterful brushwork or an eye for color) but to a particular economy. According to Stein, the painter “always has need of emptying himself, of completely emptying himself” (5). Thus when Picasso finished what is known as his “blue period” he “emptied himself” of it entirely before proceeding to the “rose or harlequin period” (5, 7). For Picasso, the persistent need to empty himself makes it “necessary” for him to receive constant stimulation, for only if “greatly stimulated” can he be “active enough to empty himself completely” (5). Picasso is thus driven by a kind of economic necessity toward self-expenditure, but the economy at stake is that of creation. The repeated emphasis on the completeness of this action suggests that what is specific to the psychic economy of the painter is not its structure of give and take, but the thoroughness with which he exhausts every inspiration. Insofar as the gift of the painter is implicitly differentiated from other creative gifts by degree (complete versus incomplete consumption), it would seem that the structure underlying the economy of his gift is the same as that underlying the

economy of any form of creation. This economy, as represented by Picasso, is characterized by both evenness (he gives as much as he takes and takes as much as he gives – which is to say everything) and openness. He draws on the “influence” of his “literary friends” while in Paris and “the monotony of the Spanish coloring” while in his native Spain (5). Thus while Stein reinforces the boundaries between different artistic media (the literary versus the painterly) and different countries (the French versus the Spanish), she also indicates the capacity of the creator to migrate freely and import ideas across them. In this respect, art has an open door policy.

Indeed, *Picasso* provocatively suggests that the creator and his creation only assume an aura of quasi-divinity in the present, a period in which the gift, under the sway of economism, comes to be defined by its absolutely exceptional stance with respect to reciprocal exchange. Thus while Stein may be an elitist, she is also an extremely self-conscious historian of elitism, not to mention (as I will argue) a profoundly rigorous thinker of equality, economy, and evenness. The relegation of critical reflection on the present to a select few is for Stein always a temporary – and temporal – phenomenon, for the creator only understands now what everybody will come to understand in time. Her funny story thus functions as a standing invitation to the reader, and to the future reader in particular, to conceptualize the gift that remains incomprehensible to the collector in the present. Much as Stein capitalizes on her superiority over the collector and by extension us, for whom the universality of sale is also a given, she nevertheless suggests that the realm of commerce rather than the realm of creation is characterized by exclusivity and closure. Whereas the former must outlaw the thought of the gift in order to establish interested exchange as the fundamental form of sociality, the latter – the realm of creation, of artistic production, of understanding and reflection – is distinguished by its openness, by its tireless and timeless hospitality to strangers.

II.

Stein's *oeuvre* is rife with tales of crisis – from sweeping events like World War I to her bout of commercial success in the mid-30s – and ruminations on the formal dilemmas they pose for the artist.⁴ In this regard, *Picasso*'s narrativization of a change in the difference between a sale and a gift constitutes one of many allegories of the modern (to borrow a phrase from Fredric Jameson⁵) in Stein's work: in other words, this “funny story” is but one way of telling the story of modern life. Nevertheless, this particular one echoes throughout her writing of the 30s and early 40s, in no small part because of its preoccupation with money. The increased attention to money in her work is explicitly linked to at least two things: the fact that she suddenly started earning it with the publication of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* in 1933 and what she saw as FDR's egregious mishandling of it upon his inauguration that same year. The texts she produced in subsequent years recall the vision of an all but totally commercialized present relayed in *Picasso*, but they also change the inflection of the funny story offered there by revealing the rationale behind the division it presupposes between gift economies and money economies.

By looking in particular at the first in a series of five editorials published by Stein in *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1936 – titled simply “Money”⁶ – and *Ida: A Novel*, published in 1941, I want to argue that this division was for Stein necessary under the conditions of the present. Indeed, these texts allow us to trace its necessity to the American sociopolitical climate of the 1930s. Stein was a profoundly rigorous thinker of equality and exchange. In her literary critical writings, lectures, and interviews she often claimed that her various formal techniques – such as “throwing

⁴ See note 1 for elaboration on the second of these items.

⁵ See Jameson's reading of DeMan's *Allegories of Reading* in *A Singular Modernity* (113).

⁶ The articles are “Money,” “More About Money,” “Still More About Money,” “All About Money,” and “My Last About Money.” All five are included in *How Writing is Written: Volume II of the Previously Uncollected Writings of Gertrude Stein*.

away” punctuation, a phrase that sums up her contempt for linguistic waste – were means of achieving balance, a balance that she explicitly figured as democratic in nature. Thus in *Three Lives* she hoped to capture the “evenness of everybody having the vote” (Afterword 99-100). Not surprisingly, then, her critique of FDR in *The Saturday Evening Post* continually takes aim at what she saw as the excesses of the New Deal – the tendency of the president and congress to spend too much, to tax too much, to have “too much organization,” and so on (“My Last About Money” 112). In “Money,” Stein attributes these excesses to the tendency of the federal government to treat money *as if* it were a purely immaterial entity – as if it were a free gift. The problem, as she suggests here and elsewhere, is that the mistaken conception of money as a thing unbound from exchange and its idolization not only encourage political and personal irresponsibility, but also doom the subject who idolizes it – whether the social body or the individual – to unhappiness. Happiness is for Stein as it was for Freud “a problem of...economics” (*Civilization* 34). But the subject is not ruled by one economy. Rather, like Stein in the story from *Picasso*, she is split between two worlds, two sets of tendencies, two value systems. While it may masquerade as the gift, money can never be the gift, for it can never make the subject, as Stein was with her portrait, “satisfied.” Read in conjunction, “Money” and *Ida* suggest that the only way to restore political equilibrium *and* secure a space for intellectual freedom is to keep money and the gift, material and ideal, radically distinct. Striking a balance between these economies and the modalities of the human to which they correspond is, they suggest, crucial to the wellbeing of the subject as well as the health – and wealth – of the nation.

For Stein, a very public and unabashed opponent of “big” government and Keynesian tax-and-spend economics,⁷ the errors of the Roosevelt administration were many, from its profligate spending practices to its adoption of work-relief policies that she saw as effectively encouraging the public’s slavish dependence on the state. In “Money,” Stein addresses the first of these grievances, admonishing the US federal government for its mismanagement and imprudent over-expenditure of what she calls “public money” (107). She attributes the fiscal irresponsibility of “the people who vote money, presidents and congress” to their failure to “think about money” the way that “everybody who lives on it every day does” (106). Indeed, “the trouble really comes from this question is money money”: is the abstract idea of money the same as the material currency earned and spent on a daily basis? Is the ideal thing the same as the real thing?⁸

If those who vote money fail to cognize the identity of the former with the latter, it is first of all because of the delay between the time of voting and “the time...when the money voted comes suddenly to be money just like the money everybody earns everyday and spends everyday to live” (106). While the shock of this sudden transformation “makes everybody very unhappy,” this unhappiness could be easily enough avoided were the voters to “make up their mind” about what they, as parsimonious heads of households, already know: value is a measure of labor time (here, a day’s work) and should you spend “more than you have” now the price will inevitably be paid later, at the very least in personal happiness (107). Although Stein elsewhere denounced what she referred to as “Marxian” states – in which “money is

⁷ Michael Szalay also notes that Stein was a “fiscal and social conservative”; see pp. 87-93 of *New Deal Modernism*. One can only guess what aspersions Stein would have cast on Barack Obama’s “New” New Deal.

⁸ I borrow this terminology from Marc Shell’s *Art and Money*, in which he calls money “a manifestation of an ideal and a real thing.” For Shell, these two modalities correspond to a series of oppositions: “Money is...understood as a manifestation of authority and substance, of mind and matter, of soul and body...[M]oney is the expression of inscription and inscribed” (7-8).

not money” – she here espouses a labor theory of monetary value not unlike Marx’s own (*Everybody’s Autobiography* 42). To forget that money is money and to mistake it for an immaterial entity at the time of voting is in effect to confuse money with the free gift on the one hand (that which the government spends) and with the free lunch on the other (that which is “gathered in as taxes” [106]). The problem is that the free gift and the free lunch are not in fact free, but are complementary halves of the same transaction: the debt accrued by spending too much must be paid by taxing just as much. The law of exchange is not transcended, but heedlessly disregarded – for a time anyway.

The text furthermore suggests that conceiving of money as an autonomous surplus rather than a thing for which one has to work has the deleterious effect of creating a hierarchical division between the people (the taxpayers) and the government (those who vote money). In failing to account for the toll that will be taken on the American people later by voting large quantities of money now, the president and congress also fail to account for the interests of the American people – that is, “everybody,” a group in which they are also included. Although “everybody knows” that money is money, the tendency of FDR and company to disregard that knowledge marks a breakdown in representative democracy. Indeed, it marks a breakdown in representation, period. If money is not money, then that means that it has lost its referential status as a token of material value, of time spent and labor expended. This crisis in monetary representation precipitates a crisis in political representation; “everybody” follows “money” in becoming a mere floating signifier, or so it seems. After all, these crises are not actual, but perceptual: money inevitably comes to be money and everybody knows money is money, even if these truths are not self-evident to the powers that be. Because “Money” and “everybody” *have* material referents, thinking otherwise has material effects, throwing political economy and with it the

libidinal economy of the citizenry into disequilibrium, running up debt and making everybody, as we know, very unhappy.

The administration's legislative nearsightedness might be remedied, however, were more reflection time incorporated into the voting process. Stein advocates inventing a system within which money would "not be voted right away"; instead, "when one lot voted to spend money...they would have to wait a long time, and another lot have to vote, before they vote again to have that money" (106). She furthermore suggests that instituting such a system of checks and balances, within which authority is dispersed and decision deferred, would render the federal government more like a father. Contemplating the possibilities for procedural overhaul, Stein muses, "in short, if there was any way to make a government handle money the way a father of a family has to handle money if there only was" (107). By figuring her fantasy of a government that would operate like a father of a family as a more succinct iteration ("in short...") of her preceding plan for distributing duties among various "lots" of governmental officials, Stein seems to slip from a democratic to an autocratic conception of government, as if the bureaucratic multilateralism of the former were at once analogous and reducible to the sovereign decisionism of the latter. The dilemma thus confronting Stein is how everybody can be made "to make up their mind" – how the State might be brought into unanimous agreement and the irrational frivolity of the Many might harmonize with the constrained intentionality of the One.⁹ In order for the government to be made to think and act in conjunction and in the

⁹ A similar dilemma worries Stein in her article "More About Money" where she writes, "In America, where, ever since George Washington, nobody really can imagine a king, who is to stop congress from spending too much money. They will not stop themselves, that is certain. Everybody has to think about that now. Who is to stop them" (108). The seemingly inappropriate declarative form of the first sentence has the fortuitous effect of giving "who" the value of a relative pronoun, thereby turning the otherwise interrogative "who is to stop congress from spending too much money" into the very definition of a "king." If for Schmitt "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception," then for Stein the king is he who is to stop them (*Political Theology* 5). In the American context, where the president and congress constitute no exception to inclusion in the whole, there is, perhaps ruefully for Stein, no One to curb governmental prodigality.

simultaneous pursuit of one purpose, the common good, then it must comprise representatives identified with the father, for whom personal and familial pecuniary interests are joined.

Such paternal self-identification depends upon each voter's recollection of the affect that accompanies saying "no": "until everybody who votes public money remembers how he feels as a father of a family, when he says no, when anybody in a family wants money...there is going to be a lot of trouble" (107). While the domestic patriarch "thinks several times" before spending, his frugality derives as much from his instinct for imposing prohibitions as from his accounting skills and his capacity for speculative reason: "The natural feeling of a father of a family is that when anybody asks him for money he says no" (107). Although the privilege of saying "no" is specific to the father, Stein is careful to add that familiarity with this paternal function is shared by all: "Any father of a family, any member of a family, knows all about that" – in other words, knows that the "natural feeling of a father of a family is that...he says no" (107).

Her reification of a paternal standard is at first somewhat surprising, not only because her poetics have been read as a retort to what she famously called "patriarchal poetry" in her 1927 essay by that name, but also because Stein famously complained of the pre-World War II political scene that "there is too much fathering going on just now" (*Everybody's Autobiography* 137). Offering a thorough litany of offenders – from which England alone, "the only country now that has not gone one," escapes – Stein laments, "Everybody nowadays is a father, there is father Mussolini and father Hitler and father Roosevelt and father Stalin and father Lewis and father Blum and father Franco is just commencing now and there are every so many more ready to be one" (137). By contrast, in "Money," the issue seems to be that there are not enough who are ready to be one. To what extent are these claims contradictory? Is it the same

kind of father at stake in each of these claims? Is there a way in which Roosevelt could be at once too much and not enough of a father? Insofar as the father is traditionally considered to be a figure of the law, the liberal legislative tendencies of the administration in “Money” could be classified as a symptom of excessive fathering: too much fathering would mean passing too many laws at the expense of what Stein takes to be the most important of laws in the realm of political economy – the law of exchange, which underwrites both monetary and democratic representation. To father too much is to imagine that one is above this law, that one’s actions have no consequences. Paradoxically, “Money” responds to this excess of fathering by promoting what Szalay appropriately calls “a more patriarchal model” of government (89). For Stein, ever the antagonist of big government, the political sphere should consist entirely of law-abiding, penny-pinching fathers in order to avoid becoming a Fatherland.

As the universalized ideal orienting subjective identification in Stein’s text, the father occupies a position analogous to that of money – namely, that of the general equivalent. In his analysis of the structural parallels between monetary, patriarchal, phallogocentric, and linguistic “symbolic economies,” Jean-Joseph Goux argues that the becoming-money of gold corresponds to “a certain point in ego formation” when the father is “chosen” to resolve the Oedipal crisis and “becomes the sole reflecting image of all subjects seeking their worth” (*Symbolic Economies* 17). Following Marx’s own tendency to personify commodities when noting their specular self-recognition in others, Goux suggests that the “choice” a commodity makes in finding its value in gold is akin to the choice a subject makes in investing in a normative paternal identification. The latter presupposes the death – or, as in *Totem and Taboo*, the murder – of the father such that he might be elevated to the status of a transcendental, exceptional standard, thus becoming, as Freud remarks of the father of the primal

horde, “stronger than the living one had been” (*Totem and Taboo* 178). Yet how are we to understand the nature of this choice, particularly insofar as it refers to both a singular moment in the psychic life of an individual and a generalized phenomenon (not to mention insensate objects like commodities)? This question goes to the heart of the Freudian project in general and his concerns in *Totem and Taboo* in particular, where he argues that “savages and neurotics” manifest the same “father-complex” and comparable feelings of ambivalence toward figures of authority; here especially the question of the relationship between the ontogenetic and the phylogenetic, the historical and the primordial, the idiosyncratic and the structural, is central. In the case of both the primitive and the modern, the subject’s relation to the father, archetype of the superego, is primary and determinate; hence, figures such as the totem animal, the king, and God are but substitutes for the father, the absent Other, of whom Freud’s myth of the patricidal horde provides but one fictional account. Like the primordial, sacrificial expulsion of the father, the guilty decision to abide by the law imposed in his stead constitutes, in Goux’s words, “a purely syntactic moment” – a condition of possibility, rather than a strictly locatable historical instant – “belonging to the very structure [of] the general equivalent” (18).

Stein’s portrait of the amnesiac executive and legislative branches suggests a somewhat different account of the fraternal clan,¹⁰ for the US government

¹⁰ Stein’s fiendish posse of voters resembles the “regime of the brother” that Juliet Flower MacCannell argues emerged “after the patriarchy” – that is, with the Enlightenment valorization of “a new non-patriarchal egalitarian norm” (13). In disavowing the parental along with the paternal, the ideal of post-Revolutionary self-governance offers no substitute for the “preserving and protective” – and not merely tyrannically prohibitive – function that the Oedipal symbolic once served (13). The US, “the great emblem of democracy,” is perhaps most exemplary of this phenomenon in selecting as its figurehead “the figure of the mother’s brother, Uncle Sam, who can fill in for a parent without needing to be one” (10). Although she may upbraid Uncle Sam for his irresponsible behavior, Stein by no means calls for more hands-on parenting. In “The Capital and Capitals of the United States of America,” she notes that what makes “the people of this country what they are” is their “having put the capital away” – not in a “big important city,” but “where they can always know where it is” if they need it (74). In that piece, the persona most appropriate to the American government is not the Father, but the Doctor: “Lincoln in his time said this country is sick and he was the doctor that was to make it well. That is the way

demonstrates no restraint with respect to the good they covet – which is in this case money rather than women. To what extent does this absence of restraint derive from difference between money and women as goods? Lévi-Strauss suggests that if women are likened to commodities it is because they are “not only scarce but essential to the life of the group” (*Elementary Structures of Kinship* 36). Monogamy is an effect of scarcity, and not the nature of desire; the reality principle curbs man’s acquisitiveness and checks his quest for satisfaction. Stein makes clear that money, as the thing on which everybody lives, is essential to the life of the group. But the people who vote money, in forgetting that money must be earned, demonstrate no sense of money’s scarcity, spending it as if its supply were boundless, but as Stein and any axiom-wielding father would know, money does not grow on trees. There may be a free lunch – the portrait, the favor – but money is not it.

For Stein as for Freud, the individual and collective vow of self-control depends upon remembrance. In championing identification with the father, Stein calls for the restitution of an ethical standard rooted in material necessity by which to gauge the propriety of one’s actions. The immediacy with which “any father” returns a “no” when “anybody asks him for money” suggests a mode of duty reminiscent of the Kantian subject’s respectful adherence to the moral law and in this respect Stein’s text reminds us of Freud’s claim that “Kant’s Categorical Imperative is...the direct heir of the Oedipus complex.”¹¹ To remember how one feels as a father would be to find oneself hailed by the superegoic voice of conscience. For Kant, the will mediates between subjective principles (maxims) and objective principles (the law): hence his prescriptive formula, “I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will

America has always felt about government, a healthy man does not have to know and that is why they have put the capitals where they are so that they need not have them unless they need them” (74).

¹¹ Freud, “The Economic Problem of Masochism” 167.

that my maxim should become a universal law.”¹² For Stein, only by internalizing the *non du père* – by adopting the dictum of the father, who is here the exemplar of good will – might the “people who vote money” be assured of their faithful representation of their constituents. By checking the subject’s tendency toward excess (too much spending, too much taxing) the paternal “no” promises to restore the equivalence of the ideal and the real – “money” and money, “everybody” and everybody.

The restitution of the father as a model citizen, like the revelation that money is money, would ensure that the equality which Stein axiomatically posits is also realized in practice. “Money” presupposes a relation between one and all whereby “everybody” constitutes a collectivization of the individual; the whole is not a sum of its parts but is analogous to each one of its parts, which are then equal to one another. Although the people constitute a group in which the many members always add up to one, this provisional ideal of unity is undercut by the deficiencies of the administration. Barring the likelihood that the federal government either makes up its mind and decides once and for all that money is money or at last begins to act like a father of a family, the only guarantee is that everybody “is going to be awfully unhappy” (106). For Stein, ever the American traditionalist, the inexorability of the law of exchange means that nothing is certain but taxes – the inevitable moment when money becomes money, when one must pay another pound of flesh. Eventually the price for political prodigality must be paid, for “sooner or later there is disaster” (107).

III.

While “Money” renders the reification of standards like the father (the avatar of self-restraint) and money (the commodity on which everybody lives) necessary to the smooth operation of political economy, *Ida: A Novel* in effect counterbalances the image of an integral, homogeneous social body championed in Stein’s political

¹² Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* 15.

writings. As its title suggests, *Ida* is at base a *bildungsroman*, a text concerned with charting the singular path of its title character. In so doing, however, the novel in effect plays out a kind of democratic fantasy, a dream of being friends with everybody, of responding to others and their individual needs one by one by one. *Ida* spends much of the “first half” of the novel on the move, crisscrossing the United States, before taking up residence in Washington, DC, where she plays hostess to a stream of visitors seeking her help. Notably, this detail of the narrative has garnered little attention: although many critics of the novel have followed Donald Sutherland in calling its protagonist a “publicity saint,” they have consistently focused on the first rather than the second part of that label and thus ignored what is perhaps most saintly about *Ida* – that is, her penchant for granting wishes.¹³ Indeed, *Ida* – whose name is fittingly enough an anagram for aid – “liked to do favors” (74). In tracking *Ida*’s travels before her arrival in the capital, the novel suggests that the development of her gift depends on her ability to preserve the space necessary to its cultivation, space that

¹³ See Sutherland 154-159, Brinnin 359-360, and Hoffman 98-100. It was Stein and not Sutherland who coined the term to refer to the “modern saint” – “somebody who achieves publicity without having done anything in particular”; Therese Bonney reports this quotation from Stein – about *Mrs. Reynolds*, not *Ida* – in *Gertrude Stein Remembered* (180). No less influential to much biographical criticism of the novel has been W. G. Rogers’s 1948 memoir of Stein, in which he recalls her telling him during a walk, ‘I want to write a novel about publicity, a novel where a person is so publicized that there isn’t any personality left. I want to write about the effect on people of the Hollywood cinema kind of publicity that takes away all identity. It’s very curious, you know, very curious the way it does do just that.’ According to Rogers, “[t]he novel was *Ida*” (68). While Brinnin and Hoffman read this loss of identity as a tragedy, Sutherland rather more convincingly draws on Stein’s refutation of identity in her non-fiction to assert that *Ida*’s freedom from personality raises her to the heights of the human mind. Many critics have also noted the resemblance of *Ida* to the Duchess of Windsor, Wallis Warfield Simpson, who – like *Ida* – had many marriages. Taking a tack reminiscent of many of the early readings of Molly Bloom in *Ulysses*, Miller argues that *Ida* chronicles the “life of a whore” (a characterization which would give a rather different cast to my analysis of the gift in the novel): “Not since her portrayal of Melanctha has Miss Stein handled a character like *Ida*. If the eighteenth-century Moll Flanders and the nineteenth-century Nana are looking for an admirable twentieth-century addition to their group they are impatiently waiting for *Ida*!” See Miller 43-46. Knapp and Bridgman ultimately read the novel as a screen for Stein’s personal turmoil (see Knapp 166-169, Bridgman 305-309), while Dubnick brings linguistic structuralism to bear on the text, which is in her view emblematic of the “relative clarity” of Stein’s writing from the 1930s (65-78). Cynthia Secor’s laudatory analysis of *Ida*, which she identifies as “a great American novel,” remains one of the most thorough treatments of the novel and pays the greatest attention to Stein’s techniques of characterization.

the text conceptualizes in both physical terms (Ida, like Melanctha in *Three Lives*, is a wanderer) and psychological terms (her thoughts are no less prone to wander). Yet insofar as this gift is a gift for giving, the text also suggests that gratifying personal desires and fostering the oft-idealized individual talent may have positive social and political ramifications. Ida, like *Ida: A Novel*, not only sets in motion an exchange of gifts, but also sets a formal example for others, not least her reader, to follow.

While *Ida* suggests that the possibility of developing this gift primarily depends upon its heroine's financial independence, we are never told how much money Ida has or whence it comes. The exclusion of these material details is not only an index of the novel's departure from the realism of its literary forebears, but also replicates its heroine's lack of interest in money. We know that Ida has money – in relaying at least that much information Stein offers a nod to material necessity – but she has “that kind of money to spend that made it not make any difference about weather” and therefore “did not pay much attention to weather” (52). What enables her indifference to the weather – which we might read as shorthand for environmental factors in general – is not a specific quantity of money, but a certain attitude she assumes with respect to money: “She just sat and she always had enough. Anybody could” (40). Admittedly, the claim that “anybody could” have enough smacks of a rather dubious voluntarism, as well as a presupposition of equality that W.H. Auden for one found as reprehensible as it was typical of the American scene.¹⁴ But we might also hear in it a note of optimism not so easily assimilable to specious platitudes about the universal attainability of economic security and the threadbare American dream. For although a trace of impracticality may persist in that claim, “Anybody

¹⁴ In his 1946 introduction to Henry James's *The American Scene*, Auden rails against the hypocrisy of institutions like the American country club, which, because it “purports to be democratic” but in fact excludes Jews, must take recourse to the boldest mendacity to rationalize its practices (xvii).

could,” the text nevertheless suggests that having enough is a subjective posture – indeed, a seat (“Ida just sat”) – one assumes.

Yet maintaining this posture ultimately appears to take a greater effort of self-mastery and, indeed, more movement than this rhetoric of stasis and the nonchalant tone of the above passages admit. In plotting Ida’s path around the country – from Connecticut to New Hampshire to Ohio and so on – the novel in effect maps her avoidance of those factors that threaten to disrupt her carefully preserved feeling of contentment. Thus when Ida passes “a sign up that said please pay the unemployed and a lot of people were gathered around and were looking,” she does not join the crowd: “It did not interest her. She was not unemployed” (40). We might first hear in Ida’s misreading – her interpretation of the sign as an invitation to be paid rather than pay – a joke about the subject’s rule by avaricious self-interest; inferring from the plea the promise of a handout, the hope of a free lunch, Ida automatically tends toward identification with the donee rather than the donor. Yet the text negates even as it prompts this reading by asserting Ida’s lack of interest, her honest acknowledgment of not being unemployed. The fact that the sign has attracted a crowd – none of whom appear to be digging into their pockets – suggests that Ida’s apparent misreading is not a misreading at all. Indeed, it would seem that the people whom such a sign interpellates are in fact “looking” to be paid rather than pay – that is, the unemployed.

Ida is neither unemployed nor employed, at least not in the sense in which Stein uses that term in her critique of federal work-relief in essays like “The Capital and Capitals of the United States of America.” Originally published in 1935 in *The New York Herald Tribune*, the article draws a distinction between “a hired man” and “an employee” (75). While being employed – by, for example, the Works Progress Administration – or, worse yet, receiving unemployment signals a loss of freedom (employees are “not on their own” [75]), being hired receives significantly higher

honors from Stein. As Michael Szalay argues, Stein's vision of being hired "romantically recalls the self-indentured laborer of preindustrial America," an America characterized by the relative diminution and obscurity of the federal government (93). Ida's financial independence and her indifference to accumulating more money grant her a freedom like that of the "hired man." Ida occasionally sets out to "earn a living," but always does so by choice rather than necessity: "She did not have to, she never had to but she decided to do it" (44). Anticipating restlessness, she selects professions that promise to be "most easy to leave," such as photography and the rather enigmatic job of "just talking" (44).

Ida's indifference to the street scene anticipates an opposition between her favors and alms – between gifts and money – on the one hand, and registers her desire to remain unbound from those group identifications that threaten to make leaving less easy on the other. Her repudiation of the culture of philanthropy (which here doubles for the work-relief policies Stein disparaged in her expository pieces) signals not only her lack of interest in making money, but also her repudiation of identification as the condition of generosity. Whereas those who give and receive alms share an interest in money despite the difference in their wealth, Ida does not liken herself to or feel for either the needy or the well-to-do. Ida is neither motivated by a desire to acquire money, nor stirred by the suffering of those who need it. Sympathy – which would seem to be for Stein as for Freud rooted in narcissistic identification – does not compel her willingness to help.

Still, Ida is not immune to the pull of identification. Feeling herself hailed by the national anthem and news of the death of some mother's son in times of war, Ida cannot help but respond: "Ida knew it was funny about crying, she listened at the radio and they played the national anthem and Ida began to cry. It is funny about crying" (107). While Ida's crying is indicative of her vulnerability to the affective force of

identification (in this instance, her sense of belonging to the nation), her claim that crying is “funny” acknowledges her awareness of the irrationality of identification-based feeling. Elsewhere the text draws an association between identification – or what Stein more commonly refers to as identity – and the animal nature of the human also familiar from Stein’s non-fiction. While thinking about “everything that had ever happened” during her peripatetic life, Ida says, apparently to herself, “How many of those who are yoked together have ever seen oxen” and is thus driven to tears (43). As in the above passage, Ida’s sadness (here about leaving places and people to which she has become accustomed) is coupled with critique. Ida’s half-wistful, half-wry remark suggests that the tendency of the subject to become inured to habit is an index of her inability to fully override her animal nature. The characteristic substitution of a period for a question mark lends this already rhetorical question a further tone of lamentation, as though Ida were remarking the vast number of people that *have* seen oxen and were therefore prone to grow attached to others. In other words, the statement seems to ascribe to people a tendency to imitate what they see. Still, the text is ambiguous on this point, for it suggests that seeing oxen may constitute either the problem (clinging to others) or the solution (leaving, like Ida). In the latter case, the possibility of transcending the nature which humans share with oxen would reside in further self-reflection – that is, in seeing oneself, to one’s dismay, in oxen.

At the same time, Ida’s own gesture of self-reflection suggests that she is more of a conscientious objector to almsgiving and the logic of identification that undergirds it than her seemingly unstudied, relaxed response to the sign’s solicitation admits. In other words, not paying attention to the weather – maintaining a posture of indifference – takes more effort than Ida always acknowledges. Insofar as the “lot” of people gathered around the sign begging payment constitutes a herd of sorts, *Ida* further suggests that while money may differentiate men from animals (as Stein

suggests in “All About Money”), the mutual demand for money renders men like animals. As a sublime expression of the human potential for abstraction and the stimulant of our baser animal proclivities, money straddles the division between what she elsewhere referred to as “human mind” and “human nature,” which she considered tantamount to animal nature. Resisting the influence of others’ appetite for money thus appears to require a constant exercise of mastery and, more often than not, moving.

Foremost among the factors that threaten Ida’s peace is, quite simply, the thought of money, the danger of which becomes evident when she goes to live briefly with a somewhat distant relative:

Ida went to live with a cousin of her uncle.

He was an old man and he could gild picture frames so that they looked as if they had always had gold on them. He was a good man that old man and he had a son, he sometimes thought that he had two sons but anyway he had one and that one had a garage and he made a lot of money. He had a partner and they stole from one another. One day the son of the old man was so angry because the partner was most successful in getting the most that he up and shot him. They arrested him. They put him in jail. They condemned him to twenty years hard labor because the partner whom he had killed had a wife and three children. The man who killed the other one had no children that is to say his wife had one but it was not his. Anyway there it was. His mother spent all her time in church praying that her son’s soul should be saved. The wife of their doctor said it was all the father and mother’s fault, they had brought up their son always to think of money, always of money, had not they the old man and his wife got the cousin of the doctor’s wife always to give them presents of course they had.

(41)

Can we trust the judgment of the doctor’s wife? In other words, can we glean from this narrative of greed, jealousy, and murder a rather straightforward moral about the deleterious effects of raising one’s child “always to think of money”?

The above passage suggests that the son follows the example set by his father in his conception of property and in this respect authorizes the doctor’s wife’s

assessment. A counterfeiter by trade, the old man seems more interested in gilding frames than in making an accurate count of his brood and thus seems to privilege artificiality over authenticity, fakes over originals. While his occasional uncertainty about the number of sons he has (“he sometimes thought he had two sons but anyway he had one”) might be read as a witty allusion to the one son having two personalities, one presumably more violent than the other, the text favors a more literal reading, for it would seem that the son, like his father, has little interest in taking responsibility for more than his proper share of children. We catch no hint of envy in the narrator’s acknowledgment of the son’s having “no children that is to say his wife had one but it was not his,” and the wife’s child by another man inspires no crime of passion comparable to that inspired by the son’s anger at his partner’s superlative success in acquiring “the most.” In this regard, money assumes a degree of desirability in excess even of that traditionally ascribed to another idealized object of male contestation – namely, woman. Indeed, money appears to be a kind of object altogether different from such precious property as women and children insofar as its possession is synonymous with what here becomes a potentially fatal desire to possess more. By contrast, women and children can be counted in integral increments and, like all commodities, have a price relative to some measure of labor-time; hence, the life of the slain partner, equivalent to the sum of his possessions, is equal to “twenty years hard labor.”

By holding both the old man and his wife accountable for their son’s crime, the doctor’s wife not only affirms the role of environmental factors – the “weather” to which Ida pays so little attention – in determining the son’s path, but also cautions against valuing value and fetishizing what may be false idols above all else. Echoing the claim that anybody could have enough money, she suggests that if anybody could fall prey to the destructive lure of money, then anybody also could not: one is not born

a capitalist, one becomes one – apparently by being brought up “always to think of money, always of money.” While this repetition at once mirrors the family’s alleged preoccupation with money and registers the doctor’s wife’s exasperation with that preoccupation, the elision of “to think” in the second instance implies that always thinking of money is in the end tantamount to not thinking at all. The constant thought of money abolishes thought – or, rather, it abolishes all thought but that of money.

The domination of thought by money is furthermore linked to a demand for gifts: “they had brought up their son always to think of money, always of money, had not they the old man and his wife got the cousin of the doctor’s wife always to give them presents of course they had.” Raising the son to think of money and coercing gifts from her cousin are here construed as comparable, but the former is immaterial while the latter is material. The passage does not isolate one tendency as the cause of the other, but instead offers the second indictment as a substantiation of the otherwise ungrounded accusation against the parents. In other words, the criminal act of finagling presents *proves* that the son has been raised in an environment in which the thought of money is always primary, in which an ideal thing is privileged over its material referent. As in Stein’s political writings, the idea of money is linked to the fantasy of getting something for nothing – a fantasy to which the law and its principle of distributive justice, like the inevitable return of tax season in “Money,” ultimately provide one corrective.

We should not be surprised then that Ida, who would prefer not to think of money, “did not stay...very long” at the old man’s house and went to live instead with the far less money-minded and far more generous cousin of the doctor’s wife (42). Never one to suffer the burden of unwanted obligation, familial or otherwise, Ida opts to make her home with a kindred spirit rather than her kin. Although the fable of the

old man's family therefore constitutes but a brief interlude in the narrative of Ida's *bildung*, it raises a series of questions that make manifest the extent of the challenge before Ida and before *Ida: A Novel*: if the gift is already accounted for by the money economy, then what space can be reserved for the gift beyond the money economy? If the idealization of money and the bottomless demand for the gift are locked in this dyad, is there a demand for help that is not an expression of a driving interest in money or violent acquisitiveness like that of the old man's son? What form would this demand take and how can it be recognized as such? Is there a gift that will not merely awaken a gluttonous desire for more? I want to suggest that these questions at once haunt and condition the form of the favors Ida performs upon moving to the seat of American politics, Washington, DC.

IV.

Ida moves to Washington, DC, in the chapter entitled "Politics" – which is the only chapter with a title (a point to which I will return) – in order "to do what she could for everybody": "She came to do what she knew each one of them wanted" (66). What each one of the men she meets wants from her appears not to be an object per se, but a rest from the business of politics, which appears to consist primarily of commercial transactions. Everybody in Washington "wanted to buy," but "they do not want to buy from Ida," for Ida does "not sell anything" (65, 66). On the contrary, "resting" is "the way Ida was needed" (73). The text thus points to a fissure internal to desire, a split between a desire which is answerable within the world of goods, and a desire that is satisfied only by way of a rest from that world. This split corresponds in turn to a series of divisions – between politics (with which Ida claims unfamiliarity) and favors (which Ida enjoys doing), between commercial exchange and resting, between relations to things and relations to people. I want to begin with the last of these oppositions because it both conditions the other two and begins to illuminate the

difference between the business partnership of the old man's son and the friendships that Ida establishes while in the capital.

If the favor that Ida can do for others is to give them a rest from "politics," or political economy, then it is because she does not allow her valorization of commodities to interfere in her social relations. A closet commodity fetishist, she neither allows things to come between her and other people nor allows people to come between her and the things she likes. Her reverence for objects like hats and dresses becomes especially evident in her imitation of albatrosses, which she learns "always bowed before they did anything" (131). Ida adopts their "funny habit," but also revamps it, bowing not before undertaking an action, but "to anything she liked":

If she had a hat she liked, she had many hats but sometimes she had a hat she liked and if she liked it she put it on a table and bowed to it. She had many dresses and sometimes she really liked one of them. She would put it somewhere then and then she would bow to it. Of course jewels but really dresses and hats particularly hats, sometimes particularly dresses. Nobody knew anything about this certainly not anybody and certainly not Andrew [her husband], if anybody knew it would be an accident because when Ida bowed like that to a hat or a dress she never said it. (131)

Certainly Ida proves no less acquisitive and enamored of excess, no less prone to developing habits by imitation, than the old man's son. While rather childlike, Ida's lack of self-reflection about her appropriation of the albatross's custom to demonstrate her appreciation of these objects serves to make strange and underscore the arbitrariness of that appreciation. Yet in stressing the idiosyncratic nature of this rite, as well as the particularity of its form to Ida's development ("She had once heard"), this passage also pays homage to a notion of the individual as one for whom impressionability, contingency, and even acquisitiveness (here in the guise of a mimetic faculty) potentially pose a threat of conformity (everybody can be put on the

same path) but also hold open the possibility of personal distinction and innovative self-fashioning (anybody can be put on any path).

It bears noting that her capriciousness does not translate into aggressive rapaciousness. Contra male modernist fantasies about the danger posed by the amorphous, devouring feminine masses,¹⁵ Stein suggests that the monetary monotheism of the acquisition-bent male poses a far greater threat to the integrity of the subject and the social body than that posed by the fickle lady shopper. Insofar as Ida venerates goods conventionally recognized as objects of female desire, we might take her habit as representative of a tendency shared by other women, if a peculiar incarnation of it. Nevertheless, the clandestine nature of Ida's habit of bowing before things she likes ("Nobody knew anything about this") suggests that however commonly adored the objects before her – one thinks of all that Ida in this moment shares with the unlikely protagonists of Jean Rhys's 1930s novels – their mass idealization provides no point of identification between Ida and others. On the one hand, her secrecy suggests a jealous determination to guard those things she likes against the gaze of others – to have them all to herself. On the other hand, it suggests a certain shame, as if she knows how "funny" the habit is, but cannot help but do it anyway. Indeed, it would appear to be in the nature of the human to take after the animal – in this case, the albatross – but also to turn those animal tendencies toward distinctively human ends. While the albatross bows, the human is alone in deferring to some sovereign good, in being possessed by the things she nominally possesses. If the son's murder of his partner is any indication, it would seem that for the human the temptation to pay a higher courtesy to things than to people is strong, and the temptation to venerate money – an exceptional thing, capable of measuring all others –

¹⁵ On this point see, for example, Andreas Huyssen, "Mass Culture as Woman" in *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, 44-62.

even stronger. Insofar as the text suggests that the compulsion to elevate things to spiritual heights must be gratified sooner or later, *Ida* suggests that it may be best – for the good of oneself and others – to do so in private.

Unlike the business partners, doomed by their aspiration after a common good to be enemies, *Ida* engages with her fellow denizens of DC as “a friend” (16). Insofar as *Ida*’s friendship consists in her performance of favors, the novel would seem to confirm the aphoristic claim in “The Good Anna” that “Friendship goes by favour” (*Three Lives* 66). In that text, however, favor – specifically that of Anna’s love, Mrs. Lehtnmen – is never assured: “There is always danger of a break or of a stronger power coming in between” (66). In both *Ida* and Stein’s critique of the federal government, this danger both belongs to and defines the sphere of political economy. Indeed, the primacy of material necessity – the fact that everybody lives in money – means that the social contract is fundamentally mediated by “a stronger power,” sometimes to disastrous ends. *Ida*, however, avoids the danger that such mediation poses by never allowing her adoration for such stronger powers as hats and dresses to creep into her social calendar.

But while the favors that facilitate friendships between *Ida* and her many petitioners are external to the field of political economy, they also appear to be beneficial rather than inimical to politics as such:

She was kind to politics while she was in Washington very kind. She told politics that it was very nice of them to have her be kind to them. And she was she was very kind...

It was not really politics really that *Ida* knew. It was not politics it was favors, that is what *Ida* liked to do.

She knew she liked to do them.

Everybody knew she liked to do favors for them and wanting to do favors for everybody who wanted to have favors done for them it was quite natural that those who could do the favors did them when she asked them to do them. (74)

In rendering “politics” an addressee (“She told politics”) and a collective agent (“them”), the narrator personifies “politics,” treating this network of relations as if it were a single corporate body and thus treating the public as a homogenous whole: here, as Stein wishes they were and insists they must be in “Money,” the people are counted as one. While Ida’s gratitude toward politics echoes the politeness in which she trades throughout the novel, the note of constraint struck in this passage (“to have her be kind to them”) is particularly salient in contrast to the enjoyment she derives from performing favors: although politics has “her be kind to them,” Ida “*liked* to do favors.” Hence, the social body to which Ida is ultimately kind is “not really politics really,” is not quite synonymous with the uniform group that would have her be kind, but instead exceeds it. While we might expect the scope of those deserving of Ida’s favors to be limited (indeed, limited to those she favors) Ida wants to do favors for – and hence favors – everybody who wants to have favors done for them: Ida shows favor without showing favoritism. She does not pass judgment on the legitimacy or merit of the nature of their demands, but responds to the very fact of their desire to “have favors done for them.”

Although Ida appears to be unique in the pleasure that she gains from doing favors, she is not alone in performing them. Yet the question of whether the feeling of “wanting to do favors for everybody who wanted to have favors done for them” pertains to everybody or Ida is not so easily answerable. We can presume that Ida is the implied subject here, but the ambiguity leaves open an intriguing possibility. For if everybody wants to do favors for everybody who wants them done, then it would seem that the mere knowledge of Ida’s enjoyment of doing favors (“Everybody knew she liked to do favors”) inspires a comparable disposition in everybody else: knowing that Ida likes to help does not make them want to be like or imitate Ida, but inspires them to want to help, too – to say “yes” to the other.

While this “yes” counters the “no” with which the father answers anybody who asks for a little financial aid in “Money,” it is not maternal, for Ida “never was a mother” (57). She does not complement the father: hence, politics may add up to one, but the heterosexual couple does not. And while this “yes” – this availability to and affirmation of the other – may nevertheless be in a sense feminine, the fact that men constitute the primary subjects of “Politics” in the novel suggests that “those who could do” favors may well be and are most likely male. Helping, like having enough, appears to be a seat that anybody, regardless of his or her gender, could assume. The universal availability of these postures furthermore suggests that the oppositions between affirmative and prohibitive, altruistic and egoistic, and feminine and masculine are constituted by differences *within* the subject rather than differences between subjects. In thus indicating that the subject as such is split, *Ida* democratizes the duality that Stein emblemized in shuttling between the collector and Picasso, her fellow creator, in the funny story with which I began. But rather than override the importance of the division of gift and money economies for Stein, this gesture suggests that the battle between them, and between the dueling tendencies to which they correspond, is one waged internally. Like Stein, everybody is at once indistinguishable from the pack and utterly exceptional – both inescapably dependent on money and possessed of a gift whose value remains immeasurable by a monetary standard.

The particular form her favor takes, as well as the supplemental role it plays with respect to political economy, gains the fullest elaboration when Ida performs a favor for Henry:

Once upon a time there was a man his name was Henry, Henry Henry was his name. He had told everybody that whatever name they called him by they just had to call him Henry. He came to Washington, he was born in San Francisco and he liked languages, he was not lazy

but he did not like to earn a living. He knew that if anybody would come to know about him they would of course call him Henry. Ida did.

She was resting one day and somebody called, it was somebody who liked to call on Ida when she was resting. . . He knew that everybody sooner or later would know who Ida was and so he brought Henry with him. Henry immediately asked her to do a favor for him, he wanted to go somewhere where he could talk languages and where he would have to do nothing else. Ida was resting. She smiled.

Pretty soon Henry had what he wanted, he never knew whether it was Ida, but he went to see Ida and he did not thank her but he smiled and she smiled and she was resting and he went away. (75)

In this moment, the novel fantasizes a world in which one could get by working at what one enjoys and enjoying one's work. It is, after all, important that Henry is "not lazy" for that fact suggests that Ida, in granting Henry the favor for which he asks, enables not his escape from work altogether, but his escape from work he does not like; he will not do nothing, but will "do nothing else." The passage presents a number of oppositions along these lines – that between earning a living and talking languages; between the frenzied repetition of the opening chiasmus and the insouciantly declarative style used to describe Ida; between Henry's obsessive concern with proper identification and the indeterminacy with which Ida's own recognition is anticipated ("sooner or later"); and between the urgency of Henry's request ("Henry immediately asked her") and the casual imprecision of Ida's response time ("Pretty soon").

The slow deliberate economy of prose used to describe Ida's near static, contented response ("Ida was resting. She smiled") contrasts sharply with the excess that burdens the narration when Henry is its subject ("Henry, Henry Henry"). Might we read this verbal excess as an index of the exigency of a desire long ignored in the interest of meeting the demand to make money? Where Henry rushes, abruptly interrupting Ida's rest, Ida takes her time and in so doing gives Henry time, a rest from the dogged economic imperative to earn a living. The indefinite span of time ("Pretty soon") between his request and its satisfaction registers the detachment of her resting

from what Georg Simmel referred to as “the fixed framework of time” which grounds the exchange of commodities, and according to which “[p]unctuality, calculability, and exactness” are touted as the virtues of modern life (“The Metropolis and Mental Life” 328). Insofar as Ida’s resting takes place outside the bounds of that framework, it also constitutes *the* rest, the remainder of that realm.¹⁶ Although her resting appears here as a form of leisure in excess of and unaccounted for by the machinations of the money economy, it nevertheless satisfies a “need” at the level of the individual’s libidinal economy, for resting is after all “the way Ida was needed” (73). Indeed, the text even construes resting in material terms, referring to it at one point as “a pleasant thing” (136). And yet, while it is part of an economy – it gives pleasure and takes time – it is not a thing measurable by any evaluative or temporal standard other than those dictated by the needs of the subject. Henry’s need is immediate, but what Henry actually needs is a rest from the immediacy of need.

The above passage thus registers a residual disjuncture between political economy and the libidinal economy of the subject and draws out the limitations of Stein’s claim in *The Geographical History* that any profession can open a path to the good life: “money is what we all agree, to be happy and make money, is anything” (182). Can *anything* can bring joy and turn a profit? Can one earn a living by talking languages? The story of Henry would suggest not. Although the narrator of *Ida* optimistically proclaims that “In Washington, some one can do anything,” this ideal of

¹⁶ The fixed framework of time that Simmel identifies with the modern money economy recalls the “vulgar” concept of time as a circle (traceable from Aristotle to Heidegger) that renders the gift impossible for Derrida: “A gift could be possible, there could be a gift only at the instant an effraction in the circle will have taken place, at the instant all circulation will have been interrupted and *on the condition* of this instant” (*Given Time* 9). Freedom from time – which is explicitly figured in circular terms later in *Ida* – is a condition of creation and one definition of the master-piece for Stein. While I would argue that the Steinian gift is comparable to the Derridean gift, this comparison must be accompanied by two caveats: first, Stein, as I have tried to argue, historicizes the dissociation of the gift and exchange or, in her parlance, gifts and sales; second, Derrida’s reading of Baudelaire’s prose poem “*La fausse monnaie*” in *Given Time* maintains a formal isomorphism between money – the counterfeit coin – and the gift against which “Money” and *Ida* militates.

limitless possibility is undercut by the fact that not everything can make money, which constitutes both the means of survival and the medium of politics in Stein's work (67). While "Money" suggests that the reduction of desire to a common denominator is necessary to sustaining agreement among the members of politics, *Ida* suggests that the consensus it enables may come at a dear cost to the individual subject. Of course, Henry *does* go on to do "what he wanted," but only because Ida graces him with her favor. Thus while the axiom that "some one can do anything" serves as the definition of politics in the novel (as Jessica Berman has argued¹⁷) this definition would not be realized were it not for Ida. The rest that politics negates and Ida in turn gives, though it may constitute an escape from the business of political economy, is helpful rather than harmful to politics as such. In order to avoid becoming political in name only, politics requires a supplement, a gift for which it cannot account, but which ultimately falls – as Ida's favors fall in the novel – under the title of "Politics."

While the desire to talk languages implies a desire for another form of relation, the satisfaction of this desire nominally takes place outside the register of relation. Indeed, mystification of the means by which Henry gets what he wants appears to be crucial to ensuring the freedom of both the donor and donee from mutual obligation. After Henry issues his request, Ida continues to rest and offers a smile, but she offers no word of consent that would prove her commitment and as a result no verbal contract is forged between them. If Ida is in fact the one responsible for getting him "what he wanted," she has not complied with his request out of any obligation. Her silence therefore serves to assure us of the freedom of her gesture, and appears to contribute to the difficulty that Henry experiences determining the role that Ida plays

¹⁷ Berman writes, "While [Ida] settles for a time in Washington, she is not specifically tied to the *city*, but rather to the possibility that in Washington 'some one can do anything' (67), which is here also a definition of politics. In other words, the very American tendency towards doing and going anywhere is part of the character of the capital that attracts Ida" (196).

in granting his wish. Because Henry remains uncertain about “whether it was Ida,” he is under no obligation to reciprocate. He returns the smile, but not the favor, even by way of a show of gratitude. But whether *what* was Ida?

Some ambiguity surrounds the question of what exactly remains unknowable to Henry. An idiomatic reading of the claim that “Henry had what he wanted, he never knew whether it was Ida” suggests that “it” refers to the thing responsible for the satisfaction of Henry’s desire, a thing that may be Ida. What is missing from the text is the chronological chain of causality by which to connect “what he wanted” and “Ida.” The sentence would certainly make more sense – or at least the sense would be more readily apparent – if it read “Henry had what he wanted, he never knew whether it was Ida who got it for him.” By omitting this relative clause – “who got it for him” – Stein also omits the possibility of being assured of any relation between Henry and Ida. In other words, Stein’s text reproduces the very freedom from time and relation that Ida grants to Henry by way of offering him a rest and, in so doing, encodes the social convention it also depicts. By in effect giving the reader a rest from the twin burdens of time and relation, if one which takes significant work to appreciate, the text presents itself as a gift and offers the means to decipher what counts as a gift.

Yet the absence of this relative clause also has the paradoxical effect of shifting the locus of uncertainty by changing the nature of the possible relation between the gift and Ida. Amid the omission of the question of causality, the parallel form of the two simple statements – “Henry had what he wanted, he never knew whether it was Ida” – prompts us to read “it” as a reference to the aforementioned direct object (“what he wanted”). According to this reading, the gift and Ida stand in a relation of identity. Hence, the obscuration of Ida’s identity hinges on the obscuration of the relation of identity between persons and things. For Marcel Mauss in *The Gift*, the steadfastness of the contractual bond between the donor and the donee

in gift-exchange depends on the inherence of the soul of the donor in the gift – that is, on the confusion of persons and things, their being “mixed up together” (46).¹⁸

Because the donee knows that “to make a gift of something to someone is to make a present of some part of oneself,” he “clearly and logically realizes that [he] must give back to another person what is really part and parcel of his nature and substance” (*The Gift* 12). Hence, because Henry does not know if the gift constitutes “some part” of Ida, he owes her no debt of recognition, which Stein elsewhere offers as the definition of identity.¹⁹ Insofar as recognition is precluded by his uncertainty about who gave it to him – or who “it was” – reciprocity is properly speaking impossible.

Thus the second meeting between Henry and Ida is characterized not by relation and reciprocity (both of which presuppose identity), but by division and asymmetry. The elision of the link between Ida on the one hand and the gesture of giving and the gift on the other marks her status as an “entity.” Unlike identity, which is a social and temporal phenomenon for Stein, an entity is “a thing in itself and not in relation” (“What Are Master-pieces” 88). We might also ascribe this term to Henry, who is figured as having what he wanted – as if by some miracle – without any mention of the manner in which he received it. Hence, even amid their simultaneous enjoyment of the pleasure that attends giving and receiving, a disjunction, which is marked here by a conjunction, persists between them: “he smiled and she smiled.” Yet insofar as we read Henry as knowing without knowing that it was Ida, their meeting has a contractual element. Their smiles serve to seal a pact, but a pact to make no pacts – as if to utter any word would be to say “it was I” or “it was you” and

¹⁸ Jonathan Parry also argues that for Mauss the social contract hinges on “the absence of any absolute disjunction between persons and things”: “The gift only succeeds in suppressing the [Hobbesian] Warre of all against all *because* it creates spiritual bonds between persons by means of which things embody persons” (457).

¹⁹ In “What Are Master-pieces,” Stein writes, “Identity is recognition, you know who you are because you and others remember anything about yourself” (84).

in so doing saddle both parties with unwanted obligation. In this respect, their second encounter admits to a certain paradox: both parties are dependent on one another for their freedom. It is not so much the impossibility of confirming identity as a mutual vow of silence that allows for the preservation of the integrity and freedom of both subjects as entities – and sexually different entities at that.

While we might assume that the foreclosure of reciprocity between Henry and Ida is typical of favors in general, the passage assumes additional significance as a result of their sexual difference. We should recall that Ida, in being dis-identified with the gift, is dis-identified with “what Henry wanted” – that is, with the object of his desire. Having received and more often than not accepted numerous marriage proposals, Ida is frequently identified as the object of male desire. Yet rather than presuppose that Ida is what he wanted, Henry tacitly acknowledges a gap between object and subject, between seeming and being. His gesture of *not* thanking Ida, of not paying her any recognition, therefore has the strangely felicitous effect of doing her a greater personal justice: although Henry takes advantage of her hospitality, he also respects her privacy.

V.

Ideal though this scenario may be – at least for Henry and Ida, who seem happy enough – we cannot help but ask: what has been done to ensure that Henry receives what he wanted? Indeed, how is it that Ida – or somebody else for that matter – has not given him money? No less important and possibly more important than the occlusion of Ida’s responsibility for granting Henry’s favor is the omission of the practical means by which his wish is fulfilled. What would allow Henry to do nothing other than talk languages other than a gift of money, the thing on which everybody lives? What other than money could relieve him of the demand to earn a living? And if Henry now has, thanks to Ida, enough money to do what he likes, why not simply

acknowledge that money constitutes the ground of that freedom? What is the effect of the novel's omission – or, indeed, repression – of this detail?

The text's silence on this point in some sense reads as a mark of the strain required to maintain a division between materiality and ideality, between commerce and creation, the market and the gift. Stein's work suggests that the individual under capitalism is dependent on money and yet, to his own and others' peril, he is also prone to conceive of money as only an ideal and not a real thing. Moreover, her critical and autobiographical writings aptly demonstrate that she was far from immune to its appeal. Thus in *The Geographical History* she suggests that money, as an abstraction, achieves an optimal "flatness" akin to that which the master-piece should have.²⁰ The problem is that in setting up solitary reign as *the* sovereign good, money tends to overstep its boundaries, to colonize the imaginary absolutely and in so doing to undercut the capacity of the subject to create (as in the case of Stein after the success of *The Autobiography*), to think (the old man's son in *Ida*), to understand (the collector in *Picasso*), and to know that money is money and not a fee gift (the president and congress in "Money"). Hence, in "Money," Stein renders the imposition of rules such as the paternal prohibition and the sense of duty to obey them necessary to avoiding disaster within and without politics. *Ida* then offers a glimpse of life beyond the prohibition, giving its reader, as its heroine gives Henry, a "rest" from politics and what we tend to think of as the "real world" or "reality" more generally.

Because *Ida* is placed – even if barely – in the world, avoiding reality takes work, work which is represented both at a thematic level and at the formal level. *Ida*'s evasive movements and her unique brand of impersonality are reinforced and often

²⁰ Stein suggests that money can be a master-piece when it is "thin enough," but later recants this claim in suggesting that money is "not like a master-piece" (182, 222). Money most closely approximates the abstraction of a master-piece when it is paper money – when its value is not inherent, but purely a matter of representation.

realized through the use of various formal strategies, including the exclusion of signifiers of time and relation and the contortion of syntax to occlude the links between subjects and predicates, thus mystifying agency. All of these techniques serve, in my reading, to establish a set of conventions for social engagement, indeed for peaceful coexistence. The novel, we might say, works to establish a grammar of the gift. Because the novel remains largely anti-realist – what *does* Ida do for Henry? – the gift it offers is primarily stylistic. Or, rather we might say that the novel renders generosity a matter of style, an attitudinal bearing toward the world that may be unrepeatable in so-called real life. In other words, the gift at stake in *Ida* is purely a fiction. Indeed reading *Ida* in the context of Stein’s work from the period suggests that its fictionality, its inimitable ideality, is its virtue. The question of whether or not the text achieves this feat is another matter, one which is complicated by the fact that a certain reality principle is operative in *Ida*. For while the novel keeps reality at bay, it also represents a woman who devotes herself to keeping reality at bay. Put somewhat differently, while *Ida: A Novel* figures generosity through its style, it also represents a woman who has made generosity a lifestyle and goes to some lengths to treat that lifestyle – fabulous and inscrutable though it may be – with a degree of seriousness, in part by suggesting that it cannot be preserved without some cost to our heroine.

During her time in Washington, Ida has a number of dreams that register this cost. These dreams, I will argue, mark the return of those influences that she has taken such care to keep at bay – such as the thought of money, the demand for recompense, and of course her basic animality. Ida dreams “if you are old you have nothing to eat, is that, she dreamed in her dream, is that money” (70). What money names here is not so much a means to relieving destitution as the very experience of destitution. Nevertheless, this experience remains a hypothetical one, for Ida “never starved” (44). While the dream registers some anxiety about not always having enough, it also

constitutes a return of what has been repressed in the present. In other words, the dream not only manifests a fear of having to think about money in the future, but also implies that Ida cannot help but think about money now. Just as the old man's son must eventually pay the price for the crime that follows from always thinking of money, so Ida must pay some price for never thinking of money, for tirelessly negating those signs of depressed times that haunt the periphery of her waking life. The text may aver that the weather makes no difference to Ida, but the dream confesses to her susceptibility to environmental influences. Yet the text also suggests that the dream of money is as much the product of internal as external influences, for those signs that Ida ceaselessly avoids are figured as an expression of human nature – a disposition toward the animal in which Ida, too, has a share.

Elsewhere the text makes explicit the correlation between human nature and the dream-work while calling into question whether Ida is in fact starved for some return on her favors. Indeed it would seem that Henry, in not thanking Ida, does not only her but also himself a favor:

She dreamed that they were there and there was a little boy with them. Somebody had given the little boy a large package that had something in it and he went off to thank them. He never came back. They went to see why not. He was not there but there was a lady there and she was lying down and a large lion was there moving around. Where said they is the little boy, the lion ate him the lady said, and the package yes he ate it all, but the little boy came to thank you for it, yes I know but it did happen, I did not want it to but it did happen. I am very fond of the lion. They went away wondering and then Ida woke up. (68)

By supplanting the singular “somebody” (the donor who gives) with the plural “them” (the donor who is thanked), the text suggests that the donor is characterized by duality – by generosity and greed, by mind and nature, human and animal. Nevertheless, it seems that the lion would have remained in abeyance had the boy not decided to thank the donor. But what is the problem with thanking? In the context of the dream,

thanking provides an immediate return in recognition and in thus confirming the identity of the donor revives a human tendency toward animal predation only provisionally suppressed. Like the old man's son, raised always to think of money, the lady's leonine companion is also characterized by murderous hunger. While his "moving around" recalls the circulation of goods from which Ida withdraws, the supine pose of the lady reveals her status as a double for the frequently resting Ida, who is later described as "[lying] down in an easy chair" even though "she was not tired" (74). How strict, then, is the split between the lady and the lion, the human and the animal of which she is admittedly "very fond"? Might the homonymy between the signifier for her posture ("lying") and the signifier for her pet ("lion") reinforce their identification? Might it be possible that the lady is not only lying down but also *lying*, whether to herself or others about her initial intention? In other words, did the lion play a part in the original donation? Would the gift – the "large package that had something in it" – have been truly free if the boy had not taken it upon himself to "thank them"?

The description of both the package and the lion by the same term ("large") suggests that the gift is never absolutely dissociated from the carnivorous cravings of the lion. Insofar as the link between the gift and the lion corresponds to the link between things and persons, a link which guarantees the operativity of the rule of reciprocity for Mauss, it would seem that the package similarly contains "something" of the lion. Though it may be held in suspension, the link between persons and things cannot be altogether severed. Hence, the impersonal "it" that may refer both to Ida and to what Henry wanted serves to mediate between them even as it connotes their separation. But in positing a connection between the gift and human nature the dream does more than foreground the ongoing relation of persons and things; it raises the question of the motive behind the gift, which has thus far been affiliated with the

human mind rather than human nature. The resemblance between the lady and our typically languid heroine invites us to ask if her favors do not also carry a sinister, if unintended, trace of a hunger for return. Admittedly, the lady “did not want” the little boy to die, and yet “it did happen.” The dream thus alludes to the limits of intentionality and the impossibility of fully suppressing that animal avarice which that threatens to infuse any gesture of generosity. Neither the foreclosure of reciprocity, nor the freedom of the gift is ever guaranteed. Yet the dream also suggests that this nature may be not only a burden to the human but also (as Stein herself found) a pleasure to indulge: the lady is after all “very fond of the lion.”²¹ In this regard, the dream is as much the fulfillment of a wish otherwise forbidden to Ida as it is a token of the cost of her freedom from human nature. Both the content of the dream and the fact of its occurrence suggest that the freedom of the gift cannot be maintained without some toll being taken on the subject. Although the subject may not want any return, sooner or later it will happen. The debt to human nature must be paid, and is paid here in the form of the dream.

Although her economy of favors takes place beyond those prohibitions (the paternal “no”) that govern or should govern the sphere of politics, Ida is not without limits. The novel continually asks what is possible for the subject – how much she *can* do for others – and still maintain a balance, a sense of evenness akin to the homeostasis that Freud argued was the aim of the pleasure principle. Hence, hers is not an ethos of total self-sacrifice. Ida does what she can to satisfy the needs of others, but also keeps what she needs: “she needed only a part of the day and only a part of the night, the rest of the day and night she did not need. They might but she did not”

²¹ In *Everybody's Autobiography* recalls enjoying her celebrity – her status as a literary lion – after the success of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*: “Everybody invited me to meet somebody, and I went. I always go anywhere once and I rather liked doing what I had never done before, going everywhere. It was pleasant being a lion, nad meeting the people who make it pleasant to be a lion” (93).

(148). And when an acquaintance named Charles wants Ida “to give him the rest of the morning,” the narrator – in a rare deployment of emotionally charged free indirect discourse – repeats the demand as if appalled at the extent of his request, “The rest of the morning. She was too busy too. She said, she never had anything to do but she did not give him the rest of the morning” (67). Although Ida has no obligations, she, like Charles, is busy – too busy to spare the rest of the morning. She thus splits her time between the rest she gives (“the rest of the day and night she did not need”) and the rest she withholds (“she did not give him the rest of the morning”).

Although Ida continues to play hostess to an increasingly long line of visitors and leads an increasingly sedentary life after she leaves Washington, her practice of granting favors entirely subsides – at least it *almost* entirely subsides. Shortly after relocating to Boston, she begins spending time with the brother (Abraham George) of a man who appears only momentarily in the text but seems to be her lover (Woodward George). She tells Abraham, “I do like to do favors for anybody” (86). The response she receives makes clear that not all wishes are as noble – or at least as innocuous – as that of Henry. Abraham tells Ida “do one for me, and she said what is it, and he said I want to change to being a widower and she said yes of course, and she did not really laugh but she did look very pleasant resting and waiting. Yes she did. After all it was Woodward George who was important to her but he was far far away” (86). How are we read to this brief encounter? In the course of the few sentences following it, Ida leaves Boston with yet another man, Gerald Seaton, and almost immediately after that we are introduced to Andrew, with whom she settles down for the “second half” of the two-part novel.

As far as we know, Ida does not grant Abraham’s wish. On the contrary, she seems to answer his request with precisely the sardonic wit it deserves: “yes of course.” Although incredibly ingenuous – or perhaps for some readers scandalously

seductive – in her original proclamation of liking to do favors for anybody, she appears, despite her distraction by thoughts of Abraham’s brother, to shrug off the request as if it were a joke. But if we read the request as a joke, then I want to speculate that it is in some sense a joke at Ida’s expense. Abraham’s desire to be a widower most immediately invites our suspicion of him. But might we also read it as an index of his suspicion of Ida? After all, what kind of person likes to do favors for anybody? The term “favors” certainly carries a nefarious resonance, not least because of our own early twenty-first century distrust of any gift that purports to be free – whether we attribute that distrust to the modern marriage of democracy and imperialism, or the complicity of global capitalism and philanthropy, or simply too many Hollywood mafia films.

Abraham is not the first that we have seen distrust the generosity of others. Indeed, the posture of Abraham is comparable that of the collector in *Picasso* – if the collector had a sense of humor. Indeed, we might think of the scene between Abraham and Ida as a companion piece to the funny story offered in *Picasso*. While the collector cannot believe that Picasso would give the portrait to Stein for nothing rather than sell it for a profit, Abraham cannot believe that Ida really likes to do favors for anybody. Might he, in telling Ida “I want to change to being a widower,” be testing her – as if, in response to her claim to liking to do favors for anybody, he were to cry out “anybody” as the collector cried out “nothing” in *Picasso*? I want to suggest that his disbelief casts doubt on the universal reach of her proclamation in two respects – by suggesting that nobody could possibly be that generous on the one hand, and by suggesting that not everybody could possibly be that deserving of generosity on the other. As Freud also suspected, loving thy neighbor is no simple feat.

The implication, then, is that there must be a standard for deciding who deserves favor. For Freud, who continually returned to a narcissistic model of love,

this standard was the ego: “[The neighbor] deserves [my love] if he is so like me in important ways that I can love myself in him; and he deserves it if he is so much more perfect than myself that I can love my ideal of my own self in him” (*Civilization and Its Discontents* 66). While this formula aptly describes the criteria by which Stein gauges her satisfaction with her portrait – “it is I” – it also describes the basis for those identification-based bonds that Ida takes such pains to avoid forging during her travels around the country. And yet, the fact that Ida does not – at least as far as we know – grant Abraham the favor for which he asks suggests that there *is* some standard operative. Ida will not do just anything for anybody. What I am suggesting here is the possibility that at stake in the encounter between Ida and Abraham is not just the question of where the limit to her generosity lies. Rather, in suggesting that we might read his reply as a joke at Ida’s expense, I mean to argue that their exchange raises the question of how far others are willing to go in believing that such generosity not only was possible once (in the case of *Picasso*), but also continues to be possible (in the case of *Ida*).

Certainly, the guileless openness with which Ida proclaims her enjoyment of doing favors for anybody is all but impossible to believe. While *Ida* therefore tests us, it has also already accounted for our disbelief by way of Abraham and in so doing provokes us to respond otherwise. The collector in *Picasso* serves a similar function, but Stein goes even farther there, at once anticipating our distrust and genealogizing it by recollecting a time when the difference between a gift and a sale used to be negligible and attesting to a type – in that case, the creator – for whom paying nothing for a gift remains believable. Just as the funny story in *Picasso* stands as an open invitation to understand what the collector does not, so *Ida* stands as an open invitation to realize that even in the present someone still can do something for nothing, simply because she wants to and sometimes just because she can – at least some of the time.

The novel is therefore a gift, but a gift committed to hoping rather than demanding that in sharing this knowledge it will inspire us – as its heroine inspired the denizens of Washington and as Picasso inspired Stein – to return the favor. Of course, it is no less committed, in typical Stein fashion, to leaving us to wonder and ultimately to determine for ourselves, *how?*

CHAPTER 3

“The Perfect Hostess”: Money, Magic, and *Mrs. Dalloway*

I.

While Virginia Woolf has been foremost among the canonical writers to whom literary critics have turned to trouble the traditional view that modernists were hostile to the market, she is also, to my knowledge, the sole writer in this study whose work has been read in light of theories of the gift.¹ Critics who have taken the second tack argue that the gift economies operative within her texts stand in tension with the market and consumer culture, “running counter to, but also contiguous with, capitalist

¹ The two critics I have in mind who fall into this second category are Kathryn Simpson and Glenn Willmott. Drawing on Hélène Cixous’s characterization of gift economies as feminine and anti-capitalist,” Simpson argues that “the gift economy in Woolf’s texts works to facilitate the realization and satisfaction of women’s more subversive desires” – particularly lesbian desires (20). In *Modernist Goods: Primitivism, the Market and The Gift*, Willmott primarily addresses *The Waves*. Reading Woolf alongside Eliot, Willmott suggests that Percival is a “parodic shaman” who stood “less for an imperialism Woolf despised than for an aboriginal modernity she wished, as a Grail parody, to create” (195). Willmott’s study “aims to reveal systems” and to draw out the “economic unconscious” to which modernism gives expression (20). While our aims are thus similar in a very general way, our frameworks and findings are fairly disparate – particularly with regard to matters of gender and sexual politics. Willmott draws on a classification system established by anthropologist Chris Gregory that distinguishes between institutions of the Market, the State, and the House to argue that Anglo-American modernism is dominated by the structure of the House (gifts are those values that move between Houses). In “House dominated societies...the role and power of women as producers and exchangers of things is fundamental” (17). While the fact that the House “is articulated...by women’s heritage” does not “rule out scenarios of domination,” this model nevertheless presupposes that women have a “political role,” a role which may be different from but not subordinate to that of men (17). Clearly my previous chapter argued that Ida played just such a role in Stein’s novel. Nevertheless, I remain wary of espousing this domestic terminology to set up a generalizable model because of its consistency with Victorian ideals of femininity. While extremely careful not to claim a simple “affinity” between “aboriginal” and “imperialist” cultures, Willmott seems to me to be in danger of doing so when he draws on Marilyn Strathern’s claim that there is no ideology of the gift in Melanesian societies to suggest that “it may be impossible to speak of an ideology of the gift” (16). I am not convinced that there cannot be or has not been an ideology of the gift, and would suggest that such an ideology is in fact coextensive with a certain ideology of femininity – one which is “Victorian” but which continues to operate in the salvational rhetoric used by contemporary bourgeois feminism, particularly in the transnational context. Thus I am wary of relegating modernist women writers to the House – even if heroines such as Mrs. Dalloway comfortably make their home there – without also considering the largely critical postures they assume with respect to the Victorian House and its resident Angel.

systems” (Simpson 20). These economies, the argument goes, permit something – a sense of community or a moment of *jouissance* – otherwise forbidden or denied expression under the conditions of modern capitalism. A preeminent member of the first camp of critics, Jennifer Wicke has suggested that the market and the gift are not opposed in Woolf’s work. On the contrary, in *Mrs. Dalloway* in particular “consumption is reformulated as the nature of the gift” (18).

In “*Mrs. Dalloway Goes to Market*,” Wicke draws a parallel between Woolf’s innovation in the field of literature and that of her fellow Bloomsberry, John Maynard Keynes, in modern economic theory in order to argue that both modernists gave representation to “a market transfused by a collective magic” – a “buzzing, blooming socio-economic system...no longer equatable with realist or entirely rationalist models of representation” (21, 11). The perceived inadequacy of traditional literary and theoretical models meant that both Woolf and Keynes were confronted by “the imperative...to re-present what is acknowledged beforehand to be resistant to representation” (11). In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf responds to this imperative by placing “Clarissa at the core of the book, a meditation on urban modernity. Clarissa tentatively and tenuously reverses the disenchantment of the world characteristic of modernity by the generosity of her gendered acts of consumption” (18). These acts – for example, her purchase of flowers and other goods for her party – assume an aura of generosity in being linked to the party itself (tentatively defined by its hostess as “[a]n offering for the sake of an offering”) and Clarissa’s twice recollected sacrificial toss of a shilling into the Serpentine (*Mrs. Dalloway* 122). According to Wicke, the generosity of Clarissa’s consumption “appears paradoxical, in that gift-giving looks like the reversal of consumption, the taking in or appropriation of something through an act of exchange” (18). But to whom does it appear paradoxical?

Gift-giving and consumption seem to be antithetical only if we begin with two presuppositions, one of which bears on the nature of consumption and the other of which bears on the nature of the gift, but both of which we can presume to be typical of the rationalist model of political economy from which Keynes and Woolf deviated. Wicke explicitly acknowledges the first presupposition when she defines consumption as the acquisition of something through exchange. Although the second remains unacknowledged, it is nevertheless implied by Wicke and can be derived from the first: to claim that consumption and gift-giving appear paradoxical is to suggest that any gift given is (or at least should be?) a free gift, exempt from any process of exchange that would entail a return – that is, “the taking in or appropriation of something.” Otherwise what would differentiate gift-giving from consumption? While Wicke makes clear that the de facto generosity of consumption in *Mrs. Dalloway* undercuts the first of these two presuppositions and with it a specious opposition between the gift and exchange or at least between the gift and reciprocal exchange, she intriguingly suggests that this opposition remains in place for us, her readers, to whom Clarissa’s generous consuming practices – what Wicke refers to as “sacrifice through spending” (22) – will appear paradoxical.

This point is important because Wicke begins her essay by inviting “[her] readers to entertain the notion that modernism contributed profoundly to a sea-change in market consciousness, a consciousness we all tend to share” (5). While we may be surprised to find antecedents of some of our own ideas about the market in modernism, she suspects that many of the ideas themselves will be familiar – except it would seem for the idea that the nature of the gift and the nature of consumption may not be antithetical. Despite the depth of the impact made upon our perception of the market by modernists such as Woolf and Keynes in particular and the Bloomsbury Group in general we are bound to be surprised by an act of consumption that does not

aim at some acquisition or an act of giving that does. While Wicke makes a strong case for reading these seemingly disparate acts as manifestations of the same magical market in *Mrs. Dalloway* her argument rests upon what I take to be a major exclusion. What gets excluded from her account of Woolf's market is Clarissa's rationale for giving and the novel's critical re-inscription of that rationale. Barring for the moment further elaboration of the different ways in which her generosity is explained, I want to suggest that their inclusion allows us to wedge a gap between the market and exchange – not because the market is “bad,” but because the market falls short of accounting for the breadth of the socio-economic system at play in *Mrs. Dalloway* even when re-interpreted and re-assessed by a critic as generous as Wicke.

This system, I want to argue, bears a kinship to that which Marcel Mauss detected in the archaic transfer of gifts but which he, according to Lévi-Strauss, could not quite bring into full relief. In his *Introduction to Marcel Mauss*, Lévi-Strauss argues that while Mauss was “controlled by a logical certainty...that *exchange* is the common denominator of a large number of apparently heterogeneous social activities,” he was prevented from formulating this certainty because he could not empirically prove “the existence of a structure” (46-7). His observations instead yielded the rule of reciprocity, which consists of three obligations: the obligation to give, the obligation to receive, and the obligation to reciprocate gifts received. This rule demonstrates only that reciprocity is prescribed, not that “exchange is necessary” (46). Instead of putting the whole before its parts by positing an underlying structure of exchange, Mauss sought “to reconstruct a whole out of parts” (47). In order to do so, he had to bring an “additional quantity” to bear on his analysis (47). In *The Gift*, this quantity was *hau* – that is, the spirit or power in Maori tradition that inhabits the thing given and functions as a subjective guarantee of reciprocity and thus of the totality of exchange. As a product of magical thinking, *hau*, like *mana*, is “the

subjective reflection of the need to supply an unperceived totality” which is “given to” and “given by” symbolic thought, but which is not fully available to perception (58). Mauss’s mistake, according to Lévi-Strauss, was seeking an explanation for these subjective phenomena in sentiment – “in the order of feelings, of volitions and of beliefs” – rather than structure (56).

By contrast, Lévi-Strauss focuses on the function played by “*hau*” and “*mana*” as *signifiers* and specifically as floating signifiers, supplementary or “zero” symbols “whose role is to enable symbolic thinking to operate despite the contradiction inherent in it” (58). This contradiction regards relation: on the one hand, we perceive things to be elements within a system of exchange, “in respect to self and others simultaneously”; on the other hand, we perceive those same things to be “destined by nature to pass from one to the other,” to be exchanged (59). The second perception presumes a division between one and the other – a division that the transmission of the gift would overcome by bringing the two into relation. But Lévi-Strauss argues that the opposite is true: “The fact that those things may be *the one’s* or *the other’s* represents a situation which is derivative from the initial relational aspect” (59). In placing an emphasis on our perception of things as belonging to either the one or the other, Lévi-Strauss raises an intriguing possibility, one which is echoed by Georges Bataille in *The Accursed Share* when he argues that we misunderstand the nature of luxury and wealth in contemporary society. For the privilege put on private property – on what belongs to the one or the other – in modern legal and philosophical discourse emerges here as the symptom of a cognitive failure to grasp relation rather than as a symptom of any kind of moral failure. Relation between individuals exists, but it exists at “a deeper level of thinking” – one which magical thinking works to represent by taking recourse to symbols such as *hau* and *mana* (59).

It is important to underscore the fact that for Lévi-Strauss the unity restored by these symbols and magical operations more generally – a category that includes the production of art for Lévi-Strauss – is not lost per se, “for nothing is ever lost” (59). Unity already exists, but is unconscious or “less completely conscious than those operations” (59). But neither does the unity recreated via symbolic thought correspond to structure as such: because the signifiers in which this unity finds support are not grounded in any accessible signified, it has an excessive or redundant quality. Consider, for example, Mauss’s rules of reciprocity and the *hau* that guarantees them: why create a system of relation – or of what Mauss called “total services” – if we are already bound by relation? Or, consider Clarissa Dalloway in Woolf’s text: why – as Peter Walsh is wont to ask – would Clarissa engage in the “interminable traffic that women of her sort keep up” (77)? Why orchestrate an elaborate “network of visiting, leaving cards, being kind to people; running about with bunches of flowers, little presents” (77)? Indeed, why do all this if – as Clarissa is so certain is the case – “somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home; of the house there, ugly, rambling all to bits and pieces as it was; part of people she had never met; being laid out like a mist between people she knew best, who lifted her on their branches as she had seen the trees lift the mist” (77)?

The answer, for both Lévi-Strauss and for Woolf, is a *need* at the level of the subject. For the former, as I noted above, *hau* reflects a “need to supply an unperceived totality” (58). *Mrs. Dalloway* circles a similar insight when Peter reflects on how Clarissa “had a sense of comedy that was really exquisite, but she needed people, always people, to bring it out, with the inevitable result that she frittered her time away” (78). Clarissa, to the irritation of Peter, depends on others in order to become herself. Her neediness, her lack, grates on him – arguably because it reflects

his own dependence on external supports, namely the pocket knife with which he fiddles throughout the novel. But what is so striking about this particular plaint of Peter's – and he has no shortage of criticisms of Clarissa – is its excessiveness, what I would argue is its irrationality. Can Clarissa be fairly faulted for relying on others to realize her sense of comedy? Could we imagine a sense of comedy that would not be mediated or relational in some way – even if the other with whom one shares the joke or for whom one tells it is internalized or projected? Although Clarissa's need of people may be negatively framed by Peter, its rationality in this instance renders it a powerful example of the paradoxical logic behind her seemingly wasteful expenditure, including the party in which the novel culminates. Her apparent wastefulness reflects a need to supply an unperceived totality, where the totality in question is the subject – that is, Mrs. Dalloway. Or, to frame this claim in terms not of the time she passes but of the social engagements with which she fills it, we might say that without this added something, this supplement in the form of the other, she could not be herself. Thus Peter remembers Clarissa suspecting that “to know her, or any one, one must seek out the people who completed them; even the places” (152-153). Such people and places, according to the “transcendental theory” Clarissa developed in her youth and by which she seems still to abide in the present of the narrative, constitute “the unseen part of us, which spreads wide...even haunting certain places after death” (ellipsis mine 153). No less haunted by Clarissa than he is critical of her (and perhaps the latter all the more so because of the former), Peter admits:

Looking back over that long friendship of almost thirty years her theory worked to this extent. Brief, broken, often painful as their actual meetings had been what with his absences and interruptions...the effect of them on his life was immeasurable. There was a mystery about it. You were given a sharp, acute, uncomfortable grain – the actual meeting; horribly painful as often as not; yet in absence, in the most unlikely places, it would flower out, open, shed its scent, let you touch, taste, look about you, get the whole feel of it and understanding,

after years of lying lost...She had influenced him more than any person he had ever known. (153)

Although he does not openly confess to a need for Clarissa, Peter nevertheless reinforces her sense of dispersal, her notion of the social texture of human existence.

Significantly more important than the fact that Peter validates Clarissa's transcendental theory is the way in which the novel itself lends it justification. Without suggesting that Woolf condones Clarissa's personal point of view – which, as I will argue below, is constrained in troubling ways – I would suggest that this theory offers a partial guideline for conceptualizing the project of the novel. Alex Zwerdling, whose reading of the novel remains indispensable, argues that “*Mrs. Dalloway* is in large measure an examination of a single class and its control over English society” (70). Set on a June day in 1923 (five years after the end of World War I, on the eve of the election of the first Labour Party Prime Minister), the novel captures this class at an historical moment when its control is teetering, while also demonstrating the continued sway that some of its more nefarious representatives – including medical professionals such as Sir William Bradshaw and Dr. Holmes – continue to hold. As Zwerdling suggests, the ultimate treatment of this class is (to put it lightly and for lack of a better word) ambivalent. For while Woolf takes satirical aim at “the English social system, with its hierarchies of class and sex, its complacency, its moral obtuseness,” her method of examining this system renders a degree of sympathy with at least some of its supporters – not least Clarissa Dalloway – inevitable:

But though Woolf's picture of Clarissa Dalloway's world is sharply critical, her book cannot really be called an indictment because it deliberately looks at its object from the inside. The very use of internal monologue is a form of sympathy, if not of exoneration. To know everything may not be to pardon everything, but it makes it impossible to judge simply and divide the world into heroes and villains. (70)

The issue of the impossibility of judging either Woolf's characters simply or the nature of “her” judgment of them emerge will later in the chapter when I discuss

Clarissa's fleeting identification with Septimus – the portrayal of whom contrasts with that of the “governing class” (to use Peter's term) and renders it somewhat easier to gauge their faults.

In shifting among multiple perspectives, Woolf's text gives psychological depth and complexity to – indeed humanizes – a variegated swath of this class while also registering the human costs of its preservation, from the life of Septimus to the livelihood of Doris Kilman, who suffered the consequences because she “would not pretend that the Germans were all villains” when the war came (124). What interests me is not just the fact that Woolf incorporates the sexually and class divided experiences of such disparate characters – down to the urban extras that occasionally sneak into view and the domestic workers who sustain the world of the novel. What interests me is the fact that all are subsumed under the title of a single proper name, *Mrs. Dalloway*. Zwerdling argues that the result of Woolf's decision to examine her object from within and to focus much of the narrative through Clarissa is “a sympathetic picture of someone who has surrendered to the force of conventional life and permitted her emotions to go underground” (79). Yet this picture would not be complete were it not for the glimpses of so many other perspectives. I want to be specific about my meaning here: my point is not merely that others provide points of comparison and contrast that enable us to produce a more thorough sketch of Clarissa in her particularity. Of course, they do. For example, Clarissa's enjoyment of the opportunity afforded by her party “to go much deeper” – to give play to those emotions otherwise forced underground, to satisfy her need for engagement – is implicitly opposed to the stoicism of Hugh Whitbread, whom we are told “did not go deeply” (171, 102). My point, however, is that Hugh is in a way part of Clarissa in her particularity. In being identified with Mrs. Dalloway, the novel suggests that so many people, places, and times inhabit and are inscribed in her and that she in turn is spread

out and disseminated among them. *Mrs. Dalloway*, like its heroine, is “the perfect hostess” (7).

Woolf, of course, adds to a long tradition of titling novels by the names of their heroes or heroines – a tradition to which, of the writers in this study, Gertrude Stein would later add both *Ida*, discussed in the previous chapter, and *Mrs. Reynolds*. Yet the identification of novel and character, text and subject, has a distinctive effect here as a result of various elements of *Mrs. Dalloway*’s form and content. Woolf at once thematizes and realizes the dissemination of the subject, for example by plotting correspondences between their thoughts; thus Septimus and Clarissa, though strangers, share a preoccupation with Shakespeare. That literature serves as a point of commonality is telling, for while Peter suggests that Clarissa’s transcendental theory works to the extent that he remains in many respects taken with her, the novel suggests that her theory works insofar as the subject is first of all a *linguistic* entity, a being like Mrs. Dalloway who would remain unknowable without a generous sample of the symbolic fabric into and from which her life is woven – that is, who would remain unknowable without *Mrs. Dalloway*. At the same time, the specificity of the title, the naming of *only* Mrs. Dalloway, requires us to ask: is Clarissa’s theory applicable to the subject as such, or rather has the novel been perfectly fitted to its object, the character of Clarissa Dalloway? Would a novel called, for example, *Mr. Whitbread* or *Dr. Holmes* have the same shape and texture? Or, would such a title necessarily punctuate and reinforce a different theory of human character (to use the term that Woolf sets forth in her essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” to describe the almost atmospheric quality of the individual)?

It is of course in that essay that Woolf famously declares that “in or about December, 1910, human character changed” (320). Especially important for my purposes is the fact that this change in human character corresponds for Woolf to a

change in human relations: “All human relations have shifted – those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children” (320). The old hierarchies had shifted. We might add to this list the relations between characters and novelists. When Woolf recalls observing Mr. Smith and Mrs. Brown (as she calls them) in a train car on a trip from Richmond to Waterloo, the “overwhelming and peculiar impression” left by Mrs. Brown is both informed by her heavily gendered exchange with Mr. Smith (who is “of a bigger, burlier, less refined type”) and by Woolf’s own belief that the impression is the thing that the modern fiction writer must work to transmit: “Here is a character imposing itself upon another person. Here is Mrs. Brown making someone begin almost automatically to write a novel about her. I believe that all novels begin with an old lady in the corner opposite. I believe that all novels, that is to say, deal with character” (324). As the evolving sympathies of the public demonstrate – “Read the Agamemnon, and see whether, in process of time, your sympathies are not almost entirely with Clytemnestra” (320) – the significance or value of character is relative and specific to a particular time and place. The implication, then, is not only that beginning a novel with a Mr. Smith (or a Hugh Whitbread or a Dr. Holmes) would entail writing a novel very different from *Mrs. Dalloway* but also that such a novel would be thoroughly anachronistic against the backdrop of the 1920s. It is a moment when, according to Woolf, “we are suffering, not from decay, but from having no code of manners which writers and readers accept as a prelude to the more exciting intercourse of friendship.” Thus *Mrs. Dalloway* might be read as an attempt to establish such a code, a convention to serve as “a means of communication between writer and reader,” and as an allegory of that attempt. The novelist aspires, or should aspire, to transmit character, which Woolf compares in the person of Mrs. Brown to “the spirit we live by, life itself.” As a medium for this monistic spirit, what is the ideal novelist if not the perfect hostess?

In what follows I will posit a tension between *Mrs. Dalloway*'s code of manners and Clarissa's code of manners, the rules of engagement that govern the interminable traffic and social networking for which Peter berates her. Linguistic play and the repetition of key figures, I will argue, trouble and reveal the limitations of the social conventions – what we might think of as the laws of hospitality – by which Clarissa abides as well as her understanding of herself and others. First, though, I want to return for a moment to Wicke's reading of the novel and specifically her equation of "social relations" with "market relations" in order ultimately to frame my analysis of *Mrs. Dalloway* in terms of a broader conception of Woolf's work and the ways in which it manifests the market. Wicke makes a claim similar to my own about connections among different characters in the novel when she argues that consciousness is "social consciousness" in Woolf's writing; within the "wide social net" laid out in the text, people "are one another's thoughts" (11, 12). Woolf, she argues, "is *transcribing* (via modernist experimentation) a phenomenon of the everyday world... This phenomenon is encountered in everyday life as the experience of 'the market'" (12). While I would agree with Wicke that the buzzing, blooming system to which Woolf gives form in *Mrs. Dalloway* is in a sense magical, this system, I will argue, cannot be reduced to the market. To be more precise: we cannot explain the fluidity between consumption and the gift in Woolf's work *unless* we consider the status that the market has there as a symbolic economy and specifically as a *money* economy.

In *Mrs. Dalloway* the twice invoked image of Clarissa's sacrifice of a single coin – "She had once thrown a shilling into the Serpentine" – establishes a link between money and the gift that becomes more fully developed in *A Room of One's Own* as well as *Three Guineas*, although I will discuss only the former here. Published in 1929, four years after *Mrs. Dalloway*, the essay offers among other things

a myth of the creation of the modern woman writer.² In the tale of Mary Beton, the money economy constitutes the material ground for the development of her individual talent: a gift of money in the form of an inheritance from her aunt endows Mary with the freedom to harness her creative power or “gift,” a term Woolf uses throughout the essay to signify inborn individual talents. Yet the money economy, I want to argue, also constitutes the *conceptual* ground for a number of Mary’s critical insights into symbolic economies in general – particularly the patriarchal regime of the professoriate – and what we might think of as the symbolic situatedness of the subject as such. Thus, to dwell in what Geoffrey Hartman calls “Virginia’s Web” is to inhabit a system of relations which, although irreducible to the money economy, may be inconceivable without the money economy.

II.

In order ultimately to bring this point to bear on *Mrs. Dalloway* I first want to turn to *A Room of One’s Own* to explore the nature of the privilege it assigns to the money economy. One need hardly repeat Virginia Woolf’s conclusion in *A Room of One’s Own* that “it is necessary to have five hundred a year and a room with a lock on the door” in order for a woman to produce literary works (105). Woolf roots this conclusion in a straightforward syllogistic argument:

Intellectual freedom depends upon material things. Poetry depends upon intellectual freedom. And women have always been poor... Women have had less intellectual freedom than the sons of Athenian slaves. Women, then, have not had a dog’s chance of writing poetry. That is why I have laid so much stress on money and a room of one’s own. (108)

² In “Virginia’s Web,” Geoffrey Hartman argues that *A Room of One’s Own* “illustrates in slow motion how [Woolf’s] mature prose came to be” (81). This prose – the first example of which is *Mrs. Dalloway*, which he considers to be her first experimental novel – creates continuity, Hartman argues, by projecting imagination into spaces of “apparent discontinuity” (78). My concern here will be what creates these spaces and what determines the imaginary content with which they are filled.

Suspecting that her fictional account of the researches and reflections that drove her to this conclusion will not preempt dispute, Woolf – who at this point has regained control of the narration from “Mary Beton” whose name she assumed to tell her tale – anticipates two criticisms: first, she has neglected to opine on “the comparative merits of the sexes even as writers”; and, second, she has made “too much of the importance of material things,” which “you may say that the mind should rise above” (105, 106). While the first criticism complains of her failure to measure the impact of sexual difference on the value of a literary work, the second criticism complains of her ascription of too much value to the material conditions of literary production. Criticism of her undervaluation on the one hand is countered by criticism of her overvaluation on the other. These criticisms not only balance one another out, but might also be taken as two sides of the same coin, for considered in conjunction, they add up not to criticisms, but to one: Woolf, they imply, has overestimated the importance of the *wrong* material things, dwelling on “how much money women had and how many rooms,” and how their traditional lack of both stifled their productivity, when she should have been evaluating “their capacities” relative to those of men (105).

Yet such a criticism would rest upon a fundamental error. Capacities – which Woolf repeatedly refers to as “gifts” throughout the essay – cannot be measured by the same standards as things like money and rooms. It would be a mistake to presume that “gifts, whether of mind or character, can be weighed like sugar and butter,” (105). That is not to say that they are not treated as if they could be, particularly at male-dominated academic institutions like the fictional Oxbridge and the actual Cambridge which have helped to place England “under the rule of the patriarchy” (105, 33). Gifts cannot be weighed, calculated, ranked – “not even in Cambridge, where they are so adept at putting people into classes and fixing caps on their heads and letters after their

names” (105). Dispelling the illusion that they can is one of the primary objectives of the text.

While gifts are immeasurable and innate – one is “born with a great gift” whether or not one is born into money (49) – their cultivation and expression nevertheless depend on sociohistorical and material circumstances. Thus earlier in the text our narrator, Mary Beton, expresses certainty that in the sixteenth century, “a highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry would have been so thwarted and hindered by other people, so tortured and pulled asunder by her own contrary instincts” – her desire to write versus her duty to serve – “that she must have lost her health and sanity to a certainty” (49). Writing two hundred years later, Jane Austen is an exceptional case: “Her gift and her circumstances matched each other completely” (68). In making this claim she means not to credit Austen’s creative vision but to acknowledge her perfect attunement, her myopic conformity to the social mores and sexual politics of her day. In contrast, the circumstances of Charlotte Brontë were inadequate to her gift. Because her genius exceeded her resources, she could not transcend her “defects as a novelist” and was therefore bound to produce imperfect works (69). By way of these ruminations, the narrator suggests that a gift cannot be brought to fruition and remains inchoate if it is not equal to the resources of its owner – resources which are entirely calculable. Thus she permits herself the indulgence of imagining “what might have happened if Charlotte Brontë had possessed say three hundred a year” (70). In speculating that three hundred a year would have fit the bill in the nineteenth century, as opposed to the five hundred a year which is the modern woman’s due, Mary is presumably accounting for inflation. In any case, it is clear that gifts, despite Woolf’s claim to the contrary, can and even must be valued like material things if women are to live up to their potential.

Not only do gifts have a monetary value, but money is figured as being like a gift. Fittingly, its figurative resemblance to a gift comes into relief amid Mary's reflections on the practical and psychological effects of inheriting her aunt's legacy – a gift of money. Before looking at these reflections, I first want to establish Mary's socioeconomic and emotional status before receiving the inheritance in order to link her experience to that of women whom she imagines that history either misunderstood or forgot – women such as Shakespeare's fictitious sister Judith who were thwarted in their creative ambitions. Drawing this connection will help me ultimately to demonstrate that the gift is both materially *and* conceptually dependent on money for its realization and to argue that there is a crucial tension at play in Woolf's text. While the essay makes clear that a gift may exist independently of whether or not an individual possesses money, it also suggests through its representation of Mary's perception of money and the freedom it gives her that money figures as the first gift. Of course, in the form of the legacy money is literally a gift, but I mean to argue a point beyond the banal claim that money is or can be a thing given from one person to another. Gifts would not be gifts – in other words, "gifts" would not signify an immeasurably valuable "creative force" which cannot be "weighed like butter or sugar" (87, 105) – were it not for money. Mary ascribes to money a spiritual quality and suggests that it functions as a kind of floating signifier, indeed as the zero symbol *par excellence*. For money grants Mary access to what Woolf later refers to as the "world of reality" (114), a world which I will argue is tantamount to a symbolic landscape that assumes significance in relation to the gifted individual. Recalling Lévi-Strauss's discussion of *hau*, we might say that money, in *A Room of One's Own*, answers a need to supply an unperceived totality and yet its capacity to do so implies that the subject is already in possession of a gift – that there already exists a need to be answered and a totality to be perceived.

But before we can say as much we must consider Mary's place within a long line of women with hidden talents. Before receiving her inheritance, Mary lived off "odd jobs" (37). Worse than the poverty she suffered was the feeling of being "like a slave, flattering and fawning," catering to her superiors because "the stakes were too great to run risks" (38). In a world where everybody lives on money – to borrow a phrase of Gertrude Stein's – nothing short of her life depended on her ability to remain in the good graces of men. And yet her slavish dependence threatened to take a fatal toll on "that one gift which it was death to hide – a small one but dear to the possessor – perishing and with it myself, my soul" (38). It would be a mistake to dismiss this passage as merely hyperbolic, for as I noted above Woolf's text takes pains to theorize the psychological costs and horrific consequences of harboring and suppressing one's gift. History, she surmises, is filled with potential women writers, so that when "one reads of a witch being ducked, of a woman possessed by devils, of a wise woman selling herbs...we are on the track of a lost novelist, a suppressed poet, of some mute and inglorious Jane Austen, some Emily Brontë who dashed her brains out on the moor...crazed with the torture her gift had put her to" (49). Without a proper outlet the gift becomes a torture to its possessor, turning on her, driving her to self-destruction.³ Here the lack of a proper outlet or channel translates into the lack of a proper name. In the form of Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Church-Yard," literary history has given us not some mute and inglorious Jane Austen but some mute and inglorious Milton. There is no elegy written for a woman novelist or

³ I am reminded of Marcel Mauss's consideration of the fact that in Germanic languages "gift" can mean both "present" (as in English) or "poison." See especially "Gift, Gift." These seemingly disparate meanings are not only linguistically but also conceptually bound according to Mauss. The confluence of the notions of gift and poison finds one manifestation in the Maori belief that keeping or failing to reciprocate a gift "would be dangerous and mortal" in part because gifts and the rituals through which they are exchanged "exert a magical or religious hold over you" (*The Gift* 12). The transformation of the gift into deadly poison is temporally determined, for "in every possible form of society it is in the nature of a gift to impose an obligatory time limit" (35-36).

poet manqué. At stake in the allusion to Gray's "Elegy" and the substitution of Austen for Milton is not just an acknowledgment of so much unrealized and unrecognized talent, but also an indication of a certain lack in the past – specifically the lack of a symbolic framework for conceptualizing a lost woman novelist, the lack of a signifying code that would allow a reader of human character to convert "a woman possessed by devils" into a suppressed woman poet. What was missing – which is also to say what was violently excluded by misogynist tradition – was a signifier that would provide the symbolic ground for conceptualizing *feminine* gifts, gifts which were already present, but which we are meant to believe were misdirected and misinterpreted because they lacked a context that would allow for their proper expression. What makes up for this lack in the present?

The most immediate answer is a female literary tradition, limited though it may be in Woolf's account. Certainly the emergence of a vociferous and glorious Jane Austen – as well as a Charlotte Brontë, an Emily Brontë, and a George Eliot – allows Woolf to rewrite Gray's famous verse. Yet I want to argue that this web of proper names and the texts that issued from their pens would not in themselves provide an adequate context. Another symbol necessarily comes into play. Reflecting on the scant tradition on which early nineteenth-century women novelists had to draw, Mary proclaims that "we think back through our mothers if we are women" (76). But the works of such "maternal" figures as the Brontës and Austen are not Mary's sole resource, for Mary thinks back not only through her mothers but also through her aunt, also named Mary Beton. This genealogy, from the elder Mary Beton to the younger, is crucial to understanding what Woolf takes to be the ideal circumstances for the woman writer in the modern age and the logic of the gift both in *A Room of One's Own* and in *Mrs. Dalloway*, to which I will return later in this chapter.

Mary's reflections on the legacy and the experience of having money more generally are set in motion by the arrival of her lunch bill:

It came to five shillings and ninepence. I gave the waiter a ten-shilling note and he went to bring me change. There was another ten-shilling note in my purse; I noticed it, because it is a fact that still takes my breath away – the power of my purse to breed ten-shilling notes automatically. I open it and there they are. Society gives me chicken and coffee, bed and lodging, in return for a certain number of pieces of paper which were left me by an aunt, for no other reason than that I share her name.

My aunt, Mary Beton, I must tell you, died by a fall from her horse when she was riding out to take the air in Bombay. The news of my legacy reached me one night about the same time that the act was passed that gave the votes to women. A solicitor's letter fell into the post-box and when I opened it I found that she had left me five hundred pounds a year for ever. Of the two – the vote and the money – the money, I own, seemed infinitely the more important. (37)

As the fulcrum between “the money” and Mary's judgment of its importance, the illocutionary “I own” refers to and reinforces her authority over both. In this moment, the text anticipates its eventual claim that “owning” money is a prerequisite to “owning” one's thoughts and perceptions. Indeed, in asserting that the money “seemed infinitely the more important,” Mary begins to register the extent to which it has granted her the freedom and ability to express her gift, the possession of which she formerly felt obliged to deny.

Most striking about the above passage is the power that Mary attributes to her purse to “breed ten-shilling notes automatically.” Forestalling for the moment discussion of the mystification that such a claim entails, I want to emphasize the way in which the fact of having money remains utterly astonishing to Mary. While the notes have an instrumental function, meeting the necessity of paying the bill, the indefatigability of Mary's surprise upon seeing them suggests that they also constitute a kind of providential surplus, as if they were a free gift. Certainly the gendered image of the purse suggests an affinity between its creative power and that of women,

which “differs greatly from the creative power of men” (87). Yet their power has not had an outlet: “women have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by this time the very walls are permeated by their creative force, which has, indeed, so overcharged the capacity of bricks and mortar that it must needs harness itself to pens and brushes and business and politics” (87). At the same time, as I noted above, there is little on the historical record – the innumerable pieces of paper that Mary reads in order to determine “[w]hat conditions are necessary for the creation of works of art” (25) – to suggest that such a force exists, that women have gifts. The perplexed tone of Mary’s meditation on the ability of the pieces of paper bred by her purse to buy food and shelter – the bare necessities – suggests to me that the notes may provide just such a proof. It would seem that Mary’s aunt – if we can be permitted the speculation – put her gift toward the “great art of making money” (21). Yet we might also put more pressure on the status of the notes as mere pieces of paper which nevertheless serve as a medium of exchange. I want to argue that, as such, they provide a template for conceptualizing those gifts that managed, against many odds, to find expression. Indeed, their unprecedented authority is echoed in Mary’s discussion of the fiction produced by those early nineteenth-century novelists who faced a great difficulty “when they came to set their thoughts to paper – that is that they had no tradition behind them” (76). What is are the ten-shilling notes in Mary’s account if not paper with no tradition behind them?

While Mary elsewhere figures her inheritance as inalienable property which bolsters her autonomy – “No force in the world can take from me my five hundred pounds” (38) – the seemingly miraculous appearance of the notes has the effect of undercutting the sovereignty of the subject, taking her breath away: Mary momentarily expires, dies a little death. Whereas the elder Mary Beton set out to take the air, the younger Mary Beton has her breath taken away. As the origin of the this strange twist

of fate, death constitutes a negative and a positive force, instantiating a loss that is also magnificently productive in enabling Mary Beton's social participation.

It is worth stressing the two women's possession of the same name because it seems to me to evoke a certain structural logic – one which contravenes the apparent freedom of the gift. I have in mind the logic whereby symbolic initiation depends upon a loss. For example, within the “elementary structures of kinship,” the son surrenders the mother or another female relative as a love object and submits to the paternal prohibition in order to form social ties through exogamous marriage; by way of the exchange of women, the loss of the mother is compensated by the acquisition of a wife. The structure of kinship operative here obeys a similar logic and in so doing underscores Lévi-Strauss's own point that any kinship system is an “arbitrary system of representations.”⁴ The role of sociohistorical factors in determining the imaginary content of any such system is registered here in the fact that Mary receives her aunt's legacy “for no other reason than that I share her name.” Culture and not nature, the name and not biology, is the reason for her good fortune. In the myth of Mary's symbolic accession, *A Room of One's Own* thus offers a feminine alternative to the nominally universal Oedipus complex.

Yet in linking Mary to the past and, indeed, to her kin, this structural logic stands in tension with Mary's treatment of the ten-shilling notes as if they were created *ex nihilo* and her concomitant occlusion of the sociohistorical origins of her inheritance. Mary's aunt, we might recall, was in Bombay when she died. What besides the air was she interested in taking in India? At what – or whose – expense was her wealth accrued? What must be obscured for surplus value to masquerade as

⁴ See “Structural Analysis in Linguistics and Anthropology,” where he stresses the breach between kinship, which has “a socio-cultural character,” and the “biological family,” and suggests that the idea that the “biological family constitutes the point of departure from which all societies elaborate their kinship systems” is as “dangerous” as it is commonly agreed upon (50).

the free gift? What debt does Mary owe to colonialism? We can only guess at the particulars of the British imperial legacy to which Mary would seem to be the heir. Nevertheless, we can say that the colonial reality fleetingly signified by the reference to Bombay is excluded from the “world of reality” to which the inheritance gives her access.

Woolf concludes *A Room of One's Own* by urging her audience to see that “our relation is to the world of reality and not only to the world of men and women” (114). For the female subject, seeing oneself only in relation to the world of men and women has traditionally meant finding one's view of the world – one's world view – obscured and mediated by men. Relegated to the fringe of the phrase, fettered by the conjunctive “and,” women relate directly not to the world but to men, the privileged beneficiaries of the prepositional “of.” Such used to be the case for Mary until, as she recalls, “my aunt's legacy unveiled the sky to me, and substituted for the large and imposing figure of a gentleman, which Milton recommended for my perpetual adoration, a view of the open sky” (39). Here, as elsewhere, Woolf motions toward the power of literature – in this case, Milton – to impact the world, to dictate human experience. Like literature, the legacy has the power to change one's point of view, undercutting Mary's captivation by the figure of the gentleman – the masculine ideal erected by an androcentric literary tradition – and endowing Mary with the “freedom to think of things in themselves” (39). Hence an ideal of transcendence gives way to a field of immanence.

At stake in the sky's unveiling is a transformation of how value itself is conceived, not just a question of which figures get assigned value. This passage marks a shift from a universal standard of value (with “Milton's bogey” functioning as the general equivalent) to a conception of value as inherent in things – or so it seems. What is originally framed as an unveiling of the sky is recast a substitution of the sky

for the gentleman; indeed, Mary substitutes an image of substitution for an image of revelation as if to indicate their comparability. The two processes are more or less the same, which means that the so-called thing in itself is never actually a thing in itself but assumes a place within a web of relations. The primary being to which the thing relates is the subject, for instead of putting an end to evaluation, the acquisition of the legacy makes of evaluation an inalienable right (as a consequence of having money – that is, “the money, I own”) and a matter of personal taste. Granted the freedom to ponder her view of things, Mary wonders: “That building, for example, do I like it or not? Is that picture beautiful or not? Is that in my opinion a good book or a bad?” (39). In sum, she asks of the things that populate the world of reality – which is essentially the world of her reality – what does that mean to me?

Money not only facilitates her oscillation between the world of men and women and the world of reality, but also belongs to both worlds. As medium of exchange and magical surplus, it not only enables her to ponder things in themselves, but *is* a thing in itself insofar as Mary attributes its existence to the creative power of her purse rather than that of the colonies. Bombay, it would seem, exceeds her purview. In “Modernism and Imperialism,” Fredric Jameson argues that the “life experience and life world [of the colonies] remain unknown and unimaginable to the subjects of the imperial power” (50).⁵ Woolf’s text, I think, is indicative of the limitations imposed by beginning with such a premise. To presume that Mary mentions nothing further about India because it is unimaginable would be to mistake *Room*’s ideology for necessity, to confuse – as Mary does – subjective reality for objective things in themselves. Without simply excusing or blaming Mary (or Woolf) for a certain imperial nearsightedness, we can recognize how the substitution of the

⁵ Patrick Williams has convincingly argued that such a claim to the inscrutability of the colonial other bears “echoes of standard imperialist ideologies” (22).

colonial scene by the figure of the purse constitutes a violent displacement, how the British female subject capitalizes on imperialism without acknowledging the debt. If the feminine gift, as I have tried to argue, would be unthinkable without money, then neither would it be thinkable without Bombay to serve as the beyond of “reality,” as a constitutive outside that allows the world of the subject to close. A similar gesture of mystification and displacement, I will argue, is at work in Clarissa’s identification with Septimus at the end of *Mrs. Dalloway*.

III.

Reading *Mrs. Dalloway* alongside Woolf’s non-fiction suggests a kinship between the projects of the writer and the hostess – and Mrs. Dalloway is, as Peter predicted and perhaps in so doing ensured that she would be, “the perfect hostess” (7). In her 1930 essay “Street Haunting,” the narrator suggests that the “average unprofessional eye” has a “strange property: it rests only on beauty” (157). This eye “is not a miner, not a diver, not a seeker after buried treasure” (156). Rather, “it brings back the prettiest trophies, breaks off little lumps of emerald and coral as if the whole earth were made of precious stone,” feasting (if I may mix Woolf’s metaphors by way of a leap in the text) on only “simple, sugary fare” (157). Whether these visual delights are figured as stones or sugar, the point is that this eye – this perceiving subject or *I* – consumes only “beauty pure and uncomposed” (157). It is a passive recipient, taking all those sensuous souvenirs that immediately offer themselves up for our delectation but giving nothing in return: “The thing it cannot do...is to compose these trophies in such a way as to bring out the more obscure angles and relationships” (157).

The task of composition, of drawing out connections that may not otherwise be visible, implicitly belongs to the professional eye, to the *flâneuse* who braves “some duskier chamber of the being” (157). Better yet, we might say that the pleasures of “digging deeper” than the average eye can plunge are the unique privilege of the

writer, the particular professional at stake in the essay – for “what greater delight and wonder can there be than to leave the straight lines of personality and deviate into those footpaths and lead beneath brambles and thick tree trunks into the heart of the forest where live those wild beasts, our fellow men?” (157, 165). Of course it always remains an open question in Woolf’s writing how deeply one can dig into the lives of others. Thus at the end of the essay the narrator suggests that digging deeper does not mean plumbing some newly discovered but preexisting depths of consciousness or extracting some kernel of thought or feeling from the other by forsaking the self: “Into each of these lives one could penetrate a little way, far enough to give oneself the illusion that one is not tethered to a single mind, but can put on briefly for a few minutes the bodies and minds of others” (165). The other is not wholly inaccessible – one can penetrate a little way – but neither is she knowable without the mediation of the self. Hence, bringing relationships into the foreground is an act of creation but not an act of creation *ex nihilo*: the writer – indeed, the professional – inevitably leaves her imprint. Any notion to the contrary is an illusion, a gift we narcissistically give ourselves.

The kinship between the compositional task of the writer as delineated in “Street Haunting” and that of the hostess in *Mrs. Dalloway* becomes clearer when Clarissa reflects on the rationale behind her parties:

Here was So-and-so in Kensington; some one up in Bayswater; and somebody else, say, in Mayfair. And she felt quite continuously a sense of their existence; and she felt what a waste; and she felt what a pity; and she felt if only they could be brought together; so she did it. And it was an offering; to combine, to create; but to whom?

An offering for the sake of an offering, perhaps. Anyhow, it was her gift. Nothing else had she of the slightest importance. (122)

Clarissa suggests that a connection to others constitutes both the original motivation and the desired end of her offering. Insofar as others are already convened in

Clarissa's consciousness by way of her continuous sense of their existence, the party realizes a preexisting unity. Nevertheless, the relationships brought out by the party are not identical to anything that exists beforehand, for in combining otherwise scattered people Clarissa also creates them anew. Creating order and relation, that is her gift.

I want to draw the various strands of my discussion together by arguing that the novel, through its characterization of Clarissa, ratifies a vision of the subject as a being who permeates the world as much as she is permeated by it: Clarissa *is* the web of relations she inhabits and by which she is inhabited – that is, *Mrs. Dalloway*. Yet the text also suggests that her perception of this web and the relationships she effectively brings out are conditioned by social and economic factors, not least because she primarily keeps company with other members of her class. As Zwerdling notes, two of the three neighborhoods to which Clarissa refers in the above passage – Kensington and Mayfair – are “upper-middle-class preserves” (73). Whereas *A Room of One's Own* identifies money as the means of the gift's liberation, *Mrs. Dalloway* suggests that money may also constrain its expression. Indeed, the novel asks, can the mind in fact rise above material things?

Although Clarissa feels herself to be dispersed “on the ebb and flow of things” (9), the novel suggests that her scope is limited – almost as limited as the socioeconomic and geographic scope of the above passage. I say “almost” because Clarissa's brief sympathetic communion with Septimus – unsettling though it may be for reasons I will discuss shortly – does appear to differentiate her from many of the guests at her party: men such as Hugh Whitbread (who, as I noted earlier, “did not go deeply” [102]), Sir William Bradshaw (whose medical expertise helped usher Septimus to his suicide), and her husband, Richard (who declares that “no decent man should read Shakespeare's sonnets because it was like listening at keyholes” [75]).

While the text, I think, condones Clarissa's impulse to compromise her "little point of view" (168), it also casts suspicion on the possibility of doing so and enables us to see how her fleeting identification with Septimus ultimately supports a highly stratified social system.

And yet – as is inescapably the case with a text by Woolf – the matter is more complicated, for Virginia's web (the novel) is more expansive than Clarissa's web (the relationships she perceives). The primary "material thing" that flows through *Mrs. Dalloway* is not after all money, but language. Thus before turning to Clarissa's brief desertion of her party to ponder Septimus's suicide, I want to trace the movement of one material thing in particular – the signifier "diamond" – in order to explore the ways in which the *linguistic* economy of the novel troubles Clarissa's point of view and the social system from within. Clarissa invokes this word to figure the central, unifying function she serves within the exceptionally privileged world of men to which she belongs. It serves, like Clarissa, as a rivet, a lynchpin that holds this world together while also threatening its undoing:

That was her self – pointed; dart-like; definite. That was her self when some effort, some call on her to be her self, drew the parts together, she alone knew how different, how incompatible and composed so for the world only into one centre, one diamond, one woman, who sat in her drawing-room and made a meeting-point, a radiance no doubt in some dull lives, a refuge for the lonely to come to perhaps; she had helped young people, who were grateful to her; had tried to be the same always, never showing a sign of all the other sides of her – faults, jealousies, vanities, suspicions, like this of Lady Bruton not asking her to lunch; which, she thought (combing her hair finally), is utterly base!

(37)

The self that Clarissa projects to the world is as much an object of combination and creation as the gatherings she orchestrates. Throughout the novel, Clarissa is highly sensitive to, even ashamed of her preoccupation with appearances and her desire to make an impression, to influence others, "to make people think this or that" (10) – a

desire that stands in irresolvable tension with her respect for the “privacy of the soul” (10, 126-127). What intrigues me about this passage is the multifarious ways in which the division between variegated fragments and unified whole, private and public breaks down – and not simply by dint of the fact that the two “sides” of Clarissa (which is to say the one she exhibits and “all the others”) intermingle here as objects of reflection. It is not simply because the drive toward dispersal and the call for consolidation are conjoined in her consciousness that the division between inside and outside is called under suspicion. We know what Clarissa knows: fashioning a coherent, integral Self takes effort. But can we be so certain that her effort is rewarded, that she is actually perceived “to be the same always, never showing a sign of all the other sides of her”?

Instead of granting us any solid ground on which to answer this question – at least in this passage – the text plays with indeterminacy. The text, it seems to me, reinforces Clarissa’s perception of her self as “pointed; dart-like; definite.” The severity of the pauses introduced by the semi-colons and the trochaic thrust of each term renders the prose as pointed, dart-like, and definite and the self she describes. Yet we could also say that the proliferation of signifiers challenges the seeming coherence of form and content: instead of whittling the self to a point, this description yields three points. The slippage between unification and multiplication of the subject becomes more pronounced when Clarissa imagines herself to be, when necessary, “one centre, one diamond, one woman.” The “centre,” we promptly notice, is off center, having been displaced by the figure of the diamond. Of course, this term too gives way to an alternative, as if “one woman” constituted the end of a dialectical progression of thought, as if it were the best name for the self that she becomes – and in a way it is insofar as answering the call to be a self (such as when Hugh hails her in the street) means taking up the mantle of gender, assuming a place within what Woolf

refers to as the world of men and women in *A Room of One's Own*. What, then, does it mean for this “one diamond” to occupy the center of a decentered self?

This “one diamond” is not the one “diamond” in the novel. Clarissa used the term earlier to describe the kiss she received from Sally:

Then came the most exquisite moment of her whole life passing a stone urn with flowers in it. Sally stopped; picked a flower; kissed her on the lips. The whole world might have turned upside down! The others disappeared; there she was alone with Sally. And she felt that she had been given a present, wrapped up, and told just to keep it, not to look at it – a diamond, something infinitely precious, wrapped up, which as they walked (up and down, up and down), she uncovered, or the radiance burnt through, the revelation, the religious feeling! (35-36)

At the very least, this earlier hedonic moment, I want to argue, complicates Clarissa's evocation of diamonds to figure her consolidation. Her figuration of the lesbian kiss as “a diamond, something infinitely precious” may not turn the world for which she draws her disparate parts together upside down, but it does have the felicitous effect of turning this signifier – “diamond” – into a kind of pivot between past and present. Indeed, the sequence of these moments in the text makes it tempting to draw a causal link between them. It is as if the kiss from Sally, which she figures as a gift (“a present, wrapped up”) were somehow driving *her* gift, as if her own capacity to be “a meeting-point, a radiance,” somehow derived from the “radiance” imparted to her by Sally.

While this logic finds justification in the play of signification within the text, it stands in tension with Clarissa's catalog of the debts she owes others for her happiness:

Not for a moment did she believe in God; but all the more, she thought...must one repay in daily life to servants, yes, to dogs and canaries, above all to Richard her husband, who was the foundation of it – of the gay sounds, of the green lights, of the cook even whistling, for Mrs. Walker was Irish and whistled all day long – one must pay back from this secret deposit of exquisite moments. (29)

In classifying the kiss as “the most exquisite moment” stashed away in this secret deposit, the text displaces – if only temporarily – Richard as the “foundation” of daily life, life being, she later concludes, the reason she gives parties: “What she liked was simply life. ‘That’s what I do it for,’ she said, speaking aloud, to life” – as if taking an oath or making a promise (121). It is in this epiphanic moment that we encounter the third allusion to diamonds. After Peter’s surprise visit and a brief conversation with Richard, Clarissa feels “desperately unhappy,” but cannot determine the reason why she is so dismayed, so she begins to dig:

As a person who has dropped some grain of pearl or diamond into the grass and parts the tall blades very carefully, this way and that, and searches here and there vainly, and at last spies it there at the roots, so she went through one thing and another...It was a feeling, some unpleasant feeling, earlier in the day perhaps; something that Peter had said, combined with some depression of her own, in her bedroom, taking off her hat; and what Richard had said had added to it, but what had he said? There were his roses. Her parties! That was it! Her parties! Both of them criticized her very unfairly, laughed at her very unjustly, for her parties. That was it! That was it! (120-121)

While initially relieved to have unearthed the root of her discontent, Clarissa soon decides “to go deeper, beneath what people said...in her own mind now,” to ask “what did it mean to her, this thing she called life?” only to conclude “Oh, it was very queer” (122). And with that she segues into the reflections, cited above, about how her parties are an offering for the sake of an offering – “her gift.”

At one point in *Capital*, Marx raises the suspicion that diamonds, because of their rarity and the labor-time required for their discovery, may not “ever have been paid for at...full value” (130). I want to argue that the same might be said of the “diamonds” sprinkled throughout the novel, beginning with that which symbolizes the kiss that Sally gives to Clarissa, the present she considers “infinitely precious.” Its value and the debt it leaves are immeasurable. I stress the connection between this “diamond” and those that follow because it suggests to me that Clarissa’s gift exceeds

the restrictions imposed on it by her status as a member of the governing class. At stake in the link between Sally's kiss and Clarissa's various offerings is, I think, the thought of a gift immeasurable by a monetary standard, of a gift that would not serve to bolster the social system. By littering the text with "diamonds," Woolf, I want to argue, puts another *material* at our disposal for thinking the gift, a means for conceptualizing value beyond the money-form and for bringing out – as the writer hopes to in "Street Haunting" – more obscure angles and relationships. As the woman whose consciousness offers up these gems, Clarissa plays hostess to this material and yet her view remains obstructed, in part by the figure of the gentleman – the gentleman in this case being not Milton's Bogey, but her husband, Richard.

By way of its linguistic play on diamonds, the text, I want to argue, establishes a tension between two notions of what it means to play the hostess. On the one hand, Clarissa occupies the center of a feminized system of exchange – "that network of visiting, leaving cards, being kind to people" for which Peter chides her (77). While her party in particular appears trivial and superfluous to both Peter and Richard, it is conceived by Clarissa as a counter-gift, a gesture of gratitude offered to "life." Of course, the life for which she is thankful is *her* life, a life founded – which is also to say, funded – by Richard. In repaying both her husband and the servants who make her *lifestyle* possible – "her mother," Elizabeth notes, "had breakfast in bed every day" (131) – Clarissa pays homage to an ideal of masculine authority and bolsters the social system so artfully delineated by Zwerdling. She is, in this mode, the perfect hostess as benevolent mistress: "one centre, one diamond, one woman" – one Self. On the other hand, Clarissa plays hostess to an excess that renders resolution into a single self impossible. Indeed, the seditious power of the kiss appears not to have diminished over time, for the *jouissance* she describes having felt then resurges with her memory of it, culminating in her ecstatic recollection of "the revelation" – indeed, "the

religious feeling!” The present (the gift) is still very much present (immediate, here and now) for Clarissa.

The tension between these two forms of hospitality comes into finer relief during Clarissa’s party, where she plays hostess both to her invited guests and one uninvited one, that most untimely of visitors – death. Upon hearing news of Septimus’s suicide (that is to say, as far as Clarissa is concerned, Sir William Bradshaw’s patient’s suicide) Clarissa promptly seeks out a bit of privacy:

Oh! thought Clarissa, in the middle of my party, here’s death, she thought.

She went on, into the little room where the Prime Minister had gone with Lady Bruton...The party’s splendour fell to the floor, so strange it was to come in alone in her finery.

What business had the Bradshaws to talk of death at her party? A young man had killed himself. And they talked of it at her party – the Bradshaws, talked of death. He had killed himself – but how?

(183-184)

While Clarissa initially seems miffed at the Bradshaws for disrupting her party with such unwelcome news, the cause of her irritation quickly becomes less clear: is Clarissa upset because the Bradshaws have disgraced the dignity of her party or because they have disgraced the dignity of death? Can we fairly decide between these two possibilities?

The movement of her thought – the oscillation between expressions of shock and calm, then outright curiosity (“but how?”) – indicates a dialectical process of absorption. Clarissa is (to borrow a turn of phrase from Stevie Smith’s *Novel on Yellow Paper*) becoming accustomed to the thought of death by suicide. She is finding the means of relating to this unknown and turns first to the memory of her own relatively minor sacrifice:

She had once thrown a shilling into the Serpentine, never anything more. But he had flung it away...A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her

own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter. This he had preserved. Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate: people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart, rapture faded, one was alone. There was an embrace in death. (184)

In the wake of Septimus's suicide, any sympathetic gesture on Clarissa's part is not only phantasmatic, but also tragically belated. Moreover, while Clarissa initially acknowledges the incommensurability of their sacrifices,⁶ she goes on not only to imagine a kinship with Septimus, but also to reveal a kinship between her renewed appreciation for life and a perverse enjoyment of his death:

But what an extraordinary night! She felt somehow very like him – the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away. The clock was striking. The leaden circles dissolved in the air. He made her feel the beauty; made her feel the fun. But she must go back. She must assemble. (186)

Clarissa, despite her initial sensitivity to the incomparability of their losses, ultimately converts Septimus's suicide into another mere toss of a shilling into the Serpentine. For what is her flight into the little room off the party if not a carefully calculated sacrifice? If in the modern world time is money, can we say that money ever ceases to be the ground of her identification with Septimus? What is this brief retreat if not a means of reinvigorating not only Clarissa but also the status quo? Tidying the little room, she reflects on her own good fortune, "It was due to Richard; she had never been so happy" (185). Thus a vicious logic suggests itself: Septimus's sacrifice and especially Clarissa's revaluation of it serve to reinforce and circumscribe the privileged world of men and women convened at her party. His gift – before flinging himself from the window he cried, 'I'll give it you!' (149) – is turned into an occasion for Clarissa to exercise her own.

⁶ See Hessler for a rather scathing but, I think, ultimately accurate analysis of Clarissa's identification with Septimus: "She does not see the glaring discontinuities between her own experiences and Septimus' which make her self-identification with his absurd and wholly unfunny...Clarissa cannot let herself feel the extent to which she participates in Septimus' death" (135).

Clarissa's excursion – to which the sounding of the clock puts a prompt end – is but a temporary respite from the business of hostessing. Yet it also signifies another way of playing the hostess, another style of relating to the other. While this style is realized within the novel only at the *expense* of the other, the text nevertheless inscribes the means of bringing out a relationship that takes a material thing other than money as its common ground. Clarissa, as if recalling her own cherished secret, wonders of “this young man who had killed himself – had he plunged holding his treasure?” (184). Although the response to this question can never be more than an illusion that Clarissa narcissistically gives herself, in this and other moments the text nevertheless gives us the very thing for which Clarissa acknowledges a debt to Peter. Clarissa may owe her current happiness to Richard, but Peter – “[s]he owed him words” (36). *Mrs. Dalloway* joins Woolf's other fictions – tales of Mrs. Bennetts and Mary Betons – in offering a common parlance, a reserve of “treasures,” “trophies,” and “diamonds.” All told, the novel offers us something largely lacking for its characters – a means of communication with the power, in the most exquisite moments, to turn the whole world upside down.

CHAPTER 4

The “Unending Business” of Exchange in Jean Rhys’s *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*

If you love without evoking love in return – that is, if your loving as loving does not produce reciprocal love; if through a *living expression* of yourself as a loving person you do not make yourself a *loved person*, then your love is impotent – a misfortune.

Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*

I.

In her novels and short stories, Jean Rhys often figures sexual exchanges as forms of gift exchange. “In a Café,” originally published in *The Left Bank and Other Stories* in 1927, and her first novel, *Quartet*, published the following year, are perhaps the most conspicuous examples of this aspect of her work. The first depicts an “extraordinarily vulgar” man hawking copies of a song about a *grue*, or “tart,” whose “charity,” “warm-heartedness,” and “practical sympathy” are repaid with “abominable ingratitude” when her ex-lover shuns her in the street (14). *Quartet*, which opens with an epigram warning the reader against “good Samaritans,” also presents a case of uneven exchange. In representing the hospitality shown to its down-and-out protagonist, Marya, by her lover and benefactor, H.J. Heidler, as a kind of colonizing mission, the novel suggests that her sacrifice is ultimately far greater than his. H.J. can get away with his cruel treatment of Marya because her sexual availability and financial dependence render her a “bad” woman in the eyes of others, fully deserving of whatever misfortune befalls her: as she comes to discover through personal experience, “Nobody owes a fair deal to a prostitute. It isn’t done” (161).

In using rhetoric of charity, ingratitude, and indebtedness to portray scenarios of sexual exchange, Rhys adopts a trope with some literary precedent, particularly in

the work of Charles Baudelaire.¹ In the prose poem “*Les Foules*” from *Le Spleen de Paris*, the narrator characterizes the projection of the poet into the urban crowd as “this holy prostitution of the soul that gives itself entirely, poetry and charity, to the unexpected which appears, to the unknown which passes by.”² In “Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,” Walter Benjamin argues that the speaker in the poem, who boasts of his empathetic communion with so many strangers, is none other than the “commodity itself” (32). By drawing a comparison between the “*charité* which prostitutes claim for themselves” and the capacity of the *flâneur* to bathe in the multitude, Baudelaire attested to the commodification of the labor power of both the writer and the petty bourgeoisie to which he belonged under the conditions of high capitalism (32). Although, as Benjamin elsewhere claims, “prostitution was an unavoidable necessity for the poet,” the practice of *flânerie* “makes a virtue out of necessity” (“Central Park” 188, “Paris of the Second Empire” 42). By transforming economic necessity into an ethical virtue, the *flâneur* in effect camouflages the “fragility of [his] existence,” but for Benjamin the seams inevitably show; as a kind of egoic armor, virtue cannot help but display the underlying insecurity of the individual who dons it and his status as a “dispossessed person” (42, 43). In my reading, Baudelaire formalizes this dynamic through his ironic figuration of the prostitute, whom Benjamin famously defined as “saleswoman and wares in one,”³ as giver and gift in one. Through his metaphorical identification with the prostitute and his

¹ Rhys was well-versed in the French literary canon, including the work of Baudelaire, although she was not always inclined to read him. Thus in her letters she recalls a period when “I couldn’t *look* at Rimbaud whom I thought so great or Mallarmé or Baudelaire (I haven’t got Verlaine) without a horrible pain – I don’t know why” (45).

² My translation of the original French: “*cette sainte prostitution de l’âme qui se donne tout entière, poésie et charité, à l’imprévu qui se montre, à l’inconnu qui passe.*” See Baudelaire, *Le Spleen de Paris* 60.

³ See “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century” 157.

appropriation of her *charité*, the *flâneur* makes a pretense of giving himself entirely while nevertheless withholding the intimate truth of his dispossession.

The work of Rhys, of course, gives us something which, as Benjamin reminds us in “Central Park,” that of Baudelaire never did: “the standpoint of the prostitute” (174). Hence, we should not be surprised that motifs of giving serve a somewhat different function in the aforementioned texts. Rather than gilding what are at base commercial relations, the representation of her heroines as participants with men in the exchange of gifts serves in her work to illuminate and account for the residual failure of the social system to give these women a fair deal. “In a Café” and *Quartet* suggest that the “gifts” exchanged between men and women are both material (money and shelter) and immaterial (warm-heartedness and practical sympathy). In other words, the immaterial – the virtue of generosity – is not a metaphor for the material, but its supplement, one crucial to both men and women. In recalling “the *numberless* times she had ministered to [the] necessities” of her lover, the balladeer’s ode to the *grue* hints at the impossibility of fixing a price on either the depth of masculine demand or the abundance of feminine generosity (emphasis added 14). In light of Rhys’s rhetoric, the term “necessities” retains the economic valence of “necessity” in Benjamin’s text, but alludes to forces better classified under the rubric of libidinal economy. The desires of the masculine subject, it would seem, are no better met by commodities than the “gifts” offered by women like the *grue* are reducible to the “wares” of the prostitute. The subjectivity of each therefore exceeds calculation, but ultimately his “necessities” are satisfied while hers are not. She is deprived of a gift comparable – or comparably immeasurable – to that which she gives.

A victim of ingratitude and failed reciprocity, she is denied recognition: the hero of the song “turn[s] his head aside” when he “passes the heroine, reduced to the uttermost misery” (14). The text furthermore suggests that his disavowal of the

heroine is a socially sanctioned phenomenon, for “Paris,” the narrator remarks, “is sentimental and indulgent” toward the *grues* but only “in the mass and theoretically of course, not always practically or to individuals” (14). By enabling the crowd in the café to sympathize with the discourtesy suffered by a fictional *grue* at a safe remove, by converting such suffering into a spectacle and a source of capital for him, the balladeer’s performance is in keeping with this custom. It demands no gesture of “practical sympathy.” And yet, many of Rhys’s heroines, women like the *grue*, continue to seek recognition from an exchange that seems, from the point of view of the reader, destined to maintain their inequality with the men on whom they are dependent and the public for whom their suffering continues to serve as a spectacle.

Insofar as female protagonists such as Marya in *Quartet* participate in their victimization it would be fair to say, as many critics have, that they are, in a sense, masochistic.⁴ Yet I would argue that the much discussed and variably defined masochism of Rhys’s heroines remains insufficiently understood if we overlook what I would call its symbolic stakes. Rhys brings these stakes into relief in a passage from *Smile Please*, her unfinished autobiography, wherein she recalls receiving financial

⁴ Carol Dell’Amico provides an extremely useful gloss on the critical debate surrounding the masochism of both Rhys and her heroines (see pp. 58-61). The primary two positions in this debate are represented by Mary Lou Emery, who draws on a Freudian tradition to argue that the masochism of her heroines constitutes a realistic portrayal of the effects of women’s oppression, and by Coral Ann Howells, who draws on Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s concept of “romantic thralldom” to argue that their masochism is a sign of their – and implicitly Rhys’s – complicity with a misogynistic status quo. There is, thanks to Dell’Amico and Sheila Kineke, at least a third position in this debate, one which identifies the masochism at play in Rhys’s work as a challenge to masculine as well as imperial authority. Dell’Amico draws on Deleuze’s analysis of Sacher-Masoch’s work in *Coldness and Cruelty* in order to argue that the masochism of Rhys’s protagonists “does not in fact indicate submission but rather involves a *contestation* of oppressive authority” (62). I will return to her argument below. Like Dell’Amico, Kineke invokes the term “masochism” to challenge the “perceived passivity” of the Rhys woman (289). She, too, reads Rhys’s novels as an affront to imperial mastery, but for Kineke the “imperial mastery Rhys was interested in deflating” was that of Ford Madox Ford, her early patron and lover (288). Maintaining a heavily biographical bent, she draws an analogy between the relationship of Ford and Rhys on the one hand and the relationship of the metropole and the colonies on the other. As will become clear in a moment, I agree with Kineke that the relationship between mentor and mentee, colonizer and colonized, is characterized by mutual dependence, or “reciprocity” (283), but I am highly suspicious of the nature of what grounds it.

support from her first lover after he put an unofficial end to their relationship by announcing his imminent departure for New York on business. Looking back on the aftermath of the affair, Rhys draws on her personal experience to speculate more broadly on the function that gifts of money serve for women in love:

It seems to me now that the whole business of money and sex is mixed up with something very primitive and deep. When you take money directly from someone you love it becomes not money but a symbol. The bond is now there. The bond has been established. I am sure the woman's deep-down feeling is 'I belong to this man, I want to belong to him completely.' It is at once humiliating and exciting. (97)

Compelling the woman is not only the thrill of bondage but also her desire for a “bond,” for a symbol that would ensure her connection to her beloved benefactor. In other words, her desire to belong “completely” to the man, to give herself entirely, translates in part into a desire to be brought fully into the fold and under cover of the symbolic the primary way that women historically have been – that is, as the property of men. While this bond reinforces a traditional imbalance of power between the sexes by solidifying the subordinate social status of women as dependents, it also signifies the accomplishment of an even exchange, at least from the perspective of the woman.

What allows money to assume the value of a symbol and to establish a bond is the love that the woman has for the man. By way of her love, she invests money – an otherwise impersonal medium of exchange – with significance, converting it into a sign of commitment. In this respect, she rather than he is the primary donor, the initial giver of love for which money constitutes a counter-gift. As such, the woman is not only an object, one of the many belongings that constitute masculine identity, but also a participant in the sexual exchange, a subject endowed with the power to give and to take. Insofar as her love is responsible for the conversion of the gift of money into a symbolic gesture her status as an equal is clearly a fantasy, one which we might

classify as masochistic insofar as it entails a mixture of humiliation and excitement, pain and pleasure. Still, it would be a mistake, I think, to dismiss this fantasy as a mere delusion or mark of complicity without taking into account the function that it appears to serve for the woman here. As a means of acquiring a degree of security and protection she otherwise lacks, the masochistic fantasy affords her a way to make up for the deficiencies of the symbolic order, its failure to count her as an equal. Hence, the feminine masochistic fantasy is at base a fantasy of reciprocity.

Nevertheless this fantasy, Rhys suggests, is not unshakable. Recalling the first time she received a nondescript envelope with a cheque and a letter from a solicitors' firm while staying at a hotel in Bloomsbury – a detail which reminds us of the geographic proximity of otherwise socially stratified literary figures and suggests that British modernism consists of at least two Bloomsburys – she reflects: “To get money through a lawyer, stating please acknowledge receipt and oblige, was a very different matter” (97). This matter constitutes the starting point and the primary object of critique in the text which will be my focus here – Rhys's second novel, *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*. Originally published in 1930, the narrative of *Mackenzie* begins at a moment when the masochistic fantasy of reciprocity has become increasingly difficult for its destitute and aging female protagonist, Julia Martin, to sustain. If “grues” are “sellers of illusion,” as the narrator of “In a Café” suggests, then *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* is a novel about what becomes of a *grue* when she can no longer find a buyer for her illusions (14).⁵ The question thus confronted by the novel is: how does she respond to the failure of reciprocity? What becomes of the woman when the

⁵ Rhys's publications suffered a similar problem. In a 1931 letter to an admirer of *Mackenzie*, Rhys wrote, “I like Mackenzie better than anything I have done yet, and I am hoping that it will have some luck in America where it is to be published by Knopf...Both the books I wrote before, ‘The Left Bank’ and ‘Quartet’, were published in America...but neither of them did much though they had some kind reviews. I am always being told that until my work ceases being ‘sordid and depressing’ I haven’t much chance of selling” (*Letters* 21).

masochistic contract – which has served as the cord tying Julia to the world and which is by definition and to her chagrin constrained by a specified time limit – has expired absolutely? What becomes of her relationship with society once its inadequation to her necessities becomes manifest and she is no longer compelled to make up the difference? What posture becomes available to her once her “necessary illusions” – illusions that she had about her own status and “which enabled her to live her curious existence with a certain amount of courage and audacity” (31) – have been destroyed?

The answer, *Mackenzie* suggests, is yet another posture of routine interest to Baudelaire – the posture of the beggar. In following Julia as she sinks into mendicancy, the novel in effect genders the sacrificial and contractual structure of almsgiving elaborated by Jacques Derrida in his reading of Baudelaire’s prose poem “*La fausse monnaie*” in *Given Time* while also demonstrating the ways in which this structure reinforces both a capitalist and a sexist status quo. While the dissolution of the masochistic fantasy of reciprocity constitutes a crisis for Julia, Rhys converts this crisis into an opportunity to rethink the conditions of sexual exchange in particular and social relation in general. Through the use of multiple focalization, the novel suggests that all of its characters – including Julia’s conservative male benefactors – are compelled by a sense of necessity for which utilitarian rationality cannot account. By rendering Julia’s feeling of helplessness and the fact of her dependence attributes of subjectivity in general, the novel reveals the social underpinnings of traditional modernist as well as feminist ideals of authority and undertakes the difficult work of conceptualizing a form of relation that does not presuppose the status of the subject as a self-possessed autonomous agent.

II.

As its title suggests, *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* begins after the affair between its penniless protagonist and the well-to-do Mackenzie has come to an end. At its

opening, we find Julia fatigued and living in a cheap Parisian hotel where she has taken refuge for the six months since their split and where she is determined to stay “until the sore and cringing feeling, which was the legacy of Mr Mackenzie, had departed” (11). This oppressive feeling is not the only legacy with which he has left her, for her “monotonous life” – her quotidian routine of making up, lunching at the same restaurant, walking and window-shopping “whatever the weather” – is being financed by none other than Mackenzie, who has been sending her weekly cheques for 300 francs through his lawyer Maître Legros for the six months since their split (12, 17). Every Tuesday Julia receives a cheque accompanied by a typewritten letter, which is presented in the text and reads:

Madame,

Enclosed please find our cheque for three hundred francs (fcs. 300), receipt of which kindly acknowledge and oblige

Yours faithfully,

Henri Legros,
per N.E.

Unlike the gifts of money that fueled a desire to belong “completely” to the donor and supported a fantasy of reciprocity in *Smile Please*, these payments make Julia feel – at least in her more peaceful monadic moments – “complete in herself, detached, independent of the rest of humanity” (11). Indeed, as we later learn by way of a lengthy interiorized passage narrated through the perspective of Mackenzie, these payments are intended to dissolve any bond between the couple and to keep Julia at bay. Knowing that if he gave Julia a lump sum then she would “immediately” spend it and “come back for more,” Mackenzie opted for an allowance instead, for he “had always intended their parting to be a final one – those things had to come to an end” (28, 27). The ideological presupposition here is of course that flings are alienable “things” to be handled like any others, that relations in general and the sexual relation in particular have an objective, commercial character – a notion that Mackenzie

further reinforces when he recalls putting “the whole affair in the capable hands of Maître Legros” (28). In so doing, he makes certain that what Rhys calls “the whole business of money and sex” in *Smile Please* is circumscribed and rendered just that, a “whole business,” a completed transaction that leaves both parties complete in themselves.

In reflecting on the affair, Mackenzie makes clear that the bond dissolved by way of Legros’ intervention was governed by a masochistic contract. He hired Legros not only to pay Julia but also to ensure the destruction of the material traces of their relationship – namely, a number of letters that Mackenzie wrote to Julia and which would seem, based on the one excerpt we receive, to pay an unmistakable homage to the Masochian literary tradition. One began, as if channeling *Venus in Furs*, ‘I would like to put my throat under your feet’ (28). Like the promises he once made and “never intended to keep,” Mackenzie disavows the letters as “part of the insanity,” a temporary lapse from his usual code of ethics for which he feels that “he was not responsible” and for which he considers Julia – who is in his eyes “irresponsible” – ultimately to blame. He cannot be held accountable for the affair because, as his recitation of another fantasy of sexual exchange suggests, he was not the author of his actions: he was simply not himself. The reimplementing of the rule of law and specifically the laws of the market coincides with a reconsolidation of personal identity by affirming that both the affair and Mackenzie are made “whole,” that the former falls once and for all outside of his jurisdiction.⁶ Hence, the intercession of the

⁶ In *Coldness and Cruelty*, Deleuze argues that masochism parodies the rule of law by demonstrating overly strict adherence to its dictates rather than interrogating its underlying principles. He writes, “The contempt in the submission of the masochist has often been emphasized: his apparent obedience conceals a criticism and a provocation. He simply attacks the law on another flank. What we call humor – in contradistinction to the upward movement of irony toward a transcendent higher principle – is a downward movement from the law to its consequences. We all know ways of twisting the law by excess of zeal. By scrupulously applying the law we are able to demonstrate its absurdity and provoke the very disorder that it is intended to prevent or to conjure. By observing the very letter of the law, we refrain from questioning its ultimate or primary character; we then behave as if the supreme sovereignty

law, as personified by Legros, reinforces those distinctions that love allows the feminine subject to circumvent in *Smile Please*. It reinstitutes a division between not only persons (Mackenzie) and things (the affair), but also commerce (weekly payments) and art (Masochian letters), present (*After Leaving...*) and past (before being left), and masculine and feminine.

Before taking on the ramifications of their division for Julia and the novel, a brief summary of the overall narrative is called for here. The Tuesday on which the narrative opens marks the end of the “solitary confinement” to which Julia has been resigned since leaving Mackenzie (19). In place of her usual pittance, Julia receives a cheque for 1500 francs with a letter from Legros, informing her that “from this date, the weekly allowance will be discontinued” (18). For Julia, the money has a double significance: as the last installment of her pension, the cheque means that she will have to go back on the market and resume her “habit” of “living on the money given her to by various men” (26, 14). But the impersonal send-off also leaves her with a “sensation of...dreary and abject humiliation” (20). Thus wounded, Julia seeks out Mackenzie to reciprocate the blow dealt to her “sense of well-being” by receipt of his final payment (18). Although certain that the confrontation will “end badly for her,” she follows him to the Restaurant Albert, the very restaurant in which he initially declared his intention of breaking off the affair and of paying her a weekly sum (22). On that night, Julia “made a scene,” garnering the disapproval of the proprietor and embarrassing Mackenzie, although not so much that he avoids returning to the scene of the crime, of his ungenerous action – or perhaps just enough that he is compelled to do so (27). The scene that unfurls between them in the present is also characterized by rivalry: she returns the cheque and, remembering that she intended to “have it out with

of the law conferred upon it the enjoyment of all those pleasures that it denies us; hence, by the closest adherence to it, and by zealously embracing it, we may hope to partake of its pleasures” (88).

him” regardless of the consequences, slaps his cheek with her glove (33, 22). The retribution falls woefully short. Mackenzie does not blink, and although Julia holds her own in the staring contest that ensues, she leaves the restaurant with “a mournful and beaten expression,” defeated (34).

Nevertheless, the display attracts the attention of George Horsfield, who later tracks Julia down and makes her acquaintance, thereby beginning a long night of what would seem like a game of hard-to-get were it not for her less than coquettish inertia. By the end of the night and against his better judgment, Horsfield has taken the place left vacant by Mackenzie, giving Julia 1500 francs (the precise amount she earlier refused). He encourages her to return for a visit to her native London and the family – including her sister and her dying mother – she long ago deserted, and to look him up while there. True to form, she does, sparking a courtship that lasts for the duration of her visit and in which neither party is especially eager to engage, compelled though they may be to do so. The ten-day trip and the death of Julia’s mother occupy the heart of the novel, which ends shortly after Julia’s return to Paris and to the same cheap hotel on the Quai des Grands Augustins.

The narrative ends where it began, but with the welfare of its heroine even less assured than at its opening. In the concluding chapter, Julia passes Mackenzie in the street. In a striking reversal of their earlier meeting, this time it is he who follows her, determined to prove not to Julia, but to himself that he is not such “a bad sort” (190). Wishing he had an audience to witness his gesture of good will – his willingness to forgive Julia for the embarrassment she caused him – and thus to confirm his virtuous self-image, he offers to buy her a drink. She accepts and, to the surprise of Mackenzie, asks for a loan to boot. He strips a couple of bills from his “small bundle of change” for himself, and gives “the rest” to her before buying her a second, final drink and making a quick exit (191). The chapter is fittingly and yet ambiguously

entitled “Last.” Whether it is the last of the commerce between Julia and Mackenzie – the end to their relationship so often proclaimed but until now deferred – or, more chillingly, the last of Julia we cannot be certain.

In sum, the narrative consists of a series of exchanges: exchanges between Julia and a number of more financially secure men (from lovers old and new to her rather merciless Uncle Griffiths); between Julia and her sister, Norah (perhaps her most justified critic); between Julia and an interminable line of unknown strangers (sometimes male and sometimes female, but all unhesitatingly quick to sum her up); and even between Julia and her catatonic mother (who seems fleetingly to know her). Compelling these exchanges is not only Julia’s immediate need for money, but also a “longing to explain herself,” a desire for an addressee to whom she might give an account of herself and who might give her the accreditation and understanding that she craves in return (48). In other words, what Julia wants is reciprocity, to be an equal participant in *symbolic* exchange. The problem is that her status as a subject hinges on her desirability as an object and at the age of thirty-six, she is, as Molly Hite notes, “at a point in her life when she is aging out of successful objecthood” (42). So where does this leave Julia? In following Julia at a moment when the charms that have long been her livelihood as well as her determination to capitalize on what remains of them are fading, and when the slim donations of money and time that she manages to garner hardly assuage her hunger for a sign of affection, interest, or recognition, the novel opens onto broader questions: what social positions are available to women – specifically poor, unmarried women – once the role of object of desire is rendered uninhabitable? On what ground is their social belonging possible and their equality with men conceivable? How it answers these questions merits particularly close attention because its heroine does not have – as Mary Beton does in *A Room of One’s*

Own – five hundred pounds a year. By contrast, Julia has “not a penny of her own” (26).

Julia lacks the primary thing that is supposed to guarantee women the full rights of social participation under the conditions of capitalism in the early twentieth century – that is, money. By withdrawing the spectral pecuniary ground of gender equality, the novel exposes the limitations of conceptualizing women’s subjectivity as a mere extension of their buying power and thus challenges the bourgeois feminism of many of Rhys’s contemporaries, including writers such as Virginia Woolf. In so doing *Mackenzie* intersects with larger and still pressing political and philosophical concerns such as: how is socioeconomic inequality to be rectified? Does it require redistribution or recognition – to cite the title of a recent dialogue between Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth – or a mixture of both? What is the relationship between these two methods of compensation and is it always the same?

In beginning well after the point where novels about women like Julia traditionally end – at a time when she, by the conventional moral standards that shape the novel and tend to steer heroines toward either marriage or death, should be consigned to the latter⁷ – the narrative is framed from the start as a kind of postmortem. Insofar as her appearance is generally felt to be an unwarranted and unwelcome intrusion of the past into the present – in the words of Neil James, her first lover and one of her many disgruntled hosts, “tactless, really” – Julia is right to presume that others think of her “as an importunate ghost” (110, 66). While the aspect of her appearance that others find unsettling varies from one man to the next, her tactlessness is consistently figured in temporal terms. Her impropriety derives from

⁷ Hite notes that the “action in effect begins after the romance plot has concluded,” while Arnold Davidson suggests that it “opens with a half-reversal of the usual fate of the usual demimondaine protagonist (Hite 42, Davidson 216). Rather than end “with this foreordained victim seduced and abandoned, we commence that way” (216).

the fact that that she “deserted her family” and “*now* expect[s] to walk back and be received with open arms” (emphasis added 84); that she split from James “a hell of a long time ago” but still asks him for help (109); that she seeks out Mackenzie even though his “final payment” has been made and her allowance “discontinued” (18). In short, her fault is behaving as if she were untouched by the passage of time. How she could possibly persist in this manner let alone survive continually baffles those around her. Thus Horsfield finds himself wondering about the “pathetic illusions” that Julia must entertain in order “to go on living” (92). In the midst of professing his willingness to help her in any way he could he wonders to himself: “Did she still see herself young and slim, capable of anything, believing that, though every one around her grew older, she – by some miracle – remained the same?” (92). The answer is of course yes and no. Does Julia believe that she has not aged? No. Must she believe that she is “not finished” in order to manifest the will to press on despite what others see as her diminished capacity to do so in good faith (59)? It would appear so.

Nevertheless, it is less the accuracy or inaccuracy of Horsfield’s assessment of Julia than what his inquiry tells us about the subject that interests me. The self that emerges from his speculations is a subject for whom illusions and beliefs constitute the primary means of survival, whose capacity to create them persists – as if by some miracle – even when their support has given way. Their support, in this instance, is not a pure material referent or the body conceived as a thing in itself, but “a background” (91). Upon reconvening with Julia in London, Horsfield thinks: “She looked older and less pretty than she had done in Paris. Her mouth and the lids of her eyes drooped wearily. A small blue vein under her right eye was swollen. There was something in a background, say what you like” (91). The ground of beauty is a moving one and London is a particularly unforgiving setting for a woman like Julia, who according to her sister, Norah, no longer looks “like a lady” and thus no longer

satisfies “certain tastes” – namely, a traditional British “taste” for ideals of femininity (73).

While we can presume that the content of these ideals for Norah is Victorian – she has dutifully nursed her dying mother for nine years – the structure underlying the idealization of femininity is thoroughly masochistic. Masochism, as Slavoj Žižek reminds us, is coextensive with “the matrix of courtly love” (109). This matrix, we might recall, underwrites the Victorian ideology of feminine moral superiority set forth in texts such as Patmore’s painstaking homage to his wife, “The Angel in the House,” as well as John Ruskin’s essay “Of Queens’ Gardens,” which advocates “blind service” akin to that performed by the chivalric knight for his lady (Ruskin 76). Because the process of disillusionment that follows from Julia’s failure to approximate any feminine ideal coincides with a decline rather than a boost in socioeconomic standing, it is remarkably unglamorous compared to that of the narrators of such cornerstones of the feminist canon as *A Room of One’s Own* and *Three Guineas*. Nevertheless, *Mackenzie*, I will argue, participates in a broader feminist critique by laying bare the complicity of masochism with a social system that normalizes sexual inequality, advancing a critique of masochism that complements Woolf’s scathing appraisals – and, in “Professions for Women,” murder – of the Angel in the House. Like “the courtly image of man serving his Lady,” the masochistic image of Mackenzie pinned beneath Julia’s foot is, the novel suggests, “a semblance that conceals the actuality of male domination” (Žižek 108).

Thus while I agree with Carol Dell’Amico that the masochistic fantasy often takes “the curious form of a *lament*” in the novel (74), I also want to argue that its dissolution sets in motion a sharp sociopolitical critique of the function served by this fantasy. Rather than attesting to an ongoing “masochistic attachment to contractual relations,” the presentation of the letters sent by Legros and the notes and messages

passed between Julia and other characters throughout the novel admits to a change in the nature of the contract between Julia and the men on whom she continues to be financially dependent (Dell'Amico 72). Julia's receipt of the final cheque from Mackenzie and the loss of a steady income for which it partially stands leave her in an especially precarious position. She continues her old habit of going "from man to man," but the immediacy of her material need combined with the diminution of her charms increasingly render her more like a mendicant than a mistress, more like a ghost than a *grue*, in the eyes of others (26). The men and family members she attempts to engage during her stay in London are quick to assume – and with good reason – that she is "trying to get hold of some money" (82). They in turn feel obliged to help some, but not much, and only on certain conditions which are made clear in the speech or missives accompanying their donations and presented in the text (82). Hence, her Uncle Griffiths gives her not only a pound, but a bit of unsolicited advice, telling her to "get along back" to Paris "as quickly as [she] can" (85). In a similar vein, James sends a note declaring "after this I can do no more" along with his offering of twenty quid (172). Like the payments from Mackenzie, these donations are intended to sever ties with Julia and win peace for the donor, and are framed in such a way as to ensure that their meaning is not misunderstood, to ensure that the money is not mistaken for a symbol.⁸ Although meant to annul any residual bond with Julia – all lingering feelings of responsibility or indebtedness – these "gifts" are contractual. Yet the contract in question is that which governs the exchange between

⁸ In making this claim, I part ways from Wendy Brandmark, who argues that the gifts of money received by Rhys's protagonists "may be humiliating, but they are also comforting because they establish without a doubt the relationship between possessor and possessed" (26). Brandmark follows many critics in identifying her heroines as "the passive victims of men," but rather than dismissing them on this basis she argues that their relative guiltlessness wins her a "moral victory" (21). In this respect, she suggests that Rhys's fiction is characterized by a *reversal* of values.

the figures of the almsgiver and the beggar, the terms of which Derrida outlines in *Given Time* in reference to the work of Baudelaire and Marcel Mauss.

Derrida argues that alms economies consist of both material and symbolic dimensions. Because the beggar “does not work” (active though he may be), he “represents an *apparently* useless mouth”: he consumes and destroys material wealth, but he does not produce or accumulate it (135). His uselessness is only “apparent” because the gesture of almsgiving and the destruction of surplus value serve a regulatory symbolic function within a “sacrificial structure” (134). Within this structure, the beggar is both sacrificed and sacrificed to. On the one hand, his exclusion allows the “symbolic circle” to close, thus enforcing the identity and equality of those included within it (144). Thus the social category of the beggar – a category akin to that of other miscreants and misanthropes such as “madmen and delinquents,” “criminals or thieves” – “delineates the pocket of an indispensable internal exclusion,” a constitutive but inassimilable outside (135). On the other hand, the donor, in giving alms to the beggar, “hopes for, or counts on a benefit,” primarily in the form of “a protection” or “a security” from the particular threat that the beggar represents (137). What he represents varies based on the sociohistorically and culturally specific topology by which his appearance is framed and with respect to which he becomes not an individual but a figure. As a figure, he can represent “the gods or the dead,” a spirit with which one is obliged to make peace “so that it comes back without haunting you or so that it goes away, which amounts to the same thing” (138, 139). Because alms therefore fulfill “a regulated and regulating economy” – because they restore order – the encounter between a beggar and an almsgiver is not “a chance meeting,” but a socially determined exchange marked by obligation on both sides: the donor “must pay...and pay well” and the beggar (or the spirit for which he stands) must reciprocate the favor by leaving the donor alone (139).

By demonstrating the indispensable roles that Julia and other undercompensated women play in keeping what she calls “organized society” intact, *Mackenzie* in effect genders the sacrificial structure outlined by Derrida (22). Yet it also works to recuperate the losses of that structure, primarily by giving the reader the perspective of the beggar, a perspective not only forsaken by Baudelaire in *Le Spleen de Paris* but also precluded by the codes that regulate the script of supplication and donation in the novel. In giving us her perspective, the novel reveals the inadequacy of this script to accommodating her desire as well as the failure of alms to count as a gift. In her foreword to Mauss’s *The Gift*, anthropologist Mary Douglas builds on Mauss’s theory of gift-exchange to declare, “A gift that does nothing to enhance solidarity is a contradiction” (vii). As a gift that asks for nothing in return – a gift that carries conditions for the recipient but seeks freedom for the donor – alms constitute such a contradiction.⁹ As I suggested above, Julia’s desire is a desire not only to receive but also to give, to be seen as “having” something to give – a credible account of her life, a plausible justification for her actions – despite her poverty. For Julia, as for theorists of the gift such as Mauss and Georges Bataille, recognition is first of all a counter-gift, the gift one receives in return for a spectacular destruction of wealth rather than its conservation. Julia is foremost a creature of consumption, prone to spending money (“After all that time she had not saved a penny” [27]), wasting time (reading, daydreaming, taking “pleasure in memories” [12]), and sacrificing that all important good, appearances (crying in public, making “uncalled-for” scenes [33]). As Andrew Gibson also points out, she practices “expenditure without reserve”

⁹ Whereas for Douglas the so-called free gift is not truly a gift, for Derrida the free gift is the only gift. For the latter, alms do not count as a gift because they are “bound” despite – and, really, because of – the fact that they may be given in order to dissolve social bonds: “As soon as almsgiving is regulated by institutional rituals, it is no longer a pure gift – gratuitous or gracious, purely generous. It becomes prescribed, programmed, obligated, in other words bound. And a gift must not be *bound*, in its purity, not even *binding*, obligatory or obliging” (137).

(192).¹⁰ But in giving herself entirely, Julia is inevitably perceived to be lacking “the self-control necessary to keep up appearances” (27). In the world of *Mackenzie* – where caution, common sense, and constraint are the supreme virtues – such sacrifices, particularly when “carried to the extremity of giving up money,” are taken to be unequivocal signs of “hysteria” (33). It hardly needs mentioning that this diagnosis, coming from Mackenzie, does not enjoy the premium that Jacques Lacan, for example, puts on it in his analysis of Dora’s “gifts.” Because the semblance of mastery, of having, is paramount in the novel’s social system, losing inevitably means losing face.

There is, then, a second way in which the novel works to recuperate the losses of the sacrificial structure of almsgiving and the status quo it reinforces. By shuttling between Julia’s perspective and the perspectives of her alternately grudging and cavalier male donors, the novel suggests that while the “losses” of the social system in *Mackenzie* are feminized – as Rita Felski has argued they typically are in androcentric myths of modernity – they are not peculiar to Julia in particular or to women in general.¹¹ Neither the necessities of the beggar nor those of the almsgiver are measurable by money or answerable by the market. Such is the case because money is, in the end, no substitute for the symbol. Language has the final word, as it were, in plotting the fate of the subject.¹² Thus while it is true, as Hite argues, that “[w]hat is at stake for Julia in *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* is survival, her physical continuance as

¹⁰ Gibson draws on a Levinasian framework to argue that the “sensibility” of Julia Martin in *Mackenzie* and Sasha Jensen in *Good Morning, Midnight* is privileged over the modes of “attending to the world” adopted by other characters. Both women, he argues, “are characterised by...their disposition for self-expenditure, a giving away of self” (192).

¹¹ In her indispensable and resonant analysis of the “gender of modernity,” Felski argues that woman has been cast by many theorists of the modern “as a sacrificial victim exemplifying the losses which underpin the...logic of the modern” (*Gender of Modernity* 2).

¹² In making this claim I part ways with Betsy Berry who locates *Mackenzie* in a naturalistic French literary tradition, arguing that economic determinism is “the only control” in the world of the novel. Or, rather, I would agree but only if we expand our notion of “economy” to include language, a symbolic economy.

a living being” (Hite 40), I would also argue that the novel gives credibility to the recent claim of Judith Butler that “*no one* survives without being addressed” (Butler emphasis added 63).¹³ In claiming that the symbol – a gift for which we depend on others – is critical to the life of the subject as such and drawing a comparison between the almsgiver and the beggar my intention is neither to diminish the exigency of Julia’s material need nor to suggest that well-to-do men like Mackenzie are “victims” in the way or to the degree that Julia and other women in the novel are depicted as victims. We might think of the difference between the Julias and the Mackenzies as a difference between the helpless and the helped, rather than a difference between passive, dependent victims on the one hand and active, independent agents on the other. Framing their difference in this way underscores the fact that in the novel both the haves and the have-nots are characterized at bottom by *dispossession*, by a lack of mastery, despite their division along other lines.

At various moments in the text, Julia has a kind of intuition about her “extraordinary life” being less extraordinary than it is made to seem (11). While at her mother’s funeral, she remembers that it “had been a long succession of humiliations and mistakes and pains and ridiculous efforts” – that it had been a series of occasions of *failed* mastery, of *lost* self-control (131). Shifting from the singular to the general, she thinks “*Everybody’s life was like that*” (emphasis added 131). Although we might not expect Julia – whose impropriety and deviance are endlessly reflected in the judgmental looks of others – to draw such a conclusion, she does and in that moment

¹³ Butler makes this claim in the context of a reading of another writer who has been frequently identified by critics as asking “questions of the age,” both his and ours – that is, Franz Kafka. I note this because I have long thought that the work of Rhys provides an interesting counterpoint to the work of Kafka, particularly insofar as the latter has provided ample material for recent discussions of “bare life,” discussion which in turn tends to lack much analysis of gender or consideration of how, for example, the demand for “attentiveness” that Eric Santner associates with the “creaturely” may be complicated by factors of gender and sexuality (particularly insofar as the “creaturely” corresponds to a Lacanian logic of masculinity). In other words, I wonder what is sacrificed in repeatedly taking recourse to the same masculine paradigms and fictions of sacrifice (homo sacer, the creaturely).

feels, for reasons she cannot explain, powerful: “At the same time, in a miraculous manner, some essence of her was shooting upwards like a flame. She was great. She was a defiant flame shooting upwards not to plead but to threaten” (131). The inexplicable conversion of Julia’s initial melancholic reflection into a sense of power suggests that the revelation of the commonality of her experience has political stakes. The fact that Julia considers her imaginary rise to power a miracle is indicative of the *pre*-political nature of her own position. So, too, is the speed with which she feels depleted: “Then the flame sank down again, useless” (131). The novel, I want to argue, is less quick to sink. In demonstrating that everybody, like Julia, is compelled to repeat an unpleasant past, the novel grounds the possibility of Julia – of a man or woman like Julia – no longer having to beg for the recognition that men like Mackenzie enjoy the luxury of taking as a given. It does so, I will argue, by *removing* the conventional ground of recognition, by undercutting the illusion of mastery.

The argument that follows will be divided into three sections. First, I will offer some additional explication of the nature of the contract between Julia and the members of organized society and its inadequacy to her demand. After exploring the foreclosure of her recognition as a subject from the scene of supplication and donation, I will turn to consider the ways in which the novel suggests that its social system fails to account for not only other women but also men insofar as it fails to account for the subject as such. Through a close reading of an especially surreal scene between Julia and Horsfield, her most sympathetic auditor, I will argue finally that the novel renders perception of the formal similarity between otherwise opposed individuals, of the fact that everybody is limited in his or her mastery, the condition of even exchange between the sexes *and* an alternative social contract, if one ultimately relegated by the novel to an unforeseeable future.

III.

The allowance sent to Julia from Mackenzie through Legros, up to and including the final installment, codifies the terms of her contract with the members of organized society and establishes a template for the payments she receives throughout the novel. In requesting that Julia “kindly acknowledge receipt and oblige,” the letters accompanying the allowance make clear that the latter carries an obligation to reciprocate, but to reciprocate by leaving the donor alone. We should hear in this formula an echo of the novel’s title, which critics have found oddly unrepresentative of the events that precede the narrative and are therein recalled. Certainly, Mackenzie rather than Julia initiated their split by announcing six months earlier that “he was going away, and that he proposed to present her with a certain sum of money weekly” in his stead (27). But rather than misrepresent the details of their disunion, the displacement of agency from Mackenzie to Julia in the novel’s title registers her instrumentality in realizing his proposal and fulfilling his original intention. His ability to leave her depends on her agreement to leave him. My intention in suggesting that she is indispensable to the efficacy of his speech is not to exaggerate her choice in the matter. In backing up the end he proposes with money, Mackenzie essentially makes Julia an offer she cannot refuse. Although she later insists that “she had been determined never to accept the money offered” – a claim that begins to acknowledge the determination of her actions by a law other than that of material necessity – her acceptance of the offering is undoubtedly determined by her circumstances, the fact “that she had not a penny of her own” (32, 26).

Her instrumentality is especially significant because it suggests that Julia – rather than the rule of law as personified by Legros – ultimately ensures the consolidation of Mackenzie and the unification of “organized society,” which she perceives to be “perfectly represented” by the two men (22). Her vision of modern

fraternité is a familiar one: the relationship between Legros and Mackenzie is strictly professional and totally impersonal; the latter “had only received three very businesslike communications” from Legros since depositing the affair in his hands (31). The international alliance of the British businessman and the French lawyer testifies to the prioritization of commercial interest over national identification, but this shift does not so much mean the dissolution of tribal politics as it means the reconstitution of the tribe. Julia recounts being “bullied” by Legros, who threatened to call the vice squad – “the *police des mœurs*” – and have her deported, while his office staff “stared at her and laughed” (31). While the public shaming is effective, the threats are dubious: Mackenzie suspects that “three-quarters” of his intimidation tactics are “a bluff” (31). In other words, the majority of – indeed, *le gros de* – his theatrics are purely performative. They are, to borrow a phrase from another moment in the novel, “merely rhetoric” (81). But the fact that these threats are not likely to be backed by *public* law enforcement paradoxically underscores just how little recourse Julia has. Insofar as the pact between the two men is forged as a consequence of Mackenzie being able to pay for protection, it also signifies the commercialization of the rule of law and the privatization of membership in the group that falls under its aegis. The law, as the name Legros suggests, is in *le gros* – in the wholesale business and, as I suggested above, the business of selling so many illusions of wholeness.

Nevertheless, the law – which is to say the laws endorsed by the market – does not suffice as a guarantee of the security of the group or, on a smaller scale, of the fulfillment of Mackenzie’s long-harbored intention of making his parting from Julia a final one. An additional element is required to cement the social contract: namely, Julia’s certainty that she has “no place” in organized society, her belief that her status as an outsider is absolute (22). Although the text suggests that if Julia is “very much afraid” of Mackenzie and Legros, then she is justifiably so, it also makes clear that her

feeling of total abjection is in part illusory: “When she thought of the combination of Mr Mackenzie and Maître Legros, *all sense of reality deserted her* and it seemed to her that there were no limits at all to their joint powers of defeating and hurting her” (emphasis added 22). Her impression of their absolute authority and of her absolute defenselessness – like the feminine feeling of belonging completely to the man in *Smile Please* – is a fantasy. This fantasy serves a function for Julia as well as the whole from which she is excluded. Not only does she paradoxically prove to be central to the unification of the group by enforcing her own marginality,¹⁴ but she also derives a certain enjoyment from her self-sacrifice. Thus she becomes “excited to an almost unbearable degree” because of and not in spite of the fact that she suspects her confrontation with Mackenzie is “certain to end badly for her” when she follows him to the Restaurant Albert (22). At least she enjoys it up until a point: “Nowadays something had happened to her; she was tired” (12). Her abjection and abandonment cease to give her the same thrill: “she was tired,” “smashed up” (12, 49).

I have already suggested, by way of reference to Derrida’s *Given Time*, that the economy of alms in the novel abides by this same sacrificial structure. Julia’s continued compliance with this structure despite both her shrinking enjoyment of the non-place she occupies within it and her growing disillusionment with the men it benefits are explained by her penury and her acknowledged status as a creature of habit: she needs money and has long been accustomed to going from man to man to get it. Yet this explanation does not fully account for the logic of her circulation in the text, her return to people who, like James, consider such “resurrections of the past” to

¹⁴ This kind of dynamic is operative in not only *Mackenzie* but also Rhys’s fiction in general and has led critics such as Coral Ann Howells to remark the complicity of her heroines and ultimately Rhys with a “traditional balance of power between the sexes.” Thus she argues of the major female characters in *Quartet*: “they are all shown to be collaborators in a collective fantasy about male power and female submission. It is the paradox of Rhys’s version of femininity that, though she offers a merciless exposure of women’s vulnerability, her stories make no attempt to unsettle the traditional balance of power between the sexes. Rather, women’s fantasies continue to sustain it” (52).

be bad form (110). Tactless though her reappearance may be it nevertheless signals her devotion to the letter of the law – or, rather, the law of the letter. In writing to James, ringing Horsfield in London, and confronting Mackenzie at the Restaurant Albert, Julia responds to their invocations. While James is displeased by her arrival on the scene, he feels obliged to grant the intrusion: after all, “what is one to do?” (110). If he cannot turn her away, then the text suggests that it is because he extended her an open invitation when they split seventeen years before: “He had said: ‘I am your friend for life. I am eternally grateful to you – for your sweetness and generosity’” (109). In writing to James years later, as she has done many times before, Julia in effect accepts his offer of hospitality, collecting what she considers her “reward” for having borne their break-up “without fuss or scenes or hysteria” (109).

By holding James to his word, indeed by calling his bluff, Julia abides by the letter of the law or, rather, the law of the letter. Thus while we can presume that his pledge of eternal gratitude was no less rhetorical than the promises that Mackenzie made and never intended to keep, it nevertheless justifies her return on a symbolic plane. Whether genuine or feigned, Julia’s *misreading* of these oaths points to the limits of intentionality and suggests that the decline of mastery only heightens the importance of personal responsibility, of taking care with one’s words. Without validating the extent to which the men she approaches fancy themselves rather than Julia to be the victims of misfortune, I would suggest that the text frames Julia’s fidelity to the letter as a check against speaking irresponsibly, of making promises one never intends to keep. Like the “figure of the beggar” in Derrida’s analysis of “*La fausse monnaie*,” Julia is a “figure of the law” – not Legros’s law of the market, but the law of the symbolic (144). Her return indexes the power of words to forge a bond regardless of their purported emptiness and with it the implication of the subject in a network of relations that escapes his control.

The novel demonstrates the capacity of language to create bonds, to indebt the subject by way of the spoken utterance or the written word, in the course of its digression into the consciousness of Mackenzie. Put quite simply, Mackenzie *thinks* about Julia – about the promises he broke, about the letters he wrote and suspects her of hoarding despite her testimony to the contrary. If his fear is that Julia plans to use the letters to humiliate him in some court of public opinion, the text suggests that the court to which he must ultimately plead is superegoic. By his own account, Julia “haunted him, as an ungenerous action haunted one” despite his attempt to convince himself that “he had not been ungenerous” (28). The fact that she appears before him as if she were a material witness responding to his summons while he hovers over the plate of veal laid before him like some totemic meal only serves to confirm his guilt. But while his unwitting remembrance of things past marks the failure of his effort to put an absolute end to the affair, it only fortifies Mackenzie’s resolve to “forget it” (28). It does nothing to change the dynamic between them once Julia confronts him. Because she behaves unconventionally – defying “common sense” by threatening to “make an un-called for scene” (30, 33) – she remains undeserving of an apology let alone sympathy: hence, “Mr Mackenzie had no pity for her” (33).

In other words, his guilt supplements and strengthens instead of interrupting the status quo and for this reason *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* is, in my reading, ultimately quite critical of the masochistic matrix. The novel suggests that the division between the masochistic game and everyday reality, which assures their relationship of antagonistic complicity for Žižek, requires considerable psychic and material expenditure to maintain. This division and the repression it entails take so much work, the text suggests, because time and the subject situated in it are not as neatly divisible as the laws of the market, which render time a commodity, suggest that they should be. Julia’s untimely resurrection of the past renders visible the

artificiality of the division between the masochistic fantasy and the quotidian routine from which it provides a temporary excursion, as well as the temporal framework that orders both modes of experience. But while her return breaks with this framework it is promptly absorbed into another preexisting narrative, one with its own set of rules but ultimately underwritten by this same framework: the benevolent lady is recast as the harrowing beggar.

In representing the encounter between James and Julia in particular, *Mackenzie* figures the conventions that govern the scene of supplication and donation as well as James's ultimately unconvincing affection of kindness in temporal terms. He carves out a pocket of time for her from his schedule: "trying to be kind," he tells her, "Look here...I've got loads of time – heaps of time. Nearly three-quarters of an hour" (111). Of course, his quick calculation and his reticence to round up makes clear to Julia and to us that the abundance he promises is merely a pretext. Because he is on the clock, he is not in sync with Julia. The text initially registers their asynchrony when Julia notes that James answered her most recent letter "*almost* at once" (emphasis added 109). While Julia admires the relative punctuality of his response, she senses his distance once they are face to face. Hence, after James has entered the room and they have already begun to chat, Julia feels as if "she were sitting in an office waiting for an important person who might do something for her – or might not" (110, 111). But James also waits for Julia.

Although Julia has prepared an explanation of why she has come and the path that brought her back, she cannot "disentangle" the various "threads" of her story and fears that her justification will not be adequate (112). After a few vague fumbled lines and a long silence, she takes recourse to the same trope that Mackenzie used when he originally "proposed to present her with a certain sum of money weekly to give her time to rest, to give her time to look about her" (27). Thus she makes her plea: 'I felt I

needed a rest. I thought perhaps you'd help me to have a rest' (113). He agrees to send her something, but Julia is frustrated because she "always meant...to explain" (113). For James, though, the promise of payment effectively relieves him of obligation: he does not "want to hear" her explanation and insists that they "talk about something else" (113). She eventually leaves the meeting with a promise that he will "send...something," but dissatisfied and close to tears because she "had hoped that he would say something or look something that would make her feel less lonely" (113, 116). The economy of alms depicted in this scene can only deepen Julia's desire for a companion, for a sign that the other is present with her. Such is the gift – indeed, the present – that Julia seeks and which this economy renders impossible.

Within this economy, the end of exchange is presumed to be material for the beggar and symbolic for the giver. Hence, when Julia asks James for help he thinks: "At last she has come to the point – relief of Mr James!" (113). In other words, "the point" of exchange is money for Julia, and thus a "rest" from exchange, and the "relief of Mr James." But James also gets something else: once the business trading pleas and promises is done, he instructs her "before you go you must come and look at my pictures" (115). She does, assuring him that she liked them and that "he did not...love the wrong thing" when he becomes timid "in their presence" (115). James thus gives himself to his pictures as we can presume he once did to Julia. As his title – *Esquire* – suggests, chivalry is not dead; rather, its aim has been redirected. Thus displaced, Julia assumes the task of supporting and stroking the masculine ego, work which it would seem is never done. In putting Julia to work, James appears to be collecting on the debt that she implicitly owes him for his willingness to give her some money. Yet the novel suggests that such is not the case. In this moment, James is "a different man" – "modest, hesitating, unsure of his own opinion" (115). If Julia complies with his demand, ministers to his necessities, then it is because she "must": "Sometimes,"

as she notes with respect to her concession to dance with a rather ghoulish older man later in the novel, “one has to do things” (152). And sometimes, the novel suggests, women in particular have to do things, not just for economic reasons (when Julia accepts the dance, she is already with Horsfield, who is footing the bill) but because they become a habit. The support that Julia gives James is but one example of the unrequited affective labor undertaken by women in the novel, of the women’s work that others treat as if it were a free gift.

Mackenzie suggests that if reciprocity is a feminine fantasy, then the free gift is essentially a masculine fantasy about femininity – a fantasy that the novel goes to great lengths to dispel by demonstrating the toll taken by this “gift” on the feminine subject. This toll is subtly registered in a scene late in the novel. Julia and Horsfield enter a London restaurant to find a row going on:

One of the customers was bawling at the waiter that the soup was muck, and the other diners were listening with shocked but rather smirking expressions, like good little boys who were going to hear the bad little boy told off. The complainant, who must have been sensitive and have felt the universal disapproval, put up his hand to shield a face that grew redder and redder. However, he bawled again: ‘Take it away. I won’t eat it. It’s not mulligatawny, it’s muck.’

Mr Horsfield said: ‘Let’s have a gin-and-vermouth and go somewhere else.’

‘No,’ said Julia. ‘Why? It’s quite all right here.’

The rebellious gentleman was handed a bill and walked out, his face crimson, but still stubborn. The waiter said loudly to his back: ‘Some people don’t know how to behave themselves in a good-class restaurant.’ And a very thin woman, dressed in black, who was sitting at the cash-desk, echoed him in a thin, mincing voice: ‘Some people aren’t used to a good-class restaurant!’

(144-145)

This scene is emblematic of not only the split, but also the contradiction between ideal and real – “mulligatawny” and “muck” – that characterizes the world of the novel.

The question of whether the mulligatawny is in fact inedible is a moot point insofar as “good” and “bad” are determined on the basis of the ability to keep mum about one’s

muck. This is no minor detail, for it demonstrates the extent to which money is not quite all in *Mackenzie*. Insofar as we can presume that the bad little boy is a paying customer, his sin is simply that he speaks up and thus breaks with the vow of silence – the collective pledge to keep up appearances – that implicitly sustains the status quo.

As an “echo” of the male waiter’s disapproval – as if an Echo to his Narcissus – the voice of the woman sitting at the cash-desk is dependent and supportive in both repeating and reinforcing the sentiment of her co-worker. And yet, like Echo, who only partially repeats words that are not her own, she deviates from his script and in so doing highlighting the role of habituation in perpetuating normative behavior. In other words, whereas the waiter rewrites the customer’s “stubborn” display as a deficiency, a failure to know better, the woman implicitly preserves the rebellious spirit of his self-damning opposition to the pack. In this respect, her seat at the cash-desk indexes her function – however accidental – as a faithful keeper of accounts, while the slight variation in her wording smuggles a slight, but critical difference into the otherwise univocal universal: she begins to revise the public record.¹⁵

But we might also wonder at what cost this mournfully dressed thin woman with her “thin, mincing voice” has become “used to” echoing the orthodoxy of her peers. The content of her inexact restatement points to two elements of characterization typical of Rhys’s work more broadly: a naturalistic emphasis on the impact of environmental factors on subject-formation and a testimony to a residual

¹⁵ The echo of the woman also recalls Spivak’s discussion of Echo in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Spivak argues that Echo “is staged as the instrument of a possibility of truth not dependent upon intention” and “remains uncoupled from herself as cause” (25). As a form of speech cut off from intention, her echo entails “the possibility of deconstruction” (15). Spivak thus furthers a link between femininity and deconstruction opened up by Derrida’s own writing and, I would argue, supported by a novel like *Mackenzie*. Echo – like the phantasmatic free gift for Derrida – is cut off from the symbolic circuit of narcissistic self-recognition that gives back to the subject his own identity. Echo, the gift – Julia, as well as the lure to be with Julia and the speech acts it generates – pose a challenge to identity. In general, I would argue that Rhys and Spivak are very much kindred critics: for both the impossibility of subaltern speech must be understood in terms of the failure to be heard. And indeed we might apply the terms that Spivak uses to describe her project in her analysis of Echo to the *oeuvre* of Rhys, for both are efforts at “rescuing Echo, struggling to break through” (36).

discrepancy, a strain of inassimilable difference. In this respect, her seat at the cash-desk indexes the extent to which the support she has given and the sacrifices she has made have not been compensated: she is waiting to be paid.

So, too, is Julia's sister, Norah. Despite her difference from Julia, Norah also fails to garner the particular form of help she seeks. For commitment to taking care of her invalid mother for nine years and through two strokes, Norah receives something that her sister never does – that is, the unanimous approval of organized society:

Everybody always said to her: 'You're wonderful, Norah. You're wonderful. I don't know how you do it.' It was a sort of drug, that universal, that unvarying admiration – the feeling that one was doing what one ought to do, the approval of God and man. It made you feel protected and safe, as if something very powerful were fighting on your side. (104)

While the recognition that Norah receives from others for her dutiful conformity to universal standards of comportment is intoxicating, the security she gains in exchange for her loss is ultimately a cold comfort. Although her admirers dole out generous compliments, they do not reciprocate her display of good will. Instead, they “stood around watching her youth die, and her beauty die, and her soft heart grow hard and bitter” (104). They pay witness to the spectacular destruction of her most precious possessions and “back their approval” of her sacrifice “but not in any spectacular fashion” (105). In short, they passively observe her suffering, but “they did not help” (104).¹⁶ Amid the absence of help, Norah seeks solace in the thought of eventual

¹⁶ Her resentment, I would argue, points us toward the limitations of what Woolf refers to as “benevolent spectatorship” in her introduction to *Life As We Have Known It*, the 1931 anthology of the Women's Co-operative Guild. Her sense that the sympathy of financially comfortable women like herself with the experiences of working women are “imaginative” and “fictitious” is exemplary of her adherence to the notion that class division is determinant of identity – that minds which “fly free at the end of a short length of capital” cannot again be tied to “that narrow plot of acquisitiveness and desire” (xxvii). Still, her insistence on the irreducibility of class division appears at times to be more cautious than necessary. Elsewhere the acquisitiveness that she here associates with economic despair is associated, however slightly, with the imperial project. In *The Pargiters* Woolf further avers the fictitious nature of her relation to the women professionals that make up her audience, telling them “You call out...all those sympathies which, in literature, are stimulated by the explorers who set out in crazy cockle shells to discover new lands, and found new civilizations” (6). To what extent does this proposed parallel between explorers and women professionals imply a link between imperialism and the

reparation. Like the fantasy of the woman in *Smile Please*, hers is at base a fantasy of reciprocity, for “she had begun to think – in a dull, sore sort of manner – about Aunt Sophie’s will, and the will her mother had made. And that at long last she would have some money of her own and be able to do what she liked” (105).

Certainly we might attribute the inefficacy of Norah’s heroic expenditure to prompt a countermove to the near universal endorsement of the mantra that the pain of others has “nothing to do with me” among characters in the novel (188). Yet we might also ask to what extent its inefficacy is symptomatic of the *feminine* gift. Does the cultural presupposition that women “must” do certain things foreclose even the thought that one should attempt to offer a comparable counter-gift? What conditions would have to be in place for them to forge a viable social contract? If the rule of reciprocity extends to women only at the level of fantasy, what can be done to make exchange even in practice?

IV.

After Leaving Mr Mackenzie begins the work of getting even by displaying the debts owed to women like Julia and Norah and those feminine “gifts” that are systematically unreciprocated, repudiated, or discredited by others in the novel. In the case of Julia, this means sharing those personal experiences that go unspoken in the text because the narratives that mediate her exchanges with others and sustain their shared reality (the masochistic fantasy then, the mendicant’s script now) cannot accommodate them and

progress of women? To what extent do they both owe an ideological debt to Enlightenment idealism? Might we read the distance upon which Woolf insists as a measure against identifying with that destructive avarice, or against giving in to a colonizing impulse that can color even the more noble missions? Certainly we can square this possibility with the non-interventionism with which Woolf dallies in a text like *Mrs. Dalloway*, for example, and which is emblematic of the “modernist pluralism” that Melba Cuddy-Keane critiques in her analysis of modernist paradigms of cross-cultural encounter. Cuddy-Keane suggests that “a pluralistic vision” – that is, a vision that admits to the limited knowledge of the subject and the autonomous independence of the other – while it may have “positive potential,” also “runs the risk of losing an effective interventionist stance” (551). Rhys is, I think, counters this risk while also upholding the importance of extending to women a right to privacy – and even a right to privacy in public – which is seldom afforded to her female protagonists.

because, for this reason, she suspects they will not be believed. Julia imagines telling James about the death of her newborn baby, thinking: “When you’ve just had a baby, and it dies for the simple reason that you haven’t enough money to keep it alive, it leaves you with a sort of hunger. Not sentimental – oh no. Just a funny feeling, like hunger” (112). She keeps the memory to herself because she anticipates receiving the same incredulous response that has so often been her lot: “Look here, I don’t believe that; you’re making it up” (112). By ventriloquizing the retort she has tended to receive, at the very least in the suspicious tones of voice and looks of her auditors, Julia demonstrates for the reader her internalization of and acclimation to the judgment of others and the literary conventions and codes they use to determine the credibility of a subject. Like the woman seated at the cash-box, she echoes the status quo.

While Julia’s experiences of losing the baby due to poverty and of being discredited go unspoken, their inscription in the narrative and our forced identification with them work to preempt our complicitous repetition of what are not only the common responses to her misfortunes in the world of *Mackenzie* but also the easier ones – namely, distrust and blame. While these are certainly the attitudes adopted by Mackenzie when Julia confronts him in the Restaurant Albert, the novel offers a more adequate template for the ideal reader in the form of George Horsfield, who finds himself “filled with the glow of warm humanity” when she finishes recounting what he perceives to be “the story of [her] life” (50). This story is not only a story within a story, but also a story *about* telling the story of her life. Julia recalls telling a female sculptor for whom she used to sit about “[e]verything that had happened to [her], as far as [she] could” (52). She had felt like she was “before a judge...explaining that everything [she] had done had always been the only possible thing to do” (52). In trying to convince the woman that all of her actions had been driven by necessity,

Julia sought understanding: “I wanted her to understand. I felt that it was awfully important that some human being should know what I had done and why I had done it. I told everything. I went on and on” (52). As I suggested above, the necessity by which Julia is driven is not limited to *material* economic necessity. There are things she and other women “must” do because they are expected to serve certain supplementary functions for other individuals and for the collective.

Yet there are also things that she feels she must do which clearly defy common sense and which mark the return of what *she* has repressed in the interest of serving what is upheld as the good of the group. Thus, when she becomes “consumed with hatred of the world and everybody in it” she is suddenly “*obliged* to walk up and down the room,” and when she follows Mackenzie to have it out with him it is because “she *must* see” him (emphases added 12, 22). Julia is certain that such feelings of compulsion are universal – “that it’s always so with everybody” (52). Nevertheless, when she finished giving the woman her account of herself, the latter replied “You seem to have had a hectic time” and with that Julia knew that “she didn’t believe a word” (53). Horsfield provides a hint as to why she would not believe a word when he suggests that “there’s a good deal of tosh talked about free will” (52). In testifying to the dispossession of the self by so many drives, Julia challenges the notions of free will and of the autonomous individual which it presupposes. Believing her story and the image it presents of a subject overwritten by necessity, a woman for whom everything – from money and time to words and images – is borrowed because she has “absolutely nothing at all,” would mean unsettling these notions (26). That is not to say that Julia’s story should absolve her of all responsibility for the path she has taken. By demonstrating her bouts of internal conflict, her slips into and out of indifference, the text allows us to see that this is ultimately a story that Julia tells both herself and others in order to rationalize her existence. In this respect it is a means of excusing

herself, but no more or less so than the stories that others tell themselves to bolster their confidence or to relieve their guilt.

The novel, therefore, is less invested in proving that Julia is right or wrong than it is in proving that her illusions are, as Mackenzie accurately observes, “necessary illusions” – that they are at some level indispensable to the subject even though their indulgence appears to contravene “the instinct of self-preservation” (31, 27). Insofar as Julia’s illusions undercut the assumption that such an instinct takes priority, they suggest that it may be yet another illusion. The preservation of the self, regardless of the image to which it accedes, has little to do with instinct and a good deal to do with whether or not the tosh we talk is lent credibility by others. In failing to solicit this response she feels as if she were dematerializing, “as if all my life and all myself were floating away from me like smoke and there was nothing to lay hold of – nothing” (53). The body, for Julia, is not simply a preexisting material referent. Rather its very materiality, its reality for the subject, is determined by its sociohistorical situation in a far broader system of exchange. Depriving the account she gives of herself of credibility means cutting the symbolic cord that grounds her relation not only to others but also for herself. The feeling of dissolution that accompanies the loss of this cord and the ground it affords the subject is, as Julia tells Horsfield, “more frightening than I can ever tell you” (53).

It is this unspeakable feeling of what is ultimately a form of helplessness – of having, as Woolf says in the conclusion of *A Room of One’s Own*, no arm to cling to – for which Julia seeks understanding from Horsfield in the present of the narrative. As a story about telling the story of her life, the story she tells him is not the same as that which she told the sculptor – whose profession, we might note, indexes the hand she had in shaping Julia’s self-perception. The story she tells Horsfield is proffered as an example of the fact that “it doesn’t always help to talk to people” (50). After a long

history of being disbelieved, the experience for which Julia seeks recognition and for which the novel seek to secure recognition for her is an experience of failed address, of not being heard. While I would argue that the novel does in effect give Julia the validation of which she has been deprived, I say that it *seeks* this recognition because other reviewers and critics have been less generous.

Indeed, Julia has tended not to inspire a glow of warm humanity comparable to that which she momentarily inspires in Horsfield. Hence, an anonymous critic for the *Times Literary Supplement*, although impressed with Rhys's prose, did not think much of her heroine and found it "difficult to see why leaving so unattractive a person as Mr Mackenzie should have broken Julia's spirit." It is the kind of view shared by student readers of Rhys and literary critics alike. Ultimately, the reviewer concludes: "The sordid little story is written with admirable clarity and economy of language. But it leaves one dissatisfied. It is a waste of talent." It is the right style, but the wrong woman, as if such an unbalanced subject does not deserve such a balanced treatment. Despite his ultimate distaste for the story, the reviewer serendipitously captured the fundamental antinomy of the novel: while *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* works to give an account of that which resides beyond credibility and common sense its own style is relentlessly efficient. As a novel that is in some way about excess, it bears no trace of excess. The minimalist, evenhanded presentation of this sordid little story constitutes the primary means by which the novel works to bring a woman like Julia into the fold of reason.

The other means by which the novel performs this feat is by demonstrating that Julia is right – that "it doesn't always help to talk to people." In other words, the gift carries no guarantee of reciprocation. The project of *Mackenzie*, as I have tried to argue, is twofold: on the one hand, it recuperates those elements of the feminine subject that remain unspoken because they can never get a fair hearing within the

closed circle of exchange typical of the economy of alms in particular and the social system in general. It gives Julia the audience she otherwise lacks. On the other hand, it shows that some demands are met by address – particularly those of men – and some are not. Although it did not help Julia to talk to the sculptor, it helps James to talk to Julia about his beloved pictures, before which he becomes insecure, vulnerable. In the context of the novel, showing that it doesn't always help to talk to people also means showing that anybody can become dependent on the other for help, specifically that which is potentially afforded by intersubjective exchange.

Indeed, I would argue that the fact of mutual dependence constitutes the open secret of organized society in the novel. When Julia finds herself unwelcome by her Uncle Griffiths, she caustically remarks, 'it was idiotic of me to come...It's childish to imagine that anybody cares what happens to anybody else' (84). Griffiths responds "with an air of letting her into a secret and an expression that was suddenly open and honest: 'Of course, everybody has to sit on their own bottoms'" (84). Although he intends to deliver a hard lesson about independence and self-reliance, the plural form of the possessive ("their own") in effect collectivizes the ground ("bottoms") that supports "everybody." Seldom are men's expressions described in Rhys's novels as "open and honest." We might take this rare occurrence as an indication that the secret Griffiths shares is greater than either he or Julia realizes, for the fact is that even a man like Mackenzie does not sit on his own bottom, but has received help from others throughout his life, first from his father and now from those hanging on to a lower rung of the social scale. Thus, when he sees Julia enter the restaurant, Mackenzie looks "to the right and the left of him with a helpless expression" and is relieved to find the *maitre d* "standing near his table and looking at him with significance" as if to say 'I understand; I remember this woman. Do you want to have her put out?' (28).

In this moment, Mackenzie is “the sort that,” in the parlance of the novel, “gives itself away” (87).

His vulnerability derives from the fact that the security afforded by conforming to convention inevitably falls short. Beyond a certain point mastery fails. It fails, the text suggests, because the sacrificial structure characteristic of almsgiving and, on a larger scale, organized society is also characteristic of the members of that society: men like Mackenzie who assume a place in it by means of disavowing not only the other (that is, Julia) but also those aspects of the self that exceed certain ideals of comportment. The scene in the “good-class” restaurant that I discussed above realizes *en masse* a sacrificial disavowal that the novel suggests is also the precondition of the individual acquiescence of men and women to the social system. While Julia, as I suggested earlier, bears an affinity to the woman at the cash-desk, she ultimately bears a far greater one to the “bad little boy” who is expelled for complaining about his muck. More often the excess of the universal than its echo, Julia figures throughout the novel as the return of the repressed – as the bad little boy who must be expelled not only by but also *from* every good little boy.

The sacrificial structure of masculine identity becomes clear when Mackenzie describes his personal code of ethics. During his youth, Mackenzie enjoyed a romantic, creative phase, even publishing a small book of poems. Nevertheless, he always had “a tight and very tide mind” (24). Put off by “people who allow themselves to be blown about by the winds of emotion and impulse” because they were always, in his eyes, “unhappy people,” he eventually adopted “a certain code of morals and manners” which “was perfectly adapted to the social system” (24). But despite the perfect conformity of his code, both it and by extension the social system to which corresponds are imperfectly suited to him:

Mr Mackenzie's code, philosophy or habit of mind would have been a complete protection to him had it not been for some kink in his nature – that volume of youthful poems perhaps still influencing him – which morbidly attracted him to strangeness, to recklessness, even unhappiness. He had more than once allowed himself to be drawn into affairs which he had regretted bitterly afterwards, though when it came to getting out of these affairs his business instinct came to his help, and he got out undamaged. (24)

Mackenzie's suspicion that the "volume of youthful poems" may be to blame for his attraction to strangeness is striking for it implies a reversal of agency: although he authored the poems, they now have the power to claim authority over him. But can we then say that he is the undisputed author of the poems? Or do they, like the letters he sent to Julia, belong to a literary tradition that precedes and exceeds him? Even if we cannot answer these questions with any confidence based on the text at hand, we can at least underscore the possibility to which they point – that is, the possibility that the will of Mackenzie, like that of Julia, is overwritten by drives and derailed by desires that remain incommensurable with the ethics of mastery prescribed by the social system. At odds with what Mackenzie calls his "business instinct" (which was presumably instilled in him by his businessman father) these desires situate him on what Lacan refers to as "the track of something that is specifically our business" – that is, the business of the subject – in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (VII 319). In keeping Mackenzie from unhappiness, this business instinct is a kind of pleasure principle, which is for Freud a homeostatic and quantitative principle: it balances the libidinal and psychic economy of the subject. Yet, as the "kink in his nature" suggests, Mackenzie is prone to perversion – is, indeed, kinky – and, in having "allowed himself to be drawn into unhappiness" despite his wish to avoid it, ultimately resembles the very wayward people from whom he aims to distinguish himself. Insofar as this kink has reasserted itself repeatedly, the text suggests that the business of the subject is – to borrow a phrase from a later moment – "an unending business" (113). Hence, if his

affair with Julia cannot be brought to an absolute end, then it is not just because Mackenzie is troubled by guilt over his ungenerous actions, but also because the affair is only the most recent effect of a desire that is unending, indestructible. For Mackenzie, as for Lacan, desire “keeps coming back, keeps returning,” and “demands insistently that the debt be paid” (Lacan *VII* 319).

In attributing the return of desire to the influence of his poems, Mackenzie further suggests that the status of the subject as a subject of desire derives from his inhabitation *by*, and not merely his inhabitation of, a symbolic order that escapes his grasp. The return of his desire is thus underwritten by a law of language, which was *the* law of exchange for Lacan and which is the same law that Julia upholds in her quest to collect on old debts. As a subject under this law, Mackenzie plays host to words, impulses, and thoughts that are not properly speaking his own and which continue to own him even if he would generally prefer to relegate them to a distant past. Yet he only allows his subjection to this law to shape his exchanges with others under the terms of the masochistic contract, which constitutes an exception to the rule, a temporary deviation from his usual code of ethics. While the novel repeatedly undermines the presupposition that he has the authority to enforce the division between the exception and the rule, to keep the past from bleeding into the present, he continually invests in this illusion of authority – both financially (he hires Legros) and psychically and libidinally (he tells himself “Forget it; forget it” [28]). In being framed as a limited excursion from the norm, masochism is consistent with Mackenzie’s wish “never to go too far or too deep” (26), never to give himself away entirely or to become inextricably entangled in relation. In other words, it is consistent with his wish to deny the extent to which he is *already* bound by a broader

linguistic, social, and temporal context that occasionally renders him, like Julia, helpless.¹⁷

Slavoj Žižek has argued that masochism has a relationship of what he calls “*antagonistic complicity*” to political economy (109). As the perverse underside of bourgeois ideology, the “masochistic game...suspends social reality, [but] none the less fits easily into that everyday reality” (92). For the masochist, “the most intimate desires become objects of contract and composed negotiation” (92). He aims, as Jacques Lacan suggests in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, to reduce himself to “this thing that is treated like an object, to this slave whom one trades back and forth and whom one shares” (*VII* 239). In this respect, “the economy of masochistic pain ends up looking like the economy of goods” – the very economy from which it constitutes an apparent departure or escape (239). Yet there remains a crucial difference between them, a residual point of antagonism which is in my reading analogous to the antagonism between capitalist exchange and gift exchange.

As a ritualized pageant consisting of rules, contracts, and personae, the so-called masochistic game appears to share a formal kinship with the “skillful game of exchange” that Lévi-Strauss detected in the gift and potlatch practices of aboriginal groups (*Elementary Structures* 54). In manifesting a desire to become a thing, masochism, I would argue, constitutes the return of what political economy represses:

¹⁷ It is because the figure of the beggar threatens to reveal the susceptibility of everybody to forces beyond their control that I do not consider, as Arnold Davidson does, Julia’s reduction to “obvious mendicancy” at the end of the novel, when she outright asks Mackenzie for money, a moral coup (225). Davidson claims that the conclusion of *Mackenzie* is not “irredeemably bleak,” in part because Julia eventually ceases to deceive herself into believing that her past relationships with men were “affairs of the heart, not affairs of the pocketbook” and – if her successful solicitation of money from Mackenzie in the final scene is any indication – because she may reap a greater fortune as a beggar than as a commodity: “Although Julia is finally reduced to obvious mendicancy, asking solely for the cash, she is also more successful than when she earlier asked for something more [e.g. Mackenzie’s concern]. Presumably she will continue with that greater success in a game more demeaning (she is now a beggar) and less (she is no longer, in effect, hypocritically prostituting herself)” (225). Davidson thus reinforces the very capitalistic code of ethics that I take the novel to be undermining. See Hite for an incisive critique of the faulty division between “romantic” and “mercenary” guiding Davidson’s argument (see *The Other Side of the Story* 23-24).

that is, the concept that objects are an inalienable feature of personhood, the notion that persons and things are bound to one another. In *The Gift*, Marcel Mauss argued that the primary difference between “archaic” societies and our own is how we conceptualize the relationship between persons and things. Whereas modern property law draws a sharp distinction between them, codifying their status as separate entities, archaic societies conceive of them as manifestations of “the same nature” (*The Gift* 46). For this reason, “to make a gift of something to someone is to make a present of some part of oneself” (12). In objectifying his “most intimate passion,” the masochist in effect gives his most precious possession – that is, himself – for as Žižek remarks, “[t]he very kernel of the masochist’s being is externalized in the staged game” (92). While the gesture of giving oneself to the other is a reaction against bourgeois ideology, it ultimately lends support to that ideology, both as its constitutive outside and as a temporary respite from business as usual.¹⁸ For while there is “truth in the mask” worn by the masochist, he nevertheless maintains a “constant distance” from the game he plays (92). In other words, unlike the woman in *Smile Please* and unlike Julia, he never gives himself away completely.

V.

While *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* critiques masochism for its ultimate complicity with a social contract that forbids the equal recognition of women by casting them as either the echo of masculinity or an excess that must be expelled, the novel also suggests that masochism exposes a truth about the subject that may be the key to imagining another form of social relation. In assuming a persona – Mackenzie becomes like one of those people who allows themselves to be blown about – the

¹⁸ Such a respite is exemplified by the scene between Sylvia Beach and Ernest Hemingway with which I began my introduction. Hemingway found a willing Venus in Beach, whose suspension of business so that Hemingway might show her his most precious possession – his dreadful scars – marks her entrance into a masochistic contract.

masochist brings to the fore those aspects of the self that must be disavowed in order for men like Mackenzie to maintain their social standing: a taste for humiliation, a penchant for pain, a dependence on the other – indeed, a passion for the gift. As the site of this passion, the kink in Mackenzie’s nature marks the point where the division between inside and outside gives way, not only because it drives his attraction to Julia, but also because it makes him in a way *like* Julia. In suggesting their likeness, I have in mind not their shared investment in various fantasies of prostration, but the fact of helplessness which these fantasies reproduce and convert into a source of pleasure and excitement through the introduction of various constraints and conventions. What these fantasies reveal and their dispossession ensures is that at some level and in some irreparable way both are unhappy people. We might thus suggest that unhappiness fuels masochism, which in turn gives the subject, as Lévi-Strauss might say, “the illusion of squaring his account” – of paying the debt to desire by means of the fantasy (*Introduction to Marcel Mauss* 47). Yet the novel suggests that unhappiness might also be the condition of another form of exchange, one which I would call, following Rhys in other texts, sympathetic.

Indeed, *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* confirms the suspicion expressed by a character in Rhys’s short story, “In the Rue de l’Arrivée,” that “only the unhappy can either give or take sympathy” while slightly modifying this claim to suggest that they must willing to come to terms with their unhappiness (*Collected Short Stories* 54). Mackenzie, for example, is prone to unhappiness but his resistance to committing too much prohibits him from engaging in “whole-hearted agreement” with Julia (*Mackenzie* 26). He is capable of pitying her, but only from a distance. When she is seated across from him, telling him about how she has “been pretty unhappy,” he feels “no pity for her” (33). Horsfield, however, does give Julia sympathy and is able to do so because of his willingness to concede to a certain loss of mastery and thus, we

might say, to own his discontent. While Mackenzie's wish to evade unhappiness is the reason he takes refuge in a code of ethics predetermined to discount any self-explanation Julia can give, Horsfield's willingness to confront his own unhappiness enables him to take her at her word, and enables her to come into relief as a subject deserving of a fair deal, an equal participant in exchange who has long given sympathy to others – particularly men – without getting much in return.

In its depiction of the ultimately very brief romance between Julia and Horsfield and, specifically, its depiction of the one night they spend together toward the tail-end of her trip to London, the novel works to think the possibility of an exchange between the sexes rooted in mutual sympathy. I suggest that it works to think this possibility because Julia repudiates what I take to be Horsfield's most radical gesture of sympathy and because the text, in the scene I want to examine, gives us the sense that we are in uncharted territory, that there exists no script to mediate such an exchange. The scene – which is told from Horsfield's point of view – starts out heavily scripted. Horsfield escorts Julia back to her boarding house, where she unequivocally implored him to stay: "You mustn't leave me. Don't leave me. You must stay with me. Please" (149). Julia thus assumes the role of the suppliant, but does so here in the mode of seduction. Horsfield obliges, playing the chivalrous savior to her damsel in distress, but while he is filled with a "sensation of excitement and triumph" while standing on her stoop, his feeling of victory promptly gives way to insecurity once inside her room. He reaches out his hand to touch her hair, he quickly withdraws it "because something sensitive in him was puzzled and vaguely unhappy" (152). Their location provides one explanation for his sudden unhappiness: on the night they first met in Paris, Horsfield invited Julia back to his hotel room, but this is the first time that he has ventured to her room. In this moment, their roles are reversed: the suppliant has become the hostess, while the host has become her

guest.¹⁹ But to what extent can we ascribe Horsfield's malaise to the fact that he is now in her territory? As the otherwise enigmatic title of the chapter claims: "It Might Have Been Anywhere."

Amid the awakening in Horsfield of "something sensitive" – something that I would suggest is not unlike like the kink in Mackenzie's nature – this title suggests that his abrupt feeling of unhappiness is not solely attributable to where he is. The host, it suggests, can become the guest "anywhere."²⁰ The reversibility of these positions follows from the fact that the host is inhabited by something that is not properly his own – something sensitive in Horsfield, a kink in Mackenzie – but which is nevertheless specifically his business. As a kind of mark of singularity that distinguishes the subject, this irreducible something remains a consistent feature of the subject from one place to the next. What animates and alerts the subject to it, in this scene, is the condition of being a guest, of suddenly finding oneself exposed and dependent on the hospitality of the other.

While Horsfield's unhappiness initially causes him to retract in self-defense, it also sets the tone for the exchange that follows. Horsfield asks Julia about her spin on the dance floor with the rather lecherous older gentleman earlier in the night:

He said: 'Well, your partner was a good show, don't you think?'
'No,' she said. 'No, I thought him horrible, horrible.'
'Then why did you dance with him?'

¹⁹ Alicia Borinsky has argued that the posture of the guest is typical of the Rhys woman in general: "Jean Rhys has drawn a detailed picture of the woman as guest in her books... This guest has no money but also no ambition. Her role is permanently to be there as an occasion for the selfishness or generosity of others" (240). I have tried to show that in *Mackenzie* this "generosity" is more often than not compatible – if not isomorphic – with "selfishness." Borinsky also notes the contractual nature of the relation between these female guests and their male hosts, suggesting that a "pact is forged between those with extra money and the *petite femme*" – a pact which cements the status of the former as "victims" (242).

²⁰ The laws of hospitality, as Derrida writes, "make everyone into everyone else's hostage" (*Of Hospitality* 125). The guest and host – as their joint signification by the term *hôte* suggests – are substitutable.

‘Sometimes one has to do things, haven’t you ever felt that? You’re very lucky, then. But if you haven’t felt it, it’s no use talking. Because you won’t believe.’

‘Don’t you be so sure,’ he said, ‘about what I’ve felt and what I haven’t felt.’

She said: ‘D’you know what I think? I think people do what they have to do, and then the time comes when they can’t any more, and they crack up. And that’s that.’

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘and perhaps I know something about cracking up too. I went through the war, you know.’ (152)

Although Julia presumes that Horsfield has not felt as she has, the fact is that he has. His ability to commiserate with Julia and to whole-heartedly agree with her speculation that people do what they must until – like her – they crack up is empirically rooted in his World War I experiences. Julia remembers the war as a “mad reckless time” when “everybody else” was also doing the “mad things one did” (68). Here and elsewhere it constitutes an historical referent for the past that Julia – who “rather liked the air raids” – continually resurrects and others would rather forget (152). Horsfield, at least in this moment, is an exception to this rule. He knows firsthand the toll that the ceaseless demand to make sacrifices, to minister to the necessities of the Other, exacts on the subject and, more importantly, tells her as much. Admittedly, the demeanor of neither Julia nor Horsfield is especially warm in the above passage. Both are at once defensive and confrontational, even narcissistic in their quickness to announce what *I* think and what *I* know. Yet the antagonistic tone of their dialogue in my reading also registers its novelty. In the case of Julia in particular, long inured to believing herself the only one of her kind, we might also interpret her behavior as a symptom of the strangeness of having a receptive audience, of being believed.

While their exchange thus constitutes a step toward mutuality, it is the passages that follow that most interest me. Horsfield begins stroking Julia’s hair and, surprised by its softness, finds it “soft and warm, like the feathers of a very small bird”

(153). Horsfield feels an “extraordinary pleasure,” but his enjoyment is interrupted by Julia:

She said: ‘You’re awfully good to me.’
‘You mustn’t say that,’ said Mr Horsfield, pulling his hand away abruptly. ‘I absolutely forbid you to say that. I mean, it’s the most fearful rot to say it.’
She said: ‘No, you’re good and kind and dear to me.’ (153)
He leaned forward and stared at her, and she looked back at him in a heavy, bewildered, sleepy way.
‘She asked me up here,’ he thought. ‘She asked me.’
When he kissed her, her body was soft and unresisting.
There was a subdued rumble of trains in the distance. He thought again: ‘The Great Western.’
You are thirsty, dried up with thirst, and yet you don’t know it until somebody holds up water to your mouth and says, ‘You’re thirsty, drink.’ It’s like that. You are thirsty, and you drink.
And then you wonder all sorts of things, discontentedly and disconnectedly.
‘But the worst of it is,’ he thought, ‘that one can never know what the woman is really feeling.’ (153)

In telling Horsfield that he is “awfully good” to her, Julia resorts to the same cloying gratitude she doled out when he made her a gift of 1500 francs the night they met. In other words, she steps back into the role of the doting advocate of the masculine ego. What, then, is at stake in Horsfield’s rejection of her flattery? We might read it as a sign that love (as Renata Salecl argues by way of Rouchefoucauld) “does not call for an answer” – that the last thing the lover wants is a response that would shatter his narcissistic illusion of the beloved (18). Or we might argue that his response is driven by guilt. This interpretation would presuppose that Horsfield has selfish motives (he wants to sleep with Julia), but it would also mean that he is doing something people seldom do in the world of *Mackenzie* – being honest.

In forbidding Julia to say that he is awfully good to her, Horsfield forbids the utterance of empty signifiers, of speech which is untrustworthy. By way of this command – which is in some respect a commandment against lying – he in imposes a

duty to be truthful, a duty which Kant argued was “the basis of all duties to be grounded on contract.”²¹ Truthfulness, I have suggested, is far from the basis of any of the contracts in the novel – whether the masochistic contract that bound Mackenzie to Julia (which consists of disingenuous promises), the social contract that binds all the good little boys (which rests upon the misrecognition of “muck” as “mulligatawny”), or the contract between the almsgiver and the beggar (which mistakes Julia for an apparently useless mouth). These contracts impose a duty to uphold false pretenses, including ideals of femininity (the sovereign lady) and ideals of masculinity (the powerful donor). We catch a glimpse of what a contract that places a premium on truth would look like in practice in the preceding exchange between Julia and Horsfield. But if such a contract – one capable of accommodating the truth of her experience – is the very thing that Julia has sought throughout the novel, why would she refuse it? If she wants a rest from the labor of catering to people before whom she feels like “a kind of worm,” then why would she rebuff it (112)? In short, why would Julia reject this gift?

The answer is ambiguous. The fact that Julia repudiates Horsfield’s prohibitive gesture may be taken as a sign of her own idealism, her own unwillingness to part with certain illusions about not only the other but also herself. When Julia visited her Uncle Griffiths “she felt a great desire to please him, to make him look kindly at her” (81); hence, her stubborn insistence on Horsfield’s kindness might be interpreted as a means of preserving an image of herself as an object with the power to inspire kindness in others. The feminine “no” in this case would be a way of protecting what remains of her charms – the sweetness that is, according to Mackenzie, “part of these people’s stock-in-trade” (27). At the same time, her resistance manifests an element of childishness typical of Julia throughout the novel:

²¹ See “On a Supposed Right to Lie from Philanthropy” 613.

like the bad little boy in the good-class restaurant, Julia is wont to rebel and this moment is no exception. Whether she is driven by calculation or naïveté, Julia is arguably justified in not giving herself away in this moment, for the fact is that Horsfield turns out to be no less prone to propagating empty promises than the men who came before him. Although he “promised to stay” with Julia on the night in question, he sneaks out while she is sleeping, and while he is determined to prove that he is “not one of the others,” he allows her return to Paris to serve as an unofficial end of the affair. Horsfield wants to escape, “chuck everything,” and “[u]ndertaking a fresh responsibility was not the way to escape when you came to think of it” (167, 169).

More important than determining the correct interpretation of her utterance is the fact that it resists and exceeds a single interpretation – that it remains ambiguous – and in so doing lends a degree of validation to Horsfield’s claim that “one can never know what the woman is really feeling.” For all we know, Julia may mean what she says and be telling what is from her perspective the truth. What may be inexcusably “fearful rot” from the point of view of Horsfield may be thoroughly justified in the eyes of Julia. Her disagreement with him and the possibility that their notions of the truth are incompatible admits to the absence of a shared frame of reference for judging whose version is valid, whose system of signification counts. Its absence marks what I take to be the limit of their sympathy – a residual line of sexual division, of non-relation.

This division is brought into relief by Horsfield’s final thoughts in the above passage which bear repeating here:

You are thirsty, dried up with thirst, and yet you don’t know it until somebody holds up water to your mouth and says, ‘You’re thirsty, drink.’ It’s like that. You are thirsty, and you drink.

And then you wonder all sorts of things, discontentedly and disconnectedly.

‘But the worst of it is,’ he thought, ‘that one can never know what the woman is really feeling.’ (153)

In this moment, Horsfield attests to his division from the woman, but also his *self*-division. Unaware of his “thirst,” the subject only gains knowledge of his demands by way of imperatives that are issued by the other. His demands are retroactively determined as the effect of commands. Moreover, water – the actual object of necessity – does not awaken his thirst, the signifier does: “You’re thirsty, drink.” Insofar as the signifier exercises authority over the subject, dictating his necessities, the text suggests that his division from both himself and other and the epistemological limits this division – or castration – entails are consequences of his submission to the law of language.

At the same time, this passage has a number of affinities to the form and content of sections of text narrated from the point of view of Julia. In particular, his strangely detached reflections on thirst echo Julia’s claim that “it leaves you with a sort of hunger” when “you’ve just had a baby, and it dies for the simple reason that you haven’t enough money to keep it alive” (49). Nevertheless, it is an imperfect echo. Horsfield, like Julia, slips into the second person and assumes an eerily rational tone. Yet unlike his thirst, her hunger is neither incited by nor does it bear with it the promise of its satisfaction. If the difference between their respective relationships to lack can be rationalized on the basis of their different socioeconomic statuses, the use of different signifiers to figure their demands suggests that another difference is in play. “Thirst” and “hunger” signify different demands, different forms of desire – different subjects. While the subject as such thrives on address, masculine and feminine subjects do not quite speak the same language. And yet the implicit wager of the novel is that “you,” as its reader, have the means to relate to both. In providing a frame of reference that its characters lack while also demonstrating the structural

asymmetry between their perspectives, the novel leaves “you” with the difficult task of giving each of them a fair deal.

While Rhys, as many critics have noted, was a writer profoundly concerned with fairness, fairness is inevitably limited in *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* by the fact that subjects, particularly men and women, while bound by networks of relation, are divided from both themselves and one another. Their division means that their exchange may never be balanced, no rule of reciprocity between them ever guaranteed, except by way of fantasy. Put somewhat differently, their division means that the work of balancing accounts may never be finished. It is bound to be an unending business, one that the novel sets in motion by asking the question that Horsfield and other characters either do not think it necessary or would prefer not to take the time to ask: how is the woman really feeling? No doubt it is far easier and far more efficient for Horsfield to assure himself that one can never know and to resume their conventional postures as mendicant and master: as Horsfield thinks to himself, ‘She asked me up here...she asked me’ (153). The burden of the novel is to show that while it may be impossible for anyone – including her – fully to understand her hunger, the woman is never the only one to do the asking.

CHAPTER 5

Stevie Smith's Novel of Manners, or, How to "Work It Out for Yourself"

As a baby I was rather cynical. I wrote a poem about it which I will now give you. It will break up the page for you, and something fresh to the eye helps the tired brain and aids concentration. I dare say you find it difficult to concentrate? Never mind, the great thing is never to mind. Just keep on trying, and one day you may figure as a case-sheet in one of those books the smarties write, that have such high-up titles, they would look well on many drawing-room table, like the one I have in mind at this moment – 'The Economics of Fatigue and Unrest.' I said The Economics of Fatigue and Unrest. Is not that a sweet title to put in gold ink on a red cloth-board?

Do you, Reader, ever have this suffering feeling of economics and unrest? Do you?

Smith, *Novel on Yellow Paper*

I.

Classifying *Novel on Yellow Paper* is no easy feat. Indeed, it is not altogether surprising that criticism of the text – like criticism of women's writing in general and, of the writers in this study, especially that of Rhys – has tended to emphasize its autobiographical elements. Published in 1936, *Novel* is narrated in the first-person from the perspective of Pompey Casmilus, a secretary – like Smith – for a publisher of women's magazines. It is perhaps Pompey who provides the most accurate and succinct characterization of the text when she refers to it as "the talking voice that runs on" (39). Pompey directly addresses the "Reader" throughout. While the novel is typically characterized as stream-of-consciousness, this term doesn't quite do justice to the style of the narration which is far more chatty and conversational on the one hand and far less embodied and less clearly situated in time and space than the texts to which it is typically applied. Like the novels of other British women writers such

Virginia Woolf and Dorothy Richardson, *Novel* deviates from traditional romance plots, but it is ultimately much closer in diction and delivery to the work of such American contemporaries as Gertrude Stein, Anita Loos, and Dorothy Parker, whose rhythm and idiom Smith openly and later ruefully acknowledged as an influence.¹ Rather than a chronological series of plotted events, the narrative consists of a series of tirades, lamentations, and anecdotes, as well as poems, including a number of Smith's own which had not yet been published.² *Novel on Yellow Paper* is, in this respect, a novel of ideas. Topics of its commentary along the way include Greek tragedy, the Victorian novel, mass culture, Christianity, marriage, Anti-Semitism (of which Pompey is regretfully guilty), sex (of which she is blissfully guilty, calling copulation "first class fun" [139]), and finally death – including Pompey's own.

Indeed, if it were not for the fact that Pompey returns as the heroine of Smith's second novel, *Over the Frontier*, published in 1938, it would be tempting to read *Novel on Yellow Paper* as a 250-page suicide note. Pompey says "goodbye" to all of her friends within the first few lines of the text and concludes with what would seem to be a thinly veiled allegory about the "death of the Tigress Flo" after "falling into her pool at Whipsnade" – which I take to be Whipsnade Zoo in England. Although initially dragged out and revived by her caretakers, Flo eventually "fell, she whimpered, clawed in vain, and died" (252). Pompey seems all but certain to follow her lead (184). Disillusioned with marriage after having observed too many

¹ Drawing on Smith's journals, Laura Severin has argued that Smith was "as much, if not more, influenced by her female compatriots": "Smith may have borrowed her Americanisms from Dorothy Parker, but it is her antilinear disruption of traditional romantic narratives that links her to the subversive stylistics of Richardson and Woolf" (*Resistant Antics* 25). At the time of its publication, *Novel* was also compared to Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*; see Barbera and McBrien, 87-91, for a summary of its reception. Features of both the form and content of the text – particularly its use of direct address and its biting critique of ladies who "linger hopefully" in anticipation of being scooped up by Mr. Right and settling down (*Novel* 143) – suggest an additional comparison to a much later text, Joanna Russ's feminist science fiction novel, *The Female Man*, published in 1975.

² Smith famously wrote *Novel* at the behest of a publisher who rejected her poems and told her to "go away and write a novel." See Barbera and McBrien 74-75.

“unsuitable” ones, including that of her parents, Pompey decides against marrying her fiancé, Freddy (162). Freddy wants “marriage now or nothing” (207). Pompey chooses nothing, but is overcome by “a deep-seated morbidity” when he leaves her, proclaiming in the penultimate paragraph of the text, “To the heart of pain and the distraught mind, nature speaks only of death” (207, 240, 251). Yet she does not succumb to its siren song, for as much pain as the loss of her “peculiar friend and playmate” may bring her, it is marriage that she deems “utterly suicidal” (207).

Rather than presupposing that marriage is unequivocally “right,” as she suggests unmarried girls are wont to do under the insidious influence of women’s magazines, Pompey decides what she must or must not do based on what marriage would mean to her. In so doing she adheres to the same dictum she repeatedly gives to the reader, a dictum which also serves as the alternative title of the novel – that is, *Work It Out for Yourself*. By working the dilemma of whether or not to marry out for herself, Pompey models a code of ethics that is radically personal while also aiming, paradoxical though it may seem, to teach this code to her audience. The point is not for us to mimic the content of her decision or the particulars of its enactment. Rather, the example she sets is primarily formal. In order to follow her lead, we must chart our own paths; we must determine what is livable or unlivable, suitable or unsuitable, for us – but how?

Novel on Yellow Paper suggests that our ability to work out any particular dilemma for ourselves requires that we first make a more fundamental commitment. We must courageously join Pompey in taking “death as our immediate ally” (159). At stake in this alliance is our recognition of death as a force both immanent to life and peculiar to the subject, a power which the text suggests it would behoove us to engage rather than to disavow. Confronting its authority and, by extension, the limits of our own mastery constitutes the condition of personal responsibility – our assumption of

an ethical attitude akin to that adopted by Pompey – as well as a form of equality at odds with that which underlies the existing “social order” (146). The problem with the social order, for Pompey, is that its premise of equal *opportunity* only “makes for the survival of the status quo” (146). Despite the nominal collapse of the “horrid gulf between the proletariat and the next of rank,” the promise of upward mobility leaves a certain hierarchical structure intact insofar as “people go on healthily envying and emulating the next step up” (146). This idealism, I want to argue, corresponds to a kind of secular fantasy of redemption. Troping on a provocative claim made by Pompey at a slightly later moment and to which I will return below, we might say that it leaves the door to Christianity half open. As long as we continue to peer through it, “we shall never get a revolution in *Eng.*” (146).

The revolution staged by *Novel on Yellow Paper* consists in part of turning this idealism on its head to reveal its perverse underside. Imagining that paradise awaits us just another rung up the social ladder is, according to Pompey, but one means of putting to use our “splendid and really ingenious gift for inflicting suffering on ourselves” (236). Because this gift distinguishes the human and grounds our existence – because “suffering and strain are the gauge of life” – we are bound to exercise it. Hence, our penchant for putting this gift to creative uses is not the issue for Pompey, whose own knack for suffering is, as we will see, quite spectacular. Rather, Pompey aims her critique at the tendency of her contemporaries to *misuse* this gift to support a social order ruled by conventions that find little empirical justification in the present and which she thus considers to be outmoded. These norms serve a function for the individual and the social body, but the shape and purpose they give to our suffering belong to a bygone era. The text responds to this conjuncture by dispelling popular illusions about the good life and revamping the traditional novel of manners to promote a code of ethics altogether more suitable to the modern age and its resident

heroines, “the Pompeys of this world” (162) – that is, subjects for whom such illusions are insufferable.

II.

Victorian novels, Pompey claims, are indicative of the “peculiar flavour” of the era in which they were written (31). In “books of that period,” suffering is rewarded and “Providence tidies things up,” reminding us that back then “a human foot was bound to feel there was something behind it all” – a figure or force such as God or Providence to guarantee the eventual restoration of moral and social order (13).

Whether there was actually something there does not matter. What matters is that fictions in which the “right people” would end up on the “right side of calamity” were credible (13). Such it would seem is not the case in the present. In classifying herself as a “foot-off-the-ground person” writing a “foot-off-the-ground novel,” Pompey registers her historical distance from those “Victorian days” as well as her critical distance from other literary fare of the 1930s (38, 13). “What’s written nowadays,” she declares, is “bad bottom false” (31). Worse yet, people continue to believe it.

The gods who oversee contemporary life are false gods. Foremost among them are the fallacious ideals of femininity and marriage “doled out” to credulous consumers by women’s magazines:

It is awfully funny I think the way their allowance of fiction is doled out to these little sweeties. Because they are allowed fiction as well as instructive articles on erotics, oh yes, as well as hard hard lessons in sex appeal, they are allowed to fill their little permanently waved heads with lovely lovely dreams of the never was. That I fear is where they get their funny thoughts on matrimony. (151)

The “little sweeties” “believe everything” they are told, devouring every edifying morsel, every bit of advice about how to secure a mate – about how to be “Good Listeners,” how to be “Good Pals,” how to be “Feminine” with a capital “F” (151). Moreover, they do exactly as they are instructed: “They put a spot of scent behind the

ear, they encourage their young men to talk about football” (151). The fact that the “lovely dreams” of matrimonial bliss propagated by the fashion papers were never based in reality – not even during those Victorian days for which Pompey occasionally longs – is either unknown or inconsequential, and it may not matter which. Pompey suggests that what these rapacious readers want, what magazines “allow” them, is not truth (whatever that would be) but meaning and order. Magazines afford girls a belief system, consisting of phantasmatic elements and formal conventions – “funny thoughts” and “hard hard lessons” – which has an analogue in religion but, as the apotheosis of marriage makes clear, is by no means limited to religion proper.

To the deep dismay of Pompey, unmarried girls tend to exalt marriage as if it were the Supreme Good. As “the *leitmotiv* of all their lives,” marriage is akin to the impossible ideal upheld by the disappointed heroines of Anton Chekhov’s turn-of-the-century play *The Three Sisters*: “It is,” Pompey cleverly suggests, “their *Moscow*” (149). Single girls think “Oh if we could only go to *Moscow*. Oh if we could only get to *Moscow*. Oh if we could only have got to *Moscow*” – thus registering with each shift in verb tense their increased distance from the phantasmatic good life (149). As a metaphor for marriage and the name of a place, “*Moscow*” is doubly significant. “*Moscow*” has the status of what we might call a “master signifier,” which Renata Salecl, following Jacques Lacan, defines as an “ultimate point of reference that seems to guarantee the consistency of a given symbolic field” (4). It only *seems* to guarantee consistency because it operates as a “stand-in for the lack in the midst of the big Other” – that is, a substitute for the lack in the Symbolic (4). As the placement of “*Moscow*” in each of the above sentences suggests, the master signifier serves as the anchor of meaning, the point to which all utterances return. It is an empty signifier and yet, as an ideal that orients signification and identification, it serves a function and has effects. For Chekhov’s heroines, “*Moscow*” forever indexes a life that might have

been; it is the standard with respect to which their own lives cannot help but appear inadequate. Thus to identify marriage with “*Moscow*” is to suggest that it serves a symbolic function for unmarried girls: it is their master signifier. As the name of a place “*Moscow*” further underscores the role that this privileged signifier has as a placeholder for a fundamental lack. Both ideals are utopias in the fullest – or perhaps emptiest – sense of the term, for both occupy a place which is in fact no place. The “Russia of their matrimonial ambition” bears no correspondence to the more-Siberian-than-Moscovian beyond where married women actually take up residence here and elsewhere in Smith’s *oeuvre* – that is, the London suburbs (150). This disjunction between the dream and the reality raises an important question: what happens when unmarried girls become wives? The fact that Chekhov’s heroines never return to Moscow helps to explain the persistent sway it holds over them. But what becomes of women’s funny thoughts about matrimony once they actually get married?

Pompey suggests that married women would rather work to maintain the ideal of marriage, disappointed though they may be, than allow for its displacement. For unmarried and married girls alike pledge themselves in support of “an idea” – “an idea, that if only they were married it would be all right, and the married women think, Well now I am married, so it *is* all right: Sometimes too of course it is all right, but sometimes they have to work very hard saying it all the time: So now I am married, so now it is all right, so Miss So-and-So is not married, so that is not all right” (149). In focusing on the function this idea serves at the level of the individual subject – “I” – Pompey implies that the order ostensibly imposed by marriage, like that guaranteed by God or Providence in Victorian novels, is not only social but also personal. It is, in the eyes of unmarried women, the end reward for their suffering – “the sobs and tears and stretching and straining and contriving” – and the redemptive source of “all blessings and benefits” (149, 150).

The social ramifications of this idea and of the sacrificial logic that undergirds it become more pronounced once marriage fails to deliver on its promise and actually bring peace. In the wake of personal disappointment and dissatisfaction, marriage can be used to measure the moral superiority of one woman over another, to ensure that the right person has ended up on the right side of calamity. Yet the fact that unhappy married women are compelled to assure themselves constantly of their victory over Miss So-and-So – that is, the Pompeys of this world – admits to its untrustworthiness both as a privileged standard of judgment and as a signifier. Marriage, we might say, does not mean what it is supposed to mean despite the number of times these women attempt to persuade themselves that it does. Because no performative gesture is efficacious enough to hold it in place, to keep it from slipping, the labor of supporting it is never done: women must work very hard all the time to compensate for its deficiency and, according to Pompey, “will run mad” instead of “readjusting their pop-eyed dreams” and “coming into line with reality” (150). Their madness inevitably confesses what they will not: marriage is not the “*fons et origo*” of personal happiness, of meaningful existence, of moral rectitude – at least not for everybody and certainly not for Pompey. What affords her the critical distance to demystify the ideology of marriage as well as the courage to break with this matrimonial cult? No stranger to the work of “the psycho-analysts” – although somewhat suspicious of their professional status and the way they “charge a pound an hour” – Pompey suggests that the answer lies in her childhood (15).

III.

According to Pompey “the two subjects about which there is [the] most nonsense talked are sex, and how to bring up children” (145). While she offers numerous opinions on the first subject, it is with respect to the second that she sets forth what I take to be the “moral” of the novel. Following her scathing critique of the poor

instruction dispensed to girls by twopenny weeklies, Pompey offers her own two cents on childrearing. She addresses us directly and aggressively, describing the Reader as being “held by the wrist and forced to listen,” therefore suggesting that we would most likely prefer not to hear what she is going to tell us (154). Thus bound we are told: “it is a wise thing that every intelligent, sensitive child should early be accustomed to the thought of death by suicide” (155). Her claim that this sagacious insight is a logical consequence of her critique of women’s magazines is by no means transparent. The connection between them, I want to argue, hinges on the question of personal responsibility: becoming accustomed to the thought of death by suicide means the difference between following a path laid out for us by another and taking our deaths and thus our lives in our own hands. In expounding this tenet, Pompey not only addresses us as parents – exhorting us to “teach your little ones to look on death” – but also treats us as if we were “little ones” in need of some parenting.

Pompey’s sense of the importance of acclimating children to the thought of death by suicide stems from her own experience as a young girl. This thought was not imparted to her. Rather, she came to this conclusion on her own, at the age of nine, in response to a series of three emotional traumas and three subsequent discoveries. The first of these crises occurred when her parents sent her to a convalescent home. Once there, she cried for want of her distant mother to the point of thinking “If I go on crying long enough I shall die” (155). When she found herself “still alive” after crying for days upon days she became, in her words, “rather cynical” and “thought: I am still alive after all these tears, I am still alive” (155). Wrenching though the separation from her mother was, melancholy would not – as she seems to have suspected that it would – be the end of her.

She made her second discovery when a maid at the facility took a liking to her and began treating her with affection. By way of this experience she came “to

encounter the deceitfulness of outward similarity” (156). The maid was not her mother and yet coddled Pompey as if she were her mother. Feeling herself the arbitrarily chosen object of a sentiment “without depth or significance,” Pompey was “terrified” (156). At stake in her terror is not only a precocious intuition about the falsity of appearances, but also a revelation that our value in the eyes of others is mutable and inconstant. As objects for others, we are substitutable, things of their making. The immense insecurity brought on by this epiphany “sent [her] thoughts again towards death” (156). Rather than further upsetting Pompey as we might expect, these thoughts – and specifically the realization that “it is possible to die by falling off a high cliff, or out of a high window” – proved to be “very consoling and very comforting” (156). She drew comfort it would seem from her growing understanding of ways one could die and ways one could not die, of ways one could kill oneself and ways one could not kill oneself. She “understood...so far” that falling from a considerable height would likely do the trick, but crying and presumably being nuzzled by a cloying maid would not, much as a child might think that they would (156).

Her education in these matters was completed once she returned home from the convalescent home (after she was deemed too disconsolate and resistant to recovery). Once at home, Pompey’s fear, which she never quite shook despite the strength she gathered from her budding knowledge of mortality, “transferred itself” to her mother, who was terribly ill with heart disease (157). She became “afraid, not of her of course, but *for* her” (emphasis added 157). She felt not only fear on behalf of her mother but also contempt. If the two had to brave a crowded tram, Pompey “hated the tram for her, and all the other people” (157). While she had these feelings for her mother, she was also repeatedly struck with the fact that “there is nothing to do for people” (158). When her mother would have “the heart attack of suffocation,”

Pompey would give her some medicine but beyond that she “could not do anything for her” (158). She could identify with her mother emotionally and physically – on one occasion Pompey began choking when her mother could not breathe, thus replicating her symptom – but she could not replace her mother’s suffering with her own. If the superficial affection of the maid in the convalescent home alerted Pompey to our substitutability, then her feelings of “fury and helplessness and indignation” in the face of her mother’s suffering awakened her to the *limit* of substitutability – the point beyond which substitution becomes impossible (158). This limit, which is also the limit of exchange, is the ground of the “significant truth” that sustained Pompey since the tender age of nine: “Death is my servant” (159).

This truth, I want to argue, is underwritten by the same “idea of mortality as irreplaceability” that Derrida outlines by way of a reading of the Heideggerian logic of being-towards-death in *The Gift of Death*. Death, Derrida argues, is “the one thing in the world that no one else can *either give or take*” (44). However it may be inflicted, death remains radically inalienable, inappropriable, one’s own. Hence I cannot die “in place of” the other, thereby “freeing her from her own death” (43). I may sacrifice myself for the other (in honor of the other, before the other) but “I cannot give her my life in exchange for her death” (43). In other words, I cannot give her immortality in exchange for mortality: I cannot save her. “Only a mortal can give,” which is also to say that only a mortal can take for “that mortal can only give to what is mortal since he can give everything but immortality” (43). This notion of death as the exception to “*giving and taking*” in turn grounds a concept of the subject as self-identical: “The sameness of the self, what remains irreplaceable in dying, only becomes what it is, in the sense of an identity as a relation of the self to itself, by means of this idea of mortality as irreplaceability” (45). Self-identity in turn constitutes the foundation of traditional notions of “freedom and responsibility” – or, we might say, of a traditional

notion of responsibility *as* freedom. As Derrida elsewhere notes, the responsible subject, the subject posited by the fields of “morality, law, and politics,” is presumed to be the master of his fate, “a sole, unified subject, present and present to itself, identifiable, sovereign, without difference” (“Provocations” xix, xxxiv). *Gift of Death* then brings into relief the extent to which this notion of sovereignty “the intentional auto-determination of the conscious self” first of all presupposes the capacity of the self “to realize its unsubstitutability” (“Provocations” xix, *Gift of Death* 45). We might say (with an inevitable echo of Schmitt) that the first decision made the sovereign, the decision that initiates him as sovereign, is the decision to assume sovereignty over his own death. Sovereign is he who gives himself death, who decides, as Pompey does, “Death is my servant.”

In *Novel on Yellow Paper*, Pompey’s subjugation of death to her will similarly constitutes the ground of individual freedom and personal responsibility. Before realizing that she could not do anything for her mother, Pompey was plagued by “the fear that things may become more than we can bear” (159). This fear, she suggests, can breed an insidious “slave feeling” and may lead us to “anxiously placate our fellow-beings, who appear to us to be in more authoritative positions and to have more of power than we over the things that oppress us” (159). By way of this claim, Pompey offers an implicit explanation of the psychology of those girls whose libidinal and financial investments help to keep the marriage market afloat. Subservience to the fear of suffering is coextensive with the illusion that there exists an ideal addressee, an Other, with the power to relieve it – whether that addressee takes the form of a mother, an advice columnist, or a husband. Under pressure of this fear, we resign ourselves to waiting to be saved, which is, according to Pompey, what girls in particular are raised to do. She suggests that women’s magazines not only normalize feminine passivity but also elevate it to the status of a strategy: if one wishes to be seen home by a young

man, then according to their advice columnists one must “linger hopefully” (147). Pompey thus draws on her personal experience, particularly her time at the convalescent home, to suggest that lingering hopefully is tantamount to “waiting for death to come” (160). She ceased to wait for death to call on her the moment she “sat up and said: Death has got to come if I call him” (160-161). As a promise Pompey makes to herself, this speech act in effect instantiates an ethics rooted in choice which, in presupposing what Derrida calls “the intentional auto-determination of the conscious self,” is very much an ethics of mastery.

Pompey makes her ascription to such an ethics explicit when she claims that if we (who are being addressed as concerned parents) wish to “brace and fortify” a child prone as she once was to lean toward death, then “it is necessary to say: Things may easily become more than I choose to bear” (160). This statement is more exemplary than it is instructive. As a statement to be appropriated by the parent, it presupposes a child who learns by imitation and who will appropriate it in turn for himself. For in telling the child what *I* do, I in effect model being a subject who chooses and for whom choosing and speaking are linked. Referring back to the above statement, Pompey proclaims, “that ‘choose’ is a grand old burn-your-boots phrase that will put beef into the little one” (160). Phrases such as “linger hopefully” are also efficacious but have the effect of demoralizing rather than empowering the addressee. “Choose,” we might say, is a far more responsible word choice when addressing a child. The text suggests that in speaking to a child, one in effect chooses her fate; one thus has an obligation to speak responsibly. To say “I choose” is both to demonstrate that I am a subject who chooses her words carefully, who decides her own fate, and to empower you to do the same.

Teaching a child to become accustomed to the thought of death by suicide – to take death as their own and give themselves death – and instilling this ethics of choice

furthermore makes him, according to Pompey, “no longer a Christian” (160). Although she does not explain how, we can presume that this conclusion follows from the revelation that no Other can save us, that we are at our own mercy whether or not we realize it. What intrigues me, though, is how Pompey, in closing “[t]he door” on Christianity (160), also poses a challenge to the social order in general, an order according to which the good life is perpetually relegated to a transcendental beyond – the next step up. For women, as I suggested above, marriage is essentially *the* next step up, the thing that once possessed is supposed to make everything all right. For men, however, marriage constitutes one among many means of upward mobility: “given a slight increase in income and ordinary luck, and a wife that is quick at noticing, there you are, you’ll be one step up” (146). A sharp wife is just one of the collectibles that reflects and confirms masculine social status. That does not mean, however, that men are less invested in fallacious ideals than women are or that they reach a point where they cease “envying and emulating” their superiors (146). Rather, Pompey suggests that every step has a next step up. The next step up, we might say, their *Moscow* – their secular Shangri-La. If marriage in particular has a religious status for women that it does not have for men, we can assume that it is because “a slight increase in income” was not the way in which the former were most likely to be launched up the social ladder in the 1930s – a period in which, as Laura Severin has noted, the “British Slump created an outcry against women who were supposedly taking away men’s jobs” (“The Gilt” 203).

IV.

God, Moscow, marriage, the next step up – *Novel on Yellow Paper* suggests that while all of these myths are complicit with the status quo and help to maintain the dominant social order, they also serve an ethical function for the individual subject. They are, I

want to argue, means of exercising, and manifestations of, what Pompey takes to be our “gift for inflicting suffering on ourselves”:

Oh how beautifully and loamishly sad are those sad and tearing
sonnets, where everything is so unsuitable, and not on the ground at all.
And all is being the expense of spirit in a waste of shame. But human
beings must suffer, and must make suffering for themselves, and beat
themselves into spiritual frenzies, and oh death and desolation, and oh
night space and horror, and oh keep my dream from me. And how very
splendid it is that we can do all this to ourselves and have such a
splendid gift for inflicting suffering upon ourselves. For suffering and
strain are the gauge of life, and who wishes to live like a vegetable?
(236)

In stripping the first line of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 129 – “Th’expense of spirit in a waste of shame” – of its context, she in effect strips it of its sense. Without the predicate that grounds this phrase in the sonnet, revealing it to be a definition of “lust in action,” the phrase itself assumes a kind of superfluity. It is, quite literally, “not on the ground at all.” While Pompey distinguishes between feet-off-the-ground people and feet-on-the-ground people in other moments, her suggestion here that the sonnets are emblematic of a knack for suffering shared by human beings in general suggests that we are all, at base, feet-off-the-ground-people. What the sonnets reveal is that we are the primary *fons et origo*, not of all benefits and blessings (as girls foolishly imagine that marriage will be) but of our own suffering. Indeed, this passage testifies to the inexhaustible creativity of human beings, who *make* suffering for themselves by projecting threats (“death and desolation,” “night space and horror”) but also ideals, such as the dream I demand be kept from me (“oh keep my dream from me”).

Without making etiological claims about why human beings must suffer, Pompey suggests that our suffering obeys a certain economic rationale. The sonnets, those highly conventional testimonies to wasteful expenditure evince an underlying logic of necessity, for “human beings must suffer and make suffering for ourselves.” Suffering circulates within what we might think of as an intrasubjective economy: we

produce suffering and turn it on ourselves. Indeed, we have a “gift” for doing so – that is to say, a talent for doing so. Yet we might also ask if this whole economy is not driven by a kind of gift, by an excess that makes itself felt in the “expense” and “waste” of the sad sonnets and which renders suffering the “gauge of life” for the human.

In identifying suffering as the gauge of life, *Novel on Yellow Paper* would seem to reinforce the eventual suspicion of Freud that masochism is primary, while also universalizing what the father of psychoanalysis called “moral masochism.” In moral masochism, which originates in the death drive and entails “a regression from morality to the Oedipus complex,” masochism, according to Freud, becomes a “norm of behavior” (“Economic Problem” 170, 161). By way of this regression, moral masochism in effect undoes the work of the castration complex, which for Freud terminates the Oedipus complex through the installation of an impersonal superego and a sense of conscience (à la Kantian moral law). Because identification with the group is the basis of modern society for Freud, the masochistic turn away from the “real world” coincides with a renunciation of self-interest: “In order to provoke punishment...the masochist must do what is inexpedient, must act against his own interests, must ruin the prospects which open out to him in the real world and must, perhaps, destroy his real existence” (169-170). While this description of withdrawal from the collective may sound extreme, it also resonates profoundly with Freud’s description of femininity in other contexts.

Indeed, I would argue that the posture of the moral masochist is implicitly feminine (while “feminine” masochism is implicitly a masculine phenomenon). Girls, Freud argues, have a more difficult time transitioning out of the Oedipus complex because they have already suffered the “loss” that poses such a threat to boys: “Castration,” as he suggests, “has already had its effect” (“Anatomical Distinction”

182). What interests me is not the credibility of this claim so much as what Freud sees as the consequence of the resilience of the Oedipus complex in women: “Their super-ego is never so inexorable, so impersonal, so independent of its emotional origins as we require it to be in men” (182). The fact that morality remains in a way personal for women explains why, as “critics of every epoch” have complained, they “show less sense of justice than men,” “are less ready to submit to the great necessities of life,” and “are more often influenced in their judgments by feelings of affection or hostility” (182). Thus it seems to me that in dis-identifying with the interests and ideals of the collective, the moral masochist assumes what has traditionally been a feminine position of marginality with respect to the group. Put somewhat differently, we might say that the ethics of moral masochism are analogous to the ethics of femininity insofar as both involve a radical relativization or personalization of morality. What does it mean, then, for *Novel on Yellow Paper* to suggest that moral masochism, which makes suffering a norm for the individual, is a norm for the human being as such – indeed, that it measures human life?

In claiming that suffering is the gauge of life, Pompey in effect universalizes the structure of moral masochism. This gesture has numerous ramifications. Most immediately, it means that even the most collectively sanctioned ideals and norms – for example, marriage – serve a purpose within the *personal* ethics of the subject and within an intrasubjective economy. In other words, even the most abstract standards are relative. Marriage is at once a social standard for judging whether the life of a woman is “all right” or “not all right” *and* a means by which a woman can inflict suffering on herself – which is not to say that she does not enjoy it in her own way. But Pompey does not suggest that pleasure is the primary motivation, though it may play an implicit role. Rather, what drives us is an imperative to live, not the life of a vegetable – of inertia, fixity – but the life of the human. Pompey provides a clue as to

the stakes of this distinction in her mock performative “oh keep my dream from me,” which essentially translates into “oh keep my dream from me *so that I might suffer*.” The fact that suffering is the gauge of life then suggests that my dream *must* be kept from me so that I may live. In other words, to achieve the dream – to get to the Moscow of our dreams, to reap all blessings and benefits – would be death. We say “Oh if only we could get to Moscow” but we mean “oh keep my dream from me.”

This logic suggests to me that these ideals serve the function of what Lacan calls a limit – “that which cannot be crossed” (*VII* 151). The limit cannot be crossed because to cross it would mean coming up against what resides at the center of ethical experience for Lacan – that is, the Thing, *das Ding* (*VII* 21). Lacan, following Freud, articulates an ethics not with respect to an ideal or sovereign good, but in terms of the symbolic, of which *das Ding* constitutes the excluded center. In other words, it is the “beyond-of-the-signified,” the Thing missing from the symbolic, which is to say the real (54). It is not a good to be sought, but the unbearable good of which we demand to be deprived: “what man demands, what he cannot help but demand, is to be deprived of something real” (150). What the subject seeks in symbolic structures is the imposition of distance between himself and *das Ding*, “a space of relaxation” in which to maintain desire – desire being, we might say, the gauge of life for Lacan (99).

It is in his discussion of the symbolic structure known as courtly love that Lacan invokes the notion of a limit. The ideology of courtly love, as he points out, is “fundamentally narcissistic in character” (151). The love object, the Lady, is a phantasmatic projection: she mirrors a masculine ideal of femininity. Yet there is also another mirror function operative in courtly love. Recognizing this function requires that we see the Lady as not only a masculine fantasy, but also the effect of a sublimation, which according to Lacan “raises an object...to the dignity of the Thing”

(112). Her status as a figure for the Thing is made manifest in her introduction “through the door of privation” (149). This door is the limit that cannot be crossed, the other mirror – “And the only organization in which it participates is that of the inaccessibility of the object” (151). This threshold, I want to suggest, is marked in *Novel on Yellow Paper* by those figures human beings contrive to turn pain on themselves: “oh death and desolation, and oh night space and horror, and oh keep my dream for me” (236). As I noted above, the path of pain, like the path of the gift, is circular. These figures designate the imaginary point where aggression is reflected back onto the subject, where the gift rebounds and returns home. Like courtly love, they impose a limit.

Yet – also like courtly love – they leave in place the fantasy of surpassing it, of taking possession of the Thing. Based on Pompey’s disparaging portrait of the unmarried girl – who diligently buys her twopenny weeklies, and puts a spot of perfume behind the ear, and lingers hopefully to try and catch the eye of a certain someone – we can assume that she does not reflect, as Pompey does, on the necessity of human suffering. The unmarried girl simply wishes for everything to be all right. In shifting our perspective to the role played within an intrasubjective economy by the various conventions and rules to which she subscribes in the interest of fulfilling this wish, the text suggests that all of her apparent losses – “the sobs and tears and stretching and straining and contriving” – are not only compensated in moral superiority but also constitute their own reward. This shift in perspective furthermore entails a shift in agency. To suggest that such a girl inflicts suffering on herself is to imply that she is more active than her apparent passivity, her devotion to lingering hopefully at the behest of an advice columnist, would suggest. Indeed, Pompey blames those miserable married and unmarried women who would sooner “run mad”

than “com[e] into line with reality” for their misfortune: according to her, “it is their own fault” (150).

In clinging to their pop-eyed dreams, these women err, the text suggests, in two respects: first, they fail to realize that they have brought their misery on themselves. Unhappy married women in particular, because they do not see how they inflict suffering on themselves and because they will not surrender the impossible ideal, end up inflicting suffering on others – especially on their woebegone husbands (“how unhappy is the situation of the young man who becomes their husband” [150]) and the Pompeys of this world over whom they lord their married status. Second, such women fail to realize that the only common good to which they contribute is a material one. Thus Pompey – who works for a publisher – caustically and rather unmercifully proclaims: “the only good thing these female half-wits ever did was to buy our publications and swell our dividends” (151). Indeed, I would suggest that there is an element of truthfulness in her remark that “God loves a cheerful buyer of twopenny weeklies, and so do we” (151). The question is: which God? The cheerful buyer merits aspersion in Pompey’s eyes because she does not see that the sovereign ultimately served by her investment in the idea of happily-ever-after is that modern deity, Capital. The fact that Pompey is identified with the interests of commerce both in name (her last name is Casmilus, another name for Hermes, the Greek god of commerce among other things) and in deed (she makes her living in the magazine industry and, thus, off of the same women she disparages) no doubt opens her to charges of hypocrisy. Moreover, for a woman so troubled by the spurious moral superiority of others she seems rather quick to claim the high ground for herself. Yet neither of these contradictions concerns me so much as the fact that the question of “fault” – of personal responsibility – is not as easily resolved as Pompey suggests it is either here or in her triumphant tale of mastering death.

Its irresolution derives from the fact that the mastery of the subject and especially that of Pompey is less certain than she would occasionally have us believe. For Freud, the origin of moral masochism in the death drive rendered its sufferer susceptible to the residual risk of self-destruction: as I noted earlier, “the masochist must do what is inexpedient,” including, “perhaps, destroy his own existence” (“Economic Problem: 170). Arguably, the final third of *Novel on Yellow Paper* – which is often as “sad and tearing” as the off-the-ground sonnets she admires – is a testimony to this danger:

But sometimes suffering measures life and ends it. And then it is not so good at all. And between two people without knowing it a love may grow up, and a link may form, and no one knows or guesses. And so it has been. I did not know. But when it is over, it is over, then it is tearing inside, it is ‘tearing in the belly’ one would wish oneself dead and unborn. And one does little things and goes to see friends and does one’s work and fusses with this and that and feels in one’s heart the drift and dribble of penultimate things, and thinks: To-morrow I shall be dead.

And all the time it is nothing, really it is absolutely nothing, just an exasperation we have made for ourselves, an engine we have turned to slay ourselves. And we slay ourselves not for the person we love only, but for an end; or for a punishment for all that we have had to do in bringing it about. And there, chaps, lies the danger of accustoming oneself to the thought of death by suicide. (236)

The very thought that is intended to equip us to confront our gift for inflicting suffering on ourselves can serve to speed that suffering to its logical conclusion. Though these reflections would not appear to be those of a woman to whom death is a servant, this passage, I want to suggest, does not nullify Pompey’s assertion of subjugating death but instead reveals the irreducible status of mastery as a process. In *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, by way of a preamble to some discussion of the direction taken by different members of the psychoanalytic community, Lacan addresses his audience, saying “Here we are then in the company of *das Ding*, trying to get along with it” (106). This phrase it seems to me rather perfectly describes the

series of reflections in the above passage, Pompey's lesson in child-rearing, and ultimately the entire novel. Indeed, *Novel on Yellow Paper* – particularly when placed in the context of Smith's *oeuvre*, which is of course rife with tributes to death – suggests that the work of getting along with the Thing is never done.

Its interminability is registered in part by the mutability of the way in which Pompey figures her relation to death while recounting for the reader the epic series of heroic trials she endured at age eight. Death is her “servant,” but it is also, as I noted earlier, an “immediate ally” (159). Rather than being antithetical, these two figures – ally and servant – both attest to the existence of a bond between the subject and death while suggesting that the dynamic between them shifts. I would be tempted to call this bond a masochistic contract were it not for the fact that, unlike the latter, it resists mediation. The fact that death is Pompey's *immediate* ally reminds us that the thing with which we are dealing here is *das Ding* which is unsymbolizable, approachable only by indirection. We can come to know it only as an emptiness – such as the absence to which a vase gives form – or as “something else” (Lacan, *VII* 118).

What allows us to maintain a safe distance from the Thing is the pleasure principle, a homeostatic principle which Freud called “the watchman over our life” and according to which the subject produces “as many signifiers as are required” to maintain a low level of tension (“Economic Problem” 161, Lacan, *VII* 119). The signifier, to which we have a fundamental relation, is our best support against the Thing, but only up until a point, for “beyond a certain limit” – beyond the pleasure principle – “there is no ethical rule which acts as a mediator between our pleasure and its real rule” (*VII* 95). Its real rule is tantamount to the death drive, which Lacan defines at one point as the “law beyond all law,” a law that negates the intervention of any signifier and thus can “only be posited as a final structure, as a vanishing point of any reality that might be attained” (21). Reality, for Lacan, is always mediated; it is

an effect of speech, by way of which we are contracted to the other whom we address and by whom we are addressed. Indeed, it is because of its power to forge contracts, to establish bonds, that he figures speech as a “gift” in “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis.” Speech, he suggests there, serves to “commit its author by investing its addressee with a new reality” (“Function and Field” 246). It tempers the unknown. Thus Lacan argues that we find in the term “You” – an address that “may appear on our lips in a moment of utter helplessness, distress, or surprise” – a “temptation to tame the Other” (*VII* 56). But this “You” can never be equal to the Thing. We might therefore think of *das Ding* as the addressee with whom no contract holds but to whom we are nevertheless bound as the subjects of its law, a law that is destined to remain, beyond a certain limit, “thoroughly enigmatic” (95).

Before discussing Pompey’s personal ethics – that is, the particular way in which she works to accommodate this law and make death her immediate ally – as well as the opposition this law poses to her “link” with Freddy, it is worth underscoring how her acknowledgement of the immediacy of death troubles her claim to mastery and the notion of responsibility it grounds. The immediacy of their alliance suggests that death, for Pompey, is that which (to quote Willy Apollon) is “foretold by the drives rather than programmed by biology” (4). As a force immanent to life, it takes possession rather than submitting to it. Thus while death is peculiar to the subject – while her gift for inflicting suffering on herself is unique – it is never quite her own. Some Thing necessarily overwhelms her temptation to tame it. This raises a number of questions: If death is never entirely our own, is any choice entirely our own? If our death remains ungraspable, can we in good faith believe that we are the ones to choose when it has become unbearable? How are we to distinguish between the voluntary and the involuntary?

V.

Through its depiction of the logic behind Pompey's proclamation that marriage would be "utterly suicidal," *Novel on Yellow Paper* suggests that our subjugation to a law greater than any we have the power to impose renders it all the more important to choose our path thoughtfully. Her example implies that coming to terms with the necessity of suffering is the beginning rather than the end of responsibility, the ground of every attempt to work it out for yourself. Working it out for yourself means deciding what is sufferable and insufferable, what is good and what is not so good at all, for you. It means choosing what one must do. Pompey knows "I must marry, or I must not marry" (198). Moreover, she knows that if she chooses what is right relative to the *status quo* rather than what is right for her, she will inevitably pay the price and suffer the consequences; she resists marriage because she suspects that if "married to him in the morning, in the evening I shall be dead" (118). Why does marriage pose such a fatal threat?

Marriage would be deadly for Pompey because it contravenes what she conceives to be her "rhythm," the pattern that structures her life and in effect functions as her pleasure principle. The rhythm by which she abides is demonstrative of how a subject might create order and sculpt a lifestyle – in the strongest possible sense of that term – without taking recourse to a fantasy of fulfillment. Pompey uses her gift for self-inflicted suffering in an altogether different way than those individuals who measure their losses and gains by a false ideal of perfection or completion. Rather than holding up a mirror to visit injury on herself, she carves out a path for the expression and expenditure of that boundless gift known as the drives. Pompey, I want to argue, follows the path of the gift. She circulates *like* a gift, for her rhythm is the "rhythm of visiting":

I have travelled and come and gone a great deal, I am a *toute entière* visitor. That is what I am being all the time. I visit and visit and visit, my darling friends, my less darling friends, my acquaintances. I am very grateful to them all. In visiting I find a very great deal of comfort and satisfaction, and each least place where I visit, and that at the end of the time I may say: Good-bye and thank you, good-bye. And perhaps as I have said they will stand and smile, and say: Goodbye Pompey, come again soon. That is the very highest pleasure to me, that it is a visit that comes to an end, that may recur, that may again come to an end and be renewed. The rhythm of visiting is in my blood. (212)

For Pompey, the thrill of leaving and exchanging good-byes derives from the possibility that a visit may recur, which means that the pleasure afforded by visiting is inseparable both from the place of that visit within a cyclical series of visits and from the residual risk that a visit may not recur, that the cycle may not be completed. What gives her “the very highest pleasure” is the ceaseless opening and closing of the economic circle – indeed, “being” the thing that opens and closes that circle.

As a “*toute entière* visitor,” Pompey performs with her whole being a kind of game – a game that I will suggest is fraught with all the antagonistic impulses perceptible to Freud in the child’s game of *fort/da*. Like this game, which is a game of give-and-take, her practice of visiting realizes and writes large – and I would argue that her circulation is a style of writing – a structural parallel between gift and libidinal economies. In the game of *fort/da* recalled by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the child threw a wooden reel with a string tied to it out of view, uttering “o-o-o-o” (interpreted by Freud to translate into “*fort*,” or “gone,” signifying the absence of the object. The child then retrieved the object by pulling the string and “hailed its reappearance with a joyful ‘da,’” meaning “there”: “This then was the complete game – disappearance and return” (14). Analysis of the game yielded multiple and apparently contradictory interpretations.

Freud first interprets the reel as a symbol for the child’s mother and the game as the means by which the child compensated himself for “allowing his mother to go

away without protesting” (14). For renouncing the instinctual satisfaction that proximity to his mother would undoubtedly bring – a bravely endured loss signifying and a primary step toward civilization – the child enjoyed the reward of the “joyful return” of her substitute (15). Yet the fact that the child demonstrated satisfaction both upon relinquishing the object and reclaiming it and the fact that the first of these two acts was additionally “staged as a game in itself and far more frequently than the episode in its entirety” prevents Freud from stopping at this reading (15). The game, he suggests, might instead – or also – be interpreted as an attempt to master the loss of his mother by turning his originally passive experience into an active one regardless of the libidinal valence of the former. Or, the gesture of renunciation may have been a way for the child to “revenge himself on his mother for going away from him,” thereby satisfying a wish to inflict punishment unsatisfied in actual life (15). Expanding his view and considering the game of *fort/da* in light of other instances of children’s play does not help to clarify matters, but only adds to the possible meanings of the game by revealing that all play manifests a “wish to be grown-up and be able to do what grown-up people do” (16). While Freud resists privileging a single interpretation of the game based on this one example, he nevertheless identified it as an instance of convergence between “the compulsion to repeat” – the mark of the death drive – and “instinctual satisfaction which is immediately pleasurable” (24). Their “intimate partnership” suggests to me that Freud’s various interpretations, as he also implies, are not mutually exclusive. Rewarding himself, acquiring mastery, reopening wounds, and exacting vengeance – all may constitute sources of pleasure and pain, as well as motives and components of the same game, if not all at the same time.

I draw this comparison between the *fort/da* game of the little boy and Pompey’s habit of coming and going because the former provides a model for

conceptualizing how Pompey develops an ethics – a kind of game of exchange – to accommodate what feel to her like contradictory and competing desires and impulses:

Yes certainly I can get on with everybody, but I am never wanting to get on with them very long, and yet I love them. But I must go. I love them and I also love the memory and thought of them. And just as I must go, so after a time, after another time, I must come back to them.

My friendships, they are a very strong part of my life, they are as light as gossamer but also they are as strong as steel. And I cannot throw them off, nor altogether do without them. And I love them at the point when they say: It is nice to see you again. And I love them too at the point when they say: Good-bye, come again soon. (197-198)

Pompey can be, as the previous passage suggested, a visitor “all the time,” but she cannot indulge her love of being in the company of people on the one hand and her love of the memory and thought of them on the other at the same time. Visiting – playing the role of the constant guest by sustaining temporary engagements with others – allows her to have it both ways but never simultaneously, for being told “It is nice to see you again” means not being told “Good-bye, come again soon” – at least not right now.

While it may not seem paradoxical to us that one should love people but not want to spend every moment with them, the fact that they seem so to Pompey is an implicit testimony to the predominance of the ideology of marriage and the cultural presupposition that the marital contract – which is to say the permanent sexual contract – is *the* means for a woman to find satisfaction, to attain all blessings and benefits. At one point in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan draws on the theory of myth set forth by Claude Lévi-Strauss to offer a purely symbolic definition of myth. Myth, he claims, “doesn’t explain anything,” but is “articulated in order to support the antinomies of certain psychic relations” (143). Pompey’s praxis of visiting, I would argue, meets the failure of the social order to provide a myth capable of supporting the antinomies that constitute her as a subject. The practice of visiting affords her the

structure and space – the “comfort and satisfaction” – the social order does not. Her friendships thus perform a symbolic function while also, we might say, setting the symbolic in motion. As a kind of myth, friendship can only be articulated as a function of time. It is worth recalling that for Marcel Mauss, the transfer of gifts constituted the means by which social contracts were forged. As Simon Jarvis underscores: “Exchange...establishes a relationship between us” and establishes what the nature of that relationship is (“Gift in Theory” 205). Power dynamics and social ties are not fixed: “There is no prior framework of law which, as it were, sorts all that kind of thing out; instead, exchange *is* the arena where it gets sorted out” (205). Amid the absence of a preexisting framework capable of accounting for the Pompeys of this world, the bonds of friendship sustained by way of her comings and goings and spoken courtesies that attend them – “It is nice to see you again”; “Good-bye, come again soon” – constitute just such a living law.

It is because the rhythm of visiting, which she also calls the “rhythm of friendship” is in her blood that Pompey must not marry Freddy, for “this rhythm is antipathetic to marriage” (198). Nevertheless, their antipathy does not make the choice between “I must marry, or I must not marry” a simple one or diminish the pain she feels when Freddy leaves her (198). Because Pompey wants “only to be a visitor” and must not commit to marrying him, Freddy closes the door on her (234). It is the finality of this closure that she cannot bear: “whenever a door had been opened, if it was shut, I could not help but cry and scream and tear and cry and weep and scream. Must that door be closed because we cannot marry, that never wanted to marry?” (240). The permanence of this loss, the certainty that a visit will not recur, propels her beyond those limits which the ephemerality of visiting allows her to uphold. Pleasure, for Pompey, depends on her ability to keep time with the rhythm of visiting. By contrast, “for pain” – for the suffering that threatens not only to measure life but to end

it – “there is no measure of time” (251). Once Freddy closes the door on Pompey, death comes knocking.

And yet, as I noted above, she does not answer. What keeps the good-bye she issues on the first page – “Good-bye to all my friends, my beautiful and lovely friends” – from being her last? One response to this question is to be found in the rhythm of visiting. While Pompey says good-bye to all of her friends, she also strikes up a new acquaintance with the Reader. In this respect, she only closes the door on this part of her life temporarily. But while it may be temporary, her retreat does constitute a kind of symbolic suicide. Pompey is constituted and defined by her friendships to the point of being compelled to wonder “Is there any Pompey at all?” (196-97). Thus to turn away from her friends is to risk losing herself entirely. By redirecting her address to the Reader – “Read on, Reader, read on and work it out for yourself” – she opens a new door and forges a new link (9). Yet this link, I want to argue, is not quite comparable to the connections she has to her friends, whose lives she likes to “taste” and “sample” and “consider” (196). While the text actively implicates the reader in the process of interpretation and is in this respect “open,” any such identification of the “writer” – or, rather, “talking voice” – with its audience is foreclosed. As her listeners, we are the ones to do the tasting, sampling, and considering. The figuration of the text as a spoken utterance furthermore implies that “writing” may function as a kind of talking cure for Pompey, as if she were speaking her way back from the beyond of signification so that she might once take refuge within a web of relations as “gossamer-light” as it is “steel-strong” (198). In this respect, we sit in for the psycho-analyst.

But we are also her pupils. While the rationale behind Pompey’s decision not to marry is peculiar to her, the demonstration of her struggle with this decision – and I mean demonstration in the full perverse sense of that term – has a pedagogical

function. By staging this struggle and her subsequent agony over the loss of Freddy the text teaches the reader a lesson in what it means to work it out for yourself. That is not to say that either the content of her choice or the particulars of its enactment are to be mimicked by the reader. To claim that the right choice for her is the right choice for everybody would be just as fallacious as the “gilt-edged ideas” propagated by the fashion papers and the pundits of popular taste, those writers-turned-advertisers who turn El Greco into *the* topic of “dinner party conversations” or claim that a spot of perfume behind the ear is *the* way to land a husband (117). Thus, the point is not that we should get married or should not get married, or that we should suffer in the style or to the degree of Pompey. The point is that you should work it out for yourself but you, like Pompey, must figure out your personal rhythm and how to become attuned to it on your own.

VI.

In setting herself up as an example for others to follow, Pompey implies the possibility of a greater good from her experience. That the novel has good intentions is made clear early on when Pompey imagines a smug, skeptical reader saying of the novel, “It is not, and it cannot come to good,” to which she responds, “Yes it is and shall” (39). Yes the novel is good and it shall come to good – but how? If the experience of confronting death is singular – if my Thing is not your Thing – how can the ethics born of it be marshaled in the service of a common good? According to Pompey, human beings share a gift for inflicting suffering on ourselves, but mistake this suffering for a sacrifice that is certain to be redeemed once they have clawed their way to the next step up. At stake in the exposure of this gift are the displacement of those “gilt-edged ideas” by which individuals measure their progress and the possibility of a radical differentiation of the “social order” to make room for the Pompeys of this

world. And yet finding our place there requires that we first discover for ourselves the “significant truth” that we are bound to death.

Pompey not only insists on this truth, but also lays the conditions for each one of her readers to come to terms with it. By rendering us witnesses to her turmoil once Freddy has left her, Pompey puts us in a position like that which she occupied with respect to her ailing mother: we are helpless bystanders. Pompey has already prepared us for such a moment: “you must suffer to the utmost of your capacity for suffering with the person who is suffering. Go with them and beware of self pity. All sympathy has in it an element of self pity” (161). While it is “practical positive and desirable” to “wish to alleviate” the suffering of another, the tendency to “imagine yourself in the sufferer’s place” – to make the suffering of the other one’s own – is “dangerous,” for in doing so one excludes the other, one diminishes the singularity of her experience by reducing it to a reflection of the selfsame (162). A certain paradox thus emerges: confronting our fundamental helplessness does not mean giving up the wish to help but means giving up the illusion that we can help just because we want to help – the illusion that we will do well because we mean well. Only by confronting the limits (of intentionality, of appropriation, of relation, of identification) can we begin to learn to help the other as such – at least, that is what Pompey suggests by means of her effort to help us, to teach us to look, as she did, on death as an ally.

Precise though the directive to go with the other and beware of self pity may be, it also strikes me as remarkably ambiguous, opaque. After all, *how* does one suffer to the utmost of her suffering with the other without allowing self pity to thoroughly colonize the encounter? *How* does one keep the imperialism of the figure that Freud referred to as His Majesty the Ego in check? In other words, *how* do I resist making your suffering all about me? The answer offered by both Pompey and the novel is, of course, work it out for yourself. Walter Benjamin’s description of the commandment

“Thou shalt not kill” in his essay “Critique of Violence” inadvertently gives us, I think, a fair sense of what we are to do with the many prescripts doled out by the novel. Benjamin suggests that the commandment is not a “criterion of judgment” – in other words, it is not an absolute standard to be retroactively brought to bear on the actions of the self and others – but “a guideline for the actions of persons or communities who have to wrestle with it in solitude and in exceptional cases, to take on themselves, the responsibility of ignoring it” (250). Guidelines with which to wrestle in solitude: this seems to me to be the most accurate way of characterizing the rules issued by Pompey. Make death your ally, suffer with the other, beware of self pity – in leaving room for our interpretation of what these rules mean for us in practice, the novel in effect leaves room for the reader, for her singular experience of the “rich and spacious thought” of death (158). This gesture – which is a kind of gesture of hospitality – is what differentiates the good at stake in the novel from both the commercial good sustained by the alliance between the media and its public and the ethics of what Pompey calls “pure magnanimity” (108).

The problem with pure magnanimity, she suggests, is that it is not in fact pure: there is “not a word of honest truth in it, just wicked superiority” (108). The so-called free gift is not free, but – as economists, philosophers, and anthropologists have argued – entails a return in narcissistic gratification. By “letting you in for pure manners’ sake, and not to leave the poor dog out in the cold,” I enjoy the satisfaction of knowing that I am “*I who care*” (108). Insofar as the other is reduced to an occasion or a means of self-aggrandizement, letting her in for pure manners’ sake is tantamount to not letting her in at all. By ensuring the inferiority of the recipient, practitioners of pure magnanimity, givers of the free gift – invested though they may be in the idea of their goodness – in effect swell the “mass of cruelty in the world” (108). Arguably, Pompey is also guilty of a degree of cruelty: certainly, the

forcefulness with which she imparts her lesson to the reader gives us some sense of why she is named after a Roman military leader. What distinguishes the novel from the free gift is its honesty about the cruelty that inevitably shadows the gift, but also its insistence on both the equality and the irreducible difference of the donor and the recipient as subjects defined by singular relations to their own deaths. Part of the suggestion of the novel, then, is that coming to terms with the primacy of this *intrasubjective* relation – the relation of the subject to death – might help us to engage more responsibly in our *intersubjective* relations. Thus while *Novel on Yellow Paper* is framed as a withdrawal from the social, its address to the reader to some degree aims at a reconstitution of the social, as if we might return from our sojourn with Pompey at once attuned to our own internal rhythm and braced to re-enter communal life. And yet we must ask, what are the limitations of this reorientation? To what extent might the attitude promoted by Pompey also add to the mass of cruelty in the world in comparable if not more sinister ways than the idea of the free gift? What are the dangers of acclimating oneself to the notion that death is immanent to life?

Novel on Yellow Paper is a text well aware of its historical context. Pompey visits Nazi Germany and is extremely upset by the persecution of Jews and Communists under Hitler – which is not to say that it puts her Anti-Semitism completely to rest. By embracing helplessness as a condition of ethical engagement amid the rise of totalitarianism the novel opens onto a troubling dilemma: how are we to differentiate between a critique of social injustice and complicity with it? To what extent is the novel merely advocating ethical *disengagement* or political quietism? Pompey remembers leaving Germany and thinking, “Well, there is nothing to be done about it, about the Jews and the atavism and the decadence, no there’s nothing to be done about it” (111). Is Pompey helpless or would she prefer to believe that she is helpless, to believe that things are as they must be? In echoing the mantras recited by

those married girls who have to “work very hard” to convince themselves that they have not erred in their choices, this interior monologue reveals the danger of taking the impossibility of helping the other as a given (149). Indeed, it would seem that there is nothing to prevent the presupposition that we are limited in our capacity to give help from slipping into an excuse for apathy. Even worse, the text suggests that there may be nothing to prevent this presupposition from slipping into an excuse to help ourselves, to *take* more than our proper share. Whether or not she is in fact persuaded by her own claim that there is nothing to be done about the Jews, Pompey responds to her feeling of helplessness by redirecting her wish to help inward. She thinks, “help yourself to another helping of apple sauce, Pompey...Help yourself to a second helping of apple sauce” (111). Pompey – not to mention Smith – is too shrewd for us not to ascribe a certain degree of irony to this passage. We must, I think, hear a hint of wistfulness in the repetition of the order to gather ye rosebuds while ye may. Nevertheless, acknowledging the heightened self-consciousness of the novel and its heroine does not save us from having to wrestle with the likelihood that letting the other in – even for pure manners’ sake – may be better than leaving her in the cold to work it out for herself.

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