THE PATHOS OF MODERNISM:

HENRY JAMES, GERTRUDE STEIN, AND VIRGINIA WOOLF

(WITH A CODA ON J.M. COETZEE)

Maayan Paula Dauber

A Dissertation
Presented to the Faculty
Of Princeton University
In Candidacy for the Degree
Of Doctor of Philosophy

Recommended for Acceptance
By the Department of

English

Advisers: Peter Brooks, Maria DiBattista, Diana Fuss

March 2015
The Pathos of Modernism: Henry James, Virginia Woolf, and Gertrude Stein

(With a Coda on J.M. Coetzee)

Abstract

“On or about December 1910, human character changed,” writes Virginia Woolf in 1924. Deliberately absurd in the precision of its dating, the sentence neatly registers a tipping point in a development that had been gathering force for nearly a hundred years. By the turn of the century, the loss of religious faith, the influence of psychology in raising questions about moral agency, and a widespread sense of dislocation and anomie had come to plague the novelists of the period. What did this change mean for the novel, and what did it mean for readers and writers? What kinds of persons could the novel now represent, and what kind of relationship could readers and other characters be expected to form with them? The Pathos of Modernism explores these questions of changing subjectivity and the new emotional economy these changes produced.

Pathos, a term from ancient Greek rhetoric and dramaturgy, is an affect of distance, opacity, and ephemerality. It is an emotion that registers the inability of subjects to connect quite as intimately as they once did, asking instead that people be witnesses to each other’s losses and sorrows. This is a turn away from the traditional novel and theories of sentiment by thinkers like Adam Smith and David Hume that it inherited. For while sympathy, the primary emotional register of the realist novel, asks people to share in each other’s pain, pathos understands that such a request has become in the modernist period not only unanswerable but unethical.

This is the situation of Virginia Woolf’s Victorian Mr. Ramsay, whose request for sympathy feels more like a demand, a form of narcissism meant to subsume the needs, desires and even personalities of his peers. Henry James, Gertrude Stein (and J.M. Coetzee) represent a similar degradation of sympathy. Yet the eschewal of sympathy does not
mean the dismissal of all affective investment or all potential for ethical engagement. And charting pathos as a new affective mode more suited to a new subject, the modernists offer an emotional economy that demands its own form of ethical action.
Acknowledgments

So many have helped me throughout my time at Princeton. First and foremost, I want to thank my advisors, Maria DiBattista, Diana Fuss, and Peter Brooks, whose mentorship has both guided and inspired me. Their teaching and scholarship are my models. On a more personal note, I’m grateful to Maria for her generous friendship. I’m thankful to Starry Schor, whose support, intelligence, humor and friendship have enriched my life immeasurably, and Fintan O’Toole, for his kindness. My thanks to my Princeton friends in and out of the department, including Yaron Aronowicz, Matthew Birkhold, Mollie Eisenberg, Rae Gaubinger, Priyanka Jacob, Matthew Krumholtz, Anna Offit, Bea Sanford Russell, Kelly Swartz, and Amelia Worsley. I thank the faculty and staff in the English department, and Pat Guglielmi in particular, for all that they do. My deepest gratitude goes to my family: To my parents, to whom this dissertation is dedicated, for their deep investment in my work and for setting the example I aimed to follow; to my siblings, Jon and Sarah, Abi and Abe, and my many nieces and nephews, for their love; and to Aryeh and Teddy, who are everything to me.
# Table of Contents

Abstract iii

Acknowledgments v

INTRODUCTION
Pathos and Personhood 1

CHAPTER ONE
Henry James’s Fading Moral Subject 29

CHAPTER TWO
Virginia Woolf’s Pathetic Embodiments 68

CHAPTER THREE
Gertrude Stein’s Unlived Lives 108

CODA
Pathos and the Present:
J.M. Coetzee’s Modernist Inheritance 156

Works Cited 182
The Pathos of Modernism: Henry James, Virginia Woolf, and Gertrude Stein

(With a Coda on J.M. Coetzee)

Introduction: Pathos and Personhood

I. Modernism and the Problem of Character

How are we to respond to the characters of high modernism? What are their authors’ interests in them, and what do they imagine our interest should be? Described variously as opaque and impersonal, fragmented and decentered, critics have often noted the difference in makeup of modernist subjects, but rarely, if ever, have they paid attention to the difference in our affective investment in them from our investment in traditional eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novelistic characters. The Pathos of Modernism aims to respond to this critical gap by charting a new emotional economy—based on distance and even estrangement, rather than closeness and identification—which I argue replaces the model of sympathetic engagement that had dominated reading practices and cultural norms until the early twentieth century.

A recent article in The New Yorker by James Wood is symptomatic of the inattention paid to affective differences in modernist literature. In “Why? The fictions of life and death,” Wood chronicles the untimely death of a friend, his own early questioning of Christianity, and his discovery in literature of the freedom from life’s various constraints. Literature, for Wood, does not offer an escape from life but a kind of experiential rerouting:

Fiction doesn’t merely replicate the license you have, within your head, to think what you like. It adds the doubleness of all fictional life. To witness that freedom

---

1 A version of this Introduction was presented at the 24th International Virginia Woolf Conference in Chicago in
in *someone else* is to have a companion, to be taken into the confidence of otherness. We share and scrutinize at the same time; we are, and are not, Raskolnikov, and Mrs. Ramsay, and Miss Brodie, and the narrator of Hamsun’s “Hunger,” and Italo Calvino’s Mr. Palomar. (36)

Wood’s observation is apt, but it is a little too generalizing. It is true that we, as readers, may feel a certain “doubleness” when we locate in a character a behavior or trait with which we identify, when we see, in their struggles, struggles that we in part share.

But not all fictional characters are the same. Raskolnikov and Mrs. Ramsay may both be characters we follow, characters whose emotions and actions we attempt to track, but they are not characters who function novelistically in the same way. And if Wood is blind to the difference, Virginia Woolf is not. Quoting a short story by Elena Militsina in her 1925 essay, “The Russian Point of View,” Woolf writes that what Russian literature teaches is to “make yourselves akin to people. I would even like to add: make yourself indispensable to them. But let this sympathy be not with the mind—for it is easy with the mind—but with the heart” (174). Sympathy of the heart is crucial for Woolf’s understanding of the difference between herself and the Russians, between realist fiction of the nineteenth century and modernist fiction of the twentieth, and she goes on to say that “the simplicity, the absence of effort, the assumption that in a world bursting with misery the chief call upon us is to understand our fellow-sufferers” (174) is what Russian literature offers over the possibilities she now sees for herself. Woolf understands, in other words, that while one of the primary feats of Dostoevsky’s novel is the way in which even an average Joe finds himself in the throes of Raskolnikov’s morally tortured soul, one of the triumphs of Woolf’s Mrs. Ramsay is the way in which she resists finding altogether. Mrs. Ramsay is not someone whose life we both “share and scrutinize,” a character whom we
both “are and are not.” She is someone to whose mind’s wanderings we seem to have endless access, and yet someone with whom we can never really identify. She is a modernist character and the emblem of one of modernism’s greatest paradoxes: the more self reflective a character is, the deeper her inner life, the further away we seem to move from her.

Woolf writes compellingly about this modernist preoccupation with characters in flight in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” where she compares what she calls Georgian characters to Edwardian ones: “I believe that all novels…deal with character, and that it is to express character…that the form of the novel…has been evolved” (9-10). But what she means by character is something different than the traditional model. As she has it, Edwardian writers like Arnold Bennett, John Galsworthy, and H.G. Wells see their subjects as easily transcribed, people with histories, family trees, tax receipts, and rent payment slips. They are characters, as one critic once put it of Dickens’s characters, who have full biographies. But Woolf’s Mrs. Brown, like other of her characters (and contemporaneous modernist characters as well)—Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, Orlando, K of Kafka’s *The Trial*—far from having a biography, does not even have a first name. In her, Woolf discovers a character so elusive that capturing her seems almost impossible. She is a subject who whispers in Woolf’s ear “My name is Brown. Catch me if you can” (3). And while Woolf will attempt to catch this character on the run, her primary aim is to capture the run itself, to represent people in flight from the usual categories of character and novelistic form that seem now in the early twentieth century outmoded. So Woolf invents a story or two about this Mrs. Brown sitting across from her on the train: that she is a widow, that she has a son who has become wayward, that she is in financial straits. And yet, like all of Woolf’s characters, Mrs. Brown is not someone we ever really know, and that is just the point. She exists
in a “world seen without a self” (287), as Woolf famously puts it in *The Waves*, or, to be more accurate, a world without a self conceived as traditional selves are.

For if in nineteenth-century novels, the subjects we encounter are fully formed, whole, moral agents, in twentieth-century novels, we encounter subjects slightly *deformed*, dispersed and disjointed. They are “wandering I’s,” as Michael Levenson lyrically puts it, people without stable grounds, with whom identification and sympathy become nearly impossible. Modernist texts offer what I call pathos instead. “Pathos and Personhood,” as I’ve titled this introduction, thus introduces what I understand to be a fundamental connection between changing notions of subjectivity and changing forms of emotional engagement. As ideas of personhood are transformed, our affective responses to those persons are transformed as well, and charting those two, concomitant transformations is the primary task of this project. But how to affectively engage this new subject is not only a question for the reader of modernist novels. It is also a question for the characters in the novels themselves. Indeed, as James, Woolf and Stein all show, just how to go about relating to people is a problem that tasks all of their novelistic creations. And they explore both the challenges and the possibilities of this new condition through questions, variously, of how to maintain moral responsibility in a world populated by people too modern for such staid concerns (James); how to form relationships when people remain concealed and opaque (Woolf); and how to participate in a community when people lack the usual resources of language to communicate effectively (Stein).

Woolf illustrates this challenge of emotional engagement most succinctly in *To the Lighthouse*, a novel I will discuss in detail in *Chapter Two*. There, she not only blocks the reader’s efforts to know a character, but the other characters’ desires to know each other, as well. Lily Briscoe longs desperately to know Mrs. Ramsay, but is rebuffed by her closed mind, which
is sealed like a beehive. This is a poignant image. The critic Blakey Vermeule, echoing Melville, uses the same metaphor to talk about the problem of “knowledge of others’ minds” in literature more generally: “The mind of man, says the narrator of Melville’s *Benito Cereno*, is a subtle hive. Writers are always coming up with new ways of getting inside” (75). For Vermeule, all novelistic characters, indeed all people, have minds that are sealed like a hive, and it is the job of the writer to penetrate them. But Woolf responds differently than others writers, and rather than trying to get inside Mrs. Ramsay’s sealed mind and present us with someone we can know, follow, identify and sympathize with, Woolf works toward a relation in the condition of the impossibility of knowing itself.

This is more than a philosophical issue. Martha Nussbaum, another writer interested in the problem of other minds, has persuasively explained this Woolfian tactic to preserve the hive as a dramatization of an epistemological impossibility. No one can ever know another, and Woolf’s great achievement, in Nussbaum’s estimation, is that she understands this fundamental truth. Nussbaum (and Vermeule) may be right philosophically—minds are sealed and we try, sometimes for better, sometimes for worse, to get inside them. But what are the affective qualities of this epistemological impossibility? How does it feel to come close to someone only to realize that it will never be close enough? And if, indeed, we never can know another, how do we continue to relate to people anyway? What are the qualities of this new relation? And what can it offer? Finally, how can we account for the shift Woolf’s elision of other minds marks in the history of the novel? For if when reading *Jane Eyre* we are compelled by a certain intimacy through identification with Jane, what happens in Beckett’s *Watt*, for example, where no such identification exists? Why do we keep reading? And how can we describe the emotional tenor of

---

2 See Suzanne Keen who argues that “Jane Eyre is a magnet for reader empathy” (*Empathy and the Novel*, 70).
that reading? These are the guiding questions of my dissertation, and I aim in what follows both
to name and track the evolution of an emotion, what I call pathos, as it recrudesces in a
particularly modernist form.

II. The Origins of Pathos: From Ancient Greece to the Novel of Sensibility

Explicated as early as ancient Greece, where the term is used in discourses on rhetoric
and dramaturgy, Amelie Oksenberg Rorty explains that pathos is “an experience or event that
befalls a person, something he passively undergoes, usually by accident, in contrast to something
he actively does. Pathe came more specifically to refer to sufferings, misfortunes, or harmful
experiences such as attacks of illness or disease” (“Metaphysical Status” 523). In the Rhetoric,
Aristotle explains that pathos is one of three techniques, along with ethos and logos, used to
persuade a speaker’s audience into belief. Pathos in this context is meant to elicit in the audience
proper emotions and refers to something temporary and extrinsic. Contrasted with ethos, which
posits some idea about the nature of a character, pathos posits something that overcomes the
audience during a rhetorical performance and then vanishes, and in this way it is not inherent in
anything. In the Poetics, Aristotle uses pathos in a slightly different context, to describe a “scene
of suffering,” “a destructive or painful action, such as death on stage, bodily agony, wounds and
the like” (1452b, 9-13). Whether or not these two explanations are ever really reconciled—the
one referring to an audience reaction, the other to a tragic scene on stage—is widely debated, and
pathos has been subject to numerous translations—“passion,” “emotion,” “suffering,” “the scene
of suffering,” “the moving accident,” “suffering or calamity,” “crisis of feeling” (Rees 2)—
because of this confusion.

Additionally, critics have struggled with the spatial coordinates of this emotion. In whom
does pathos reside, and of what is it a quality? Is pathos a trait of the speaker—something the
speaker does to put the audience in the right frame of mind—or is it a trait of the reactive
audience? George Kennedy attempts an answer when he says that ethos is a quality “found in the
genealogy of the speaker, [pathos is] that found in the state of mind produced in the hearer, [and
logos is] that found in the speech itself insofar as it proves or seems to prove” (90). But
Oksenberg Rorty would go even further than that. For her, pathos is not a quality of anything at
all. It is, as she has it, a “relatively impermanent alternation in a thing, whose causal explanation
usually lies primarily outside its nature (526). And in this way, it is the response to something we
feel far away from, what Nietzsche almost redundantly termed the “pathos of distance.”

Jenny Edbauer Rice continues in this line of thinking, explicating more fully the
unlocatability of pathos:

A broken leg is a pathos insofar as it gives rise to a limping walk that would not
otherwise be natural to a body. Likewise, my dirty joke at the dinner table might
be said to be a pathos when it causes my modest companion to blush. The pathos
enacts a temporary change in this modest body that is in a normally non-blushing
state….This view of pathos—as an agent that enacts a change upon another
body—is complex insofar as it turns pathos into more of an active agent than a
unique substance. In the case of my dirty joke, the pathos is not located solely in
language or in my companion’s body. Rather, the pathos enacts a changed state in
conjunction with her body. It is this combined enactment of a blushing body and
dirty joke that is the pathos. Consequently, pathos does not exist “in” anything,
but it enacts a changed state when linked with (other) bodies. Pathos is the
(en)act(ment) of change. (The New Pathos)
Pathos has no location. Without a subject to anchor it, it is an emotion that does not belong to a particular person. And enacted as something only temporary, it cannot really belong to a particular event either. This seems to be confirmed grammatically. Unlike other affects, like hate, fear, even love, which are articulated as feelings possessed by the feeler—“I hate,” “I am afraid,” “I love”—pathos has no such verbal construction. For one, there is no verb form of the word, so we could never say “I pathos” or “I pathe.” But even if we added the word “feel,” as in “I feel pathos,” the result would not be quite right either. Instead, we say something like, “this scene elicits pathos” or “there is pathos here.” Pathos does not emerge from within a person, as a response to his various relationships, experiences, and general stance towards the world. It is not something that bubbles up from within a self, confirming or challenging his sense of being in the world, but something that is produced—through art or some desperate situation—externally and temporarily. It is, in other words, from its beginning, untethered and extra-subjective.

By the eighteenth century and the rise of the British novel, however, the distinctiveness of the term pathos is forgotten, and it is used synonymously with sympathy. More particularly, with the rise of the novel of sensibility, sympathy (or pathos) becomes the primary structuring device of novels, used as a form of emotional encouragement. For once thought, in its early stages in England, to be a tool of idleness and distraction, the novel regroups to become, at its most extreme, a tool meant for readers’ instruction in moral living. In the preface to The Adventures of Roderick Random (1748), for example, Tobias Smollett describes the reigning mechanics of this new, not yet named, form: “The reader gratifies his curiosity, in pursuing the adventures of a person in whose favour he is prepossessed; he espouses his cause, he sympathizes with him in distress, his indignation is heated against the authors of his calamity; the humane passions are inflamed” (Novel Definitions 89). Smollet is describing a form of literature whose
primary function is sympathy and identification. And novels of the period confirm as much. In
*Pamela* and *Robinson Crusoe*, whose epistolary or diary form is meant to create a kind of
immediate relation, the title characters are people to whom the reader has direct and intimate
access. Whether all readers, especially modern ones, do sympathize, is another question, but the
goal of the novels is clear enough. This is a trend that continues well into the nineteenth century
with novelists like Jane Austen, Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell. And it coincides with
theories of sentiment and sympathy propounded by eighteenth-century thinkers like the Earl of
Shaftesbury, David Hume and Adam Smith, some of which I will touch on later, who argued that
man’s moral worth is measured by his ability and willingness to identify and sympathize with
others.

To be sure, this subject of sympathy is not embraced uncritically in the period. A novel
like Fielding’s *Shamela*, for example, is surely a reproach to the sentimental excesses of
Richardson’s *Pamela*. And Mary Wollstonecraft consistently warns her readers against the lures
of sympathetic identification in novels.³ More recently, twentieth-century critics have both railed
against the distinct lack of sincerity in these overly sentimentalized works and questioned the
extent of their import. In the *Anatomy of Criticism*, for example, Northrop Frye writes that this
kind of emotional excess is “queer [and] ghoulish” (38).⁴ And Sophia Ratcliffe describes in
detail an exception to the “rule of sympathy” in George Eliot’s *The Lifted Veil*. But it is precisely
because these instances outside the structure of sympathy are merely exceptions to the “rule,”
because the novel in its greater form assumes this relationship between reader and character in
the first place that critics are anxious about its dangers and worry about its merits.⁵

---

³ See *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.
⁴ Northrop Frye, like his nineteenth-century predecessors, uses pathos and sympathy synonymously.
⁵ For an important counter argument to the idea that the realist novel is founded fundamentally on sympathy, see
Wendy Lee’s *Failures of Feeling* and Catherine Gallagher’s “The Rise of Fictionality.” In particular, Gallagher
III. Pathos in the Twentieth Century

With the introduction of the modernist novel in the early twentieth century, I propose that the particularity of the meaning of pathos, different from sympathy, becomes visible again, and I offer the term, sometimes used explicitly by the modernists, though often not, as an affective mode uniquely suited to the modernist condition. In part, I use pathos in its ordinary meaning, where it suggests suffering without shared pain, pity without moral judgment, caring without closeness. Indeed, I use it in the everyday way in which we tend to use it, to describe a desperate news item about someone we’ve never met or to chronicle the emotional weight of a film we’ve seen on screen. We tend to use it most frequently, in fact, about a work of art. The top hits for “pathos” on Google when I wrote this, for example, all turn up reviews of various art performances: a NYT review of an opera about Milli Vanilli; a review of the Coen brothers’ movie, Inside Llewyn Davis; and an article on ice skating at the Sochi Winter Olympics. In this colloquial usage, we almost never mean to describe a situation of a close relative or friend, and if we do, as with the term “pity,” we do so only to suggest a certain remove from them. Pathos would never be a term used to describe what a husband and wife feel for each other, or what family members feel for each other, for pathos is a reaction not to someone “we are and are not,” but someone who is neither, to whom the binary no longer applies—a feeling about a Mrs. Ramsay or Mrs. Brown, rather than a Raskolnikov or Jane Eyre.

Tracking this distance, novels of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century begin to dismiss the readerly sympathy and identification that was so crucial to the mechanics of the

---

argues that while the reigning notion of readerly engagement has to do with “psychic investment,” in fact readers are drawn to fictional characters not because we see in them the “doubleness” that Wood notes, but precisely because of our difference from them, because they bear the mark of fictionality: “What we seek in and through characters, therefore, are not surrogate selves but the contradictory sensations of not being a character” (361).
realist novel. Henry James, the first novelist I study, offers an early example of the waning hold of this once dominant relational mode in his 1899 *What Maisie Knew*. In short, the novel gives us a child, Maisie, who is described from the beginning as a “shuttlecock,” a mere pawn in her parents’ game of revenge, bouncing back and forth between various caregivers, and disrupting any possibility the reader has of keeping her in steady focus. With a mind left deliberately opaque, what Maisie knows, as the title tantalizingly suggests, is just the question that cannot be answered. For described in language endlessly labyrinthine, we have no access to her thoughts, desires and feelings, and the possibility of identification or sympathy is impossible. And yet, Maisie is a figure of our readerly concern who elicits not the sympathy of someone whom she can approach but the pathos of someone from whom she is kept at a purposeful distance.

The reasons for this change in the configuration of literary characters—what Woolf comically marked with her famous comment that “On or about December 1910 human character changed”—are many. David Trotter, for example, suggests that technological innovations, like the telephone, produce and reflect the age’s sense of “intimacy at a distance” (2); Joseph Allen Boone argues for the influence of psychoanalysis on the creation of the modern “libidinal subject,” with all of the fluidity that entails; and Ariela Freedman has shown that following World War I, the modernist figure is now the figure of the dead. I do not disagree with any of these approaches, though some of them tend to over periodize the trends in modernism, making too good on Woolf’s comic attempt to date the change. But I aim, rather, for something more internal to the novel, though I hope not anti historical, seeking a kind of dual directional approach that both underlines the effects of subjective rupture on the structure and thus reception of the novel, but also that tracks the changes in subjectivity that the modern novel itself initiates.

In this, Charles Taylor’s *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*, a book to
which I will be referring often, is particularly helpful in describing the kinds of subjective changes that undergird my investigation of modernist character and character reception. As Taylor lays it out, modern man gets his first full philosophical elaboration in Descartes, where the self, for the first time, exhibits “inwardness,” the realization that he is a unique entity. No longer constituted in advance by some externally imposed structure, some reality outside himself of which he is a barely distinguishable part, he is already, whatever his relation to that structure will enable him to become, a sentient, thinking, reasoning agent. He makes choices, creates connections to the world, and acts and reacts on and to the world from inside himself.

Descartes’s famous axiom, “I think therefore I am,” succinctly describes just this—a subject constituted by his own, internal capabilities. Of course, this picture of the subject is complicated throughout the development of the realist novel, and J. Hillis Miller rightly argues that Victorian novelistic characters come into self knowledge not through Descartes’s “I think, therefore I am,” but through something like “‘I know myself through my relations to others,’ or, ‘I am conscious of myself as conscious of others’” (5). Yet even Hillis Miller’s self can be summarized as what Taylor goes on to call “punctual,” 6 or what Michael Levenson calls “justified”—“composed of intelligible motives, susceptible to moral analysis” (106).

Modernist subjects, however, are neither punctual nor justified, but diffuse, fractured, “decentralized,” as Elizabeth Bowen put it, 7 to the end. Reasoning, feeling, and acting may still have import of sorts. After all, modernist subjects are still people. But these activities no longer seem to be organized by a subject who does the reasoning, feeling, and acting. So, while Tristram Shandy, for example, is a subject centered by a self outside his wandering thoughts,

---

6 Taylor, a philosopher rather than a literary scholar, tracking the shifts in philosophical movements, rather than the shifts in novelistic history, of course takes this to be the contemporary conception of the self too. Still, Taylor admits that this conception “had a beginning in time and space and may have an end” (111), and I will argue that the end has already happened, with the modernist novels of the early twentieth century.

7 See To the North, p 170.
Proust’s Marcel, who has a similarly meandering story to tell, seems as wandering as the wandering ruminations he narrates, without any subject behind his mind to anchor him. Put another way, if Tristram Shandy’s digressions are digressions of a self, Marcel, by contrast, represents the self as a digression. In one way or another, modernist characters appear lost. In James, they are caught in a web of complicated and constantly shifting relations they can only barely control; in Woolf, they are buried behind the wandering minds to which they are only nominally attached; and in Stein, they are hidden behind the vague categorical language which seems only to approximate them. Far from inwardness, though some would have it otherwise, modernism exhibits the rupture of the dichotomy between inwardness and outwardness in the first place. And trying to locate in novels of the period anyone whole enough to identify with, a task once natural and inherent to novel reading, is thus no longer possible.

Put differently, we might say, following Alex Woloch’s study of major and minor characters in realist fiction of the nineteenth century, that modernist novels threaten to turn major characters into minor ones, making their protagonists only barely the stars of their own narratives. Leopold Bloom is Ulysses, the greatest major character of all, and yet this modern, Dublin-born Ulysses is more nearly the nexus for a host of characters too large to enumerate. According to Michael Levenson, even in less populous novels like *Heart of Darkness*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *The Ambassadors*, attention is divided attention, split between two central characters that usually constitute a moral opposition. And one contemporaneous reviewer of Woolf says something similar when he writes that “*To the Lighthouse*...is a book about interrelationships among people, and though there are major and minor characters, the major ones are not...the alpha and omega of the story, but more truly the means for giving to the story its harmony and

---

8 See Fredric Jameson’s *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist*, for example, for a discussion of the various modernist “strategies of inwardness” (2).
unity, its focal points” (Kronenberger). Because, as modernists see it, the self is no longer quite whole, no longer the fixed cogito of realist fiction, a single character can no longer bear the weight to anchor a novel and to center a reader’s attention, and our emotional engagement is threatened.

As I’ve already indicated, however, this loss of whole, anchoring characters does not mean that modernist novels fail to make their readers feel. Indeed, the authors I discuss offer some of the most emotionally wrenching situations imaginable, eliciting in their readers the pathos of all that is lost in this move towards opacity, diffusion, and minorness. In this way, I argue that pathos manifests itself in modernist literature as an affective response to loss—loss of the moral subject in James; loss of sympathetic engagement itself in Woolf; and loss of traditional forms of language and community in Stein. Pathos, then, is not itself an emotion proper but an affective stance towards a situation at a distance, but a distance that, with the loss of the inside/outside binary, cannot even be measured.

Frederic Jameson offers a correlative description of emotion in Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, when he explains what he refers to as the cultural “waning of affect”: “This is not to say that the cultural products of the post-modern era are utterly devoid of feeling, but rather that such feelings…are now free-floating and impersonal” (16). For Jameson, affect in the post-modern world is disembodied, residing outside of the still sentient subjects who live in it. This describes well the state of the modernist world, and the pathos that comes to dominate its literary production, too. For pathos is an emotion external to subjectivity, an emotion outside of the modernist subjects who no longer look whole, who exist, as Woolf’s Orlando comes to epitomize, in a constant state of formation and deformation. To cite Rorty again, “Though thinking is a human activity (indeed it is the human activity), a person’s thoughts
and the reactions that follow from them are pathétique if they have been externally manipulated by a rhetorician or poet, rather than formed by the person’s own essential activity as a thinking agent” (“Aristotle and the Metaphysical” 524). Modernist subjects, no longer defined by their capabilities as thinking agents, tend to experience emotional connection only externally.

Henry James illustrates well the externalization of emotion in *The Golden Bowl*, in a conversation between Fanny and Maggie at the end of the novel. Fanny is incredulous about Maggie’s ability to withstand the blow of Charlotte and Amerigo’s affair, but Maggie assures her:

‘I can bear anything…For love,’ said the Princess.

Fanny hesitated. ‘Of your father?’

‘For love,’ Maggie repeated.

It kept her friend watching. ‘Of your husband?’

‘For love,’ Maggie said again. (384)

Love has no referent here, nothing to which it is joined. It is an emotion untethered to anything concrete. It does not bring people together, and we suspect, in turn, that hate would not really wrench them apart. It is an affect in the air, in a world of pathos, where emotion has no resting point.

What a different idea of sentiment this passage gives us than the one Adam Smith offers. For Smith, sentiments are what enable us to identify with each other, and he taxonomizes them into two distinct groups, “agreeable” and “disagreeable passions.” Love, naturally enough, gets classified in the first category, a category of emotions that works to bring people into harmonious society. But it would not be difficult to assimilate the second category into the first, which is

---

9 I’m indebted to Peter Brooks for alerting me to this passage.
what someone like Miriam Bailin does in a typically dialectical and Freudian reading of sentiment in nineteenth-century fiction. In “‘Dismal Pleasure’: Victorian Sentimentality and the Pathos of the Parvenu,” Bailin explains:

The assumption that the production and reception of pathos resides as much in disavowed as avowed sentiments need hardly be invidious or self-exculpatory. One has only to accede to what Freud called ‘the law of ambivalence of feeling’—that we often hate where we love, that we resent those to whom we are most indebted, and that we have a tendency to deny these feelings at considerable cost and representational ingenuity. (1021)

Bailin’s claim is that pathos or sympathy, since they are for her synonymous, “resides as much in disavowed as avowed sentiments,” disavowed sentiments being just those that Adam Smith calls “disagreeable.” Ultimately, her argument is that sentimentality provides a kind of emotional protection for the competition surrounding social mobility in the period. But what is important for me is that while she complicates Smith’s taxonomic picture of emotions, she also expands it, insisting, further than Smith, on the function of all emotions as a means of identification. Bailin is describing the normative view of nineteenth-century novels, and she will go on to read Dickens’s The Old Curiosity Shop in just this normative way.

The conception of affect we find in The Golden Bowl is thus all the more shocking. The norm is abandoned. Love, here, does not do what Bailin and Smith claim it does. It does not push people together, nor does it push people apart. Simply, it is not tied to people at all. Affect exists not towards anything outside of itself but to be felt in all of its bareness and all of its purity. To be clearer, because identification between subjects is no longer possible, emotion between people is also impossible. And instead we get emotion everywhere but also nowhere, as just a matter of
itself. As Fanny says to her husband Bob, “I felt today, as I tell you, that there’s so much in the air” (273), and she is right.

IV. Pathos as Witnessing

My study of pathos is related to but not quite homologous with recent criticism in affect theory, which tends to conceive of people on the model of Taylor’s punctual subject. In such criticism, the picture of a bifurcated self, constituted by his rationality, on the one hand, and his emotions, on the other hand—a model that has had traction for centuries, since Aristotle—is complicated. Teresa Brennan, for example, has shown how subjective boundaries are much more permeable than we once may have thought and discusses the various modes of affect transmission, including emotional contagion and “group think,” that take place in our daily lives; Sianne Ngai has argued how “ugly feelings,” like irritation and envy, track moments of “suspended agency,” effectively expanding the notion of what it means to be a politically engaged subject; and Heather Love has demonstrated how retrograde feelings like backwardness and inversion have shaped the marginalized community of queer subjects, widening the very idea of the subject’s identity. Still, at bottom, the notion of subjectivity assumed by these critics and others, especially critics who rely on neuro and cognitive science, like Brennan, Brian Massumi, and Suzanne Keen is one in which subjects operate as reasoning agents in a more or less reasonable world, only expanding reasonableness to the use of a combination of faculties, including emotion, to negotiate the often complex terms of their situations. It is for this reason, too, that most recent studies of affect have tended toward the politicization of emotion, seeking to put to use the sometimes visceral, sometimes more cognitive aspects of affective life. But pathos in the modernist era suggests to me a notion of subjectivity at a remove from this model,
subjectivity whose claims to agency are waning, registering the resistance to use altogether—political or otherwise. For pathos is an affect that circulates in a world where agency is precisely what’s under contest.

In some sense, pathos thus appears as an emotion of the surface, emotion that vanishes almost as quickly as it appears, and it is easy to see, accordingly, why early critics of modernism accused artists of the period of moral shallowness. It is in response to them that I want to add to my discussion of pathos a tempered ethical reading of what this affective stance can do: like ancient Greek dramas, modernist novels implore their audience to experience pathos as a form of ethical, responsible witnessing. Indeed, the experience of pathos in readers confirms that the sorrows and losses of characters have been seen, felt, witnessed. This may not meet, of course, the lofty ethical demands of the realist novel, demands that continue to be made by thinkers like Martha Nussbaum, Geoffrey Hartman, Suzanne Keen, and Pam Belluck, who recently wrote in the New York Times, citing a current psychological study, that “after reading literary fiction…people performed better on tests measuring empathy, social perception and emotional intelligence.” For them, novels not only ask readers to witness but to use their witnessing and sympathetic stance to actively better themselves and their worlds. And for them, novels are, for the most part, effective. But I argue that modernist literature can hardly claim such a noble enterprise, nor does it want to. Both skeptical of the truth in such a claim for art and more realistic about what, given the state of the world, they can possibly represent, they offer the alternative of ethical witnessing.

10 See Monica Prendergast’s “From Guest to Witness: Teaching Audience Studies in Postsecondary Theater Education,” where she writes that “Early theater audiences (and many more) were inscribed as witnesses to theater rituals and storytelling that everyone understood to be a part of sociocultural (even political and/or religious) practice, not simply an evening’s diverting entertainment to be consumed then soon forgotten” (95).
This means that the reader of modernist texts is first and foremost a witness, rather than a participant. Kept at a deliberate distance from the characters, forming a community with them, as Gertrude Stein will show, is not quite possible, and the reader becomes like an active audience member instead. At times, even characters themselves are positioned as witnesses to their companions. At the end of *Mrs. Dalloway*, for example, the novel proclaims, “It is Clarissa, he said. For there she was” (194). Peter Walsh has struggled to come close to Clarissa throughout the novel, and like the reader, he is kept away. But rather than offering distance as the final word, these concluding lines, in a voice that seems to join the perspective of Woolf, Peter, and the reader, assert Peter’s position at what can only, somewhat contradictorily, be described as an intimate remove from the woman for whom he longs. And the emotional force of this intimacy is felt through just this witnessing and just the pathos of not being able to commune further.

There are other, more widely used techniques employed by modernist texts in the movement away from sympathy towards pathos and thus away from participation towards witnessing, as well. Most notably, the modernist novel excises one of the centerpieces of Victorian emotional connection, the deathbed scene. While novels like Dickens’s *The Old Curiosity Shop* and Thackeray’s *The Newcomes* had turned the death of Little Nell and Colonel Newcome into the most heightened moments of sympathetic appeal, the modernist novel rids itself of any comparable scene. As Alan Friedman has argued, “No longer natural and culturally acceptable, fictional death became attenuated, denied, or horrific: initiatory or evaded rather than climactic. Subverting suspense, modern novels became circular and self-reflexive, returning repeatedly and ultimately to terminal events they rarely confront or transcend. Modernists elide the dying process” (18). Instead, we encounter characters who die in non-scenes. To the

---

11 See Michael Wheeler’s *Death and the Future Life in Victorian Literature and Theology* where he writes that “The deathbed scene...was a familiar literary convention not only in prose fiction but also in narrative poetry, biography” (28).
_Lighthouse_ offers the best and most famous example, disposing of its main character, Mrs. Ramsay, in one, parenthetical sentence: “[Mr. Ramsay, stumbling along a passage one dark morning, stretched his arms out, but Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, his arms, though stretched out, remained empty]” (128). Rather than a frail Mrs. Ramsay, dying slowly, we are met with the stoic terms of parentheses that bracket her death. Worse yet, she is not even the subject of the sentence. Her empty-armed, widowed husband Mr. Ramsay takes over, leaving her as the nothingness that fails to fill his outstretched arms. Certainly Mrs. Ramsay’s death is a shock, and reading and rereading this sentence to confirm what at first seems impossible is all but guaranteed. But it is a shock that refuses to send the reader into throes of emotional turmoil. Mrs. Ramsay’s death is not reported in a way to elicit the reader’s sympathy. For there is hardly a character there—squashed, as she is, between these parentheses—to sympathize with. Her death rather asks the reader to experience it as pathos, which is to say that it should be acknowledged, witnessed, felt in all of its sadness, and then moved on from. E.M. Forster makes a similar move in _A Passage to India_, where the death of Mrs. Moore is chronicled thus: “[Ronny Heaslop] has had a cable to the effect that his mother’s dead, poor old soul” (274).

These alternative representations of death entail the act of witnessing by a person who experiences the untethered emotion of pathos, an act that carries the burden of ethical response, an act that asks the witness to both observe and contain whatever losses and insufficiencies the scene represents. But unlike witnesses described by critics like Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, on the one hand, who take Holocaust victims and their experience of trauma as their paradigmatic cases, and Cathy Caruth (and Annette Wieviorka), on the other hand, who investigate psychoanalytic patients who appear in psychoanalysis as witnesses to their own
personal traumas, witnesses in this early period of modernism are not witnesses to trauma. For precisely what modernism elides is the dramatics of trauma, turning the Aristotelean scene of suffering into something more naturalized and unnoticed.

Take, for another example, the end of *The Wings of the Dove*, which I will analyze in detail in *Chapter One*. Merton Densher and Kate Croy cannot be together, and their separation is painful. But rather than the drama of suffering for a lost love or even the drama of renunciation, which James explores in earlier novels, the final proclamation of the novel is that “things are as they are.” What might in another situation be described as a trauma is here transformed into an uneventful event, whose pathos lies in its very uneventness, a fact the witness is meant to register. And something similar happens in another scene in *Mrs. Dalloway*, where the trauma of WWI experienced by Septimus Warren Smith is converted into a domestic interference that dares to interrupt Clarissa’s party. Witnessing does not, here, as it does for Felman and Caruth, signify an encounter with the traumatic, nor does it, as it does for them, entail what they call testimony. No statement need be iterated; no suffering need be articulated. For in early twentieth-century literature, witnessing is far more passive, existing simply in the recognition by one of another—one character of another or one reader of a character.

This form of emotional and ethical engagement may be disappointing. We might wish that art would give us more, plunging us into the depths of sympathetic feeling that once caused the copycat suicides following the publication of Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, for example. But the experience of pathos, an emotion that responds to the loss of just such a possibility, suggests that novels are not mere exercises in art for art’s sake either. Rather, it is the modernists’ best try at a true representation of the world, for better or worse, as they now see it.
VI. Chapter Overviews: James, Woolf, Stein, and Coetzee

The three main chapters of my dissertation center on Henry James, Virginia Woolf, and Gertrude Stein, all of whom suggest the centrality of pathos as a new form of reading and relating that registers the loss of traditional personhood. This sense of modernism as inaugurating a new, somewhat disjointed, even disfigured, relation to the world but with full knowledge of a stable relation that is left behind in its wake owes much to Michael Levenson’s understanding of the modernists as writers who “pursue[s] their formal disruptions of character even as they so often sustain a nostalgic longing for a whole self,” and of modernism, more generally, as “a set of works that engage in self conscious assault on a notion of character persistently associated with the nineteenth century” even as they “continue to cherish nineteenth century ideals of the autonomous ego, free and integral” (xiii). Accordingly, I track pathos as it captures that combined sense of newness and nostalgia, distance and intimacy, loss and gain. Yet pathos does not signal the same loss in all three writers. In James, we encounter the loss of the moral subject; in Woolf, the loss of sympathy as relationally binding; and in Stein, the loss of signifying language.

I begin with James, who stands at the cusp of modernism, with one foot in the Victorian period of his early, manneristic work and one in the modernist period of his late phase novels. The arc of James’s career suggests a conscious and steady move away from representing knowable, identifiable, sympathetic characters to representing the opaque, secretive, distanced characters of his late fiction. We get harbingers of this shift in *The Portrait of the Lady* (1881) when, in the penultimate scene, Isabel Archer pauses in the doorway, proclaiming to know now “where to turn,” but leaving the reader unsure of her choice between Gilbert Osmand and Caspar Goodwood. This is James denying knowledge of his character, denying sympathetic connection
between reader and protagonist. But James is still early in this endeavor, and the novel, in what is hard not to read as a hasty retreat, continues with another woman, Henrietta Stackpole, standing in the same doorway, ultimately revealing to Caspar Goodwood and thus to the reader that Isabel has made her sacrificial choice.

As James’s career advances, this project becomes bolder, and I thus focus on two of his final novels, *The Ambassadors* (1903) and *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), which situate us at the heart of his modernist style. These novels represent the fading authority of the moral subject. In *The Ambassadors*, Lambert Strether struggles to maintain his sense of moral security, ultimately finding that in his confrontation with modern France, he cannot. And in *The Wings of the Dove*, Merton Densher is similarly situated, struggling between his moral scruples and his love for the morally unencumbered Kate Croy.

In a sense, James’s project in these late novels is to find an appropriate protagonist for the modern world. And if he finds it at all, it is in a compromised form, in characters who seems lodged between morality and amorality, between Victorian notions of the self and modernist ones, as is the case with Strether and Densher. Or, in an even more dire turn, he gives us the morally naive Milly Theale as protagonist, whose only possibility is a premature death. For in James’s late phase, there is no longer the moral security of his early fiction, nor the more forceful moral abandon of later modernist works. And the pathos of these novels lies in the suspension between states, in the knowledge that whatever semblance of a modernist protagonist exists is only possible as a formation around the loss of the old moral subject of realism. It is from him that the new subject takes his bearings, and it is through him—lost and unable to live on, though he is—that the new subject comes into visibility.
From James, I move on to Virginia Woolf, in many ways the original inspiration for this project, who works her way through the history of the novel as I’ve laid it out, from the predominance of sympathetic relations to the dissolution of that system. Woolf progresses further in the construction of the modernist subject, not anymore imagining her as a reaction formation against what no longer is, but as an entity in and of herself, with particular qualities. Pathos, in Woolf, is thus given a body and becomes itself a character. Beginning with *To the Lighthouse* (1927), I show how the old subject of sympathy is not something for which Woolf is nostalgic, as was James, but a type that has turned positively sour. Mr. Ramsay is the representative of Victorian life. With his linear thinking, from A to Z, he hovers like a tyrant, demanding sympathy from his wife, his friends, and Lily Briscoe. But Lily, modern, untethered, and struggling to find her artistic voice, refuses his demands, and in her refusal offers a new way of relating, through pathos rather than sympathy, through distance rather than closeness.

From there, I move on to *Orlando* (1928), where Woolf offers a subject who is stretched out over 400 years of British history, navigating her way between man and woman, royal and peasant. Orlando, like so many modernist characters, only more so, is divided between various selves, and she longs for the “Captain self, the Key self, which amalgamates and controls” (310) all of those dispersions. Ultimately, it is a longing in vain, because as she represents all characters, she is accordingly no one character. She is not some amalgamation of disparate selves, but the self as disparate. And as she reflects on that disparate self, she becomes the embodiment of pathos, the modernist subject transformed into a witness of even her own transformations.

I conclude with *Between the Acts* (1941), which takes us to the eve of WWII. Here, Woolf expands her project, turning pathos which resided in a single character in *Orlando* into a
far more general embodiment. The lone modernist is integrated into a community of modernists in the form of the audience members of the annual pageant at Pointz Hall. As such, this novel also returns us to the origins of pathos on the stage, where the Greek chorus—outside and inside the action, seeing all and amplifying what it sees, but unable to alter anything—is the original locus of pathos. It is only that the Greek chorus figures a holistic community of people who are not only pre-modernist but pre-punctual, as well. So Woolf updates this chorus, turning it into the voice of a community that is broken and composed of people witness to that brokenness, to the “orts, scraps and fragments” that constitute their world and them, too.

From Woolf, I turn to Gertrude Stein. Where in Woolf we see a coming to terms with the modernist subject, a focus on the new affective relation that alone can connect subjects to each other, in Stein that subject is so established that there is no longer anything to come to terms with, and even pathos almost disappears. Her characters are thus unreadable as subjects at all. And surely this is one reason why critics have had such a difficult time accounting for Stein. Unlike James’s endlessly intricate selves whose opacity promises deep psyches, or Woolf’s limitlessly amorphous characters, whose constant wanderings lead to failed attempts at understanding, Stein’s characters are hardly persons, even in the more fluid modernist sense I have been exploring, at all. They lack even the reference to traditional structures of being to organize their minds and their actions, and indeed, they may be described more accurately as unpersonts—people who might refer to persons but don’t quite look like them.

Accordingly, the focus of this chapter is on Stein’s first published novel, *Three Lives*, where, early as it is in her career and still exhibiting some of the traces of a novel’s conventional plot and action, the pathos that emerges with the recognition of the loss of those conventions is still dimly visible. Even here, however, pathos is offered not exactly as a response to the absence
of these conventions, but as the normal condition of living without them. More particularly, Stein is interested in the absence and gaps of language serving its communicative function, leaving the characters who struggle to wield it with lives desperate and alone. Using generalities and even clichés to represent characters who seem to lack any self awareness, or worse, who seem to lack anything to be aware of, Stein figures three underling servants in a fictional town called Bridgepoint. As one over-asserts herself, one under-asserts herself, and one lands somewhere in between, Stein dramatizes the ways in which language misfires, dissolving community rather than creating it. In the end, each character dies alone. But rather than representing them as characters who, in dying, lie in wait for our sympathy, as those Victorian deaths certainly would, Stein offers characters to whom we’ve been denied access all along and thus whose desperate endings can trigger nothing so emotionally proximate as sympathy, only the vague registering of a loss even of the ability to register what is lost.

Moving on to The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas (1933), I argue for the difficulty of Stein’s position. Having given us perhaps the fullest representation of a modernist subject to whom it is so difficult to connect, she substitutes herself instead, filling the void of unpersonness and unconnectedness left by her characters in Three Lives with herself as “genius.” She is an un-person turned ur-person communing with herself. Stein is everywhere in this novel, stamping herself on every page. Only if the ur-person that is Stein is meant to solve the problem of unpersonness, it does not. Everywhere, she is also nowhere, and she renders herself as such a formidable presence, that she supersedes just the agency, activity and consciousness that was lacking in her novelistic creations in the first place. What’s more, taking up so much space herself, there is no space for any other on whom she may act or of whom she might be conscious.
Here, recent indictments of Stein for her uncertain World War II years are particularly instructive in their failure to relate her only tepid political engagement, engagement that is best described as passive, to her larger modernist sensibility. For it is not that Stein’s politics were simply bad, as so many critics understand it, but that in disconnecting her work from the values of the literary tradition whosewaninghold James and Woolf at once herald and lament, she simply jettisoned the resources of that realist tradition when confronted with a new and terrible situation that demanded them. Accordingly, I cap my study with a Coda on the South African novelist J. M. Coetzee who takes his war-torn homeland as the occasion for a return to the realism that, as he saw it, the facts of his country demanded. And yet, at the same time, aware of the overwhelming intractability of those facts, his novels are also inflected by just the kind of agentless writing I have described in Stein.

What I am calling Coetzee’s realism might seem to be at odds with a project on modernism. But precisely what I want to draw out of Coetzee is the way in which his realist characters bear all of the signs of modernist pathos as a form of living ethically as best they can. It is the ethics of witnessing the irremediable that I have shown in James and Woolf, and that becomes, in the impossible condition of South Africa under apartheid, a form of politics, as well. So, Coetzee offers us the world of realism with the emotion of modernism; the expectation of an ultimate reckoning of character, both by the audience and the character himself, along with its impossibility. This is clearest in David Lurie, the protagonist of Disgrace. For him, the emotional character—what has been called the “sympathetic imagination”—of the literature of the Romantic poets he so admires is a model with which he is constantly struggling, as both something to achieve and something that is no longer possible in the South African apartheid world to which he belongs. He experiences its limitations in dealing with his own academic
sexual scandal, and he longs to exploit its resources when his daughter is raped in the countryside. But ultimately it can no longer be, and while his coldness and reticence overtake any sympathy we, as readers, may have for him, they also act to encourage the alternative form of pathos that Coetzee has inherited from the modernists after whom he, in part, models himself.

Elizabeth Costello, another of Coetzee’s reticent protagonists, responds similarly—longing for the intellectual clarity of eighteenth century enlightenment thinking and with it the emotional economy of sympathy and identification. But sent off on a world-wide lecture tour, she is constantly confronting her own inability to be sympathetic and to feel sympathetically. For Costello too, like Lurie and like their creator, is cold, distant, reticent, and detached. But rather than abandoning any attempt to relate his characters to his readers or his characters to each other, Coetzee offers a relationship inside the parameters of reticence and distance, suggesting pathos in the mode of the modernist tradition he at once inherits and resists.
Chapter One: Henry James’s Fading Moral Subject

I. Introduction

I would like to put the same question to James as I did to the modernists more generally: How are we to respond to the characters in the late novels of Henry James? What is James’s interest in them, and what does he imagine our interest should be? Organized as an “ado” about individuals in difficult social situations “affronting [their] destiny” (8-9), as James put it of Isabel Archer in his Preface to the New York edition of The Portrait of a Lady, these novels seem to share their form with the novels of moral realism, by an author like George Eliot, that James so admired. Yet, at the same time, the characters in these novels also seem so frankly “immoral,” or at least they must adjust their actions to a world so bereft of a moral compass, that it is difficult to be invested in them in quite the way that we are invested in Dorothea Brooke or even in Isabel Archer herself. This difficulty has been something of crux in literary criticism. In the early days, James’s late period was often read as a derailment from the American ground on which his earliest works so firmly stood, a criticism that in effect consigned these late-period works to the decadence of modernist Europe. Van Wyck Brooks’s The Pilgrimage of Henry James (1925) and Vernon Parrington’s Main Currents in American Thought: An Interpretation of American Literature from the Beginnings to 1920 (1930) are two early assessments that argue just this. More recently, coming from the other end, critics like Martha Nussbaum and Robert B. Pippin have attempted to save James’s late phase novels from the amorality to which they seem resigned by insisting, instead, on the salvational quality of the careers of characters like Lambert Strether, Milly Theale, and even Prince Amerigo. Thus, they have reinserted James’s later works
back into the realm of Victorian literature in which he began. But neither view seems quite right, and I aim in this chapter to chart a path between moral abandon and moral righteousness that captures James’s position at the cusp of modernism and the cusp of the new emotional network of pathos.

Returning to New York City after a twenty-five-year absence, James finds it changed. And reflecting on the former glory of Trinity Church, he sounds nostalgic: “Where, for the eye, is the felicity of simplified Gothic, of noble pre-eminence, that once made of this highly-pleasing edifice the pride of the town and the feature of Broadway?” But mustering a kind of energy, however ironic, for a city that appears gone, James consoles himself: “The answer is, as obviously, that these charming elements are still there, just where they ever were, but that they have been mercilessly deprived of their visibility” (American Scene 78). James returns not to a city that is gone, but to a city that is not fully present, and his job is to reveal it. This return is a habit of James’s mind, and I will argue that in his late phase novels—particularly in The Ambassadors and The Wings of the Dove—James attempts a re-presentation, and a re-evaluation, of something more important to him and to those who follow him than a gothic church: of an old-world subject who is slowly being deprived of visibility too—the morally moored subject of nineteenth-century literature and classical philosophy. To varying degrees, in Lambert Strether and Merton Densher, James discovers a character from the past, from even the literature of his own past. Bound by the strict claims of morality in a world that no longer abides by such strictures, these characters are out of place. But by placing them—indeed, by giving them pride of place—James organizes the modern world around them. It is an organization with important ramifications for how the

---

13 See Peter Brooks’s Henry James Goes to Paris for an account of James’s repression of modernist influences.
modern world, in which these characters no longer quite so comfortably stand, is conceptualized and for the way in which the modernist novel, in its attempts to represent that world, is conceptualized as well.

To put it another way, Strether’s moral distress and Densher’s moral scruples have little purchase on those around them. And their naïve moral convictions in the face of a society that no longer heeds such concerns—a society, we might say, that has been lost to a certain “amorality”—marks their inefficacy in these two novels. But it is precisely that inefficacy, the way in which they cling, sometimes more, sometimes less, to a certain moral order and yet fail that comes to define a kind of nostalgic morality that characterizes these late novels as a whole and that will become important even for those novelists succeeding James who reject such nostalgia. For while the hostility of the modernists to the novelistic practices that preceded them is well known from their polemics—the ridicule of the “Edwardians” in Virginia Woolf’s “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” to which I’ve already referred, is just one example—James shows a more complicated relation to the Victorian novel, even a more appreciative relation, that underwrites the modernists’ different way of writing. This is to say that Strether and Densher do not exist as mere matter to be overturned nor as some laughable target of modern mockery. The past is passed, and James knows that it never can—nor does he want it to—be rehabilitated. But in novels pervaded by stealthy schemes that threaten to leave the morally indifferent characters who inhabit them with lives completely meaningless, the moral agency of these two characters offers them a self-consciousness without which even their indifference is incoherent. So although, ultimately, Strether and Densher are different kinds of subjects and their sense of responsibility cannot so easily be integrated into the unhinged lives of the other characters, even

---

14 Though my argument is not historical, I aim to place Densher in a previous generation and mark Kate and Aunt Maud as part of some, not always identifiable, contemporary society. For relevant passages, see WD, 43, 82.
after they are gone, after the novels suggest that neither will last in full, they remain as poignant remnants of what subjecthood once was and of what modern subjects might still need to remind themselves if they are to understand even their own modernity.

Michael Levenson makes a related claim about the instability of moral subjectivity when he compares Strether to Charles Marlow of *Heart of Darkness*:

> Obliged to make a choice between the values he has inherited and the values he discovers, he chooses the latter; but having renounced his old measures and standards, he is still unable to live among these new ones. He decides to return home where he will live as a stranger among his neighbors. (2)

Living as strangers among their neighbors describes perfectly the sense of dislodgment and suspension in which James places his characters, characters conceived by a novelist who, historically speaking, is at the very cusp of modernity, but not yet fully situated in it. James looks forward and back—back to the past of Victorian moral subjects and forward to the future where no such subjects really exist. Accordingly, James brings the past into the future, and it is a certain over-periodization of the history of the novel in James criticism, the insistence, in other words, that past and future remain distinct epochs, that has led to serious misreading. But I aim to position James in a more mediate way, as offering a continuous trajectory leading towards the modernist novelists who, I argue, inherit him. In this way, James represents subjects who are no longer defined by the strictures of morality, yet come to their fullest representation around one who is. And in this way, James anticipates the modernist subject whom his heirs develop more fully. It is, ultimately, the subject with whom we have the difficulty of saying, as Clarissa Dalloway puts it, “that they were this or that” (*Mrs. Dalloway* 8), a subject who signals a new generation of people hard to pin down because they don’t quite seem attached to themselves or
their actions. For James it is only through the visibility of the old moral subject, which he
revives, that the new modernist character can take his bearings. And as I move on to discuss
Woolf, we will see that for her too, though she goes further than James in representing such
characters and the emotional economy in which they circulate, the anchor of the moral subject
will remain important. For what James teaches someone like Woolf and what she will in other, if
more attenuated, ways, still express, is that the former subject of moral realism is not now
worthless, just untenable.

II. The Pre-Modern Subject and its Undoing

The problem of how to respond to James’s characters emerges as early as The American,
where James first expresses anxiety about what I would call the pre-modern subject. Towards the
close of the novel, when Madame de Cintré is cloistered in a nunnery and Christopher Newman
is on the brink of a scheme to take down the Bellegardes, Tom Tristram tells Newman the truth:

They have a great expression here, you know; they call it
‘sympathetic.’ Everything is sympathetic—or ought to be. Now Madame de
Bellegarde is about as sympathetic as that mustard-pot. They're a d-d cold-blooded lot, any way….My dear boy, don't think me a vulgar brute for hinting at
it, but all they wanted was your money. (427)

Newman has been taken for a ride. Madame de Cintré may in fact desire him out of true love, but
whether she does or not is beside the point. Like so many of the characters who follow her—
Isabel Archer, Milly Theale, Lambert Strether—Claire is under the thumb of an older,
domineering woman, here, her mother. And to Madame de Bellegarde and her equally exacting
son, Urbain, Newman is just a low-class, commercial man. Though “all they wanted was
Newman’s money,” even his money is not sufficient to allow him a place in their socially superior family, and their equally shallow concern for social standing ultimately trumps their desire for wealth. The Bellegardes are as morally bereft as they come in James’s fiction, and the contrast between them and Newman is clearly drawn. But the valence of that contrast is not the traditional one. So Tristram’s correlation of sympathy with morality might, at first blush, seem natural enough. His sense that “Everything is sympathetic—or ought to be” (emphasis mine) borrows the language of moral responsibility and installs the affect of sympathy in the genetic makeup of moral obligation. Indeed, from the morally optimistic work of Jane Austen to the fated tragedies of Thomas Hardy, sympathy is a perfectly routine signifier of the kind of moral subject who so often inhabits them. Of course, critics of all generations have been anxious about the allures of this sympathetic appeal, and with the rise of New Criticism, there was considerable backlash against “personal” readings that would privilege emotional reactions over formal ones, that would take too seriously, that is, the notion of characters as real-life people. But unlike these critics who are anxious about the pulls of sympathy, for James, by contrast, it is the fact that sympathy cannot be assumed at all that provokes his anxiety.

James is right to be anxious. Newman seems more secure in his own moral beliefs than we can quite be, and that James senses that this security may be overdone is reflected in The American’s overwrought style. A secret murder, a sequestered nun, a chase for money: these are gothic structures of the realist novel in extremis, shoring up the pull on the reader that a more naturally sympathetic response cannot quite produce anymore. James will, of course, go on to write a masterpiece of a gothic story with The Turn of the Screw, a sort of meditation or meta-gothic novel that investigates the form itself, but in The American it is as if gothicism is a device for simplifying what is too complex to articulate or a way to paste-over what James himself is
still unsure of. It is a kind of cover for the way in which we don’t, as readers, sufficiently identify with the characters—Newman, Madame de Cintré, even the Tristrams. So, in the end, we get a rousing, mystery-laden, over-the-top crowd-drawer to replace the lack of draw of the character as subject, the character with whom identification is supposed to be possible. This is the beginning of a life-long project for James—the positing of subjects, even heroes, who refuse identification. For while Newman is certainly the center of the novel, he is not really a subject of sympathy. He is the character we follow, but already we feel a certain distance from him.

This is what Tristram sees: the subject of sympathy is not to be embraced wholeheartedly. Certainly, without sympathy, Madame de Bellegarde is transformed from a human being into an inanimate object—a woman with the emotional capacity of a “mustard pot.” But sympathy is also, for Tristram, a mere “expression,” an old fashioned cliché for how relationships once nominally functioned. Thus in Newman, sympathy measures his generosity, kindness, and high moral standards, but also his naiveté, gullibility, and parochialism.

Ultimately, then, while Newman remains the moral hero to the end, it is only in defiance of an emerging and increasingly compelling counter-argument. For as Tristram sees it, sympathy is no longer the apex of moral activity, nor even the height of emotional generosity, as it once was, but an often duplicitous social mechanism that lulls Newman into complete vulnerability at the hands of the wily Bellegardes.

That sympathy emerges from this passage as both necessary and undesirable orients us to the crisis of subjectivity with which James is dealing. For as a subject, Tristram is, like James himself, on the cusp of a cultural shift, which means a subject who would live by the rules of a previous world and its expression in a previous form of writing—the world of Victorian propriety and righteousness and the novel of moral subjects and our identification with them—
but with the awareness of and skepticism about a world that is yet to be, the world of modernist
collapse and disillusion. James, through Tristram, is keen to these complexities, but he is unable,
in this early novel, to offer the alternative of pathos, and the hold of the traditional subject
remains. Christopher Newman sacrifices everything for a higher appeal to morality, and he is
rewarded not in happiness but in the novel’s intractable faith in his goodness. Newman’s
renunciation is a moral triumph, and the novel applauds him. Even the evil Bellegardes are left
without punishment, because their very indifference to Newman’s plot to expose the murder of
Monsieur de Bellegarde only confirms Newman’s goodness all the more. As Mrs. Tristram puts
it to Newman, “‘Their confidence, after counsel taken of each other, was not in their innocence,
nor in their talent for bluffing things off; it was in your remarkable good nature! You see they
were right’” (449, emphasis mine). And so the novel ends with Newman standing by the fire,
watching his evidence burn in the consumptive flames and left only with the knowledge of his
goodness, but a knowledge presented as good enough.

In many ways, it is a crude ending for an ultimately crude book. In James’s late novels,
his ambivalence about the effectiveness and worth of moral subjects becomes too much to quash
with the stylistic acrobatics of gothicism. Thus, in his late phase novels, James’s use of free
indirect discourse explodes. It is the perfect style for describing his new subject. The omniscient
narrator of so much nineteenth-century realist fiction is gone. The normative “we,” the measure
of sympathetic exchange, is absent. But the stream of consciousness that comes later in
modernism is not in play either. And we are left with consciousness uprooted from anything like
a stable personhood. As Sharon Cameron has explained it, “In the novels…[there is an] absence
of the first-person singular. Although, as I have noted, James predicates ostensible others,
ostensible discrete characters, he does so only in order to master this so-called otherness”
For Cameron, James posits individuals only as screens for his own individuality, and what James’s style of dislocation does is confirm the dislocation of his characters. I do not go quite so far as Cameron. Subjects in James are dislocated, but not quite absent. Thus, Lambert Strether and Merton Densher are subjects living without a community, rather than not subjects at all, subjects of sympathy without people to sympathize with, a problem that will resurface almost 100 years later in J.M Coetzee, whom I discuss in the Coda. But, in any case, it is not, in these late novels, that sympathy blocks more important desires like wealth and status, as the Bellegardes take it to do, nor is it that sympathy makes one too vulnerable, as Tristram sees it. It just no longer is.

**III. The Ambassadors and the Critique of Sympathy**

The evacuation of sympathy, a precursor to the advent of pathos, gets its first full treatment in *The Ambassadors*, published after but written before *The Wings of the Dove*. Indeed, the novel ends with just the articulation that *The American* was unable to fully realize: subjects of sympathy—who give and receive sympathy, whose moral worth is anchored by sympathy—do not function effectively in the modern world. As I will show, the novel offers a variety of critiques of sympathy—that it is dangerous, requiring a kind of self abdication, even annihilation, on the part of the sympathizer; that it is dysfunctional, no longer bringing people into happy harmony, but lulling them into uneven power relationships instead; and most damning of all, that it systematizes self-serving and narcissistic behaviors. The latter concern is not new. As I have noted already, this was a familiar criticism launched at sentimental novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Indeed, according to Janet Todd, the most potent criticism of sentimentalism was that it didn’t turn readers into good moral beings but into selfish people,
concerned only with their own feelings. But James goes a step further in challenging sympathy, and rather than merely criticizing its utility, he works towards excising it completely. Thus, while Strether remains a subject of this former affective economy, the subject with whom we do, as readers, along with the other characters in the novel, identify, it is the various failures of this form of personhood and personal engagement—failures that will be corrected beyond the possibility of calling them either successes or failures with Kate Croy in *The Wings of the Dove*—that James highlights.

At the end of the novel, Strether makes a double renunciation—of his life in Woollet, Massachusetts with Mrs. Newsome and of his life in Paris with Maria Gostrey. It is not from a lack of sociability that Strether decides to go it alone, but from an inadequacy he finds in the kinds of relationships on offer to him. Both Mrs. Newsome and Maria, strong and independent women, demand a kind of identification, knowledge and sympathy from Strether that he cannot sustain, and his position as ambassador—a perpetual proxy for others—is symptomatic of the problem. Sent, at the beginning, to save Mrs. Newsome’s son Chad from the excesses of European life, Strether explains to his friend Waymarsh that he has come to Paris “in a manner instead of [Mrs. Newsome]…and come to that extent…on her business. So you see there is plenty of connexion” (16). As international ambassador for the old fashioned moralist, Strether is meant to act in Mrs. Newsome’s stead. And to do such a job well, as he is at first determined to, he must fully inhabit Mrs. Newsome’s consciousness, taking her worries about her son as his own. The allures of European life are too much for Strether to resist, however, and ultimately he confronts his own naïveté in thinking that he could possibly share Mrs. Newsome’s outdated concerns. What’s more, as the number of ambassadorial relationships multiply—Little Bilham is taken to be Chad; Strether feels himself “falling” into the “hands” of Maria Gostrey; the Pococks
are sent as second ambassadors to retrieve Chad when Strether fails—Strether will come to understand his own connection to Mrs. Newsome as something far more compromising than “plenty,” and he will see that a relationship of identification and sympathy fail to offer him a sense of personhood sufficient to his new situation. To be sure, this is still an early stage in James’s move away from the realist structures of sympathy and moral personhood, and the alternative mode of pathos is not yet available to him, as it will increasingly become in *The Wings of the Dove*. Thus, in *The Ambassadors* we are presented not with no economy of sympathy but with an attenuated one.

As the novel opens, Strether arrives in Liverpool, a stop-over on his way to Paris, and he is glad to discover that Waymarsh is delayed. As the representative of moral life—the life of a Milrose more pure than Woollett, even—Waymarsh is unimpressed by Europe and determined to remain impervious to its charms. He finds it impossible to “enjoy” and becomes “willfully uncomfortable.” But his emotional life does not remain contained, and as Strether is his loyal and sympathetic friend, Waymarsh’s “discomfort was in a manner contagious” (12). That we are told from the beginning about the mechanism of emotional transmission, that feelings, in other words, transfer so easily from one person to another, establishes the emotional landscape of this novel, one structured by sympathy. Recent scholarship in affect theory has addressed just this phenomenon. Teresa Brennan, for example, has written about how the easy transmission of affect between people “undermines the dichotomy between the individual and the environment and the related opposition between the biological and the social” (7), destroying the fiction of selves as whole people. But, as I have discussed, such exercises in affect theory, while they complicate the traditional assumptions about punctual subjects, do not really challenge them, and

---

15 Strether “had long since made a mental distinction…between the voice of Milrose and the voice even of Woollett. It was the former, he felt, that was most in the real tradition” (14).
James, in fact, rather than finding emotional contagion a sign of subjective fluidity, sees in it the force of the old Adam Smith model—the way in which whole, Cartesian subjects so readily adapt themselves and their feelings to other whole subjects. Thus Strether, who fits, at least at first, the old model, excels at this mode of sympathetic relationality and feels immediately Waymarsh’s discomfort as his own. Only already there is a gap in this system, because this mode is not one that Strether enjoys, but one he refers to as diseased or “contagious.” Finding himself on his own, without company, Strether is thus not lonely, but relieved to be free from the burdens of sympathy. And the gap continues.

No sooner does Strether begin to revel in the freedom from such emotional responsiveness than Maria Gostrey, the self proclaimed “general guide to Europe” (9), or the “ficelle,” as James refers to her, accosts him and quickly inserts herself in his life. Interestingly, Strether is not bothered by the intrusion. He attaches himself to Maria, and it becomes clear that Strether is not looking for no company, after all, only for the right company, in which sympathy, rehabilitated, as in Brennan’s understanding, becomes a little more accommodating. So, with Maria he has the hope of renewal and feels “led...forth into the world” (8), “launched in something of which the sense would be quite disconnected from the sense of his past” (4). Only the hope does not last. Maria is not quite the woman Strether thought she was, and that she proclaims herself a “guide,” that she is so eager to “lead” Strether forth,” that she, “a woman of fashion” was “floating him into society” (21) expresses the problem. Maria too wishes to be a kind of ambassador, a guide to Strether, a guide to all Americans in Europe, a guide, indeed, to the reader, as James asserts in his preface, and Strether sees the replication of just the life he is trying to escape. In distress, Strether begins to picture himself with a “double consciousness.”

---

16 See the Preface to The Portrait of a Lady.
is a telling phrase, and Sophie Ratcliffe, whom I’ve already mentioned, offers a compelling explanation of it in a chapter on George Eliot’s *The Lifted Veil* (1859), in which the phrase also appears. As Ratcliffe explains it, a “double consciousness” is a description of a man too sympathetic, a man too connected to other people’s thoughts and feelings. She writes that Latimer “is, he claims, cursed with a ‘double consciousness’—an ability to participate in the minds of others” (6). Strether is similarly cursed. For seeing the interchange of sympathies not as a confirmation of the punctual self who sympathizes, he finds himself bifurcated, his double consciousness compelling him to be in two places at once. And Strether finds this an impossible position.

The insufficiencies of the kind of relationship Maria has to offer are expressed even more overtly than that:

He [Strether] joined his guide in an instant, and then felt she had profited still better than he by his having been, for the moments just mentioned, so at the disposal of her intelligence. She knew even intimate things about him that he hadn’t yet told her and perhaps never would. He wasn’t unaware that he had told her rather remarkably many for the time, but these were not the real ones. Some of the real ones however, precisely, were what she knew. (6)

Maria is gifted with knowledge of Strether’s mind, the ultimate expression of sympathy. Only rather than producing intimacy—though in some sense it does that too—it deprives Strether of the sense that he has a life altogether. What’s more, it is figured as a self-serving tactic, a skill Maria has used for her own “profit.” Strether is certainly charmed by Maria’s clairvoyance, and in a moment of hope and generosity, he tries to reimagine her knowledge as something less threatening: “That means simply that you’ve *recognized* me—which is rather beautiful and rare.
You see what I am” (9, emphasis mine). In Ruth Bernard Yeazell’s terms, James similarly instructs his readers and his characters into “recognition,” a process less “shocking,” less invasive, less disturbing than knowledge,17 a process, in other words, that might preserve independence while safeguarding intimacy. “Recognition” is also the term used by Martha Nussbaum, following Stanley Cavell, when she describes, as I will show, what she understands to be the new ethics proposed by Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay’s relationship in *To the Lighthouse*, that creates intimacy while still safeguarding independence. But Strether’s reframing of Maria’s oracular power in these terms, as a kind of insight or intuition, rather than invasion, is, he soon realizes, not quite accurate, and ultimately, though it will take him time, he articulates more definitively his exact objections: “No—not for myself. I seem to have a life only for other people” (142). Strether, the perpetual ambassador, the consummate sympathizer, the man possessed of a “double consciousness” is fed up with Victorian living and longs, desperately to escape.

He makes headway towards a new, more modern life when he meets Chad, Mrs. Newsome’s wayward son who has been lost to the immoral life of contemporary Europe. In Chad, as Levenson summarizes it, Strether sees the possibility of a life free from the strict moral standards of puritanical America. Yet even in Chad, as I will show, Strether does not really find a model different enough from the traditional one he knows, and the same demands of sympathy that dominate his other relationships also structure his interactions with Chad. Strether puts it well when he reflects, “If he’s going to make me feel young…If Strether was to feel young, that is, it would be because Chad was to feel old” (76). The zero sum game of this exchange, the way

17 Martha Nussbaum uses similar language, following Stanley Cavell, in “The Window: Knowledge of Other Minds in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*.” There, as I will show in Chapter Two, Nussbaum describes how Mrs. Ramsay seeks acknowledgment rather than knowledge, which signals for her the impossibility of knowing another completely.
in which in order for one to prosper, the other must suffer suggests what Leon Edel has called James’s “vampire theme.” As Edel puts it, “There were persons—James felt—who gave so much to others that they had nothing left to offer—the abdication of the self was total” (8). For Edel, this gets thematized as a form of religious sacrifice in The Wings of the Dove. But what’s important for me in Edel’s comments is his exposition of the way in which identification and sympathy entail self-abdication. For as with Gilbert Long and Mrs. Briss of The Sacred Fount (1901), Strether sees that his youth is dependent on Chad’s premature aging. Becoming modern like Chad thus does not offer an alternative to the traditional mode of sympathy and identification, but actually entails the most retrograde version of it of all—an identification so totalizing as to dissolve Chad’s sense of self and turn Strether’s into the product of Chad’s annihilation.

In a sense, this is only a more extreme, gothicized version of what Adam Smith prescribes in The Theory of Moral Sentiments:

In order to produce this concord [harmony of society], as nature teaches the spectators to assume the circumstances of the person principally concerned, so she teaches this last in some measure to assume those of the spectators. As they are continually placing themselves in his situation, and thence conceiving emotions similar to what he feels; so he is as constantly placing himself in theirs, and thence conceiving some degree of that coolness about his own fortune. (20)

Smith offers a model of relational responsibility whereby sufferer and spectator are equally asked to share the burden of sympathy. In this way, the spectator must feel the sufferer’s pain, and the sufferer, in turn, must try to align himself with the spectator’s relative comfort. The point, for Smith, is to bring people together in a kind of harmony. Each person accommodates
himself to the other and the result is a perfect economy of emotions. James offers a similar model, only the equilibrium described by Smith is lost in the realization that the edification of oneself requires the annihilation of another.

Strether’s desire to escape such a model is, therefore, a rejection of this Smithian model and also an astute criticism of the world from which he comes, which, trying to make the Smithian model work in conditions that compromise it, only makes it worse. It is a world of crude morality that has been foisted on him by Mrs. Newsome and the rest of the Woollett community. It is a kind of fetishized version of the world of the moral subject, signified in the too-vulgar-to-name object from which the Newsomes have made their money. In a sense, the world of Woollett has hunkered down in a kind of reaction to the materialist world that is disrupting it, and in this way, it is a community caught between two worlds. But unable to be quite genuine in practicing either, it fails on both counts. And only in contemporary Paris, Strether imagines, can he escape from Woollet to a different sort of life.

Desperate and trapped, Strether aims at something other—a life of his own. This is the meaning of his famous injunction to Little Bingham to “live all you can.” Awed by the indulgences of Gloriani’s garden, Strether becomes passionate: “It’s not too late for you….Live all you can; it’s a mistake not to. It doesn’t so much matter what you do in particular, so long as you have your life” (114). As Robert B. Pippin sees it, Strether calls for independence: “It is clear that the way one might, by existing, still not ‘live’ would be not to have ‘one’s own life….’” And Pippin thus wonders, “just what must one do in order to achieve ‘having one’s life,’ or presumably not having it be someone else’s?” (159). Pippin is right to ask the question and is helpful in rephrasing just the problem I’ve been charting all along—the problem of Strether as a perpetual ambassador, Strether as the consummate sympathizer. Only as Strether
continues in his speech, he ends up contradicting just the advice he dispenses: “The affair—I mean the affair of life—couldn’t, no doubt, have been different for me” (114). At once, then, Strether tells Little Bilham that it’s a “mistake” not to live life fully, suggesting to him that life is the product of choices, but so he also claims that life could not possibly have been different for himself, suggesting that his life was fated from the beginning. And here, Pippin’s response to the contradiction misses the mark: “Live by not simply living out a role…or even ‘live doubly’” (161), Pippin says, by which he means, live with the understanding that “consciousness is…dual” from the start, “at once formed by social and economic and historical conditions, and in some way, perhaps by being aware of them, understanding their meaning and implications, not merely determined by them, not simply what these conditions decree” (160). In other words, for Pippin, Strether’s contradiction signals the resolution of the problem of the doubleness of consciousness, which means that while life is, in some ways, “fated,” its fatedness can be redeemed, can be itself contradicted in its choosing.18

Pippin’s solution is an enterprising one, but too generous, perhaps, in ascribing such philosophically acute thinking to our protagonist. For one, outside the economy of sympathy there is no redemption. People are not models for each other any more. No one is like anyone else, so that if the breakdown of the possibility of identification offers a new freedom, it is hard to say in what this freedom might consist—freedom to do what or be whom? That is, Strether is not concerned with the inner workings of consciousness, as Pippin has it, but with the impossibility of formulating what such a consciousness as the one he intuits in Gloriani’s garden might have to do with him, how it might be “his” life, at all. Without the “plenty of connexion” that is too much with him, who—or in what world—would he even be? The advice he dispenses

18 Pippin’s explanation here might also imply a different reading of Strether’s use of the term “double consciousness” earlier in the novel. But earlier, Strether does not seem to be promoting that double consciousness, which Pippin here lauds, but recognizing the burden it carries.
to Little Bilham is individualized to Little Bilham, not replicable in Strether’s own life nor repeatable in any one else’s either.

As a result, this moment of optimism and passion in Gloriani’s garden does not last. Taking a day in the country, Strether spots Chad and Madame de Vionnet in a boat on the water. Arrested by their image, Strether learns the indisputable truth of their relationship, and it at first seems to him that they are doing what he has recommended to Little Bilham that he should do. Only, ultimately, it is not, as so many critics have argued, that Strether is shocked by the boldness of their activity—their adulterous love affair—but by the utter conventionality of their union. A boat on the water, a man with paddles, a woman with a pink parasol: James gives us the most stereotypical love scene imaginable, a scene out of any nineteenth century landscape painting. And what this scene does to Strether is simply place this couple back in conventional terms, the terms of mutual exchange that has been his problem all along. Thus, when Madame de Vionnet and Chad finally arrive on land, Strether responds not with anger or with disapproval but with utter disappointment: “Afterwards, after they had bumped at the landing-place and he had assisted their getting ashore, everything found itself sponged over” (291). Everything, all emotion, all judgment is “sponged over” for Strether whose dreams of some alternative world have been crushed.

Life eludes Strether in both places, and he is left in an untenable situation. Accordingly, when he renounces both Woollett and Paris, it is not as an assertion of some new self in a new world, because there is no world to which such a self might even belong. And, indeed, committing to a life alone and isolated in reaction to the dilemma—in a way admittedly more subtle than the Woollett way—rather than renouncing the sympathetic subject, he in effect, figures himself as his own sympathizer. And this is the worst situation of all.
As the novel ends, we find Strether in something of a holding pattern, clinging to that mode of morality that has lost its weight: “‘I must go….To be right….That, you see, is my only logic. Not, out of the whole affair, to have got anything for myself’” (327). Pippin confirms the complete transparency of this statement, claiming that renunciation is the apotheosis of moral activity, taking, in other words, Strether’s desire “not, out of the whole affair, to have gotten anything” at face value. “By leaving without ‘anything’ for himself, he ends up both with nothing…and yet with everything, the logic of being right and therewith having ‘his own life’” (167-8). But Pippin is wrong on two counts. For one, this is decidedly not *The American*, and having moral superiority does not save Strether or make his losses any more livable. Being right is precisely what does not matter any more. And second, here, as earlier, “affair” means life, so that what Strether renounces is not just his experience in Paris for the exchange of moral righteousness, but his experience over the past fifty-five years, including, of course, his moral life in Woollett.

Naomi E. Silver reaches the precise opposite conclusion to Pippin in “Between Communion and Renunciation: Revising *The American,*” where she charts a James who becomes critical, in his late phase, of the renunciatory act. “In his revisions of *The American,*” Silver writes, “I see James insisting upon something like an ethics of incorporation rather than an ethics of renunciation” (295), and she discards completely Pippin’s sense for the more radical claim that renunciation is only a matter of deep narcissism. Silver’s argument is compelling. It is only that her reading denies the force of loss that is felt in James’s novels again and again. It is the force not of critique, nor of triumph, but of being unable to claim for oneself hardly anything at all.
Strether’s final response, “‘Then there we are!’” (327) is not really, then, the renunciatory act described by either school. More nearly, it is a renunciation internal to James’s fiction, a revision of Mr. Longdon’s promise to Nanda Brookenham at the end of *The Awkward Age* (1899), written just two years earlier: “‘I see. Then there we are. Well,’ said Mr. Longdon—‘tomorrow’” (432). Longdon promises a “tomorrow.” But neither a father and neither, really, an appropriate husband, the life he can give Nanda is minimal and unsatisfying. Strether’s pronouncement is not Kate Croy’s either. Written a year after *The Ambassadors, The Wings of the Dove* ends on a note of mourning. Kate and Densher’s romance comes to an end, and Kate says, “We shall never again be as we were!” (711). Both Longdon and Kate gesture at a future doomed, Longdon using the future tense, Kate using the past tense to signal the future. But here, in Strether’s final comments, we get an assertion in the present tense alone, a claim for life as it is. And this is Strether hanging on by a mere thread, grasping that dream of “taking things as they come,” the dream that “one lives in fine as one can.” Only life as it is has lost the glory it had in Gloriani’s garden. It is not that beautiful combination of being oneself while recognizing the difference in another, but the negative space between it all.

These final words also suggest a comparison to a novel not yet written, a novel that will inherit the inchoate modernist sense in *The Ambassadors* and turn it into something more fully fledged. As the party in *Mrs. Dalloway* ends, Peter Walsh sees Clarissa from a distance, and Woolf writes, “‘It is Clarissa, he said. For there she was.’” For Clarissa Dalloway, the ultimate modernist subject, who feels throughout the novel that her life is too dispersed, too dissolved, “there she was” offers her a gathering of those multiple selves. Peter’s acknowledgement gives her a sense of coherence and a sense of agency that can preside over all of that inevitable dissolution. But as a subject twenty years her senior, Strether’s gathering does not have the force
of Clarissa’s. Having rejected modernity and the dissolution of the natural self that modernity requires, Strether’s gathering is only an illusion of agency. “There we are” does not bring together a multiplicity of dispersed selves, but only solidifies a falsely solid one. And here is the first mark of pathos as a registering of the loss of a moral self and the community in which he once so successfully lived. Strether becomes, at the end, a kind of witness to loss, and we as readers, begin to witness it as well. For as he is lodged between two worlds, we become aware—and so does he—that in renouncing everything, he has gained nothing, becoming, in effect, the first subject of modernist pathos.

IV. *The Wings of the Dove* and the Advent of Pathos

The nothing Strether has gained is an idea of a modernist subject that, unrealizable as it is in *The Ambassadors*, is given fuller life in *The Wings of the Dove*, a novel populated by the subtle dealers of Lancaster Gate. They are subtle, at least, in their maneuvers, the way they so stealthily pursue their comparatively vulgar goal—Milly Theale’s money. But even as this forceful plot engenders the plot of the entire novel, the so-called “plotters”—Kate Croy and Aunt Maud—aren’t, properly speaking, “plotters” at all. They are in possession of a scheme, but don’t themselves seem to be schemers. Their malevolence does not resemble that of traditional literary menaces. Neither Kate nor Aunt Maud is a vicious actor. More nearly, they seem to *enact*, which is to say, even while their plans are executed, they maintain only a disjointed connection to them. As one contemporary reviewer sourly put it, responding to precisely the mode I am describing, “as for action…there is none worth mentioning” (*Independent* 2711).

---

19 A version of the portion on *The Wings of the Dove* was presented at the M/MLA in Milwaukee in November 2013.
To be sure, we’re not yet in the throes of a modernist crisis, so Lord Mark can rightly describe Lancaster Gate as a place where everyone “was trying to ‘get’ they didn’t know what or where,” an aspersion that, though it casts the characters as villains rather than protagonists, still gives them an agency not really found in the more amorphous, less directed characters of modernist novels. But that they both “try to get,” rather than “want” to get and that what they want is never clearly spelled out, is significant, indicating that their actions are not the expression of any deep-seated desire. The will is never truly activated among this group of operators, and their goal—Milly’s money—is not the actualization of some inner longing, but simply what is. It is what fortuitously comes to them after the chance reunion between Aunt Maud and Susan Shepherd and so what they fix themselves to because they can, rather than what they pursue because they must.

This loss of will is a prescient perception, and it gains more prominence in the modernist novels that succeed James’s. Beckett, to give just one example, feels the loss of the will to such an extent as to render even “crisis” over its loss impossible. “The truth is,” Molloy blandly says in the eponymous novel, “I haven’t much will left” (1). Not enough left to even care that he has lost it, apparently. James does not quite reach Beckett’s desperation. He has not given up, and his characters are still capable of action. But what James introduces to someone like Beckett is the perception that actions are becoming attenuated, now only nominally connected to the people who perform them.

It is for this reason that Kate Croy is not entirely hateable, because she does not so much own her plot as take up residence in it. And the life of subtle maneuvering to which she so naturally adapts herself is just that, adapted. It is not some in-born, demonic impulse, because those impulses have by now lost their meaning. It is merely an attitude to which she
accommodates herself. Accordingly, at the beginning of the novel, Kate offers to sacrifice
everything for her undeserving father. “I’ll go with you,” Kate says. “Anywhere. I’ll stay with
you. Even here” (36). “Even here” means her father’s disheveled Chelsea home over her Aunt’s
palatial Lancaster Gate, a life with a neglectful, ungiving parent instead of uppercrust society.
Kate would seem to be the ultimate sympathizer in this scene, devoting her life even to someone
who has wronged her. But the passage goes on: “She cared, however, not a straw for his
embarrassment—feeling how little, on her own part, she was moved by charity” (37). And
shortly after she outright declares, “Oh dear, no; not at all. That’s no part of the question. If I
haven’t understood you by this time, I never shall, and it doesn’t matter. It has seemed to me that
you may be lived with, but not that you may be understood” (38-9). We might still call this
giving without understanding a kind of sympathy, but what a different version we get here than
what we saw in The Ambassadors. There, Strether goes in Mrs. Newsome’s stead, Maria acts as
Strether’s guide, Maria even becomes the reader’s guide. But Kate does not understand her father
and feigns no identification with him. James does not ask for the reader to identify with her,
either, and if, at times, we find her situation moving, we never really find her so. She is, perhaps,
a character of interest, but interest itself, which had traditionally meant either self-interest or
investment in others, becomes merely a kind of place-holder for the things to which it had
formerly been directed. As James puts it in The Art of Fiction, “The only obligation to which in
advance we may hold a novel, without incurring the accusation of being arbitrary, is that it be
interesting” (9), a kind of technical use of the word, even an evasion. For “interest” in this novel
has no relation to identification or even kindness. It is a mere formality, not an expression of
feeling. Even the convention of giving, its institutionalization as “charity,” has lost its hold for
Kate. What is left, then, is a donation here and there, an act of giving completely lacking in moral import and emotional ties.

Kate does the right thing—James’s major characters almost always do—but without the right heart or mind. It is as though she has no heart, and though she certainly has a mind, it is one not so much hers as a mirror of the way things are, a highlighting in her with especial clarity. As the novel, miming Kate’s voice, rather brutally explains it, she “existed, in that view, wholly for that small house in Chelsea; the moral of which moreover, of course, was that the more one gave oneself the less of one was left. There were always people to snatch at one, and it would never occur to them that they were eating one up. They did that without tasting” (60). James’s “vampire theme” returns, only in more debased form. The metaphor of eating without tasting reveals a new, more disturbing problem with the way in which sympathy is now exchanged. Quite simply, there is no economy in it at all. It does not fortify any sense of personhood, does not attenuate one person in favor of another, but acts as a gnawing, corrosive demand that steadily works to make selves “snatched” up and without any sense of self whatsoever.

The metaphor reappears in somewhat diluted form later in the novel when Densher fantasizes about his life with Kate. “‘You keep the key to the cupboard, and I foresee that when we’re married you’ll dole me out my sugar lumps.’ She had replied that she rejoiced in his assumption that sugar would be his diet, and the domestic arrangement so prefigured might have seemed already to prevail” (336). Here, Densher’s naïve assumption is that married life, the union of two people bound in reciprocal love, will produce unconflicted giving. The sugar lumps may be doled out rather than free flowing, but Densher has no doubt that marriage is sustained by an exchange of sweetness. Of course, he is wrong, and Kate’s amused response is more sinister than it may at first seem. For her version of love, which ultimately prevails, is not a love
that conquers all, but one that is itself conquered. It is a love that becomes synonymous with money and social status, and Densher’s wrong assumption thus sets him apart from the people with whom he associates, making him ineffective in achieving the romantic life he imagines for himself.

To put it more broadly, Kate’s uncertainty about the worth of true love, her sense that sympathetic giving will not produce a happy life, is not just her cynicism compared to Densher’s romanticism. Kate is attuned to something far more real and sad than temperamental differences. The moral center that we saw in Strether, that made him a subject of our readerly hopes and disappointments, has dissolved. And with it has gone sympathy, as well. Kate Croy, Marian Condrip, Aunt Maud, Lord Mark are not the traditional subjects of classic literature, which is to say, they’re not people against whom we are asked to measure ourselves. We do not enter their consciousnesses and feel their pain. We do not, by the same token, rejoice in their successes. And yet, they are not either—which is precisely what is so difficult about them and about James’s late fiction, more generally—the cruel manipulators or anti-heroes with whom we are also familiar. Their goal is ultimately as vulgar and brutal as the Bellegarde’s scheme in *The American*, but the means they take to achieve their goal, the way their goal is not so much pursued, but happened upon is what sets them apart.

They stand, then, not in opposition to some ideal of moral action, say as agents of bad, but to the side of it, as non-agents altogether. They are not immoral, but amoral. They are beyond good and evil, as it were, and it leaves them ill defined and vague. Indeed, they are often described as too subtle for definition and explanation. And yet, it is this very elusiveness, the “abysses” (*Melodramatic Imagination* 183), as Peter Brooks, echoing Milly, puts it, or the “semantic void” (183), as he alternately calls it, that makes them so compelling and also so
terrifying. As the narrator says of Milly, “she became conscious of being here on the edge of a  
great darkness. She should never know how Kate truly felt about anything such a one as Milly  
Theale should give her to feel. Kate would never—and not from ill-will, nor from duplicity, but  
from a sort of failure of common terms—reduce it to such a one’s comprehension or put it within  
herself’s convenience” (212). Milly, to be sure, in some ways like Densher, is naïve and perhaps too  
generous in her estimation of Kate’s elusiveness. But she is also right. Kate’s darkness is not a  
case of “duplicity,” something that would indicate (im)moral agency, but a kind of hollowness  
that results from her living in a new world, one that does not share the old-world terms.  

The “void,” then, the thing that is missing, is what James now recognizes as such. And  
inattention to this void as a registered loss is what leaves some recent criticism lacking. David  
Kurnick, for example, following Leo Bersani, argues for a “vision of collectivity” (214) in late  
James and in The Wings of the Dove, in particular. Keen to the way in which characters sound  
alike, he claims that James’s style “becomes a kind of secondary protagonist in the novel” (220),  
a protagonist not of a single consciousness or of “division and differentiation” (216), but one of  
“communalism” (219). Michael Wood offers a different reading, one that places ignor  
ance as  
precisely that which the characters in the novel are after. He writes, “This all adds up, it seems to  
me, to a story not of epistemological uncertainty or moral relativity but of willed and systematic  
blindness” (31). This trend in readings, uncovering the way in which characters discard strict  
moral concerns and live otherwise—and Sharon Cameron’s Thinking in Henry James might be  
added to this list—gets at something significant in James. But the abysses, as Brooks discusses,  
are real, not willfully and thus happily ignored, as Wood has it, nor replaced by an ethics of  
collectivity, as Kurnick has it. They are, in my terms, the absence of interaction, the sign of  

54
pathos as the impossibility of direct knowledge of characters and the loss of sympathy and identification.

V. Only a Picture

It’s a loss that’s represented most clearly by Milly Theale, who represents the kind of subject James can no longer really support (though even in her, as I will show, there is something awry, something that distances her from traditional subjectivity). Milly enters the company of the Lancaster Gaters as an outsider, the American ingénue thrust into a society far too complex for her to navigate. Her difference from the others is apparent in the way that, unlike her so-called friends, she is marked as an object of interest more than technical, described in the word—sympathy—used by Tom Tristram. “She was alone, she was stricken, she was rich, and, in particular, she was strange—a combination in itself of a nature to engage Mrs. Stringham’s attention. But it was the strangeness that most determined our good lady’s sympathy” (130, emphasis mine). Or later, the novel discusses the effect Milly has on Densher: “His being an acquaintance at all was one of the signs that in the first days had helped to place Milly, as a young person with the world before her, for sympathy and wonder” (161, emphasis mine). Or, “[s]uch a matter as this may at all events speak of the style in which our young woman could affect those who were near her, may testify to the sort of interest she could inspire. She worked—and seemingly quite without design—upon the sympathy, the curiosity, the fancy of her associates, and we shall really ourselves scarce otherwise come closer to her than by feeling their impression and sharing, if need be, their confusion” (141, emphasis mine). In this final quotation, the novel even sets Milly aside as a model for readers and instructs us, as though we were back
in the reading manuals of the eighteenth century, to join in the emotive responses of the characters.

Still, marked as Milly is, these quotations reveal a gap. Milly is what produces sympathy in others, but she is not herself a person of sympathy. Or, she is an object of sympathy but not its subject. The problem is a lack of reciprocity in the exchange, the falling away of the perfect harmony that Smith discusses. For Kate and the others are not themselves people with moral centers and so cannot really engage in the “direct participation…of the sufferings of another” (17), as Ratcliff has it. What’s more, even Milly is not really the sympathetic subject imagined in Smith’s model. She is treated as an artifact, something made, created, and thus capable of being destroyed, as she so easily is at the end of the novel. She, and her sympathetic pulls, are a fantasy of what once was and of what might still be, but not really the real thing. She’s a figure of sympathy, a representation of sympathy, what’s marked off as what we the reader and what the characters should feel, but not what we naturally do. So sympathy is denaturalized. And Milly, unlike Strether, is not the person we follow, but the person who is deliberately framed for us.

This is what seems to drive Brenda Austin-Smith’s argument in “The Reification of Milly Theale: Rhetorical Narration in The Wings of the Dove,” where she claims that our concern for Milly is a result of a specific narrative technique which lulls us into sympathy with an otherwise unattractive character. “Focalization, the narrator’s use of a character as a narrative lens, encourages the reader’s identification with a character, since it is difficult to resist the pull of sympathy for a character if we have been exposed to that character’s perspective for a long time” (189). Austin-Smith’s point is a narratological one, that the very structure of the novel, the use of free indirect discourse, most notably, obscures the objective moral worth of various characters. But I share with her the view that Milly is framed for sympathy, rather than its natural bearer.
Indeed, it is in exactly these artifactual terms that Milly is consistently described. Taking a day away from Lancaster Gate and away from her escort Mrs. Stringham, Milly sets out to The National Gallery. In a scene reminiscent of the opening scene of *The American*, Milly is struck by a group of female copyists who sit in the museum gallery: “Two or three in particular, spectacled, aproned, absorbed, engaged her sympathy to an absurd extent, seemed to show her for the time the right way to live” (306). Milly feels a kind of solidarity with this group, women with whom she might form the community of mutual exchange that is so lacking in the Lancaster Gate group. But then, “She would have liked to talk to them, to get, as it figured to her, into their lives, and was deterred but by the fact that she didn’t quite see herself as purchasing imitations and yet feared she might excite the expectation of purchase. She really knew before long that what held her was the mere refuge, that something within her was after all too weak for the Turners and Titians” (306). Milly’s connection quickly dissolves. These are not the real artists—Turners or Titians—but mere copyists, imitators of great art. And imitations are, of course, beneath the socially superior Milly. But they are also inadequate to her very conception of sociality. For Milly’s predicament—identifying with the imitation, but longing for the real thing—is precisely the problem. As a subject worthy of sympathy, she has become an imitation, a copy of the real. Or worse, she is an imitation of an imitation, as all art ultimately is, in Plato’s terms. She is “too weak for the Turners and Titians,” too weak, in other words, for the real thing. And the best she can do is identify with the imitations.

A similar comparison between Milly and art occurs in front of the great Bronzino at Matcham. There, under the guidance of Lord Mark, Milly is awed by her likeness to Bronzino’s painting. But far from making her feel more alive, more keen to the possibilities of her life, she laments, “I shall never be better than this” (241), which is at once to say that her real life self will...
never measure up to the painted fantasy and that she will never be more than a work of art, a picture hanging on a wall or, as it turns out, a person who “turns her face to the wall” as a precursor to death. For this is what has become of the traditionally centered subject. Sympathy is denaturalized, and if, as James still insists, it is to be recreated, it is recreated at an angle already askew. The result is a kind of artificiality in Milly, the sense we have that she does not really exist in the flesh, but as a kind of work of art, or even as an allegory. As Phyllis Van Slyck puts it of Milly, partially quoting John Carlos Rowe, her “‘tragic beauty,’ [is] her rueful acceptance of meanings imposed by others, and her ‘self-definition through opposition, resignation, or transcendence’” (303). Without much agency, Milly retreats into transcendence and allegory. And, indeed, it is this state in between life and death, as an image of life rather than life itself that gets her nominated as the “dove,” a poetic stock type, a work of art and artifice. So while “Milly hereby enjoyed one of her views of how people…were often touched by her” (301), it is a “stupid” view, as Kate later, harshly, but not wrongly, says.

VI. The Real Thing

It is Densher who is the real thing. Densher’s moral configuration is not denaturalized, and he resembles most closely Charles Taylor’s “punctual self.” As I’ve already in part explained, in Taylor’s view, from Descartes through the Enlightenment, man is primarily an ego who views the world from the stability of a given self. Taking his view from inside himself toward the world outside, he can be likened to a sort of scientific empiricist who weighs his options and calculates the best, most responsible choices. He is, in other words, first and foremost a “human agent,” someone who makes discrete, moral decisions about what to engage and how to engage it. So, Densher approximates Taylor’s punctual self and occupies the same
moral space. He looks upon the world into which he is entering and takes up his perspective. Or, to give an example of a similarly situated protagonist, Taylor’s empiricist becomes James’s “inquirer,” as Lambert Strether is called.

For Densher confronts moral decisions punctiliously and at every moment. He responds with “I don’t quite see” (346) to Kate’s evasive gestures, over-scrupulously concerns himself that “it took indeed some understanding” (345) when things aren’t made explicit, and is zealously committed to telling the “truth” at all costs. How different he is from those around him. “‘You don’t feel’—Marian brought it all out—‘as if you would like to marry Merton Densher?’” (65). In this first mentioning of him, made by Kate’s debased sister, Mrs. Marian Condrip, Densher seems rather un-mentioned, asserted to exist through a denial. And as if to confirm Marian’s sense of Densher’s misplacement in Kate’s society, and perhaps in this too modern novel altogether, Kate replies, “‘I don’t know what makes you talk of Mr. Densher’” (65). Marian talks about Densher to convince Kate of what Kate already knows—that he has no money—but also to warn her of something she does not yet see. “I don’t believe in him” (66), Marian says, by which she means, “Well, being sure he’ll never get it” (66). The plain meaning of Marian’s explanation is clear—“being sure he’ll never get” money. But just as simply, through the most common idiom—“he didn’t get it,” “he doesn’t get it,” “he’ll never get it”—Marian warns Kate that Densher will remain dumb to her mode of being, the way she acts without acting or plots without plotting that is so different from the discrete decisions he is used to making. What Densher will “never get” is not just money, but the whole untethered way in which Lancaster Gate functions.

---

20 According to the OED, the first recorded use of “get,” meaning “understand,” is in Mark Twain’s American Claimant. In 1907, the phrase “I don’t get her” was used by M.C. Harris in Tents of Wickedness, and by 1913, Jack London writes in Valley of the Moon, “When I go after anything I get it.” In any event, it would seem that the term had been circulating during James’s career.
In the end, Densher and Kate both do “get it.” They get how vast the gulf between them is, how incompatible their divergent modi operandi are. But only in the end, and then only after a whole novel of trying to ignore the differences or of trying to reconfigure themselves in order to bridge them. This attempt at compatibility is the result of their love for each other. For they do not simply resign themselves to their differences, but try to connect in spite, or even because, of them. Accordingly, when Densher first appears at Lancaster Gate, his reaction mimics Kate’s in her first appearance there, when she tries to size-up Aunt Maud. In a similarly reflective, and anxious gaze, he surmises that “She [Aunt Maud] was in fine quite the largest possible quantity to deal with; and he was in the cage of the lioness without his whip—the whip, in a word, of a supply of proper retorts” (103). The metaphor is compelling, it too borrowed from Kate’s own reflections on Aunt Maud just a short while before. It seems to capture the grandiosity that so characterizes Mrs. Lowder, but still it misconstrues something. Making the same mistake as Kate makes before she is forced to come to terms with herself and while her relationship with Densher still seems plausible, Densher figures Aunt Maud in the language of moral agency. For the “lioness,” with her discrete, if spontaneous, moves may not be a moral agent, but she is certainly an immoral agent, just the inversion of a subject still secure and still attached to her actions. Aunt Maud, however, large and menacing like the lioness, though she is, is much more subtle and, more importantly, lacks the lioness’s overt intentionality in her movements. At least, this is the way in which Aunt Maud perceives of herself, when, much later in the novel, she converses with Susan Shepherd about the plan. “How could he ever care for her?” Mrs. Stringham asks about Densher and Milly. “By being put in the way of it” (432), Mrs. Lowder responds. “Being put,” the passive verb. Merton Densher will not act himself, but will be acted upon. But by whom

21 See WD, 56.
Densher will be “put” remains unarticulated. Mrs. Lowder does not claim responsibility, nor, it seems likely, does she think of herself as responsible. It is as though this plot lands in her lap without ever activating her will or confirming her agency.

Densher, by contrast, feels the burden of his agency throughout, and it is when these two such different subjects—Densher and Aunt Maud, or Densher and Kate—confront each other in their difference that the dream of their compatibility begins to collapse. In Venice, there to visit Milly at her palace—the new Lancaster Gate, as it were—the group is turned away for the day. Kate and Densher find themselves in the populated St. Mark’s Square alone, and James suggestively describes the scene as having “in its freshness, the moral air, as we may say” (509, emphasis mine). James is being ironic about the force of such morality, of course, but he also reveals something true. For being alone, away from Milly, away from the financial and social demands of contemporary life, away from the plot to which they have grown so attached, allows Kate and Densher to enter a different world from the one they normally inhabit. They can reengage their moral agency, and being in control of their actions makes them feel free. “It was as if, being in possession, they could say what they liked” (509), which is to say that each one could say what he or she liked. For here, they are not homogenously enveloped by the larger group, but given the free, individualized space of the punctual moral subject. But then, “the flutter of the doves, begot in the heart of each a fear” (509). Milly—the dove herself—and the plot that surrounds her return to them, and the freedom to experience that “moral air” is threatened.

A clash of worlds follows, a “split” as James calls it, and Kate and Densher both try to find themselves in the mix. “What did you mean just now that I can do to make Mrs. Lowder

---

22 See WD, 515.
believe? For myself, stupidly, if you will, I don’t see, from the moment I can’t lie to her, what else there is but lying” (509). But Kate comforts Densher: “You can say something both handsome and sincere to her about Milly—whom you honestly like so much. That wouldn’t be lying” (509). What is surprising here is Kate’s willingness to engage Densher in his naïve, moral compunctions about the strict, and arbitrary, boundaries of truth and lies even as she tries to make them more porous. Because this is not, as we know by this point in the novel, Kate’s world. This moral language is not one that she speaks, and this is not a conversation that would normally compel her. But that she is compelled is what saves her, and partially, at least, she knows it. Densher’s moral strictures and sense of responsibility offer meaning to her disengaged self, and she is drawn in. As readers, we are drawn in too, for it is at moments like these when Kate Croy becomes sympathetic. Indeed, it is the fact of her loving Densher at all, someone seemingly so outside her realm, that makes her somewhat lovable too. Densher gives her a certain grounding in the world of moral agency, so at this moment, in St. Mark’s Square, when the moral air feels strong, Kate feels the force of Densher and his world and we feel the force of Kate.

VII. A Different World and a Different Subject

It is just a moment, however, and the sympathy Kate feels for Densher and, in turn, the sympathy we feel for Kate will not quite last. Responding to Densher’s complaint that he still has no “proof” from her that she is loyal to him, that she loves him, Kate retorts, “‘Am I not doing this for you? Do you call this nothing?’” But Densher confidently replies, “‘Nothing at all….I thought you exactly contend that, with your aunt so beguiled, you risk nothing!’” (513). And in response to this, “It was the first time since the launching of her wonderful idea that he had seen
her at a loss” (513). In truth, Densher is right. Within the realm of moral agency, where facts are a necessity and measured by distinct actions, decisions, and statements, Kate has given him no proof. And yet, he has also overstepped his bounds, become too cocky, so acknowledging Kate’s receptiveness to his moral needs, he appeals to her again on those same grounds. Insisting on his way, he manages to reinterpret Kate’s maneuvers to suit himself. “With your aunt so beguiled, you risk nothing,” he says. The language misses the mark, because measuring “risk” is not something Kate does. It is not the terms within which she functions. She may have beguiled Aunt Maud, but beguiling is not a matter of risk or gain for she who has no agency. Beguiling is simply what she does, the course her plan naturally takes, the way her plot comes, organically, to be fulfilled. Densher’s reinterpretation thus reveals the gap between them. And if Densher is not quite attuned to it, Kate is. She is “at a loss,” and not just because she has lost her grounding in her own world, but because even when she attempts to accommodate herself to Densher’s, the two cannot come together. Kate knows what Densher will learn later, that the life of the two together will never come to be.

For now, however, Densher insists on being with Kate. So in his most morally untethered moment, he coerces Kate into having sex with him. But even here, when Densher’s desires run wild and his moral compunctions give way to his much more sordid and aggressive desires, we can see a laudable attempt to bridge the two worlds from which he and Kate come.

“‘Come to me.’
‘How? Where?’

…‘To my rooms, which are perfectly possible, and in taking which, the other day, I had you, as you must have felt, in view. We can arrange it—with two grains of courage. People in our case always arrange it.’” (515-16)
Certainly, from one perspective, Densher reveals his usually hidden libidinal self, his desire for something carnal above and beyond his desire and his ability to be good. But straight moral abandonment is not quite right for this more complicated scene. There is too much preparation, consideration, and planning for this to be a moment of straight libidinal excess and eruption. “We can arrange it” (emphasis mine), he says, or, he takes the room in advance, or he appeals to a certain model of a relationship after which he longs when he says “people in our case always arrange it.” And all of this implies that sex for Densher is not some aberrant behavior that lasts momentarily. Nor is sex just a temporary desire. Densher is after a sexual life rather than a sexual moment, and he will make all efforts to achieve it.

This suggests that we are not witness here to a Densher who has become morally unhinged, but a Densher much more self-conscious, who is trying, in the most radical of ways, to accommodate himself to a Kate who has no moral scruples at all. He thus arranges himself by replacing his usual moral rationalism with sheer will. It is his try, perhaps, at being modern, and it is an enterprising one. Because Densher understands himself and knows that while morality may be dispensable, agency is not. So unable to abandon his will along with his morality, as the others at Lancaster Gate do, he replaces his moral will with a different, more modern one—that naked will to power that Nietzsche so forcefully describes.23 That is, he tries on a modern identity correlative to the utterly bereft one that Kate inhabits, hoping to connect with her finally.

---

23 See Stephen Donadio’s Nietzsche, Henry James, and the Artistic Will for a fuller elaboration of the connection between James and Nietzsche, though it is important to note that there is no evidence that James ever read Nietzsche.
and forever. A kind of bacchic reverie ensues, appropriately manifest in sex with the woman he loves. But this cannot last. A will to power, a will beyond good and evil, a will that revels in its own ability to assert, that gathers up as much as possible of what is possible does not suit Densher. And while it may be the only plausible will in this post moralist world, it is not a will that Densher, or James, feels it is worth preserving.

Sex and unbridled desire do not achieve what Densher hopes they will, so grasping for a solution, he attempts various renunciations of his agency instead. Only these too are just stop-gaps. In one particularly self-denying moment, which we’ve encountered in part already, Densher proclaims to Kate, “I’ll tell any lie you want, and your idea requires, if you’ll only come to me” (515). The offer lasts momentarily. For a moment, Densher “felt…that he was already, in a sense, possessed of what he wanted” (517). But then the scene ends with a foreboding remark, “The danger had dropped—it was behind him there in the great sunny space. So far she was good” (517). “So far” is telling. “So far” in the novel, “so far” in the story, but the novel goes on, and when, indeed, it goes farther, she, Kate Croy, is no longer so good for Densher. Truth be told, neither will Densher be so good for Kate. Milly dies, her money is left to Densher, and Kate’s plan seems to have arrived at its successful conclusion. Only Densher will not allow it to rest there. He imposes on the scene a moral choice and forces Kate to become an active moral agent like himself. “I see. You’ll marry me without the money; you won’t marry me with it” (710), Kate says. And Densher confirms it, “You must choose” (711). Densher will not stand the burden of what, for him, can only be understood as immoral—accepting Milly Theale’s tainted money—and he calls on Kate, by “choosing,” to become a different kind of subject than the one she is.
But even this moment of moral decision-making does not last as a viable option. Because what James knows, what Kate and Densher both know, is that the time of punctual moral beings has past. Accordingly, just as quickly as Densher offers her the option of becoming like him, he realizes it can never successfully be, and he reverts to a fantasy instead: “I’ll marry you, mind you, in an hour….As we were” (711). Kate sees that it is just a fantasy and knowingly replies, “We shall never be again as we were!” (711). The two can never be as they were because “as they were” means the melding of two such radically different kinds of subjects. And that, it turns out, is impossible.

In the end, there is no end. Neither Densher nor Kate has really changed, one reason, perhaps, so many early critics read the novel and its characters as morally depraved. Kate does not come into agency, and Densher does not relinquish his. Indeed, they would seem to fail even locally on the register of such a moral calculus, unable even to make their own relationship work. But the lack of conspicuous change is just James’s point in *The Wings of the Dove*. For it is not that nothing has happened in this novel, just that what has happened is in keeping with the prevailing world-order to which the novel has so courageously introduced us. It is the world-order of modernism where the non-event must be understood as an event itself, where to see the things that are precisely as they are, lamentable as they may be, becomes the moral imperative of the modernist witness. As Ruth Bernard Yeazell puts it, making a similar claim about the readerly experience, “Though we would find it impossible to locate the precise moment in the past at which we learned the truth about the lovers’ plans, we are nevertheless likely to feel as if we have long known just what the lovers had in mind” (35). Again, “recognition” is Bernard Yeazell’s term for this phenomenon that I would extend to the characters too.
This means that Kate, not Densher, has the last word, because Kate, not Densher, is the subject who will survive into the next generation to recognize things as they are. But it means, as well, that Densher has not completely vanished. Insistently present, though his time is past, he remains—more than just a trace—as the person who has enabled Kate’s recognition of what she is in the first place and who has given Kate the legs to live on after he, and moral realism, more generally, has faded. Wresting him from the oblivion with which modernity and modernism threaten him, James makes visible the very history of the novel which makes modernist representation of the subject possible in the first place. For while Densher may finally be denied, as his whole world order is, a positive position in the formation of this subject, his absence becomes the focal point around which the modern subject comes to understand himself. And it is this placement that transforms James’s characters from purely opaque to readable and to harbingers of the witnesses of the pathos of their situation that Woolf will go further in exploring.
Chapter Two: Virginia Woolf’s Pathetic Embodiments

I. To the Lighthouse and the End of Sympathy

In James we saw the way in which the modernist subject emerges in the loss of the possibility of moral subjectivity. Kate Croy is the new modernist subject, and she is made visible by James through the recognition that she cannot be, in the modern world, the kind of subject Merton Densher was. James remains tied to Densher and what he represents, and his novels are still structured as effects of his kind of subjectivity, so that pathos exists for James as an untethered affect, reflecting the gap between Kate and Densher, reflecting the loss, that is, of Densher’s staying power. In Woolf, however, the modernist subject takes over, and with it comes a new architecture for the novel and a new way of reacting to the characters and events in that new architecture. The characters’ actions have a different valence, and the new affective economy in which the characters circulate, the pathos that is a reaction to their loss of the old economy, is ultimately even given a body, becoming itself a character, first in the figure of Orlando and then in the audience of Between the Acts.

Considered as a whole, Woolf’s career moves from the edge of James’s sense of an emerging modernism into the heart of the pathetic relations. And I begin, accordingly, near the beginning, where Woolf first charts the history of the novel in its confrontation with the souring of sympathy, the way in which it tyrannizes rather than serves to cohere; the way it encourages narcissism rather than humility; and the way it captures a subject simply no longer available, with a force that is even greater than James’s. There is perhaps no scene more illustrative of this force than one that comes at the end of To the Lighthouse. After ten years, the Ramsay family—Lily Briscoe and Mr. Carmichael among them—return to their Scottish beach house. Mrs.
Ramsay is dead. Her children Prue and Andrew are dead too, and Mr. Ramsay is understandably distraught. Yet from Lily’s perspective, Mr. Ramsay’s “immense self pity, his demand for sympathy poured and spread itself in pools at her feet, and all she did, miserable sinner that she was, was to draw her skirts a little closer round her ankles, lest she should get wet” (152). From a certain, nineteenth-century angle, the problem here is one of degree: Mr. Ramsay requires too much sympathy, and Lily gives too little. Or Mr. Ramsay is self-consumed, and Lily is socially detached. The solution, in this case, would lie in both willing themselves closer to each other, into Adam Smith’s “harmony of society,” which I touched on in Chapter One. In part, this is true, but an even temper and a more generous heart will not solve anything. After all, Lily, more than anyone else in the novel, tries to understand those around her. It is she who so longingly asks, “How then…did one know one thing or another thing about people, sealed as they were” (51). So it is sympathy itself—rather than the refusal of characters to be sympathetic enough—that’s really at issue. And Lily’s decision to “draw her skirts a little closer” is not the result of personal preference, but of her confrontation with a modernist world that Mr. Ramsay, Victorian that he is, refuses to recognize.

Woolf is even more emphatic about the impossibility and, at times, corrosiveness of sympathy in her essay “On Being Ill” (1926):

> About sympathy for example—we can do without it. The illusion of a world so shaped that it echoes every groan, of human beings so tied together by common needs and fears that a twitch at one wrist jerks another, where however strange your experience other people have had it too, where however far you travel in your own mind someone has been there before you—is an illusion. We do not
know our own souls, let alone the souls of others...Always to have sympathy, 
always to be accompanied, always to be understood would be intolerable. (104)
The problem, as Woolf sees it, is that humans are too disconnected not only from each other but 
even from themselves to possibly experience the intuition and connection sympathy requires. 
And more, what is “intolerable” about sympathy under the condition of being “subjects who do 
not know our own souls” is that it would force us into a conception of our selfhood that simply 
no longer exists. It is not that Woolf welcomes such a situation. But, like Kate, she recognizes 
that it simply is the way things are. We are disjointed, and not to understand that we are would 
be to foreclose any new possibility of our relating to each other that, in the modernist world, 
should be our goal.

Accordingly, she gives a measure of the disjunction of her subjects at every turn. Clarissa 
Dalloway is spread out “like mist” over her own fifty-two years; Orlando is in flux between man, 
woman, and four hundred years of British history; And the voices of the characters in The Waves 
(1931) often seem indistinguishable from one another, rendering them not stable individuals, but 
fluid fragments. Woolf’s characters are not the traditional beings of traditional literature, but 
people constantly in flight from the kinds of secure structures— the economy of sympathy chief 
among them—that would make them so. In some instances, as in the passage from To the 
Lighthouse, this poses a problem for the possibility of intimacy between characters. But it is not 
only a diegetic problem, confined to the characters in the novels and essays that Woolf invents. It 
is also an extra diegetic problem that places the reader in the precarious situation of learning a 
new mode of reading, different from the one of sympathetic responsiveness inculcated by 
nineteenth-century novels.
This is a challenge noted by numerous critics. Molly Hite, for example, calls Woolf’s style one of “affective uncertainty” and highlights the difficulty readers have in knowing how to “take” Woolf’s characters. Woolf’s narratives lack “tonal cues,” she writes, and lack the usual emotional signification that helps readers read. Lili Hsieh argues something similar in “The Other Side of the Picture: The Politics of Affect in Virginia Woolf’s Three Guineas.” But while for these critics Woolf’s obscured characters bespeak her liberal politics, where affective uncertainty is a means of propounding an ethics of equality and questioning established, hegemonic ideas, I suggest, rather, that she represents a world without characters on whom hegemony would operate altogether. For Woolf, the liberal subject has vanished. And so she propounds a world where the polis is not a matter of whole, punctual subjects respecting other punctual subjects. But instead, in order to relate to each other, the new kind of modernist subjects require a whole new emotional economy, the pathos of understanding the loss of their whole selves.

As I’ve tried to show, this move from sympathy to pathos is gradual and follows the move from traditional Victorian fiction to modernist experimentation. As such, Woolf marks the crescendo of this movement, solidifying what in James is only nascent and what in Stein, as I will show, is overblown and thus often too hard to discern. For in James sympathy becomes inadequate in accounting for the more complex set of relations that he imagines. Indeed, just what is the precise nature of a relationship is always a question in James’s late fiction, and that the narrator tracks so closely what the characters know, never seeming to know much more than they do, is not because James privileges a self reflectively, self knowing subject, but because his narrator, unlike, say, George Eliot’s no longer represents that greater self-knowledge into which the character might some day come. As a result, James regards sympathy as obsolete, requiring
too much knowledge of oneself, of another, of anything at all to be viable in his world. So instead, James suggests pathos as an alternative to sympathetic identification. But pathos, as conceived by James and in comparison to Woolf, is thus only a half-gesture, a resting ground, rather than a stopping ground, say, between the utter punctuality of knowledge and the narrative security of traditional nineteenth-century novels that precede his and the narratives of high modernists that follow his, where punctual selves are now completely unhinged. For James, that is, pathos, as it is for Woolf and Stein as well, is a particular stance taken by the narrator and reader towards the characters and towards the novel as a whole—a stance that registers the loss of sympathy by refusing it. But for James, especially in comparison to the others, it remains unarticulated. For him, that stance has no real shape or body. It is not personified. It is rendered as a negative space between persons. In Woolf, however, subjects show no trace of punctuality. As a result, pathos, in Woolf, is not an amorphous, unarticulated idea, as it was in James, but fully embodied, becoming itself a kind of subject.

As Maria DiBattista has so forcefully argued, Woolf has a name for this new being equipped for a new affective network, “Anon.” Anon is the title of Woolf’s unpublished manuscript, a long essay meant to trace the literary history of England. As Donald Watt has summarized it, “‘Anon’ is the anonymous element in writer and audience—the communal voice that expresses the shared, hidden instincts of the race” (449). Anon is Woolf’s fantasy of anonymity, and for DiBattista, it is linked to another of Woolf’s fantasies, the androgynous mind, as described in A Room of One’s Own (1929). Woolf’s dream of Anon allows her authorial voice a kind of intimacy, insofar as it is not merely “objective,” insofar as it may fairly claim all the affect that a traditional person may claim. But it is the affect of a different sort of person altogether than the traditional one and so relates to other persons, also conceived differently, in a
different manner, not stamping itself on them or being stamped, not imposing itself or being imposed upon or some combination of the two, but registering just the loss of the ability to impose and be imposed upon and the life of such loss, for better and for worse.

In other words, Anon is Woolf’s fantasy of relationships outside of sympathy. Creating herself and her characters through its image, Woolf creates people with whom we are unable to sympathize but also unable to abandon. We are unable to sympathize with them because they have no center toward which sympathy might be directed. But we cannot abandon them either. These characters are compelling not because we identify with their feelings or because we see our own thoughts in their thoughts. Indeed, unable to command their thoughts and their feelings, they have hardly any identity in the traditional sense, at all. Maud Ellman gets it half right when, as she puts it, reflecting on Henry James’s phrase that “really...relations stop nowhere,” the writings of “Woolf...portray the human subject as enmeshed in relations of exchange—sexual, linguistic, financial, pathogenic—that violate the limits of identity” (1, emphasis mine). Woolf’s characters do exist beyond the limits of identity (and thus identity politics, as well, as I will show in my discussion of Orlando). They are too outstretched for the tentacular demands of sympathy. But, at least in Woolf, this is not because “relations stop nowhere,” but because relations, in the usual sense, no longer exist. And this is why Anon, as DiBattista captures it, is “the voice that speaks in one fluid, idiosyncratic style, yet the voice that expresses the common thought, the common feeling” (188). For it is precisely a voice untethered to a person, and so capable of moving between other voices, idiosyncratic from first to last.

This is why sympathy cannot work in the modernist world. As a reaction formation, an affect produced by the fetishization of a subject that no longer holds, as I have shown in James’s Woolett, sympathy does not speak “the common thought, the common feeling,” but expresses the
univocal thought and the isolated feeling, which solidifies identity into something self absorbed and socially cut off, as the passage with Mr. Ramsay illustrates. Perhaps in a previous world, the sympathy-driven Mr. Ramsay, who stands as a representation of Virginia Woolf’s Victorian father Leslie Stephen and thus as a representation of Victorian life as a whole, was a success. But in the modernist world that Woolf imagines, Mr. Ramsay only stands as a critique of that previous world. And his sympathy does not successfully bring people together, but acts as a narcissistic imposition upon those around him. His demand is just that, a demand, not a kind request from one mourner to another, but the aggressive imposition of the “beak of brass, the arid scimitar of the male, which smote mercilessly, again and again, demanding sympathy” (38).

The fact that he never offers sympathy to others thus indicates more than just his selfish use of the emotion. It confirms that sympathy as a system has soured. And Mrs. Ramsay, angry at her husband for refusing to take their son James to the lighthouse, expresses the problem well:

To pursue truth with such astonishing lack of consideration for other people’s feelings, to rend the thin veils of civilization so wantonly, so brutally, was to her so horrible an outrage of human decency that, without replying, dazed and blinded, she bent her head as if to let the pelt of jagged hail, the drench of dirty water, bespatter her unrebuked. There was nothing to be said. He stood by her in silence. (32)

Initially, Mr. Ramsay’s offense seems commonplace: he fails to enter into the feelings of those around him, even the feelings of his family and friends. But as the passage goes on, it becomes clear that Mrs. Ramsay’s critique of him is both more subtle and more profound than that. Ramsay’s problem, it is true, is that he “lack[s] consideration for other people’s feelings.” But this is a problem less of his not knowing what others feel than of his failure to acknowledge that
the “veils of civilization,” as civilization in the modern world now is, require him to relate even to feelings he cannot share. That is, Mr. Ramsay’s transgression against humanity is not simply that he fails to get inside the head of the people around him, what Nussbaum will call an “epistemological insufficiency” endemic to all people, or even that he fails to accommodate himself to others in the face of such insufficiency. Quite simply, the option of accommodation is no longer possible. For sympathy does not now accommodate the divergent outlooks and beliefs of two, distinct people, but forces the two to become one. And short of this complete unification, which is what Mr. Ramsay demands, people remain isolated and cut off from one another. And so it is no wonder that when Mr. Bankes thinks of Mr. Ramsay he imagines him “striding along by himself hung round with that solitude which seemed to be his natural air” (20).

Others in the novel cling to the outmoded form of sympathy with much greater success than Mr. Ramsay. Mrs. Ramsay, for example, the most compelling among them, as Lily Briscoe so intensely feels, manages by copiously arranging marriages. At first she has the idea that “William and Lily should marry” (26). Later she “insist[s] that…Minta must, they all must marry” (49). And this insistence on marriage is a traditional formula for bridging the distance between people that in some measure seems to work for her, as it does in her marriage to Mr. Ramsay. Still, there are moments when Mrs. Ramsay becomes self-conscious about her tendency to make matches: “and here she was, she reflected, feeling life rather sinister again, making Minta marry Paul Rayley…she was driven on, too quickly she knew, almost as if it were an escape for her too, to say that people must marry; people must have children” (60). The very forcefulness with which Mrs. Ramsay seems to insist on marriage over her “sinister” intimations signals an attempt at a kind of relation between people that she knows has come near the end of its plausibility.
For Nussbaum, as I noted in the Introduction, the problem that pervades this novel is the way in which an epistemological impossibility gets in the way of an ethical duty. Focusing on the first section of the novel, “The Window,” when Lily desperately longs to be close to Mrs. Ramsay, Nussbaum discusses the essential paradox of human needs: our “unquenchable epistemological longing” toward one another, on the one hand, and our “epistemological insufficiency” in being able to know another, on the other hand. Lily’s desire, in other words, is completely natural. And that people are sealed and unknowable is a problem for that desire. But Nussbaum suggests the error of Lily’s formulation of her impulse to begin with and, using Wittgenstein’s language, argues that Lily is blind to a possibility, the possibility of a relation that does not seek to abolish the distance between people. Nussbaum thus points to the last scene in the section where the knowledge of Mrs. Ramsay that Lily thinks is impossible to attain is attained, but by a different party. Mr. Ramsay stares at Mrs. Ramsay as she gazes out the window: “As she looked at him she began to smile, for though she had not said a word, he knew, of course he knew, that she loved him. He could not deny it….She had not said it: yet he knew” (124). As Nussbaum reads it, the final scene shows that relating to someone need not occur through the explicit exchange of thoughts and feelings. Perhaps where one consciousness is two, as Clarissa’s arguably is in Mrs. Dalloway, the two might become one, as hers arguably does in the final scene at the party. But where there are two from the start, they cannot, and “knowing” must be less a matter of sharing each other’s minds—through excessive conversation, or through any conversation at all—than accepting the terms of the experience of living together, less a matter of knowledge than attitude. As Nussbaum puts it, Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay “know one another as we know them—by reading” (11), and they learn, even in the silences, about “patterns of speech, action, reaction” (11) that help them relate to each other. It is this kind of insulated
and protected knowing that may be possible to attain, unlike the invasive kind of knowledge that Lily desires.

Nussbaum is compelling. The problem is only, as is true in her reading of James as well,\(^\text{24}\) that her attention to ethical duty leads her to reinstate Woolf’s characters into a nineteenth-century moral world to which they don’t belong and the loss of which is precisely what they mourn. For Nussbaum, Lily’s ultimate contentment with what and whom she knows means that she reaffirms the values and judgments of her Victorian predecessors. But here Nussbaum seems blind to a possibility, the possibility that precisely what Lily represents in her refusal of sympathy to Mr. Ramsay and in her unquenchable desire for Mrs. Ramsay, is a woman discovering and learning new forms of living that are at a distance from Victorian life. In other words, Woolf is far more radical and critical than Nussbaum understands her to be, and while Lily does need a solution to the problem of complete knowledge or complete sympathy, it is not by rediscovering some hidden ethical alternative supported by a Kantian model of living, but by inventing a new mode of relationality altogether, a mode less ethical, perhaps, than Nussbaum would want it, but more true to the experience of modernist living.

This new mode is pathos. “Look at him, he seemed to be saying, look at me; and indeed, all the time he was feeling, Think of me, think of me” (153). This is the tyrannical force against which Lily is working, and she is repelled. But groping for an alternative form of relating to the desperate Mr. Ramsay, she burst out:

‘What beautiful boots!’ she exclaimed. She was ashamed of herself. To praise his boots when he asked her to solace his soul; when he had shown her his bleeding hands, his lacerated heart, and asked her to pity them, then to say, cheerfully, ‘Ah,

\(^{24}\) See “Flawed Crystals: James’s The Golden Bowl and Literature as Moral Philosophy.”
but what beautiful boots you wear!’ deserved, she knew, and she looked up expecting to get it, in one of his sudden roars of ill temper, complete annihilation.

Instead, Mr. Ramsay smiled. (153)

Lily’s solution, which she is confident will end in “complete annihilation,” is to remark on something as inane as Mr. Ramsay’s boots. Rather than getting her feet wet, she marvels at the beauty of that which keeps feet from getting wet. This is, as Lily knows, a rejection of sympathy. She will not put herself in Mr. Ramsay’s shoes, as sympathy demands, but compliments their beauty instead, praising, in other words, their utility in protecting against such an invasion. But that this protective accouterment is what’s beautiful to Lily, rather than ugly, unnecessary, or frivolous, is a sign not so much of her rejection, with sympathy, of all other forms of relating as well, but a sign that she is merely turning the wheel of emotion towards pathos. For the discovery of the beautiful in that which keeps people out, or, in other words, in her own failure to sympathize is precisely what pathos makes possible.

Ultimately, this is even the language with which Lily understands the connection: “She could see them [Mr. Ramsay’s boots] walking to his room of their own accord, expressive in his absence of pathos” (153, emphasis mine). The boots express pathos without him because pathos is an emotional response to the absence of whole, traditional subjects. It is the emotion of one who feels far from another and, indeed, of a feeling for that farness. It signals an emotional relationship without the intimacy of subject-to-subject contact, a relationship that lacks whole subjects to begin with. But it signals, too, a feeling precisely for that lack, offering it as a relation instead. For by acknowledging the pathos in Mr. Ramsay’s boots, Lily and Woolf organize feeling around just the loss of sympathy and the loss of traditional forms of intimacy that once
required such a person-to-person connection. And Mr. Ramsay, self-centered narcissist though he is, accepts Lily’s offer with a smile.

Pathos consists of more than just nostalgia for sympathy, however. At the heart of pathos, as I’ve described in the *Introduction*, is the registering of the ephemeral nature of relationships, emotions and loss itself. Indeed, as Jenny Edbauer Rice explains it, “Pathe are not qualities, but they are more like agents that affect a temporary change.” At the end of the novel, Woolf explores the temporariness of change. James and Cam and Mr. Ramsay finally take a trip to the lighthouse. James is working through a lifelong Oedipal struggle with his father, and Cam comes to embody the now deceased Mrs. Ramsay, the missing mother to James. Mr. Ramsay, for his part, seems much the same as usual—overbearing, brooding, intolerable. The death of his wife and two of his children has not made him any softer, only strengthened his conviction that he deserves sympathy in droves:

Sitting in the boat, he bowed, he crouched himself, acting instantly his part—the part of a desolate man, widowed, bereft; and so called up before him in hosts people sympathizing with him; staged for himself as he sat in the boat, a little drama; which required of him decrepitude and exhaustion and sorrow…and then there was given him in abundance women’s sympathy, and he imagined how they would soothe him and sympathize with him. (166)

Mr. Ramsay lingers on his same old desire, sympathy, and in the absence of actual sympathizing women, he conjures up a fantasy to soothe himself. Ultimately, he and the kids do reach the lighthouse, and against all odds, or so it seems to the kids, Mr. Ramsay offers a respite from his

---

25 See Glenn Pedersen’s “Vision in *To the Lighthouse*,” Maria DiBattista’s *Virginia Woolf’s Major Novels: The Fables of Anon*, and Rachel Bowlby’s *Virginia Woolf: Feminist Destinations* for some examples of this kind of Freudian reading.

26 See Nancy Topping Bazin’s *Virginia Woolf and the Androgynous Vision*. 
tyrannical self by complimenting James on his rowing abilities. But that it is a respite, not a final fix is what is significant. It works, temporarily, but it does not erase the past hurt and the previous losses. Even Cam’s position as a kind of replacement Mrs. Ramsay does not erase her death. Because living in pathos, as these characters so clearly do, does not ever solve loss. It may be assuaged and ameliorated, it may find temporary solutions, here and there, but it never ends in some triumphant moment of learning and self-fulfillment. And this is what Nussbaum so fundamentally misses. When you take the subject to be the punctual subject of self improvement and self correction, learning to better yourself and to perfect yourself is the ultimate goal. As Charles Taylor again so aptly puts it, the punctual self is “a human agent who is able to remake himself by methodical and disciplined action. What this calls for is the ability to take an instrumental stance to one’s given properties, desires, inclinations, tendencies, habits of thought and feeling, so that they can be worked on, doing away with some and strengthening others, until one meets the desired specifications” (159-60). This must surely be Nussbaum’s model. But when the self is not quite a self to begin with, as Woolf’s non-selves are, self-correction never really works, and if it does, it is never more than momentary.

So Lily finally finishes her painting, and it is a kind of triumph, connecting the two masses with a single line, solving the problem of obliteration that seems fundamental in the novel. But in fact, Lily’s real triumph is something else. For in drawing the line, she gives up Mrs. Ramsay’s impulse to make things permanent—“Mrs. Ramsay bringing them together; Mrs, Ramsay making of the moment something permanent (as in another sphere Lily herself had tried to make of the moment something)” (102)—and resigns herself to the ephemeral nature of art and of life itself in a world of pathos. Lily’s realization bespeaks the ephemeral nature of all experience, as the modernists see it. For while sympathy imagines a kind of permanence, the
wedding of two people together, forever, pathos imagines a loss. Whatever tomorrow will bring is irrelevant in the moment of sympathetic commitment, and life stands still. But in the modernist world of pathos, the fundamental realization is that nothing is permanent. Life is loss, and loss acknowledges the impermanence of everything. So, Lily’s painting will “be hung in the attics…it would be destroyed. But what did that matter? she asked herself, taking up her brush again” (208).

II. Pathos and Politics in Orlando

The temporariness of pathos becomes even more central to Woolf in the creation of Orlando, her most radical vision of modernist pathos. For in Orlando, rather than revealing pathos as an affect in the air, an affect to which others must become witness, Woolf embodies it as a subject itself, a witness, that is, to its own losses: the loss of the possibility of being “punctual” and the loss of the ability to circulate in a world of sympathetic exchange. This embodiment of loss, or pathos as a person, takes the shape of a character in constant contact with loss, a character in constant flux. Orlando goes from man to woman and back again, sixteenth-century royal to twentieth-century consumer, and all over four hundred years of British history. She never rests in any one place or any one identity, and she never offers a solid version of personhood.

Put another way, Orlando is no one person. She is created in the image of what might even be called the “impersonal,” as theorists like Sharon Cameron, in Impersonality, has called it; or as Leo Bersani and Adam Philips, in Intimacies, describe it, where they champion subjectivity excavated of its social and emotional attachments; and even, in Woolf studies, where Katerina Koutsantoni praises Woolf’s “impersonal strategy.” Only impersonal, in Woolf’s usage
of it, is not the opposite of personal. It does not mean a state free of affect. Rather it signals affect outside of traditional personhood, a state of affect in a different location.

Woolf does not arrive at her maturest conception immediately, for this was not always the position on “impersonality” that the initially more traditional Woolf took. In her second and least regarded novel, Night and Day (1919), a more conventional notion of the personal and impersonal is evident. The fetching Katharine Hilbery has secretly broken her engagement to the equally admirable William Rodney. Katharine worries about the confines of marriage, about her own inadequate feelings for William, for everyone, and is keen to William’s waning feelings for her. Mary, Katharine’s lower class, suffragist friend, who has herself just that morning separated from her prospective fiancé, is ignorant of the broken engagement, and interrupted by Katharine one evening while she is working late, Mary reflects on her attractive visitor:

As usual, when she found herself in talk with Katharine, she began to feel rapid alterations of opinion about her, arrows of sensation striking strangely through the envelope of personality, which shelters us so conveniently from our fellows….Mary was to keep this knowledge of the impersonal life for herself. The thought of her morning’s renunciation stung her conscience, and she tried to expand once more into that impersonal condition which was so lofty and painless. She must check this desire to be an individual again, whose wishes were in conflict with those of other people. (271-2, emphasis mine)

In this early novel, before Woolf so bravely disrupts the usual wholeness of subjectivity, the personal and impersonal are, indeed, pitted against one another. Personal is what Katharine Hilbery is—engaged, as she is deemed to be, to Rodney, tied emotionally, socially, familially to another. And impersonal is the state Mary so relishes—a state divorced from the ups and downs
of emotional life, a state “lofty and painless,” free from the burdens of affective living. As Woolf sees it in this early phase, pain exists in people and between people and thus in the life of the personal, socially engaged Katharine Hilbery rather than the socially conscious but disconnected Mary. Impersonality is thus that desirable state where, it is true, pleasure ceases, but more importantly, as Mary knows so well, scorned as she is by her love earlier on, where pain ceases too. And she is free to live stoically, purposefully, alone.

But this is not Woolf’s position for long. Just a few years later in Jacob’s Room (1922), and then even more overtly in Mrs. Dalloway (1925), Woolf comes to a much more startling and nuanced idea: people are no longer whole and ordered and so are no longer the bearers of emotion. And as affect no longer finds its locus in people who are now too scattered for such focus, it also no longer differentiates between personal and impersonal. The binary falls apart. Emotion cannot be managed as it is in the sympathetic economy that Smith describes. Pleasure and pain are no longer a function of connection or disconnection with others. People are disconnected even from themselves, and thus they no longer face the choice so neatly laid out for Mary in Night and Day. Impersonality, if we wish to save the term, is their new reality. But then, as Woolf knows so well—and this is what separates her from theorists today—to be impersonal does not mean to be free of pain, but just the opposite: it is to feel the pain of not even having a choice and to be the place where pain is felt in its most bare and pure form.

That place both is and is not Orlando. On the one hand, he is no one to whom emotion belongs, because he is no one, stable person. Indeed, he is hardly a person at all, lacking the psychological and social moorings that usual subjects possess. On the other hand, as an embodiment or personification of pathos, which is what I suggest he is, he is precisely the localization of a locationless affect. Thus, where we saw pathos in the atmosphere, so to speak,
in James and even in *To the Lighthouse*, circulating among dispersed but fully realized subjects, in *Orlando* (1928), pathos becomes anchored in a body, but a body designed to be itself unanchored.

This is a kind of a circular logic: an incorporeal affect gets a body that’s as if bodiless, a slippery structure that contributes, perhaps, to the feeling that the novel is unserious or, at the very least, lacking in Woolf’s usual depth. And, in fact, the writing of *Orlando* began, for Woolf, as a “joke,” only later elevated by Leonard into the more earnest form of “satire.” Thus, how to categorize this strange unnovelistic novel is a problem. Woolf herself declared it a fictional biography of her friend and lover, Vita Sackville West. And, in a measure, it is that biography, charting the varied life of a sexually liberated, traveling woman whom Woolf much admired. But in its bent towards farcicality and its abandoning of any notion of stable identity, it reads as a biography of that which can have no biography—the life of something that has lost its proper life. And as the story of that loss, as witness to what Orlando is not and can no longer be, *Orlando* is the biography of pathos, an emotion so overwhelming it can take over a life but that has no life of its own. It is that which takes the shape of a life, but thus signifies the disappearance of any individuation to speak of. And Woolf’s analogy of Anon, as “sometimes man; sometimes woman. He is the common voice singing out of door, He has no house” seems more apt than ever here. For Anon, too, speaking the history of the common voice in poetry, rather than a particular voice, is the biography of something not quite biographical.

Of course, Orlando does not start out identitiless, and in his development over the course of the novel, Woolf gives us the development of character in fiction as she understands it. The novel begins with him situated in a grand house, with an identity that seems, if anything, too stable. In the opening scene, Orlando is cast as young lord in the attic room of his family’s palace,
taking swings at the head of a moor, suspended from the ceiling rafters. The head, we are told, dates back generations, cut off by Orlando’s father or grandfather (his biographer is unsure) from the living body of an African pagan. By repeating this now useless gesture—slashing a head that is already severed—Orlando is rehearsing a part, practicing for a life of violence that he will inevitably inherit. And so he signals that although he is only sixteen, his mode of relating to people, his position in society and politics is securely established. It is a position matched by another equally secure part of himself, introduced right before this one, in the opening sentence of the novel: “He—for there could be no doubt of his sex…” (13). So, royal and male and destined for a life of crusading is the seemingly solid, intractable Orlando to whom we are first introduced. It is an identity decidedly political, and this marks a change in the way in which Woolf conceives of relationships. No longer confined to the domestic life of a Clarissa Dalloway or Mrs. Ramsay, Orlando’s life tracks his public persona.

The juxtaposition of these two forceful roles in that opening quotation—royal male, on the one hand, violent pursuer, on the other hand—is not happenstance. The first clearly leads to the second, in Woolf’s estimation. For what occurs when “there can be no doubt of someone’s sex,” when gender or sexual identity—or any identity, as we will see—is taken to be unwavering, is nothing less than the endless and pointless brutality of some one over every possible other, much as we saw in Mr. Ramsay. Woolf is most explicit about this connection when, describing the period of Orlando’s first incarnation as a sixteenth-century English lord, she writes: “Of our crepuscular half-lights and lingering twilights they knew nothing. The rain fell vehemently, or not at all. The sun blazed or there was darkness….The withered intricacies and ambiguities of our more gradual and doubtful age were unknown to them. Violence was all” (27). In this period, nearly four centuries before Woolf’s own, before identities get so regularly disrupted and before
social conventions get so consciously called into question, there is no such thing as ambiguity. Parts of things, “half-lights,” as Woolf figuratively puts it, do not exist, and the result, as she sees it, is violence.

Woolf’s age offers a new logic that reverses normative social thought of the then still reigning Edwardian era, the era both inherited and rejected by Woolf and her contemporaries. For that generation is governed by a principle that seems patently false to Woolf and her cohort—that secure identities lead to a secure, moral world, a world where people know their place, know what they are meant to do, and so know what is right. And Woolf knows better than that. She has lived through the trauma of the first world war and knows already in 1928 what it will take others an even more devastating world war to learn, that steadfast identity—national, sexual, racial—only leads to violence, entitlement, and aggressive, authoritarian behavior that threatens nothing less than the survival of humanity.

Destabilizing gender, as she does so triumphantly in the course of the novel—making Orlando man and woman and everything in between—is thus not just a game, nor even the more earnest gender performance that someone like Judith Butler will come to theorize sixty years later. Much more boldly, it is a try at a whole new form of relationality, one that is decidedly nonviolent. For while usual political and social interaction is constituted by a certain opposition between two secure national, ideological, sexual, racial identities, which “performance” attempts to destabilize, Woolf imagines something different, an interaction possible among identities

27 In “Giving up the Ghost: National and Literary Haunting in Orlando,” Erica L. Johnson argues that while other parts of Orlando’s identity are overtly fluid—gender, sexual orientation, etc.—his national identity is always explicitly English, only haunted by “invisible presences,” or “ghosts” (4). While I would not quite put it in the same way, it is important to note that relative to other identity categories, nationality is, indeed, rather stable in the novel, though I would, and do, argue that Orlando is constantly trying to relate to people and things outside of his national self.
destabilized from the start and so not really in opposition, at all. Thus, she escapes what Butler does not. She neither falls into the trap of reproducing the binary of gender as gender performance often does in its attempt to contest it, nor need she disband the categories with such ferocity as to render her and her characters ineffective in a world that holds them dear. Instead, she, her characters, slide seamlessly from identity to identity.

Certainly, this model of identitilessness has its dangers: might this extreme dispersal lead to the loss of subjects altogether, a move that arguably takes place, as I will suggest in the Coda, with the advent of the post-modern novel? And what will this loss do to the political landscape? Will subjectlessness lead to anarchy or, even worse, will it degenerate into no politics at all? Woolf is eminently aware of these dangers, and while at moments she, unwillingly but desperately, submits to them, she finally does find a different path for her new subject. Again, it is a subject—intimated in Woolf’s earlier works, but only introduced in full in Orlando—of pathos, a subject whose identity is constituted by the failure and loss of identity to be anything structuring, and so it is a subject who need not escape the restrictive positions forced on the subjects whom we usually encounter, because restrictions have no inherent purchase on him. It is a subject whose consciousness, if we can even call it that, is the consciousness of the absence of such purchase, and it is as witness to that absence that he stands, rather than opponent.

This is a decidedly different subject than the one that Butler presumes. For helping to create the field of “identity politics,” Butler’s subject is one defined by his strict, politically constructed identity, and one that would seem to have very few options for life in any real polis except a prospective one. Indeed, to be politically involved, to have any voice at all, in Butler’s schema, a subject must be revolutionary, oppositional, and in a state of indefatigable energy that

---

28 I am indebted to Maria DiBattista’s reading of Woolf in Virginia Woolf’s Major Novels: The Fables of Anon. As she puts it in the introduction to that book, what Woolf gives us is the “re-creation of the many-sided voice of ‘Anon,’ the voice of the one in the many” (p. x).
brings him to constantly and forever overturn the social constructions that form him. Or, if he
does submit to his own fatigue, he is forced to shrink back into an acquiescent state that merely
abides by and upholds those obviously outmoded and false conventions. But Woolf offers
Orlando possibilities beyond either revolution or acquiescence, a mode of relationality that is
enough outside the conventions of identity that the opposition of acquiescence and revolution
vanishes. This is Woolf’s pacifism emerging, a pacifism that will become more visible in Three
Guineas (1938), where she goes on to discuss the ills of war and of the Spanish Civil War, in
particular. Thus, rather than a politics that is personal, Woolf gives us a new form of personal
identity—multifaceted, constantly changing, the “impersonal,” to use the word again, as
personal—that can be made effectively political. Ultimately, this new subject of pathos does not
win, as Orlando is forced, at the end, back into the world of restrictive identity—the world of
realist subjects living conventional lives—that he had sought to escape. But this is not Woolf’s
failing, only her recognition of the power of the system to which she offers so bold an alternative
and which she hopes eventually, in time, to defeat.

29 Martha Nussbaum worries about something similar, what has been called “compassion fatigue.” In response to an
interview question posed by the San Francisco Chronicle in November of 2001, Nussbaum says, “It's because of that
problem ["compassion fatigue"] that I put such emphasis on institutional structures. It's hopeless to depend on
individuals alone to make improvements in the world.” http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-
bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2001/11/11/RV239242.DTL#ixzz0blKOa4TN

30 Woolf’s Three Guineas may seem to raise the question of her investment in sympathy after all. In Reading the
Pain of Others, at least, Susan Sontag criticizes Woolf for just this, for what she claims is Woolf’s naïve sense that
the real moral failing of war is “one of imagination, of empathy” (8). But while Woolf does seem to suggest, at
points, the salvational prospects of sympathy to abolish war, this is only because against the backdrop of hard
reality—here, the Spanish Civil War—the language of sympathy is all that is available. This is precisely the sense in
which I argue that Woolf knows, at the end of Orlando, that the world is not ready for the possibilities of pathos and
here, in the world of politics and history, she resorts to just the language she elsewhere so vehemently eschews.
III. The Biography of Orlando as Anon

*Orlando* extends the project of Woolf’s other novels by representing the most dramatic dispersal of all. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, we encounter Clarissa who reflects that no one could say of anyone “that they were this or that” (8), and working through her own fifty-two years of life, she tries to merge her multiple selves that feel so dispersed over time. It all comes to a conclusion—temporary, but satisfactory—at Clarissa’s party when her various selves are gathered together. In *To the Lighthouse*, published two years later, Lily Briscoe and Mrs. Ramsay have a similar problem, figured in those two masses in Lily’s painting that she so desperately tries to connect. This novel goes a step further than *Mrs. Dalloway*. For not only are the number of consciousnesses multiplied, but so is the span of time, and Woolf’s attempt at forming a coherent identity is further tasked. But she is successful in *To the Lighthouse* too. Lily, at last, has her vision, and while her painting may be left to the attic rooms, she finally does connect the two masses that had seemed irreparably far apart.

In *Orlando*, however, we encounter the multiplication of a single consciousness over four hundred years, and the pressures on Orlando to connect the various moving pieces in her life are even weightier. Indeed, Orlando’s world is one where “nothing could be seen whole or read from start to finish. What was seen begun—like two friends starting to meet each other across the street—was never seen ended” (307), and people lose their place not only in each other’s lives, but in their own lives as well. The world is expanded out to all its ends and beyond. And the frames in which connections are made become exceedingly difficult to maintain. Identity and time are structures with collapsed walls: Orlando is, as I’ve said, male, female, and everything in between. And while she lives through four hundred years, he yet never ages past thirty-six. Leaping beyond Clarissa, then, who has fifty-two selves that she must collect, Orlando has
thousands of selves that she must gather together. And while Clarissa has twenty-four hours to do her job, and Lily has ten years, Orlando has over four hundred years. This overwhelming multiplication of gender and time leaves Orlando with little to grab onto, and the possibility for even a temporary solution like those found in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* would here seem dim.

But just this lack of resolution is what lends this novel its radical power. In *Orlando* the gathering force of Woolf’s art does nothing to bind past and present and future together. Because in *Orlando* the disparate times simply cannot be concentered. The past is remembered only as what is forever lost. And the future does not foretell some temporal continuation of the present, but only another period that will be ravaged by loss, that will be remembered and lived as the embodiment of loss. Henri Bergson is helpful in theorizing Woolf’s new insight. Bergson distinguishes between two kinds of time—the mechanical, measured time, *time*, and the fluid time of consciousness, which he calls *duration*. Bergson is answering a fundamental problem of philosophy—the split between cogito and world, between what one experiences and the facts of experience—and his point is to describe a kind of phenomenological, internalized time that heals the rift, that does not follow the progress of the punctual subject, moving incrementally forward minute by minute, but a time that follows the more vital, animated, unpredictable rhythms of live beings. These are the two, battling times represented in *Orlando*, and much like Big Ben that chimes so invasively throughout *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf’s mocking declarations marking the passage of time in *Orlando*—“All was dark; all was doubt; all was confusion. The Eighteenth century was over; the Nineteenth century had begun” (226)—address Bergson’s problem.

Yet noting it *as* a problem, as the mockery of Woolf’s voice makes clear, is just her point. For duration is possible, after all, only if there is an internal self in which time may be situated.
And it is just the loss of any such self—whether phenomenological or punctual—that Woolf is at pains to register. This is all to say that what it means for Orlando to be an embodiment of pathos is for him to live in a time not of self and world healed in duration, but lost in emphemerality and even lateness, as the fading of “punctuality” suggests in another register—the loss of a person in time and the loss of time itself, and the loss of the ability to gather together moments in just the temporary but effective way that Clarissa and even Lily so triumphantly do. This is the world Orlando is up against. These are the challenges of his fleeting selfhood. And yet, having little to grab onto, finding it useless to solidify identity at all—in a word, accepting the situation—is just the solution that Woolf proposes. Because while Clarissa and Lily worry about their dispersion, Orlando does not seem unnerved by his. Orlando is not someone who can be dispersed, or more accurately, he is a self already constituted by dispersal, born out of the dispersal that has already happened and that is yet to come. So waking up to find himself a woman, Orlando merely “looked himself up and down in a long looking glass, without showing any signs of discomposure, and went, presumably, to his bath” (138). There is an ease here, for Orlando, in her movement between genders, and it suggests not that she denies her past as a man, but that her selfhood as a man was never strong enough to pose a threat to her equally weak female self. In other words, the two selves—man and woman—are hardly selves at all. Thus, “Orlando had become a woman—there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity” (138). This is not because Orlando is so adept at maintaining his identity through the vagaries of his life, but because he has no identity as such. He has no self in the traditional sense, only the self of a person constituted by just that loss of self, by just that loss of identity. So it’s not so much that Orlando has “multiple identities,” as critics have said, but that the
multiplicity in *Orlando* is a sign of the loss of identity. It is a confirmation of the idea that a life constituted by just the ephemeral nature of all identities has promise. And this is the primary contribution of the novel.

Realizing this ephemerality—even as we pass through four generations, progressing to Woolf’s own modern and enlightened time—is not easy in a world that so values strict definitions and clear categories. We get a glimpse of the challenges that Orlando faces early on. Walking through a London fair, Orlando catches sight of an attractive figure, which “whether boy’s or woman’s…filled him with the highest curiosity….When the boy, for alas, a boy it must be…swept almost on tiptoe past him, Orlando was ready to tear his hair with vexation that the person was of his own sex, and thus all embraces were out of the question” (38). Finally, Orlando discovers that the skater is in fact a woman, a Russian princess named Sasha. But for Orlando, a young man ready to break out of his too tightly prescribed life, the fact of Sasha’s femininity does not make him love her any more. It only makes it possible, under the strict sign of heterosexuality to which his sixteenth-century world subscribes, for him to embrace her, and Orlando understands the distinction. He understands that conventional definitions of the self, of individuality and personal will, of personality, of the binaries of gender on which his world insists, are just a reaction formation against the felt loss of selfhood. And he knows to act otherwise. It is an anachronistic moment, to be sure, where Woolf is writing the present of the novel—the sixteenth century in which such binaries and definitions are fixed—from the modernist perspective in which she knows that they are not fixed, and she therefore sees the refiguring of the “present” of the past as a stay against its future loss, imagining a past that might have been otherwise. But this is also what explains the egregiousness of the satire of Orlando fighting the Moor. He is fighting in the mode of a past that is gone and whose loss—Woolf can’t
even say who first killed the Moor—he refuses to acknowledge and which refusal is just what Woolf points out.

Ultimately, Sasha betrays Orlando and runs away with a Russian sailor instead. That the two are properly sexed does not result in any more stable connection between them. And so, to escape his loneliness, Orlando runs away too, and joins political life as “Ambassador Extraordinary to Constantinople.” By conventional rules of diplomacy and political effectiveness, Orlando is considered a brilliant politician. But the detailed description of his life during this time reveals the extent to which his political activity is just a fraud, a performance of social and political interaction, without anything substantive to show for it:

The ceremony was always the same….In the first room, it was permissible only to mention the weather. Having said that it was fine or wet, hot or cold, the Ambassador then passed on to the next chamber, where again, two figures rose to greet him….The ceremony ended at length with the smoking of hookah and the drinking of a glass of coffee; but though the motions of smoking and drinking were gone through punctiliously there was neither tobacco in the pipe nor coffee in the glass, as, had either smoke or drink been real, the human frame would have sunk beneath the surfeit. (122-3)

That the “ceremony was always the same” returns us to the opening scene of the novel, when Orlando is seen repeating the action of his father—spearing the dangling Moor’s head. Here, as there, he is rehearsing a part, a part so rigid that it only reproduces the opposition between England and Turkey that it was meant to engage. It is a role that comes from outside, from conventionally constructed politics, rather than from any internal motivation, which Orlando, as he is constituted, cannot have. So, as an appointed official, Orlando is only able to engage in
vapid, perfunctory performances that yield nothing with political or social gravity. There is here no real meeting of the minds, no real engagement between various countries, nor even social play, as the smoke and drink give way to empty pipes and barren glasses. And ironically, it is his conformity to this empty position that, in fact, makes him worthy of a promotion. Only the very same day that he is confirmed as Duke, the very moment he moves up the chain of political offices, is the moment that violence among the Turks breaks out. “Orlando took the golden circlet of strawberry leaves and placed it…upon his brows. It was at this point that the first disturbance began…a great uproar arose” (130). The Turks rush the palace, and a rebellion hurtles into a full-blown war between the British and the natives. Orlando’s role as a diplomat thus leads to precisely the same violence as did his role as young lord in the opening scene. And the message is powerful: the difference between head slashing and diplomacy is nil under the sign of an identity that, from the perspective of Woolf’s modernist era, seems always just constructed. What’s more, as the violence indicates, such an identity is constructed as a reaction formation against its own loss, a loss that Woolf’s era, on the contrary, understands and accepts. Indeed, Orlando’s individual will is not activated in this political role, only swallowed by the will of the post itself, which turns out to be the will to domination and control.

Orlando is aware of this connection between designated roles and violence and shuts himself up in his chambers to escape his official duties. He falls into a deep sleep and is visited by three seductive sisters, the Ladies Purity, Chastity and Modesty, who offer him a way out of his desperate situation. They represent a certain ideality and, accordingly, lend him a path into a world outside of action altogether, into one of rest instead. But just as they are about to capture the longing Orlando, a group of energetic trumpeters emerge. “Ranging themselves side by side in order, [they] blow one terrific blast:—‘THE TRUTH!’ at which Orlando woke. He stretched
himself. He rose. He stood upright in complete nakedness before us, and while the trumpets pealed Truth! Truth! Truth! we have no choice left but confess—he was a woman” (137). For a moment, that is, Orlando is tempted by a life outside of himself and outside of society, a life of inactivity that can substitute for the active, but dead politics in which he is involved. But the trumpeters, or the “truth” as Woolf heavy-handedly and thus humorously, puts it, is too strong for mere escapism. And rather than finding contentment in an escape from himself, Orlando is led to the heart of a new sense of being, the product not of a singular and secure identity or even of opposition to such an identity, but of a just saying no to both. This is to say that the “truth” of Orlando’s gender transformation lies not in the fact that Orlando is essentially a woman any more than she is essentially a man. It rests, rather, on the revelation that who Orlando truly is is a new person, a modernist person about whom there is nothing essential at all. So he’s man and woman, but also, as we will see in a moment, educated and ignorant, sophisticated and common, and this frees him to engage in a world that would otherwise block him out.

Orlando’s next move is thus across the boundary between city and country, high and peasant born, “civilized” population and organic community. She leaves Constantinople and joins a group of gypsies. The gypsies welcome Orlando into their circle and are eager to teach her their ways. Orlando is equally eager to learn and even considers settling down, forever, among them. Only this happy union does not last. The gypsies turn out to be beholden to the same strict forms of identity—class, belief-system, culture—from which Orlando had thought she was finally free, and so they cannot stand what they see as her difference. They begin to “suspect that she had other beliefs than their own” (143)—namely, a belief in nature—and when a man among them sees that “she did not believe what he believed…that was enough, wise and ancient as he was, to enrage him” (145). Finally, “they wished Orlando would leave the tent and
never come near them again” (146), and so she does. But this social failure cannot really be said to be Orlando’s failure. It is not the result of her inability to relate to people different from herself—indeed, she takes them and their customs seriously—nor is it the result of covering over their differences, playing the part of diplomat, rather than actually being one, as she had done before. The failure of the two to connect thus only proves that the strictures of convention extend even outside the great centers of politics, like Constantinople and London, to the entire world order.

But Woolf is not deterred. That communion between people is still possible is what Orlando’s career comes to show. So years pass, we enter the nineteenth century and Orlando meets Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, Esquire, arguably her only truly successful relationship in the novel. Their love isn’t the result of luck. There is a kind of logic to this union, which is nothing other than the logic of unstable identities that I’ve been charting. Shel allows Orlando to extend herself beyond traditional identity and Orlando allows him the same. As Woolf puts it, “Each was so surprised at the quickness of the other’s sympathy, and it was to each such a revelation that a woman could be so tolerant and free-spoken as a man, and a man as strange and subtle as a woman” (258). In other words, they are surprised here not by the fact that each appears to be a different sex than they had at first seemed, but by the realization that their sex has nothing to do with their relation. So both in shock and ecstasy they yell, “‘You’re a woman, Shel!’…‘You’re a man, Orlando!’”

However, their love threatens to reinsert them in the double bind encountered earlier—the limiting choices of either revolution or acquiescence. Indeed, they become so comfortable, so satisfied in themselves, that they cease to act at all and gesture towards those inactive subjects that the novel has already rejected. As Woolf writes, “they knew each other so well that they
could say anything they liked, which is tantamount to saying nothing….For it has come about…that our modern spirit can almost dispense with language…the most ordinary conversation is often the most poetic, and the most poetic is precisely that which cannot be written down” (253). Woolf’s subjects stand on a dangerous precipice. Being so comfortable and free with each other, they can say anything. But “saying anything” does not quite equal freedom, or freedom of speech. Rather, it is “tantamount to saying nothing,” to becoming completely ineffective and useless. Woolf sees the dangerous world that her new sense of self might impel: a world that can “dispense with language” altogether. And while there is, as the passage goes on to say, a certain poetry to this silence, it is the poetry of those other proto-modernists with whom Woolf does not quite feel at home. It is the poetry, arguably, of the French school—Stephane Mallarmé, Paul Verlaine—and of the geographically closer Oscar Wilde, who promote art not for morality’s sake, say, nor for political justice—just “art for art’s sake,” as that old mantra goes. Comfort and rest thus quickly fall into emptiness.

But Woolf holds onto the position that crosses both boundaries in Orlando, when Orlando and Shel decide to rejoin society, now in the form of a traditional, nuclear family.

[I]n the space of three seconds and a half, everything had changed—she had broken her ankle, fallen in love, married Shelmerdine. There was the wedding ring on her finger to prove it…she had in mind…the effect that her behaviour would have had upon the spirit of the age. She was extremely anxious to be informed whether the steps she had taken in the matter of getting engaged to Shelmerdine and marrying him met with its approval. (263-4)

One reading might see Orlando’s marriage, her so obviously bourgeois wedding ring, the child that she will soon bear, as a sign that Woolf has given up her revolutionary sense of
indeterminate identity to recommend a quiet, indeed acquiescent, life of convention. But while Orlando does now have a family, it is not quite a conventional one. It is composed of the shifting Shel and the radical Orlando whom we’ve seen until now in so many different incarnations, living such varied lives over the course of at least three centuries. Woolf’s idea of selfhood is honed in this chapter, because we now see that Orlando’s career is not, after all, just a matter of living in different and varied moments that remain isolated from one another. But neither is it a matter of resolving those moments into each other. Rather, it involves a consciousness of the moments as lost, so that Orlando’s seemingly traditional decision to make a family cannot be taken up as an event divorced from her more unconventional past, but is haunted by it. Accordingly, the novel is explicit about the fact that Orlando’s decision to form a family is not at all equivalent to becoming quiescent. Indeed, it is through this family that she attempts a more effective form of political action. For as her biographer writes, “she had in mind…the effect that her behaviour would have had upon the spirit of the age” (264). Getting married is not Orlando’s way of retreating from social and political life, nor her way of submitting to conventional roles. It is, much more radically, her try at speaking the terms of the age with a new voice and a new aim.

Only the spirit of this age quickly solidifies into the next age, the age of the present moment as it were without spirit, and it is this presentness that poses such a problem for Woolf and her characters: “It was the eleventh of October. It was 1928. It was the present moment. No one need wonder that Orlando started, pressed her hand to her heart, and turned pale. For what more terrifying revelation can there be than that it is the present moment” (298). What is terrifying is a past lost that haunts the present. For what Woolf retrieves in the present is not the past itself, the identities one lived in the past, but the ephemerality of the past and of these
identities of the past—that is, once again, loss as loss. And perhaps what Woolf achieves is a sort of homeopathic cure to the terror of this loss by facing it, embodying it, in a sense impersonalizing it, but taking the impersonality personally: as pathos. Orlando’s past lives as first a man and a lord, a diplomat and a runaway are irrecoverable. But they are not forgotten. They remain as irrecoverable, and this is what turns her cheeks pale. For a moment, a single self is imposed on her and a new formula for successful living is promoted: “It cannot be denied that the most successful practitioners of the art of life…somehow contrive to synchronise the sixty or seventy different times which beat simultaneously in every normal human system” (305). But while synchrony may save Clarissa Dalloway and Lily Briscoe, giving them each a single and comprehensible life, it marks the end of Orlando’s once triumphant and promising mobility. This is not Orlando’s failing, nor is it the failing of the new subject that Woolf describes. The world is simply not ready for the kind of subject that Orlando offers, and Woolf knows it. So the novel ends in the most present moment possible, giving us a vision of a world trapped: “the twelfth stroke of midnight sounded; the twelfth stroke of midnight, Thursday, the eleventh of October, Nineteen Hundred and Twenty-eight” (329).

IV. Between the Acts and the Return of the Chorus

Between the Acts, Woolf’s final novel, published posthumously, reiterates some of the movements Woolf makes in Orlando, but in more communal form. Taking the embodiment of pathos as her endpoint, as she does in Orlando, Woolf ultimately gives us a whole community of pathetic subjects, rather than just one. To do this, Woolf begins at the beginning, as it were, retreating, first, into a fantasy of the past, a past prior to emotional engagement and, indeed, prior to persons who might even come to miss the possibility of being engaged. It is a world, as Woolf
puts it at the end of the novel, “before roads were made, or houses…[when] dwellers in caves had watched from some high place among rocks” (219). It is a world, as one critic puts it, of “prehistor[y]” (Blodgett, 32). Civilization has not yet made its mark, and the world is not fully inhabited. There is nothing and no one with which to emotionally engage and thus nothing yet to lose.

Accordingly, one of the most prominent characters is the novel is nature. Mrs. Swithin feels it in the chirping birds whom she insists “come every year…the same birds.” We see it in the swampy “hollow” on which the century old house, Pointz Hall, is built, “Obviously to escape from nature” (8), as Bart Oliver explains it. And it is evident in the rain that intermittently interrupts and threatens, throughout, to end the pageant. The first sentence of the novel even begins with a seasonal description: “It was a Summer’s night and they were talking, in the big room with the window open to the garden, about the cesspool” (3). Nature is a constant force in this novel—acting without the consent of humanity and acting even in the absence of humanity, as that first passage I quoted reveals. Or, even more forcefully, in this opening sentence, nature is even the arbiter of human activities. And because of its permanence, it is the measure against which the characters must gauge the worth of their actions. So the fact of its being a Summer’s night is not merely incidental but the proof of the inappropriateness of the discussion of the cesspool. Mrs. Haines knows it and immediately objects: “’What a subject to talk about on a night like this!’” (3)

It is, in part, because of scenes like these that Woolf, and this novel in particular, has been taken up by scholars of what has come to be called “eco-criticism.” In one study, Christina Alt writes that the novel “highlights the constant interaction and exchange between human beings and the natural world” (9), and she attempts to show Woolf’s engagement with taxonomy,
biology, ethology and ecology (2). But nature in this novel is less inviting than the eco-critics acknowledge. For, as I’ve already hinted, it also refers to a kind of Hobbesian/Rousseauistic “state of nature”—original time, original chaos, prior to civilization and prior to humanity as we now know it.

Mrs. Swithin, also called Lucy, also Cindy, also Old Flimsy—as if we are so prior to civilization that even names are not established as secure identifiers—is the “primary bearer” of this prehistory, and she obsessively tries to reconstruct a rich past to compensate for her insignificance. In recollecting her mother scolding her in her bedroom, she attempts an “imaginative reconstruction of the past” (9). She also attempts a broader, more evolutionary reconstruction, thinking of the world long ago, “populated, she understood, by elephant-bodied, seal-necked, heaving, surging, slowly writhing, and, she supposed, barking monsters; the iguanodon, the mammoth, and the mastodon; from whom presumably, she thought, jerking the window open, we descend” (8-9). In the latter instance, she attempts a history of all living creatures, a kind of pop-Darwinism. But her histories quickly dissolve into fictions, and as she leads William Dodge on a tour through Pointz Hall, stopping at the top of the staircase to see “a small powdered face, a great head-dress slung with pearls…an ancestress of sorts” (7), the lie is unmasked. “Not an ancestress,” she admits, “But we claim her because we’ve known her—O, ever so many years” (68). To Mrs. Swithin, an invented history is the best bet. It lends her meager past and thin future—consisting of one dead husband, no home, no children, no lineage—a richer texture. But to William, this fictional history amounts to no history at all. After watching the third act of the pageant, the Victorian period, Mrs. Swithin reflects: “‘The Victorians…I don’t believe,’ she said with her odd little smile, ‘that there ever were such people. Only you and me and William dressed differently’” (174). William is indignant at this
whitewashing of the past and declares, “‘You don’t believe in history’” (175). William is right and wrong. Mrs. Swithin does not, it is true, acknowledge the particularity of historical periods defined by anything essential. And she does not really know from whom or from where she comes. But this is not because she does not believe so much as it is because there is nothing to believe in. She has no children and no longer a husband either. She lives as a boarder in the house of her childhood, the house that now belongs to her brother and his much fuller family. But even more poignantly, like the rest of this fragmented modernist generation, Mrs. Swithin is threatened by the prospect of having no frame in which to place herself and no ancestry even to fight against. So in just the opposite way of Orlando, whose four hundred-year life gives him a personal history as large and rich as a national one, a history with boundaries so exploded as to include everything, Mrs. Swithin is a woman whose historical boundaries constrict her until there is no history left. And instead, she invents false histories that give her the semblance of something to which she might be emotionally attached, the semblance of something to lose.

These reconstructions have another purpose, as well. Insisting as they do on the past, they work to fend off the future, which is to Mrs. Swithin, and to this WWII era novel as a whole, the most terrifying thing of all. In this way, there is a kind of double motion to the novel—constantly propelling us forward to the inevitability of the war, which, as Gillian Beer notes, will begin just six weeks from the day on which the novel takes place. But insisting, throughout, on the legacies—true and false—of the past, the novel also holds us back. So the novel progresses and regresses, going nowhere but neither, really, staying somewhere.

These are the pressures of modernity as Woolf understands it. To quote again the passage from *Orlando*: “For what more terrifying revelation can there be than that it is the present moment.” The fantasy of connection to the past will not do. And the future means that the present will soon be as past and fantastic. The present is haunted by, but unconnected to, the past and future both. It is disconnected, isolated, a fragment. And so the theme of “orts, scraps and fragments,” as Woolf puts it, quoting Shakespeare, is central to the novel’s sense of modernist dissolution, a loss of connection with history that Woolf will attempt to embody in communal form. For as the fragments refer to the individuals, separate and disconnected, who gather at Pointz Hall to view the annual pageant, they also refer to the pieces of English history—from the Elizabethan era to the contemporary moment—enacted in the pageant, a real-life actualization, almost, of *Anon*. Taken together, the day at Pointz Hall spent watching the community play is meant to unite the orts, scraps and fragments into some whole, the whole of an audience, say. This is a resonant and familiar ambition for Woolf. Clarissa Dalloway’s party gathers together the disparate people who have made up her life; Mrs. Ramsay’s dinner gathers together the various guests at her beach house; Lily’s artwork gathers together the two masses. For Woolf, art has the potential to unite all that seems irremediably far apart, even just momentarily. And for most of her career, Woolf’s art achieves this unity. Indeed, in Woolf’s manuscript of *Anon*, it is the stage, with the participatory audience, that most exemplifies the communal spirit of Anon. As she writes, “Every body shared in the emotion of Anons (sic) song...[he] let the audience join in the chorus” (382).

But in *Between the Acts*, Woolf goes further. She gives the stage another turn. As I’ve suggested, an important property of pathos, different from sympathy, and taken from its origin on the ancient Greek stage, is the way in which it connects people not through identification but
through witnessing, through a registering of the losses and sufferings of each other and of themselves. In ancient Greek drama, this witnessing is figured in the chorus, the communal mouthpiece that gathers together the audience and the characters or, more forcefully, as August Wilhelm Schlegel has explained it, that is meant to demonstrate the reactions of an ideal audience. Of course, that ideal is peculiar to the Greek sense of itself. The Greek chorus is not a chorus of individuals as we now know them, of punctual, let alone modernist, individuals. And it therefore does not join together disparate, individuated people, but speaks the norm of people already connected by their culture, in effect, revealing the culture to itself. With the advent of the novel, and especially in the novel of sensibility of the eighteenth century, which marks, as well, the advent of individuality and the moral subject, the witnessing aspect of the chorus fades. Instead, attempting to stem the tide of individuation, the novel asks readers to come back together through sympathy. Thus, the Greek chorus of witnessing becomes the normative “we” of sympathizing, the narrator who implores the reader to share the novel’s feelings. For a long time, this novelistic stance of “we” was the primary method for affecting sympathetic appeal, and it is visible, in extreme forms, in sentimental novels like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and in moderate forms, in moralist writers like Jane Austen and George Eliot, where “we” is meant to instantiate a community of readers. But in *Between the Acts*, as Woolf rehabilitates the Greek chorus, she turns now from an idealized witness that registers a generalized cultural pain to a conglomeration of witnesses who register their loss of community as well. The orts and scraps are not now united into one, as they were in previous novels, but become a chorus singing itself as dissolution, both the witness and the subject of its loss.

What echoes on the gramophone over and over again, haunting the audience through out the pageant, is, accordingly, “Dispersed are we.” This is the breakdown not only of sympathy
and the closeness it once promised, nor just the breakdown of Anon’s communal force. It is also the breakdown of voice itself, its hollowing out: “The playwright is replaced by the man who writes a book. The audience is replaced by the reader. Anon is dead” (398). Woolf seems to indicate here that the death of Anon arrives with the advent of the novel, the individual author speaking to the individual reader. And while this audience that gathers at Pointz Hall is not the reader, per se, it is not the audience of former times either. It is fragmented and unable to join in the words of the gramophone. What’s more, the gramophone, while presumably the distorted voice of Miss La Trobe, is just a mechanical device. In other words, the death of Anon is enacted here as the transformation of the communal singer into a projecting machine and the communal audience into its receivers.

What is so poignant about the non-voice of the gramophone, then, is that, issuing sounds and mantras that no one is quite able to place throughout the pageant, it tries to mimic the voice of an Anon whose absence is thus held in view. It attempts precisely what this whole novel attempts, a retreat into the distant past, when that anonymous spirit of British literature, the unnameable, unlocatable mouthpiece that speaks for the community, can be heard. Only there is nothing, really, any more to hear and no one, exactly, to hear it. Accordingly, the first three acts, the history of England through the Victorian period, do give the audience some semblance of community. Indeed, mimicking the social climate before the modernist period, those three acts achieve in the audience the proper desire of union, sympathy and camaraderie. And by the time the fourth act, “Present Moment: Ourselves,” begins, the members of the audience are eager to solidify the feeling of community that they’ve already experienced. Only watching themselves in the shards of glass and mirrors that the actors hold up to them, what is revealed is only their fragmentation and themselves as witnesses to their fragmentation:
The gramophone was affirming in tones there was no denying, triumphant yet valedictory: *Dispersed are we; who have come together. But*, the gramophone asserted, *let us retain whatever made that harmony.* O let us, the audience echoed (stooping, peering, fumbling), keep together. For there is joy, sweet joy, in company.

*Dispersed are we, the gramophone repeated.* (196)

The gramophone, as if itself stuck in the previous eras, confirms the desire of the audience for that Smithian “society of harmony.” But unable to hold on to this idea in the modernist era, it quickly dissolves into the shattering declaration that they are, forever, dispersed. To be gathered together at a play about the present moment, modernist time, means to be gathered in fragmentation, to be gathered without the possibility of really being brought together. And art has lost its power to do anything other than represent the stark reality of a June day in 1939.

The voice on the gramophone continues: “*Look at ourselves, ladies and gentlemen! Then at the wall; and how’s this wall, the great wall, which we call, perhaps miscall, civilization, to be built by* (here the mirrors flicked and flashed) *orts, scraps and fragments*” (188). We have reached, in some sense, the limits of modernism, modernism that sinks back into prehistory, into the realization that mere orts, scraps and fragments can’t possibly continue to build civilization. And the mirrors held up by the actors turn the audience members into the embodiment of this retreat, subjects witness to their own subjectlessness.

This is further confirmed in the final scene of the novel, from which the passage I began with is taken. The pageant is over, the guests have left, and Giles and Isa are left alone.

Isa let her sewing drop. The great hooded chairs had become enormous. And Giles too. And Isa too against the window. The window was all sky without
colour. The house had lost its shelter. It was night before roads were made, or houses. It was the night that dwellers in caves had watched from some high place among rocks. Then the curtain rose. They spoke. (219)

Giles and Isa, alone together at last, are taken back in time, to the primitive life of prehistory. The house they stand in, Pointz Hall, is no shelter at all. It cannot protect them, it cannot create in them any feelings of intimacy. They speak, ultimately, but it is not the speech of a husband and wife sharing each other’s thoughts. It is the speech of a stage couple, directed to communicate. For the “curtain rose,” the stage is set, and the actors, as it were, recite their lines. The play never ends in this novel, seeping into the lives of the main characters, directing them in their private, domestic affairs. And what speaks is not two people, but just the words themselves stripped from the mouths of actual human beings. For here, in this prehistoric world that Woolf imagines, placed at the extreme end of modernism, at the moment just before Woolf’s suicide, characters no longer exist to speak their authors’ words, and what there is to speak is not even clear. Pathos has become all. And it is in such a situation, as I will now show, that Gertrude Stein attempts her own sort of speech.

---

32 For Blodgett, the ending is more optimistic than that, and she reads the persistence of nature and the resurrection of prehistory as “a statement of life’s vital potential” (27). It’s a noble project to save this novel from the bleakness to which it seems destined, but ultimately a project too starry-eyed for a book that ends so sardonically about the limitations of relationships, art, and nature itself.
Chapter Three: Gertrude Stein’s Unlived Lives

I. Introduction

Gertrude Stein moves, in a sense, a step too far on the trajectory of pathos, inhabiting so fully the world of the modernist subject that what subjects once were is virtually forgotten. Their loss cannot even be witnessed, and the gap between what they once were and what they now are is no longer legible. In this way, if James is the forefather of modernist pathos, as I am arguing, and Woolf is its exemplar, then Stein is its wayward child.\(^{33}\) Both old and new reviews of Stein’s oeuvre suggest just this about her placement in modernism, more generally. In her introduction to the 1996 special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies*, for example, Marianne DeKoven declared that Stein will “never quite be canonical” (469). Even after a revaluation of her in the 70s and then again in the 90s, DeKoven notes, her social status as friend to Picasso and Hemingway and host of the salon at 27 Rue de Fleurus has always outshined her literary achievements. The reason for Stein’s omission from modernism’s anointed comes down to her “unreadability.” Edmund Wilson wrote in 1931 that “most of what Miss Stein publishes nowadays must apparently remain absolutely unintelligible even to a sympathetic reader” (243), and Elaine Showalter, while not in agreement with such critics, still notes that Stein “is widely acknowledged to be unreadable, incomprehensible, self-indulgent and excruciatingly boring” (253).\(^{34}\) But just what makes Stein’s work unreadable has yet to be fully articulated in any satisfactory way, many critics merely describing the difficulty of her language—repetition, repetition,

\(^{33}\) In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein writes in Alice’s voice: “of Henry James…she now has a very great admiration and…she considers [him] quite definitely as her forerunner, he being the only nineteenth century writer who being an american felt the method of the twentieth century” (78). As a psychology student of William James’s at Harvard/Radcliffe, Stein seems to have imbibed some of the Jamesian interest in humanity’s deep psychological workings, and throughout her career, Stein remained a devoted reader and admirer of her teacher’s brother, noting, in particular, the way in which his work heralds the avant-garde modernist movement to which Stein belonged.

\(^{34}\) Wilson did, however, admire Stein’s *Three Lives*, and I will discuss, to some extent, why this novel has more universal appeal.
unusual syntax, lack of referents—rather than accounting for it.

In what follows, I wish to give such an account, arguing that the difficulty of her writing—though Stein did a good deal of aesthetic experimentation—is not the result of experimentation per se. Rather it is a reflection of Stein’s notion of a new modernist subject who, no longer capable of founding himself on the claims of moral agency nor capable of commanding sympathetic identification, is also so fully situated in these losses that he is incapable of recognizing them as losses. Thus, neither Stein nor the characters in her works are active or engaged. They do not relate to each other as traditional characters do, nor do they relate to each other as other modernist characters we’ve encountered do. They exist otherwise. And aware of the possibilities and limitations of that existence, Stein explores its difficulties.

This is why Stein’s subject is harder to place than James’s or Woolf’s. Neither formed over and against the lost Victorian subject, as in James, nor articulating itself as a self-conscious reflection of that loss, as in Woolf, Stein’s subject seems to lack all connection to the canon of traditional Anglophone literature. Her language and her characters emerge not in response to the inadequacies of some former subject, as a kind of corrective to the failures of Victorian literature, say, but as something apart, and her detractors object. For Barbara Will, Stein’s attitude towards the nineteenth century is dismissive, an era “insistently portrayed in her writing as a moment of… petit bourgeois values” (Unlikely Collaboration, 49). Stein’s disregard of the previous generation, in Will’s opinion, is not primarily literary, nor is it innocent but is in keeping with fascists like Ezra Pound and Bernard Faÿ, director of the Bibliothèque National and historian of Franco-American relations, who saw it as the era of an order they ultimately rejected in favor of militarism and fascism. Although I have a very different reading of Stein’s political sensibilities, to which I will turn at the end of this chapter, Will’s point is well taken that Stein’s
connection to her immediate past, literary and political, is one of disdain rather than nostalgia or longing, and this is instructive for positioning Stein and her conception of subjectivity at a distance from even her literary contemporaries whose characters, by contrast, seem directly linked to their predecessors.

This previous literary subject is, as I’ve noted, Taylor’s punctual subject, against which James and Woolf form their subjects and in blindness to which Stein forms hers. Taylor describes this subject variously, but one of his formulations is particularly useful for understanding Stein, as he notes that “In our languages of self-understanding the opposition ‘inside-outside’ plays an important role. We think of our thoughts, ideas, or feelings as being ‘within’ us, while the objects in the world which these mental states bear on are ‘without’” (111). Taylor rightly suggests, that is, that the implicit contention of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century conceptions of self is that people have insides and outsides, which they must, in order to live successfully, negotiate. Thus, “a human agent…is able to remake himself by methodical and disciplined action. What this calls for is the ability to take an instrumental stance in relation to one’s given properties, desires, inclinations, tendencies, habits of thought and feeling, so that they can be worked on, doing away with some and strengthening others, until one meets the desired specifications” (159-60). As Taylor sees it, the punctual self is self-corrective. So one way of seeing modernism’s radical break is in its understanding the self as no longer configured by insides and outsides or “self-correcting” moral agency altogether. In James, with his ubiquitous use of free indirect discourse, outsides and insides are still important structures—characters have deep internal consciousnesses with which they negotiate, often obsessively, the

---

35 Taylor, a philosopher rather than a literary scholar, tracking the shifts in philosophical movements, rather than the shifts in novelistic history, of course takes this to be the contemporary conception of the self too. Still, Taylor admits that this conception “had a beginning in time and space and may have an end” (111), and I will argue that the end has already happened, with the modernist novels of the early twentieth century.
terms of the outside world—but, revealed through a narrator whose voice is never quite separate from the character’s own, the boundaries of any individual’s inside and outside are made fluid. Similarly in Woolf, her use of stream-of-consciousness works to effectively collapse the categories altogether, as the force of the mind’s inner wanderings subsumes any grounding in the outside world. But Stein’s relationship to insides and outsides is different from these more traditionally modernist approaches. For insides and outsides are barely even posited in Stein, and when they are, they have hardly any content to substantiate them. Against the backdrop of British and American literary canons, then, Stein is, indeed, unreadable.

Yet viewed through the lens of pathos, Stein’s subjects, while never quite canonical and never exactly “readable,” can be described as an experiment in extremis of an attempt to encounter the modernist subject we saw in James and Woolf. Stein’s work, like theirs, is certainly about loss—the loss of subjects who can act “punctually,” the loss of the nominative function of language, the loss of recognizable literary genres altogether. But while for James the pathos of this loss is legible in the way his subjects coalesce around a Victorian moral agent who is fading away, and in Woolf pathos becomes embodied, as in the form of Orlando, as that subject witnessing herself, in Stein’s work, pathos lacks any such anchoring. This does not mean that pathos is altogether absent in Stein, only that without a body to represent it, its visibility is more obscured, and without a functioning mind to articulate it, it is rendered as the textual effect of a language that only barely comes together through the sheer force of Stein’s writerly will. Evacuated of insides and outsides, evacuated, in other words, of consciousness itself, Stein’s writing is propelled not by the psyches, desires or actions of her characters nor by the mechanics of the plot, of which there is so little, but by her writing itself and its inability to reference character or a character’s development at all. The result is a kind of aesthetic accumulation,
where language and the lives of characters feed on the repetition for which Stein is known. Or, to put it as Stein might, writing is writing is writing is writing—without reference, without tense, without, almost, even a writer who is anything more than just her writing.

Put another way, we might call Stein’s alternative writing style non-psychological, and it issues in an alternative manifestation of pathos. For Stein’s characters are not subjects whose loss her writing describes, but subjects lost in her writing, not subjects of loss, as are James’s and Woolf’s, but subjects themselves lost. Without an inner sphere to contemplate and assess, and without an outer sphere to correct and implement, they lack the faculties to bear witness to their own losses. Pathos in Stein is thus both more and less pronounced than it is in the others. Unmediated by a witness, it exists in its purest form, but lacking a witness, it cannot really be translated into felt emotions, and it thus exists in precisely the way Stein’s writing exists—illegible, almost unreadable, to use that word again, and passive in the sense of its not revealing or accomplishing anything except its own circulation.

Critics have accordingly erred in taking Stein too literally when she speaks, in The Making of Americans, early in her career, of getting at people’s “bottom nature.” They have largely assumed that she upholds the traditional structure of the inside-outside binary, encouraged, as some have argued, by her early reading of Otto Weininger’s misogynistic, anti-Semitic Geschlecht und Charakter (Sex and Character), and indeed, Stein does, at times, posit oppositions, insides and outsides included. As Richard Bridgman puts it in Gertrude Stein in Pieces, “Gertrude Stein saw things in two—in pairs and opposites” (9). But Stein does not so much uphold oppositions as disrupt them, leaving their structure as a mere trace. Thus, although as she more accurately records it in The Autobiography, speaking in Alice’s voice about herself

---

36 For the influence of Otto Weininger on Stein’s writing, see Barbara Will’s “Gertrude Stein and Zionism” and Leon Katz’s “Weininger and The Making of Americans.”
in the third person, “She always was, she always is, tormented by the problem of the external and the internal” (119, emphasis mine), this torment gets dramatized as a vacating of any difference between the two, rather than as an attempt to establish priority between them or negotiate their relative significance.

Such is the case in *Four in America*, an essay that imagines four famous figures in alternative occupations. Ulysses S. Grant becomes a religious leader then saint, Wilbur Wright a painter, George Washington a novelist, and Henry James, with his well-known weak constitution, becomes a very unlikely military general. Only whatever these four figures do, however different their new lives seem to be, they all end up as they were. James is a general, but unable to escape his Jamesness, he writes novels in his free time. And of Wilbur Wright, Stein muses, “If Wilbur Wright had been a painter, just like there are painters American painters would he have been different from what he was. Not at all” (*FA*, 86). Ulysses S. Grant might seem to be an exception, for split early on into one Hiram Grant and the other Ulysses S. Grant, this figure does, at first blush, seem capable of the kind of change to which a traditional character may be subject. Only he is an exception that proves the rule, for with the change of name, comes a whole new person, and Stein’s point is not that people are capable of real self-reflection and improvement, but that each individual is strapped with his own set of immutabilities, call them internal or external as you will. For without proper insides and outsides to assess and correct each other, character development is merely nominal. No act of will, no sense of moral duty or obligation can alter their “bottom nature,” a category which, in fact, as the story of Ulysses S. Grant illustrates, is itself a moving target. This realization might be comforting—we are who we are—or it might be terrifying—we can never be anyone else—if Stein’s subjects were conceived of traditionally. But configured otherwise, forming an affective relationship—either of comfort
or terror—with that bottomless “I” is precisely the problem, and in its place is the pathos of that affective inadequacy.

Others have explained Stein’s conception of insides and outsides, or as she alternatively called it, “entity” and “identity,” differently. In a queer reading of the James section of *Four in America*, Eric Haralson, for example, offers an explanation of Stein’s cryptic assertion that “I often think how Henry James saw. He saw he could write both ways at once” (*Four in America* 163). For Haralson, “Stein means that James composed ‘at once’ in the mode of utmost interiority—what she thought of as ‘entity’ writing reflecting one’s close-to-the-bone ‘internal troubles’—and in the mode of anticipatory accommodation to readerly tastes, a ‘smoother,’ less integral ‘identity’ writing” (240). Haralson is not alone in this kind of interpretation. Barbara Will and Kirk Curnutt similarly highlight this opposition.37 For them, Stein’s meditations on identity (and entity), especially as found in her 1936 *Geographical History of America*, are expressions of her anxiety over the success of *The Autobiography* and her concern that she was losing her inner, true self to an outer, merely popular self. Curnutt even goes so far as to say that Stein borrows the inner-outer dichotomy from the cult of celebrity, which was consumed with real and fake representations of movie stars. He uses Stein’s nursery rhyme refrain (in fact, Stein was once derogatorily referred to as the “Mother Goose of Montparnasse”) from that same text to prove his point: “I am I because my little dog knows me. But perhaps he does not and if he did I would not be I. Oh no oh no.” To Curnutt, this reads as Stein’s insistence that “there are two selves: an external ‘I,’ whom a pet may recognize as its master, and an interior ‘I’ that exists

37 See Barbara Will’s *Gertrude Stein, Modernism, and the Problem of Genius* where she writes, “Of course Stein herself would appear to subscribe to this opposition by generating a distinction in the 1930s between ‘entity’ and ‘identity writing’: the former an expression of the autonomous ‘human mind,’ the latter the product of the relational ‘human nature’” (156, footnote 7) and Kirk Curnutt’s “Inside and Outside: Gertrude Stein on Identity, Celebrity, and Authenticity.”
independent of observation” (291). Stein did own a dog, actually three, fluffy poodles, sometimes mistaken for sheep, named Basket I, and his replacements, Basket II, and Basket III. Stein is often seen in photographs with her dog, and he makes a kind of veiled appearance in Three Lives as one of the Good Anna’s many beloved dogs—Peter, Baby, Rags. But Curnutt seems to misconstrue Stein’s love of dogs in this analysis. For Stein’s use of a dog to prove her existence does not work to uphold that Enlightenment ideal of secure insides and outsides but to puncture, even parody, it. That is, the parody goes further than Curnutt supposes, parodying not superficial existence but the conception of existence of which the distinction between the superficial and the substantial are expressions. Thus, as Stein more definitively puts it, “and yet a little dog knowing me does not really make me be I no not really because after all being I I am I has really nothing to do with the little dog knowing me, he is my audience, but an audience never does prove to you that you are you” (Geographical History 405). Stein’s dog does nothing to prove her existence, because existence itself—once conceived of as the duality of inner and outer—is no longer on such steady ground. And with this destabilization, the chorus of ancient Greek theater that once acted as witness, as I have described in Chapter Two, becomes nothing more than a dog, whose capacity for witnessing has hardly any power at all, and it too dissolves.38

To put this in other terms, language becomes a false sign in Stein’s writing. Never really referring to any particular thing, it never really communicates any particular message, because it is never owned by anyone and never represents what someone thinks or feels. It just is. And it, too, is constituted by pathos—the loss of language doing its ordinary work of expressing where someone is in relation to the world, its objects and its inhabitants. In “Poetry and Grammar,”

38 Charles Bernstein comes closer to an understanding of Stein’s use of “identity” when he writes that Stein “shows identity as an acting out rather than as an inner state; extremely animated, not fixed” (“Stein’s Identity,” 485). “Identity” for Bernstein is not some inner core to an outer shell; it is rather the signifier of a self in flux.
Stein explains this loss: “nouns as I say even by definition are completely not interesting” (314). Proper names get similar treatment and are rejected as purely denotative, merely referring to a thing that also is. As much as possible, Stein expunges them from her writing.

This is one reason Marjorie Perloff has compellingly argued for a connection between Stein and Wittgenstein. Like Wittgenstein, Perloff writes, Stein is interested not in nouns but in “prepositions, articles, conjunctions, and especially pronouns” (89-90). As she explains it, what Stein and Wittgenstein share in their odd language games and interrogations of seemingly nonsensical statements like “milk me sugar” (Wittgenstein) and “roast potatoes for” (Stein) is an interest in grammar or “the strangeness of the ordinary and the ‘bumping of one’s head’ against the limits of language.” For Perloff, these overlapping interests are largely the result of the writers’ positions on the margins—both are expats and both are gay, to give just two examples. As such, an interest in grammar replaces the way most authors who are “at home” treat various “heightened” forms of language like metaphor, “embellishment, and transformation” (87).

Perloff’s use of Wittgenstein and Ordinary Language Philosophy, more generally, is apt. And as Stein inherits the interests of her teacher, William James, whose pragmatist philosophy shares much with OLP, the connection is fortified. For all three—Stein, Wittgenstein and James—attempt to resituate language in our everyday lives, to repossess philosophy from its lofty claims to referentiality by purging it of its Platonic claims to truth and knowledge and by re-situating it in ordinary life. But there are important differences between these Wittgenstein and Stein that Perloff misses. For Wittgenstein imagines a traditional subject in whom meaning resides. Ordinary language, for him, is language as used by ordinary people. But Stein imagines a very different “ordinary,” a modernist person who is incapable of meaning anything. And what

39 See Steven Meyer’s “‘The Physiognomy of the Thing’: Sentences and Paragraphs in Stein and Wittgenstein” for another comparison of the two.
Stein will explore in her Wittgensteinian games is not, accordingly, the extent to which subjects’ use of language signals either their successes or failures in expressing themselves but the ways in which expression has separated itself from subjects altogether. For Stein, in other words, language is not a form of life, or, rather, it is the form of a different sort of life, and its limits are what she aims to test.

In “Poetry and Grammar” Stein writes that “Sentences are not emotional but paragraphs are” (322), and she goes on to show how the real work of her writing is to transform the meager form of the sentence with its fundamentally nominative function into the robust, emotionally potent form of the paragraph where nomination is not the essential point. But thus she attempts to explore emotion not based in nomination, of persons no less than things, at all. Sianne Ngai explains that Stein attempts here to “erode the formal difference…between sentences and paragraphs” in order to “challenge dominant systems of sense-making, a challenge that she would pursue throughout her career” (250-1). Ngai is interested in an affect she calls “stuplimity”—a combination of “extreme shock and boredom” (254), presumably a portmanteau for “stupefaction” and “sublimity”—which is meant as a form of political resistance, acting as a kind of clog in the bourgeois capitalist system that thus reveals its insufficiencies. Shock and boredom seem like apt descriptors of the emotional state of Stein’s readers, but political resistance is not Stein’s aim, and a close reading of her sentences-turned-paragraphs offers another even more pronounced affect, the pathos of a world without subjects and without referents.

Take, for example, the first two sentences that Stein offers in the aptly titled “Sentences and Paragraphs”:

He looks like a young man grown old.
It looks like a garden but he had hurt himself by accident. (323-4)

What these sentences lack is much more striking than what they express. In “He looks like a young man grown old”—a sentence, it should be noted, that uncannily echoes Henry James’s description of Lord Mark in The Wings of the Dove, “It was difficult to guess his age—whether he were a young man who looked old or an old man who looked young” (173)—the questions mount. Who is “he”? And does looking like a young man make him a young man? As the sentence goes on, it seems likely, in fact, that he is not a young man at all, but a young man grown old. Does that make him old? Or does he merely look like someone who is old? Stein has stripped this sentence of its denotative function, leaving us with a pronoun—“he”—as the only secure identifier. Whether or not he is old but looks young, young but looks old or neither remains entirely unclear. There is a loss in this sentence, the loss of direct meaning, the loss of easy navigation that readers so desperately long for. It is this loss that speaks to the “unreadability” that so enrages and estranges Stein’s readers, but it is also this loss that transforms an otherwise affectively meager narrative form into one filled with emotion, albeit emotion of a special sort. For usually propositional, sentences state the way something is or was. Paragraphs, however, are more than a series of sentences. They express the writer’s conscious arrangement of what the sentences describe based on how he relates to them—what takes priority, what is more or less significant. Accordingly, when Stein turns her sentences into would-be paragraphs, she destroys readability from both ends, giving us affect without the building blocks on which affect is built, bringing to the sentence the emotional heft of loss—the loss of propositions, the loss of reference, the loss of the nominative function of language—but without any ability to name what it is that has been lost in the first place.

The next sentence in the list works similarly: “It looks like a garden but he had hurt
himself by accident.” What is missing from this statement is the causal link between “it looks like a garden” and “he had hurt himself by accident” that would justify the connective “but.” What’s more, in just the way we saw previously, it looks like a garden, but is it a garden? “He” is also unspecified and how, we wonder, had he hurt himself? Does the “but” explain that he hurt himself by accident or merely that he hurt himself? It is all indeterminate; it all expresses the absences in a language that once directed and referred. But the absences are so absent that the pathos of what has gone missing is too pervasive even for nomination.

If Stein is not completely sad about this, seeming, in fact, to revel in language’s gaps, she is keen to the ways in which the absences in language are not accidental, but the direct result of the absence of traditional subjectivity itself. As she famously records it in The Autobiography, one day a representative of the Grafton Press, who had received the manuscript of Three Lives, knocked on her door at 27 Rue de Fleurus. “Yes, she said. You see, he said slightly hesitant, the director of the Grafton Press is under the impression that perhaps your knowledge of English…” (68). Stein, of course, becomes indignant at the accusation. For stripping language of its communicative properties is not the result of poor education but of an honest confrontation with what a language without a subject sounds like, and in her confrontation with the rejection by the Grafton Press, Stein experiences it first hand.

Accordingly, as Perloff insists, what is integral to Wittgenstein and Stein both, and what has so often been missed about Stein, is that her preoccupation with the limits and gaps of language does not amount to her removal from ordinary life and language but, on the contrary, a deep investment in it. It is only that her conception of the ordinary in the modern world is so different that requires noting. So, Stein’s radical writing style aims at a form of “hyperrealism” (Perloff 96), or “a fine new realism,” as William James claimed after reading Three Lives, and
her work is, accordingly, “a treatise on grammar—grammar, that is to say, in its relation to human life” (WL 96). As Stein herself put it in *The Autobiography*, “She always however made her chief study people” (119). But the people she studies are people of a different sort.

II. The Good Anna

*Three Lives* is just such a study. The most “readable” of Stein’s texts, the closest thing she ever wrote to a traditional narrative, it invokes the characters and their stories of traditional novels more than any of her other works. Only even here, at the beginning of her career, they are characters and stories differently conceived. Configured with traditional structures—outsides and insides, proper names and dominant traits—the structures are without the content to fill them, and the Good Anna, the Gentle Lena, and the wandering Melanctha, the three eponymous characters of the novel, read as types rather than fully developed subjects. Their fairy tale names—mere abstractions that signify general kinds rather than particular people—suggest just this. Small and ordinary, their thoughts are conventional, clichés that might seem appropriate to their social status. But such status is never really internalized by them, and their language reveals a personhood almost entirely hollowed out, as they scramble in a web of language that once circulated among more traditionally moored subjects but that now no longer does. In “The Good Anna,” for example, we get a poor German servant, whose devotion to her employers structures her entire life. But servitude is not how she understands her condition. Anna is not meek. She is strong and dominant and always asserts herself and her ways above even her masters’. But here, too, her strength is no rebellion, for without a fully developed consciousness of what she is or what her ways are, without any content to fill the structure of “person” denoted by her name,

---

40 I am, to some extent, exaggerating here. *QED* is certainly a more traditional novel, but it is also a much less significant work, and I therefore exclude it from my discussion.
“The Good Anna,” Anna is just a shell of a traditional subject, and her use of language similarly emerges as a shell, never allowing her a stable place in or against a community, which itself never really is or comes to be, as she dies isolated and alone.

“The Gentle Lena” gives us the inverse model. Lena, too, is a poor German woman, but married off early, she leaves her job as a servant and is brought into a family where she is made wife and mother. Lena is given all of the opportunities that are unavailable to Anna. Yet for Lena, too, these social opportunities do not add up to anything more substantial. For if Anna’s evacuated subjectivity issues in a language too artificial to express the range of human personhood, Lena’s unpersonhood manifests itself as no language at all, and the possibility of her relating to another comes to naught, as she too dies alone in a hospital bed. Melanchtha comes closest to finding a lasting relationship, and she is, indeed, the most developed character of them all. She is not a servant, and with something of a consciousness absent in the others, she is aware of her own inner workings. Her talk even bespeaks an understanding of the ways in which it might be used to negotiate various social positions. But like the others, she is caught in a language that feels like a web, a language she can no longer make her own, and she, too, can never find a community or a relationship in which to settle. Accordingly, while she forms a serious connection with Jefferson Campbell, forever in the throes of modernist flux, she can never find rest, and their relationship, like everything else, slips away.

Stein’s characters have no place. And as radical experimenter with such characters, even Stein seems abstracted from them. She is anything but sentimental about them. And yet, the Good Anna, Melanchtha and the Gentle Lena can, after all, be placed in the light of what replaces sentiment, in the light of pathos, as people whose lives consist in a series of losses. And as the contours of traditional personhood implode and the modes of relating to others implode, the
pathos of their situation is visible as the remainder, the traces of forms no longer in effective use.

With this in mind, *Three Lives* returns us to those sentences turned paragraphs I discussed earlier. Indeed, in keeping with Stein’s “he looked like a young man grown old,” we might summarize the problem with the Good Anna as “she seemed like an inside become an outside.” For what marks Anna’s decomposition as a traditional subject is the way in which, evacuated of insides, she exhibits everything as an outside without inner content to which that outside might refer. Thus, her goodness, with which Stein practically brands her, is not, as it might traditionally be, a trait of character reflected in action, but a mere name, without the force of any morally conceived personhood to substantiate it. Goodness, that is, does not refer to “the good life,” as Plato conceived it, nor does it refer to some Kantian moral imperative. It does not even really refer to some colloquial understanding of good. It is merely a remnant of those old systems of meaning, the name of a quality without particular properties. Accordingly, Anna’s goodness begs—as my sentence-paragraph tries to express—a host of questions: What is inside and what is outside? She seemed like an inside, but is she? And what does an inside-become-outside look like? Ultimately, with insides and outsides so attenuated, with nothing securely established, “she,” like “he” in the original sentence, remains the only secure identifier.

Trapped by such a pared down version of personhood, Anna and her language consistently malfunction. For if a traditional person uses language to communicate and accommodate a variety of views, to form stable communities and lasting relationships, Anna’s meager self issues in a language similarly meager, a language narrow and restrictive that fails in just those ways. Goodness becomes for her not a virtue with a variety of expressions, understood by a variety of people in a variety of ways to be negotiated, but a term for anything she does, a “rigid designator,” to use Saul Kripke’s term, tied so radically to her situational activity that no
relation can be drawn between one situation and another.

While Anna works for Miss Mathilda, for example, a neighbor’s dog gives birth to pups. “The good Anna held to it stoutly that her Peter and her Rags were guiltless, and she made her statement with so much heat that Foxy’s owners were at last convinced that these results were due to neglect” (2). But later Anna admits, “Peter was the father of those pups...and they look just like him too...but Miss Mathilda, I would never let those people know that Peter was so bad” (2). Anna lies. Knowingly and unabashedly, she lies. Functioning as mere self-justification, goodness means nothing more than whatever Anna does, and telling the truth is always trumped by her situational doing, here her protecting Miss Mathilda, her house, and all that it includes. At most, lying can be easily written off as an unproblematic habit. So “Anna almost always did her duty. She made confession and her mission whenever it was right. Of course she did not tell the father when she deceived people for their good, or when she wanted them to give something for a little less” (39). Without the deliberative faculties of a moral agent, lying does nothing to alter Anna’s conception of the good. For the good itself is not really a conception but a convenient placeholder, referring merely to some empty activity. And good does not signify some true moral principle, but a trace of a language that once signified.

Anna treats her friends’ notions of the good with a similar haphazardness and lack of systemization. Thus Miss Mathilda’s newly purchased painting is deemed a waste of money, and Mrs. Lehntman’s adoption of an orphaned child just “ain’t right” (25), because “right,” like “good,” means what Anna says it means in a given situation. Worse even than that, Anna cannot see what she herself cherishes about Miss Mathilda, which is, in fact, her particular form of “goodness,” different from her own. Indeed, later in the section, we are told that “Anna was proud almost to bursting of her cherished Miss Mathilda with all her knowledge and her great
possessions” (39). It is precisely Miss Mathilda’s art collection and cultural knowledge to which Anna is drawn. And Anna’s friends are drawn to her too: “All Anna’s friends reverenced the good Anna’s cherished Miss Mathilda…poor people love to take advice from people who are friendly and above them, from people who read in books and who are good” (44, emphasis mine). Miss Mathilda has an idea of “goodness,” too. She, too, is called “good.” But, finally, her goodness is not Anna’s, and though Anna, in some way, sees it, even brings her friends to Miss Mathilda so that they may similarly benefit from it, without an inner sphere to fully understand what she feels, she can never actively acknowledge it, and Anna remains at a distance from her.

Anna may love Miss Mathilda and dote on Mrs. Lehntman, but with a subjectivity only sketched rather than fully developed, she is incapable of truly relating to them.

This is why the language Stein uses about Anna is at once so precise and so evasive. Stein offers pronouncements rather than descriptions, sentences, in my earlier terms, rather than paragraphs. Only just as Stein attacked the sentence by folding it into the paragraph, as I have discussed, here she delimits it so that it can never become part of a paragraph at all: “Anna was a medium sized, thin, hard working, worrying woman” (15). Or “Anna led an arduous and troubled life” (3). Or even, “Anna loved to work for men, for they could eat so much and with such joy” (20). There is no hesitation, no equivocation, no hedging that might suggest the usual gaps that open up in any attempt at representation or leave room for interpretation. The pronouncements are so definite that there is nothing that even suggests how one pronouncement might be related to another. This is not because at the core of Anna is some stable moral center which the sentences all describe. Nor is it even because her social position is securely intact, providing a possible alternative center, as I will soon show. Rather, because she is a subject deprived of traditional personhood, these pronouncements are the best that can be managed in defining her.
And the same is true for the pronouncements that Anna herself makes. At times, they procure Anna what she demands—the right price at the market, the temporary devotion of her employers—but more often than not, they read as linguistic misfires.

So Anna has definite ideas about everyone and everything, and her common refrain is that she always knows “the right way for a girl to do” (6). But Anna seems here to mimic the model of the punctual moral subject rather than be it. Stern and dogmatic, settled in her station and assured of right and wrong, Anna looks like the perfect nineteenth-century character, and “good” as moral righteousness sounds like an accurate description of her dominant trait. Only goodness for Anna has an overly assertive and insufficiently referential function. Anna is not altogether distraught about this insufficiency, because as a broken down subject, she has no inner sphere in which to experience it. In this way, Anna is not a witness to herself. And unlike Kate Croy, whose experiences as a modern subject are formed against the old moral one that Densher represents, Anna’s experience comes without any such recognition. Accordingly, Anna herself, and Lena too, is just a textual effect, a modernist subject with no self-consciousness to acknowledge it and no life separate from the text. Put another way, in Anna inwardnesss and outwardness are essentially the same thing. Her dictums are thus never restrained by the privacy of her thoughts, and Anna is outspoken, or “voluble,” as one critic puts it. There is nothing internal to safeguard what she thinks from what she says, and eventually, her judgments are all pronounced, sometimes acerbically, sometimes lovingly to the people in her life.

This is not altogether bad. As Anna’s outward gestures are what she lives by, “scolding” is one of her favorite activities. And her happiness—its’s just a nominal category rather than the expression of some deep psychological state—working for Dr. Shonjen, a respected doctor in the community, is the result of the freedom he gives her to “guide and constantly rebuke to his own
good” (20). Most of the time, these rebukes give her benefactors pleasure, too. She makes life easy for the people around her, always assuming their responsibilities and their burdens, always caring about things that would otherwise be neglected. Serving others is her raison d’être, and she finds “her place with large, abundant women, for such were always lazy, careless or all helpless, and so the burden of their lives could fall on Anna, and give her just content” (11). “Could” fall on Anna, not “would” fall on Anna, because this is not a chore but her “just content.” Similarly, “With Miss Mathilda, Anna did it all. The clothes, the house, the hats, what she should wear and when and what was always best for her to do. There was nothing Miss Mathilda would not let Anna manage, and only be too glad if she would do” (39, emphasis mine).

This is to say that from Anna’s point of view, though “point of view” overstates what Anna is capable of, she is not mercilessly oppressed by Miss Mathilda or forced into a labor she wants to escape. Nor, less dramatically, is she at all unhappy with her position. For Anna, social positions are nothing more than available but empty categories, because her servitude, never seen by Anna as such, is not really something she either inhabits or could ever imagine not inhabiting. She operates within a caste system bereft of the moral force of traditional caste systems. Accordingly Anna hardly even feels it to be a system, and though, as modern readers we may be uncomfortable with Anna’s position, Anna, unable to feel hemmed in by what seems purely structural, effectively turns the system upside down. It becomes her own dogmatism, how she organizes her life and world-view, giving her, even, a certain power. It is in this vein that she has an acute sense of “the ugliness appropriate to each rank in life” (22) and determines to dress her employers accordingly: for Miss Wadsmith and Miss Mathilda, clothing “having the right air for the upper class” (22), and for the others, more amusingly, clothing “having the awkward ugliness
that we call Dutch” (22). Despite her servitude, without traditional personhood, Anna is stripped of any class consciousness at all, and she thus easily finds a way to be mobile. She develops, as it were, an ideal model of servitude, one that demands excellence, full control, and mastery, and fulfilling this ideal becomes Anna’s life pursuit, her way of living out her own characteristic “goodness.” So it is even Miss Mathilda’s generosity, not her oppressiveness, that “lets” Anna manage her home and her life, in the quotation above. This is why, too, when Miss Mathilda finally leaves Bridgepoint at the end of the section and Anna finds herself with numerous job opportunities, Stein can write, “No one could ever be for Anna as had been her cherished Miss Mathilda. No one could ever again so freely let her do it all” (49, emphasis mine).

Critics have argued otherwise, that social position is precisely the trouble with the characters in Three Lives and particularly with the Good Anna. For Jayne L. Walker, Anna’s social position, like Felicité’s in Flaubert’s Trois Contes, whom she so much resembles, irremediably inhibits her possibilities: “Character is emphatically not destiny for these women. Because of their social position, the course of their lives is the by-product of the actions of others” (20). Failing to recognize in Anna the breakdown of traditional subjectivity, Walker assigns to her all of the categories of Victorian literature and locates the problem, as if we were in Dickens’s stratified London, in the mismatching between her outside signifier—her social position as a servant—and her inner character—her goodness. In this way, for Walker, the corrective to Anna’s debased life is the realignment of these two spheres so that her outer social position more accurately represents her inner qualities. But Anna’s social position is not a problem for her, and Walker misidentifies Anna’s trouble because she can only see Anna as a traditional subject. Thus the real problem is Anna’s own diminished self, which far from being

41 There is some debate about whether and to what extent Stein was influenced by Flaubert. Richard Bridgman claims that Flaubert did not hold much sway over Stein, while John Malcolm Brinnin claims that Stein’s translations of Flaubert were “germinal” (56) for her.
strangled by the strictures of class systems is too impoverished to participate in them—even to be oppressed by them—from the start.

This becomes clearer when we consider Anna’s unique relationship to her employers, which is never restricted to the terms of social class. In fact, Anna’s employers always become her friends. Miss Mary Wadsmith treats her with the loyalty she would her own family members, begging her to move with her to Curden, to bring her nieces and nephews whenever she likes, and to have her half brother stay over whenever she wants. And “her cherished Miss Mathilda” (9) is Anna’s dearest friend of them all. Again, Anna’s servitude is not an obstacle. It is not even a position she must overcome, because as a subject on the outside of traditional forms, it is not a position she ever fully occupies. And Walker is thus not quite right in her comparison of Stein’s presentation of Anna and Flaubert’s presentation of Felicité, at least as she understands Flaubert. For Stein writes not with what Ulla Haselstein, in “A New Kind of Realism,” calls Flaubert’s “astringent, almost clinical irony” (389). For Stein is not a realist at all. Rather, she is a modernist, looking at her characters up close, only finding nothing inside them to reveal and thus offering the nothingness itself as her revelation.

Nothingness, accordingly, is precisely the content of Anna’s version of goodness, though she adamantly insists on the category nonetheless. For adamance in Anna replaces deeper feelings like moral conviction and belief, leaving behind pure force. Thus, she imposes a restrictive and empty use of language on her under servants, branding them, as does Stein to Anna, with singular, dominant attributes that are meant to determine the course of their lives. In Anna’s tyrannical, authorial way, Molly is melancholy and Sallie is stupid, and their successes or failures working for Anna are all meant to issue from these dominant traits. But as the alliteration suggests, these traits do not reflect any inner qualities, just the reproductive qualities of language.
itself that, only outward and superficial, seems to produce them. This is, in different form, the fairy-tale quality of Stein’s novel, the way in which single traits seem to portend the outcome of the characters who bear them, or a kind of modernized version of the ancient Greek tragic flaw, the trait which even active denunciations cannot overcome. And yet, born by people constructed without insides, this one-to-one correlation of dominant trait to fate is only nominal, because the dominant traits of these characters never really do get fulfilled, or at least never in any narratively satisfying way. For Molly and Sallie are both dismissed by Anna, and the reasons why are never easily traced back to their varying traits. What’s more, as we know, Anna herself ends up alone, regardless of her goodness. These singular traits are thus just a formalistic remnant of traditional narrative forms, without the substance to bolster or fulfill them.

As Peter Brooks has argued, using the structure of the fairy tale as a model, plot is dependent on the unfolding of events over time. “Plot…[is] a structuring operation elicited by, and made necessary by, those meanings that develop through succession and time” (Reading for the Plot 12), Brooks writes, by which he means that “plots are not simply organizing structures, they are also intentional structures, goal-oriented and forward moving” (12). Stein, like her modernist contemporaries, is thus skeptical of plot, and her fairy tale is a more modernist one. For while there is, in Three Lives, a plot, it is not really one that ever moves forward, only something, like much of Stein’s work, that is iterated and reiterated, gone over again and again, forever folding back over itself, until, ultimately, it ends where it easily could have begun. It is not, then, that the ending of each story is inevitable—though after the first two, you get the sense

42 See Peter Brooks’s Reading for the Plot (p. 7) for an articulation of this skepticism.
that the third probably won’t end any better—for nothing in the characters’ actions or lives seems to foreground their desperate endings. Even their most dominant personality traits, as I’ve said, do not account for their bleak endings, so that the end fulfills no narratively schematized program. It does not seem like the culmination of the events leading up to it, and it does not play out the traits of the characters we’ve come, only hazily, to know. Rather, it ends at the end of a life cycle, with death. For in time, characters come into full being, complete themselves and fulfill the characteristics with which they are born, in this case Anna’s “goodness,” Lena’s “gentleness,” Melanctha’s “wandering.” But for Stein, who wrote passionately about writing in what she alternately calls the “continuous present” and “continuous succession,” while events do occur in some way which we may be able to summarize, without a true subject to live them and no consciousness to ever reflect on them, time is never the measure of any internal advancement. It is a phantom of a system, rather than the system itself.

So this is the way in which Anna ends up, somehow at some point, lying dead in a hospital bed. Mrs. Drehten, the closest thing to a true friend she has left, composes a letter: “‘Dear Miss Mathilda,’ wrote Mrs. Drehten, ‘Miss Annie died in the hospital yesterday after a hard operation. She was talking about you and Doctor and Miss Mary Wadsmith all the time....Miss Annie died easy, Miss Mathilda, and sent you her love’” (53). All that’s left after Anna’s death is a note she didn’t compose confirming relationships she didn’t maintain. The traces of a relationship, however restrictive that relationship might have been, remain. But what does not remain, even as a trace, is signified in the name absent from Mrs. Drehten’s list, Mrs. Lehntman, the “real romance in the Good Anna’s life” (31). The only person in Anna’s life who is simply a friend, rather than an employer, Mrs. Lehntman ultimately has no place even in Anna’s death. For Mrs. Lehntman, as a one-time friend, participates in a relationship based on
sympathetic feeling alone. And sympathetic feeling does not really exist in this novel in any sustainable way, as their broken friendship reveals.

III. The Gentle Lena

Lena’s modernist subjectivity manifests itself in the opposite way of Anna’s, and rather than an outer sphere that yields an empty interior, Lena, we might say, “seemed like a beleaguered inside become an outside.” Lacking traditional personhood, Lena lacks language altogether, and her problem is that her inner emptiness yields an equally empty outwardness or silence. Stein thus tests here an even more extreme manifestation of modernist dissolution. Lena “was patient, sweet and german. She had been a servant for four years and had liked it very well” (163), reads the first line of “The Gentle Lena.” How different it sounds from the first sentence of “The Good Anna”: “The tradesmen of Bridgepoint learned to dread the sound of ‘Miss Mathilda’, for with that name the good Anna always conquered” (1). Anna is domineering and loud. Lena, on the other hand, is docile, “patient, sweet and german,” which as the conspicuous tense of the those first lines indicates—simple past into past perfect—amounts to her being a person always passed over, with a demeanor that is decidedly passive and, at the end, without a legacy, which makes her just an ineffectual remnant of the past. Because if being stripped of insides and outsides expresses itself in Anna as volubility, the same lack in the gentle Lena emerges as silence. And if Anna deploys, too forcefully, the empty categories with which she too narrowly organizes her world, Lena lacks even the structures of those categories and, accordingly, has no way of arranging her life and her surroundings.

Pathos in this story is thus sheer loss, without even the remnants of what is lost that we saw in the story of Anna. For Lena lacks even the semblance of personhood. She has no voice
and no language, and if she does, on rare occasion, speak, in her broken English, it is only to obey orders that she never quite comprehends or to corroborate opinions she does not actually share. Worse yet, Lena has no awareness of her insufficiency, nor of other people’s reactions to it. So while her cousins, Mathilda and Bertha Haydon, taunt her simplicity and poverty, “Lena never knew that she did not like them. She did not know that she was only happy with the other quicker girls...who laughed at her and always teased her” (169). Lena emerges as truly pathetic in this passage. First, she is blind to her own feelings, that she dislikes her dislikable cousins. Next, she cannot recognize that she prefers the company of the other under-servants. And then, she is not even aware that the other girls, who “always teased her,” are no better to her than are her cousins. Lena is cocooned in her own lack of awareness. It is her problem throughout the section and seems a function of her “gentleness,” as Stein dramatizes it. For while “gentleness” may mean sweetness, and certainly at times it does, most of all, it renders Lena speechless, thoughtless, emotionless, and leaves her with no center and nothing at all to hold her in place. Worse even than the good Anna, whose insufficiency led to a rigid use of language, Lena has no language to even ponder using rigidly, an insufficiency that turns any wit she might possess and any will she might have completely ineffectual. She cannot participate in the world, and she cannot sustain a functional relationship. Life whips right by her, and Lena’s only recourse, if we may even call it that, is to abandon the world altogether or, worse, to have the world abandon her.

Lena, like Anna, is a German immigrant, brought to America by her wealthy aunt, Mrs. Haydon. And though she is placed in a social position even lower than Anna’s, an under-servant, not even a head servant, it is a situation she dislikes no more than Anna does. In fact, we might even say that she enjoys it, although this is not quite how Stein puts it. For though “Lena did not
really know that she did not like” her German life, and though “She did not know that she was always dreamy and not there” (168), her discomfort in Germany was real. Working in the Bridgepoint home of Mrs. Aldrich, “it was all a peaceful life for Lena, almost as peaceful as a pleasant leisure” (164). It is not, then, that Lena has no sense of her social position, her happiness or her sadness. It is just that she has no sense. She has, as Stein repeatedly tells us, no knowledge or, as I understand it, no personhood and thus no language, and living without either one means that she can never fully live in the world. For without language, Lena cannot speak of her happiness or her sadness and so cannot really experience it either. Thus, Lena, who leaves her “dreamy” life in Germany, which is never registered as “dreamy,” for a “peaceful” time in Bridgepoint, which is never acknowledged to be “peaceful,” is a product of life that happens without a proper subject. Experience seizes up, and life becomes “unlife.” Lena thus floats through time, “lifeless” as she is continuously described.

Without subjectivity, Lena is also unable to understand what other people say to her, and usual conversation is lost on her. In charge of Mrs. Aldrich’s two small children, Lena sits, most days, with other under-servants, the Irish Mary, Nellie and others, watching the children in the playground. On one occasion, Lena finds a paper accordion that’s been left in the yard. Trying to determine the nature of the green color, Lena brings the paper to her mouth. But just as she tastes it, Mary yells, “‘That’s awful poison, Lena, don’t you know?’” (165). Lena, certainly, does not know that it is poison. Lena does not know anything. But colluding against her, Mary and Nellie continue to taunt her. Is it a joke? Is it real? Is it poison or is it not? “Lena never knew for certain whether it was really poison, that green stuff that she tasted” (165), because “she did not know just how much Mary meant by what she said” (165), because “she could never learn to know just what the other quicker girls meant by the queer things they said” (164); because, in other words,
lacking language, she lacks the ability to join in a linguistic community, to share in experience and life itself. What’s more, “Lena was a little troubled. She looked hard at her finger where the paint was, and she wondered if she had really sucked it” (165). Lena does not even share a language with herself, unable, as she is, to determine even what her own actions mean, if they have happened, or if they are just illusions.

This unawareness is felt even more acutely when she is among her nasty cousins. Neither Mathilda nor Bertha are attractive or have much to offer, but that they come from wealthy families, compounded with Lena’s simplicity and plainness, makes Lena the target of their tauntings and disgust. But as with the other girls with whom Lena sits, her cousins’ teasings, too, are not registered. “Lena never got mad, or even had sense enough to know that they were all making an awful fool of her” (170) and “in her unsuffering and unexpectant patience never really knew that she was slighted” (169). “Unsuffering” and “unexpectant” are telling neologisms. They negate what is or what might be. It is not that Lena is “complacent” or “content,” because what those words suggest is a psyche, which Lena does not have. Insofar as they are adjectives, they describe what is. But Lena is not this or that. She is not anything. She is, rather, a function of a self that she does not actually have, and so can only be “un.”

Still, Lena continues to lead a “peaceful” life, strictly following the rules of the head cook and her aunt. She abides so completely in her “unloving,” in fact, that when her aunt decides that she is to become a wife and mother, Lena follows those instructions, too. Lena is satisfied, in whatever way, with her life as an under-servant. And though it is not a satisfaction we could ever share, for Lena it is enough. In the weeks and days leading up to the wedding, “Lena was nervous...but she did not think much about getting married. She did not know really what it was, that, which was always coming nearer” (174). Or, a paragraph later, Lena “did not really know
what it was, this that was about to happen to her” (174). Marriage, like so much else for Lena, is unarticulated. It is “that which was always coming nearer” or “this that was about to happen to her.” It is vague and undefined, and the difficulty with Lena’s entrance into this new life is thus twofold. First, Lena has no need to leave her current life. She has no desire to be married and no notion that life will be better because of it. And secondly, she has no notion of what, in fact, marriage is. It is not something she can mull over, ask about, or ever accommodate herself to, because she lacks the categories of language to even call it by its proper name, “marriage.” Without this, meaning remains obfuscated, and Lena can never understand the kinds of opportunities people are trying to arrange for her.

Because certainly from Mrs. Haydon’s perspective, marriage is a way out for Lena. It is a way away from her life as a servant into the elevated life of family. And this marks a departure from the world in which Anna was situated, a world without men and a world without the traditional, nuclear family. Indeed, in “The Good Anna,” we are introduced to Bridgepoint, a city at the border of the North and South, a city between worlds, and one populated and run solely by single women—Miss Mathilda, Miss Mary Wadsmith, Mrs. Lehntman, and Anna herself. Having children, accordingly, has either happened prior to the story with which we are presented—as in the case of Miss Wadsmith’s children and Mrs. Lehntman’s two children—or happens without traditional familial bonds, as with the adoption of a third child by Mrs. Lehntman. This is not just happenstance. Community without the nuclear family is a necessity for Anna’s survival, as she sees it, and it is precisely when Mrs. Lehntman and Dr. Shonjen find romantic partners that they exit Anna’s world. If Anna has her own romance, it is the lesbian romance of Mrs. Lehntman or the trivialized romance of her dogs, Peter, Rags and Baby, who are similarly described in romantic terms. Certainly this is Stein suggesting an alternative view
of romance and relationships, one more in keeping with her own life. For without marriage prospects Anna, unlike Stein, is fixed. And the lesbian partnerships that Stein and others of her era would come to and that the nineteenth-century climate of Bridgepoint will not allow, are an alternative possibility to which she undoubtedly points. But by pointing, Stein merely offers a suggestion, rather than a serious protest. And so in “The Gentle Lena,” Stein returns us to Bridgepoint, but offers Lena the marriage opportunities denied to Anna, giving her, at least, a way out of her unfortunate social position. Only the result is the same. For isolation overtakes Lena too, and any opportunity that the nuclear family might have offered comes to naught. Indeed, precisely to prove that social position is not what’s at issue, is not the shared problem for these two, or for Melanctha either, Stein makes that variable obsolete. She takes away the strictures of social position, and what remains for all is the problem of modernist dissolution.

Lena acquiesces to marriage with Herman Kreder, a man of few words. Herman “was a gentle soul” (172, emphasis mine), just like Lena, “was obedient to his father and his mother...liked it with them but...never became really joyous” (172), like Lena, too. They seem well suited to each other, in fact, sharing even the same kind of unlife. It is just Herman’s unlife that makes Old Mrs. Kreder “not discuss the matter with her Herman. She never thought that she needed to talk such things over with him. She just told him about getting married to Lena Mainz...and Herman made his usual little grunt in answer to her” (173). Like Lena, Herman is never brought into a community, because as his mother sees, he has no ability to participate in it. The grunt is the sound of the person who lacks mastery of language, who cannot articulate what he wants or what he means and who might, accordingly, not even know what he wants or what he means to begin with. Still, defying his parents, Herman flees to his sister’s house in New York, just days before the wedding. In Mrs. Haydon’s terms, Lena is disgraced, and she blames
Lena for her inability to keep a man. The cook mildly scolds her, too. But for Lena, Herman’s fleeing would not seem to be quite so tragic. Indeed, marriage was never so appealing to her, and if she could, she might similarly run away to New York. But again, without real personhood, Lena is at a loss for how to react. She does the only thing she knows how, mimics Mrs. Haydon, becoming despondent and weepy just like her. Emotion here is the product of mimicking. It is not born out of some fresh, new experience with the world, but with a kind of miming of old fashioned sentiments. You cry when you’re sad, you laugh when something is funny. But Lena cannot feel these things and instead finds her experience, something she’s been deprived of as a modern subject, as a copycat. The structure of traditional feeling and traditional personhood is intact, but the content is mediated through a formula that ultimately renders it meaningless.

Sitting on a streetcar on the way home from Mrs. Haydon’s, the conductor notices Lena crying. “‘Don’t feel so bad, you get another feller, you are such a nice girl’” (176). “‘But Aunt Mathilda said now, I never get married’” (176), Lena responds. Shocked at what he hears, the conductor retorts, “‘Why you really got trouble like that...I just said that now to josh you. I didn’t ever think you really was left by a feller’” (176). Lena is understood. Without needing to hear words, the conductor understands her cries. He intuits the problem and sympathizes. Lena’s cry, like Herman’s grunt, is the recourse of someone without the ability to express feelings. And for the first time, Lena uses her insufficiency, her unlanguage, successfully, forming a community of sorts, with the conductor on the streetcar. And yet, the community formed is not quite so successful, after all. For while the conductor understands Lena’s cries, they are cries not exactly genuine and not entirely Lena’s own. Her tears, as I’ve noted, are mimicked, copied from Mrs. Haydon and tried on as a sort of costume. They are something Lena wears, but does not really inhabit. They are an appeal to a certain convention of destitution felt by a lost love, because we
know that Herman was never a love. Lena never wanted to marry Herman any more than
Herman wanted to marry her, and the understanding between Lena and the conductor seems,
finally, not so promising after all.

Eventually, Herman is brought back from New York, and Lena and Herman marry. Life
becomes unbearable under the control of the dominating, scolding Mrs. Kreder, a more fully
developed and crueler version of the good Anna—the bad Mrs. Kreder, we might say, though her
personhood is more than just a type. The prospects of two people sharing a kind of unlife come
to naught, and their relationship dissolves before it is ever even formed. Because while trying to
protect Lena from his scolding mother, Herman comes into subjectivity and learns to use
language to defend his wife. But Lena is left behind, and she becomes even more “lifeless” until
finally there is no life left. Dying in the hospital, Lena is accompanied only by her stillborn child.
All that is left is death. Lena’s in-laws reject her. Her husband abandons her. And her children
offer her no comfort.

If lacking traditional personhood leads to too forceful a deployment of language and to
Anna’s mostly isolated death in the first story, Stein now shows us, in the last story, the utter
alienation produced by an extreme version of modernism that consists in no language at all.
Social position is left aside. Servant or not servant, lacking family or having family, Anna and
Lena both die alone. It is thus to a new, but no less devastating, situation that Stein introduces us
with the black Melanctha of the middle story, whose trouble, like Anna’s, like Lena’s, lies in her
inability to find any traditional form of subjectivity on which to found herself.

43 For the purposes of my argument, I’ve discussed the stories in Three Lives out of order, placing “The Gentle
Lena” second in sequence, rather than third as it is actually found in the novel.
IV. Melanctha

Melanctha does not have Anna’s trouble: she accommodates other views and allows others to interpret language differently than she does. She does not have Lena’s trouble either: she is fully aware of the resources of language and uses them adeptly. Neither is Melanctha restricted at all by servitude, because she is not a servant. Nor is she forced into relationships she does not desire. Melanctha is her own boss and in charge of her own actions. She finds Jane Harden just in the course of living, falls in love with Dr. Jefferson Campbell while he tends to her sick mother, meets Rose Johnson in church, and discovers Jem Richards while walking down the street. Despite even her blackness, Melanctha is “free” in all of the ways that Anna and Lena are not. Her relationships, and particularly her relationship with Jeff Campbell, are not strained by any insufficiency of her subjectivity. But in her too full understanding of its various possibilities, she loses herself, as well. She knows too well how different people can be and the way in which they might alter themselves in order to join together. Indeed, understanding precisely what Anna misses, that in order to create lasting relationships one must accommodate another—in her case, another’s understanding of “good” and “bad,” “right” and “wrong”—Melanctha, and Jeff too, learn to accommodate each other. Melanctha stops her “wandering,” and Jeff becomes invested in Melanctha’s “sense for real experience” (63). But their eagerness to understand each other works only for a time. Perpetually trying to move closer to the other’s position—Melanctha trying to lead a more quiet, less excited life, Jeff trying to come into “real wisdom”—they move right past each other. It is for this reason that Stein declared the Melanctha section of *Three Lives* “the first definite step away from the nineteenth century,” (*Autobiography* 54), and critics agree. For Melanctha is Stein’s most successful try at a modernist subject whose dissolution is most clearly not simply personal, not the cause of her inability to participate in a
community but an exemplification of the way community, such as it is, has come to be. And like
the modernist world in which she lives, existing not, like Anna or Lena, at its poles but square in
its center, she yet has no center. Melanctha is in a state of constant flux, forever in the throes of
the modernist world’s dynamism. And unable ultimately to stay fixed in one place, in one
lifestyle, she and Jeff drown in its torrent.

In this section, language often gets figured as emotion itself, and having the right
language often amounts to having the right kind of feeling, what Melanctha and Jeff alternately
call “real feeling,” “real religion,” and “hot passion.” Jeff and Melanctha do not have the
linguistic troubles of the other characters. Indeed, although I have argued against it, if
“language,” in the sense of a Foucauldian “prison-house,” is the problem identified by critics like
Walker, for whom Anna and Lena are constrained by the way in which it creates out of material
conditions a hegemonic idea of social position in order to keep them in their proper place, there
is no such prison for Melanctha. And in a discussion of “goodness,” which mirrors its use in the
Good Anna chapter, the difference is clear. So Melanctha has, at first, a hard time understanding
Jeff’s notion of goodness, charging him with hypocrisy—calling himself “good” though he does
not go to church. When Jeff replies, “I don’t say, never, I don’t want to know all kinds of
people, Miss Melanctha, and I don’t say there ain’t many kinds of people...as for religion, that
just ain’t my way of being good, Miss Melanctha, but it’s a good way for many people to be
good and regular in their way of living” (78), Melanctha still resists. Jeff allows that other people
are other, that they understand good differently, take up language differently, and lead lives
different from one another, and Melanctha, in her incredulity and her inability to understand
what Jeff means, may seem to approximate Anna’s rigidity, or at least, she seems rigid in her
own way. But it does not last long, and as their relationship progresses, Melanctha begins, almost
obsessively, to say things like, “‘You is very sweet and good to me always, Jeff Campbell’” (90, emphasis mine), “‘I can’t say much about how good you been to me, Jeff Campbell, I never knew any man who was good and didn’t do things ugly’” (90, emphasis mine), and even after Jeff hurts her, “‘I know you are a good man, Jeff. I always know that’” (94, emphasis mine).

“Good” in this exchange undergoes a dramatic transformation in meaning. Beginning as in the Good Anna section, good is interpreted as strict moral living, tantamount to the good life, as Melanctha equates good with going to church. But as Melanctha and Jeff begin to understand each other, good becomes “good to me,” which means nothing less than emotional openness, responsiveness, and flexibility. Circulated among two people whose lives are dispersed but not lacking in consciousness, good need not be anymore a rigid and empty designator. It is a quality of persons, fluctuating in meaning as it refers differently to different people, and it comes to mean, more generally, a form of accommodation and mutual understanding. Melanctha and Jeff are close to forming an ideal traditional relationship. But as the story goes on, Stein will dramatize the failure of that relationship, too, as it submits to the pressure of the modernist way of being, not by depriving subjects of their ability to understand themselves and each other, but by proliferating that understanding. For accommodating each other’s emotions so adeptly, Melanctha and Jeff accommodate their own selves away, and the two slide right by one another.

Critics have regularly interpreted Melanctha and Jeff’s problem otherwise. Lisa Ruddick, and Barbara Will, to whom I have already referred, seem fixed on fixing Melanctha and Jeff with distinct and opposing characters. Embedding Stein in her Jamesian heritage, they both recover James’s “conservative” and “progressive” personality types, assigning them to Jeff and Melanctha, respectively. Ruddick and Will are right to find in Stein a kind of taxonomy of human types, a practice, as I mentioned, she explores more thoroughly in *The Making of*
Certainly, too, these categories are complicated by both critics: Will shows that while Melanctha is typed, she is also the figure of untyping; and Ruddick argues that while Jeff and Melanctha “represent mental poles” (18), “contrasting character types” (20) and “personifications of warring principles” (20), “the conservative and the progressive elements described by James are,” yet, “mutually dependent” (20). The two, Melanctha and Jeff, have something to learn from each other. Still, however complicated Ruddick’s and Will’s readings get, however much they see the characters overturn or betray their own “characters,” both critics insist, at least structurally, on these categories, as they must to maintain a traditional sense of the subject. “Melanctha is ‘typically’ mulatto” (41), in Will’s terms, and the section takes up “an opposition between ‘thinking’ and ‘feeling’” (19), in Rudick’s language. Jeff the thinker, Melanctha the feeler. But just the marker of Jeff and Melanctha’s relationship is its “wandering,” meandering feel, the way it moves forward and back, reverses and then reverses again. Indeed, following the strains of reversal is a project in its own right. So while initially Jeff, it is true, may be more hesitant to “feel,” and Melanctha more easily excited, what this amounts to is only that they are different people, with different personalities, of course, and different lifestyles, sure. But this is just a fact of life. This is simply how it is between two people, and the point to note about Jeff and Melanctha is not how different they are, but how readily and eagerly they accommodate each other’s differences. Jeff relinquishes his pedantic sense of propriety to come closer to Melanctha, and Melanctha abandons her irresponsible frivolity to reach nearer to Jeff. It is only that they meet each other too much, and as each one nears the position of the other, they miss each other entirely.

The development is rendered in some detail. Reflecting on his old, dogmatic habits, Jeff says,
You remember, Melanctha...how I certainly never did know more than just two kinds of ways of living, one way the way it is good to be in families and the other kind of way, like animals are all the time just with each other, and how I didn’t ever like that last kind of way much for any of the colored people....I got a new feeling now, you been teaching to me, just like I told you once, just like a new religion to me, and I see perhaps what really loving is like. (106)

Jeff cannot so easily be called “conservative.” Here, he is open to the various “stimuli” that the world, and Melanctha in particular, present to him, and he lives a new and different understanding of love. But while Jeff excitedly accommodates himself to Melanctha’s understanding, Melanctha, working in the opposite direction, steadily accommodates herself to Jeff’s way of controlled loving. So, “[a]lways now Jeff felt in himself deep loving. Always now he did not know really, if Melanctha was true in her loving” (111). Their ways of being have switched. Melanctha stops gushing, and Jeff overflows. But now their relationship cannot function because they do not see eye to eye. In a turn of the screw, it is as if they each see from the perspective of the other’s eye, and no longer even recognize their original views. This is the structure of sympathy applied by characters who are no longer constructed as sympathy demands. For what happens when two people, who lack the contours of traditional subjecthood to insulate them, sympathize, is the complete abandonment of oneself for another. Language and thus emotion is exchanged here as a possession by people who lack the ability to possess anything, and even their own interiorities cease to be theirs. Put another way, Melanctha and Jeff have reached, here, the problem of modernism’s vastness. Because while it allows them to know each other and make room for one another in a way that Anna’s restricted sense of self and Lena’s complete lack of self did not, it also keeps them in constant motion, trying endlessly to
keep up with the variety. They lack a stable ground on which to rest, and without it, without consensus on how to understand love, Melanctha and Jeff spend their relationship apart, each searching for the other’s understanding. Their relationship fluctuates back and forth, and while a successful union always seems close, it is never reached.

They begin to break apart, and “Melanctha had begun now once more to wander” (125). Jeff is distraught, and the two “fell away from all knowing of each other” (141). Melanctha hardens when Jeff softens, and hardening is an attractive process for her. It offers her just the kind of rest that her wanderings in language, in life, do not allow. It is for this reason, perhaps, that Melanctha is drawn to the “lazy, stupid, ordinary, selfish black girl” (136), Rose Johnson, “who always saw to it that she was engaged to him when she had any one man with whom she ever always wandered” (136). Even while she wanders, Rose is stable, steady, at rest, and this is what Melanctha desires. As Ruddick rightly puts it, Melanctha “is drawn to Jeff—and finally to Rose—precisely because these characters lead lives of ‘solid safety’” (22). But Ruddick continues with a different conclusion: “Jeff is a model of mental growth…conceived in Jamesian terms” (25). He melds the seemingly unbridgeable types of “conservative” and “progressive,” becoming, as it were, a “whole” person. Jeff’s success, for Ruddick, is that he is able both to use conventional patterns of language to give himself stability within the community (“conservative”), and to break out and see new things, “real” things—things, in other words, outside of language (the “progressive”). But precisely what Stein explores in this section is the dissolution of whole selves to begin with, whole selves even as a combination of separate selves. And while Ruddick lauds Jeff as a “model,” Stein seems to stress more the pathos of his separation from Melanctha and thus from his connection to his community. Melanctha and Jeff separate forever, slide by each other forever. Like the Good Anna and the Gentle Lena, though
for reasons unalike, Melanctha is also left alone. So “Melanctha went back to the hospital, and
there the Doctor told her she had the consumption....They sent her where she would be taken care of, a home for poor consumptives, and there Melanctha stayed until she died” (162).

In some ways, this is the grimmest of Stein’s works, but only because it comes closest to a full realization of the dilemma of modernist subjectivity. Indeed, with Melanctha, Stein gives us a version of Woolf’s dispersed characters, “spread out like a mist.” But unable to stop the dispersal, unable to clog or even mark the hole, her characters disperse into oblivion. And without even a viable consciousness to bear witness to the debacle, Stein will attempt, in her later writing, to turn what is lost into a gain, giving us writing from which pathos itself seems to have disappeared.

V. A Political Problem

A notable exemplar of this writing is The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas (1933), perhaps Stein’s most readable text, certainly her most popular, where she attempts to solve the problem of modernism’s dissolution with the replacement of all people by herself. But that such a replacement is not really a solution, after all, that what is legible really isn’t, is implicit in the false contract it offers as an autobiography that is actually biography or an autobiography of a different person, a ghost-written work where the protagonist is insistently the ghost. In The Autobiography, Stein takes up all space and all time. For if subjectivity is threatening to become too attenuated and too disjointed, she responds by making herself into the most formidable, invincible, whole person she can. Still, the result is the same. For the person she becomes is rather too whole to actually be a person. And we can see what is at work here by turning to Stein,

44 A version of this was presented at the ALA Symposium in New Orleans in October 2013 and will be published under the title “Gertrude Stein’s Passivity: War and the Limits of Modern Subjectivity” by Texas Studies in Language and Literature.
as she is rendered sculpturally as “sort of modern Buddha” by American artist Jo Davidson. Stein is a life-force in this piece, but it is a force of life and not a force that acts on life. Her legs, draped by her robe-like dress, rest steadily in something like a modified Sukhasana pose; her arms, somehow both languid and sturdy, are folded across the front of her lap; her head is slightly bowed; and her eyes droop toward closure. Becoming the artist’s medium, an inanimate statue situated to oversee rather than to act, her imposing body is permanent, but immovable, larger than life, but therefore not quite life itself. In her study on impersonality which I have previously discussed, Sharon Cameron suggests that the Buddha himself represents a similar combination, assertion through self-denial, or presence through passivity: “Buddha faces, in their representation of human features, both relied on the category of the person and…simultaneously implied the transcendence of this category: a person who is like a person but not a person…an ‘impersonal person’” (8). Stein is not quite the impersonal person, for her self, what she insistently referred to as her “genius,” is too present to make her seem impersonal. But the form of her omnipresence is not as grand manipulator of the world, but as disengaged overseer. And the loss of anything like agency as the quality of a traditional, punctual self is revealed only the more in the way she rather administers than acts—“a person who is like a person but not a person,” precisely.

The earlier, better known image of Stein, painted by Picasso, achieves something similar, though perhaps in a more fledgling state than the later sculpture, capturing the liminal space between assertion and abstention, animate and inanimate, person and not-quite-person. In that representation, Stein is pulled in two directions, towards her chair in which she sits and towards the world to which she gestures. With her billowing robe, she seems weighted down, and yet, with one hand perched on her lap, there is the faintest indication that she may, indeed, stand up.
Taken literally, this is precisely the fashion in which she conducted her Saturday evening salons at her home at 27 Rue de Fleurus. Sitting most of the evening in a large armchair near the stove, Stein rose intermittently to greet guests. But more figuratively, Stein embodies the perfect hostess, an administrator to a party who seems to hover everywhere, but participates nowhere.

This, as it turns out, has serious consequences, and I turn now, in the last section of my discussion of Stein, to an issue that has divided critical response to her career, her questionable war-time activities and affiliations. As Barbara Will, in *Unlikely Collaboration*, and Alan Desrshowitz and Emily Greenhouse, in more journalistic indictments, argue, there is compelling evidence that Stein’s survival during the war was due not to luck but to her friendship with the Nazi supporter Bernard Faÿ as well as to her own support of Maréchal Pétain, the Chief of State of Vichy France. For such critics, these associations put her work beyond the pale, while for partisans of Stein, like Charles Bernstein and Ulla Hasslestein, they are an explainable aside, and Stein’s work stands by itself as important modernist experimentation. But what I wish to argue is that the work and Stein’s affiliations are connected in a way that makes her not a Nazi sympathizer after all, but that connects her experiments to her political sensibility nevertheless. For the lack of agency, of traditional personhood that we have found in *Three Lives* continues on in her view of the war, and the passivity of the responses she offers in her novel is a passivity she could not shake even under the dire new circumstances.

There’s a passage about World War I in *The Autobiography* that illustrates this passivity well:

Life in Mallorca was pleasant until the attack on Verdun began. Then we all began to be very miserable. We tried to console each other but it was difficult.

One of the Frenchmen, an engraver who had palsy and in spite of the palsy tried
every few months to get the French consul to accept him for the army, used to say we must not worry if Verdun is taken, it is not an entry into France, it is only a moral victory for the germans. But we were all desperately unhappy. I had been so confident and now I had an awful feeling that the war had gotten out of my hands. (166)

There is something odd in Stein’s description of the war raging around her, though it is an oddness characteristic of all her writing. The simplicity, even the puerility, of the language with which she describes emotions, rendered so vaguely in phrases like “very miserable” and “desperately unhappy,” is perfectly typical; the combination of detachment and investment seems of a piece with her other writing too; and the rhythm of the run-on sentences, a sort of jaunty romp past punctuation and the rules of formal writing, may be most familiar of all. Such writing is put to good use in the bulk of Stein’s work, and in a variety of ways.

In her extended love poem to Alice, “Lifting Belly,” for example, Stein employs all of these techniques to describe a moment of great intimacy: “Kiss my lips. She did./Kiss my lips again she did./Kiss my lips over and over and over again she did.” With language purposely spare, the speaker seems disembodied, acting as a kind of stage manager prescribing general stage directions, rather than a lover enacting personal entreaties. Yet the result is not, after all, to distance the lovers from each other, for through the fading punctuation, the cumulative effect of “over,” and the easy compliance of the beloved, the intensity of their communion is clear.

Alternately, in Tender Buttons, qualities we usually associate with persons are dispersed across three main topics, “Objects,” “Food,” and “Rooms,” and these topics themselves seem to be held together by no organizing consciousness, not even a speaker to guide the random word association that seems generated not by some governing principle or idea but by the play of
language itself. Consider one of the prose poems in the section on food called “Roastbeef”: “In
the inside there is sleeping, in the outside there is reddening, in the morning there is meaning, in
the evening there is feeling. In the evening there is feeling. In feeling anything is resting, in
feeling anything is mounting…” (476). The first two clauses may refer to an actual roastbeef,
though the description seems inverted—beef is red on the inside. But the immediately following
series of words—meaning, feeling, resting, mounting—themselves too active to apply to
anything so inanimate as a piece of meat, yet untethered to any person whom they might
properly describe, both call into question any easy assignment of descriptors in those opening
statements and resist assignment themselves. As Stein explains it, “it is so easy to exchange
meaning.” And this is the force of the poem: the displacement of people by things, of patent
meanings by alternative ones, rather than confining Stein’s world, opens it up as a space for play
and a deep investment in language as a kind of life itself.

Stein’s description of the battle at Verdun, as I’ve noted, uses similar techniques, but
something is amiss. The depersonalized stance, evident in the lack of proper names, so familiar
in her other work, suddenly seems inadequate to the topic at hand, and the happy passivity, clear
in the mere generalities used to describe emotional states, that usually signals play reads here as
anxiety. Against the assault of war, the usual strength of this Steinian style begins to crack, and
two fault lines are apparent. For one, the phrase “moral victory,” attached here to the conquering
Germans, seems to signify nothing but something academic, so that the moral content of the
phrase is evacuated. And second, Stein’s presumption of control—an arrogance not unusual for
her either, as throughout her work she consistently makes self-aggrandizing remarks in keeping
with her image of her own grandeur and influence—receives a check. For if she presumes the
war had once been in her hands, she fears now that it has “gotten out of her hands,” signaling the
fading authority of her own activity or of activity in general. Morality and action both recede in this passage, becoming representatives of a world in which they no longer function as such, a world occupied by people who lack the kind of stabilizing consciousnesses necessary for any kind of action—moral or otherwise. And the derision of those who accuse Stein of a deep moral transgression (Dershowitz, in particular), misses the mark for just that reason. For the categories of morality and politics lose their import in Stein’s writing, and if she is at fault, it is not for her political betrayal, but for insisting too long on a modernist subject incapable of forming political positions altogether. To put it simply, if the fading hold of traditional subjectivity and the passivity engendered by such a loss are elsewhere the grounds on which Stein builds a kind of aesthetic mastery, allowing her to find her “bearings in dimensions otherwise imagined as out-of-reach” (My Way 11), as Charles Bernstein has described his own language play, and enabling her bold modernist experiments, situated here in a scene of war, it registers, instead, as the loss of mastery and the limits of an aesthetic response to a world where the passive is no longer adequate.

It is for this reason, then, rather than for some latent fascism that will grow as WWII comes, that the passage in The Autobiography comes up short. Neither freedom nor stoicism quite work. Placed into the environment of a world war, the depersonalized, inactive characters in this passage—Stein, the Frenchman, Alice, and the French and German nations as a whole—read not as brave renderings of modernist subjects, but as impotent wanderers, merely banal characters who lack the emotional depth and commitment to engage in anything fully. The problem, that is, is not that Stein feels that war is banal. It is only that, caught in the throes of modernism, Stein becomes unable, even in the face of war, to represent any response to war except in the most banal of ways.
To be sure, WWI is a special case, and it is important to understand Stein’s reaction to WWI as only the nascent stage of an insufficiency that will be amplified later in her career with the onslaught of WWII. As a reaction to WWI, after all, a certain moral inertia seems reasonable enough. Rather than fortifying her subjects and herself into revolutionaries—a line taken by some of Stein’s contemporaries, including Ezra Pound, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, and the Futurist movement as a whole—Stein finds WWI’s uselessness infectious, and she is not alone in charting the transformation of once secure selves into people incapable of action. Indeed, by most accounts, WWI seemed pointless and endless, ultimately taking the lives of more than sixteen million for no measurable gain. As the historian John Merriman put it, “Hundreds of thousands of soldiers suffered shell shock, psychologically devastated by the battle raging around them, unable to act” (979, emphasis mine). It is in this vein that Virginia Woolf writes about the petty machismo that produces the war in *Three Guineas* and that E.M. Forster simply refused to fight. Yet if Woolf and Forster may be read as pacifists, as I have noted in *Chapter Two*, for Stein, even pacifism is a position too active. For her, not fighting is not a political stance, but a condition of modern humankind.

In “Composition as Explanation,” a lecture given at Cambridge and Oxford in 1926, Stein ascribes to WWI itself a passivity that we saw in the Gentle Lena section of *Three Lives*. “War…is prepared and to that degree…it is not a thing made by being made it is a thing prepared” (513-4). This is echoed again in her 1937 *Everybody’s Autobiography*, where she writes that

Wars…only make anybody know what has already happened it has happened already the war only makes it public makes those who like illustrations of anything see that it has been happening...Everything has been done before the
war and then the war makes everybody know it and then everybody acts as if they were doing something but really they are only carried on by momentum. (76)

In the first quotation, taking up that traditional stance of action as something planned and plotted, war is revealed to be a planning with no content or a decision without the weight of moral force. What’s more, pushing down on the categories of “planning” and “preparation,” even these terms lose any sense of activities requiring agency. “A thing prepared” does not indicate anyone doing the preparation. It is a transitive become an adjective, a thing done somehow without the activation of agency and without anything worthy to substantiate it. Thus war becomes a remnant of some false, inactive preparation. The second quotation is even more extreme: war only confirms what already exists. It is not an activity, it is not a crusade, but a heinous “illustration” of something already articulated in other forms. As such, war turns people into mere observers, not agents who activate the war, but viewers who watch it happen. “Everybody acts as if they were doing something but really they are only carried on by momentum.” Even the activity that subjects do is not done with agency; it is merely a carrying out of something already done. The passive subject, imagined in The Gentle Lena in *Three Lives*, is given a real-life manifestation, and people—fictional and real—are left without the agency of traditional subjects.

The situation is even worse when we get to Stein’s WWII writings, where even her most egregious offenses reveal something rather less determined than a wrong position about the war. In Stein’s most incriminating piece of writing, the 1941 introduction to and translation of Pétain’s speeches, she praises the Nazi collaborator precisely for doing nothing. As Wanda Van Dusen, who published the introduction for the first time in 1996, characterized it, Stein’s admiration of Pétain applauds his “heroic pacifism” (72). Yet, as I noted in comparing her attitude to Forster and Woolf, it is not that Stein stakes any ground on pacifism as a political
movement, but simply admires in Pétain his desire to abstain from fighting. Neither resistance to Nazism nor approval of it are evident here. Indeed, throughout the introduction, written in typically Steinian prose, the jolting repetitions and generally recursive language exhibit none of the bellicose rhetoric of Nazi collaboration, just a kind of calm, collected, and hedged passivity. So, after recounting the reactions of the French to Pétain, Stein concludes, “about one thing they were all agreed and that is that he had achieved a miracle, without arms without any means of defense, he had succeeded in making the Germans more or less keep their word with him. Gradually this miracle impressed itself upon every one.” The language is startling. Positioned as a kind of David against the German Goliath, Pétain, “without arms without any means of defense,” pulls off a miracle of underdog victory. Certainly there is much denial in this characterization of Pétain’s victory, and I do not wish to elide any of it. For one, the victory to which Stein refers is only short lived, a temporary armistice that only leads to further German occupation in France. For another, the image of Pétain with no army is staggeringly exaggerated. But that these are the delusional terms with which Stein chooses to introduce the Nazi supporter suggests not fascistic leanings or even anti-Semitism, another claim of some of her critics, but a kind recalcitrant and blind adherence to a modernist subject now dead.

Stein seems to know as much. *Wars I Have Seen*, an autobiographical work that describes Stein’s time in the countryside of Bilignin during WWII, is her most vulnerable text, and it is clear that happy passivity has turned into anxious inertia. What’s more, Stein seems to understand that wanting to be left to do nothing requires, in the face of WWII, doing something. Over and over, Stein expresses her desire and the desire of the French to be free: “The feeling is that everyone wants to be free and this is a new feeling (48). Or, “they want to be free, not to be managed, threatened, directed, retrained, obliged, fearful, administered, they want none of these
things they all want to feel free, the word discipline, and forbidden and investigated and imprisoned brings horror and fear into all hearts…” (48) Or, “the only thing that any one wants now is to be free, to be let alone, to live their life as they can, but not to be watched, controlled, and scared, no, non, not” (49). All Stein wants is to be free to do nothing, to enjoy, in other words, the passivity she has so boldly represented. As Stein put it in “The Winner Loses,” she was relieved to hear about the armistice for “a great load was lifted off France” (633). Only this is just wishful thinking, because protecting passivity requires activity of the greatest kind. During the first world war, when France successfully deterred the Germans, when the war itself seemed a clash of mere desires, rather than one of morals, not acting seemed like the best chance at staving off a meaningless war. But in the morally stark days of WWII, when the terms of good and evil reigned, attempting to be just left alone, as Pétain does in Stein’s estimation, turns out to be a form of deep collaboration with the enemy. This is all to say that while passivity works for Stein in WWI, in WWII it leads to further invasion. Stein cannot go anywhere without fearing a German soldier or an overhead raid. And unable to change her style, unable to engage as an agent must, Stein yet understands the failing of her own methods.

Janet Malcolm puts it this way in Two Lives,

_Wars I have Seen_ is…a work of realism struggling against itself…. [It] reflects Stein’s ambivalence toward the form she has chosen or that, perhaps, has chosen her…. For forty years Stein has been working as a twentieth-century modernist innovator. But now she is obliged to consider the possibility that the nineteenth century did not end when she and everyone else thought it did, but is only ending now, with the arrival of barbarism… something tells Stein that there is a great point in being realistic now, that life is indeed real and earnest and that she must
try to rouse herself….Stein knows better than to try to write like Shakespeare, but she also senses that the occasion demands that she not try to write like herself, either. Modernist experimentalism will not express what she wants (and doesn’t want) to express. (84-6)

The modernist terms of passivity do not quite accommodate the atrocities of the war whirling around Stein, and she knows it. And yet, after a lifetime of invention and experimentation with a new kind of writing appropriate to a new kind of subject, she cannot really change, and the result is the ironic, but misplaced and incommensurate refrain that punctuates the text: “it was funny,” or “life is funny that way” that ultimately yields to the darker more desperate refrain, “it is a little frightening” (100). Here, even the subject’s insufficiency is insufficiently confronted, for against the pressure of the world’s new situation, the weight even of pathos will not stand.
Coda

Pathos and the Present: J.M. Coetzee’s Modernist Inheritance

I. The Return to Realism

I have been writing all along about the phenomenon of pathos and how, with the dissolution of traditional subjectivity, a new affective economy comes to replace the old one of sympathy. My claims for this affective change and the forging of a new emotional relationship between reader and character have been founded on the hollowing out, in the modernist period, of realism’s traditional idea of self, on the modernists’ sense of a loss of its “punctuality,” rendering characters too inchoate and decentered for sympathy or identification. As I have shown, this sense of loss is registered in different terms by the different authors I discuss. In James the loss of moral agency means the absorption of characters into the events and situations that surround them, rendering them hardly selves to be identified with at all. Most fully, in Woolf, as she moves from the inchoate consciousness of Clarissa who cannot know herself, to the sealed mind of Mrs. Ramsay who cannot be known, to Orlando, who has so many selves that even knowing them all is to know not a single self, identification is rendered moot. All that that remains of the relations between persons, as exhibited in Between the Acts, is a witnessing of lost relation, with pathos as the affect of the witness. And in Stein the loss of language’s referentiality makes description virtually impossible, so that selves, incapable even of self-reference, are hopelessly dispossessed.

With the rise of post-modern fiction, however, loss itself seems to be lost, and the feeling of the absence of the possibility of sympathetic feeling, experienced as pathos, becomes merely an absence, something we have seen adumbrated in Stein. Devoid of a pull to feel anything at all
for characters, post-modern fictions tends to revel in what Derrida called free-play, which we might see as either a freedom from the ethical pull of one on another or as a stay against a kind of nihilism produced by the absence of any plausible ethics at all. Modernist pathos, which registers these losses, would thus seem to be a relic of the past. But what I aim to show in this coda is that with a new wave of realism, and in particular with the hybrid brand of realism used by J.M. Coetzee, pathos is still visible as a dominant affective register. So, if realism is the lost genre that Stein, even in the face of war, could not quite accommodate, for Coetzee it is precisely what he attempts to resurrect. But it is a resurrection fully inflected by a modernist sensibility that he so obviously and consciously inherits.

The return to realism towards the end of the twentieth century has been well charted. In his 1993 essay “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” David Foster Wallace prophesied that the next generation of “literary rebels” would be writers “who treat old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self consciousness and fatigue. These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naïve, anachronistic” (43-4). Some have termed this genre the “New Sincerity,” but Foster Wallace is essentially signaling the return of realism after the radical experimentation of post-modernism, and precisely because of his sense that the loss of the loss exhibited in post-modern fiction has had, as “fatigue” implies, its run.45 A New York Times review of Jonathan Franzen’s Freedom by Michiko Kakutani confirms such a return: “With this book, [Franzen has] not only created an unforgettable family, he’s also completed his own transformation from a sharp-elbowed, apocalyptic satirist focused on sending up the socio-economic-political plight of this country into a kind of 19th-century realist

45 For a fuller elaboration of David Foster Wallace and the school of “New Sincerity,” see Adam Kelly’s “David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction.”
concerned with the public and private lives of his characters.” Against Kakutani’s optimism, Zadie Smith is biting in her evaluation of this phenomenon. In “Two Paths for the Novel,” Smith rejects in fierce terms what she calls Joseph O’Neill’s “lyrical Realism” in favor of Tom McCarthy’s avant-gardism.46 And yet, even Smith is not immune to assessments of her work as participating in a certain kind of (inadequate) realism. And I return to James Wood for his telling, though flawed, categorization of Smith and her literary circle, including novelists like Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo, as “hysterical realists.” For Wood, “hysterical realism” is a genre in which the conventions of realism are not being abolished but, on the contrary, exhausted, and overworked….An excess of storytelling has become the contemporary way of shrouding, in majesty, a lack; it is the Sun King principle. That lack is the human. All these contemporary deformations flow from a crisis that is not only the fault of the writers concerned, but is now of some lineage: the crisis of character, and how to represent it in fiction. Since modernism, many of the finest writers have been offering critique and parody of the idea of character, in the absence of convincing ways to return to an innocent mimesis. (“Hysterical Realism”) Like traditional realism, hysterical realism offers a fully formed, realist world, in which characters inhabit particular environments and act and react in ways particular to their personalities. Only so keen on mapping the entire world, hysterical realists empty their characters of “the human” element. They become types, rather than living, feeling people, adopting the caricature that marked Dickens’s realism, but leaving behind the way in which caricature functions to create interest and investment in his work. Thus Wood continues:

46 “A breed of lyrical Realism has had the freedom of the highway for some time now, with most other exits blocked” (“Two Paths”).
Yet that [caricature] is not all there is in Dickens, which is why most contemporary novelists are only his morganatic heirs. There is in Dickens also an immediate access to strong feeling, which rips the puppetry of his people, breaks their casings, and lets us enter them. Mr. Micawber may be a caricature, a simple, univocal essence, but he feels, and he makes us feel.

As you’ll recall from the Introduction, this seems to be a kind of hobby-horse of Wood’s, the need for characters to make their readers “feel.” And as in the previous essay I quoted, Wood is almost right. Dickens’s characters, despite their tendency towards caricature do make readers “feel,” and this is one of their primary appeals. But characters in different novelistic eras demand different kinds of readerly feeling, and Wood simply cannot abide the difference. The return of “the human” does not guarantee the return to sympathy or identification. The circumstances of human existence change, and while it is tempting to treat contemporary realists as realists of the nineteenth century, to reinsert them back into their literary origins, to do so is to miss those changes and the kinds of engagement that are available in a changed world.

Here the lesson of modernist affect is especially visible, and Coetzee can be situated precisely at the nexus of the return to realism and the summoning of modernist emotion. Utilizing, like his contemporaries, the resources of realism in order to confront directly the historical realities of his situation, to do precisely what Stein could not, Coetzee yet understands what David Attwell calls the “tyranny of the real” (6). The facts of his apartheid South African world are not to be elided. Any claims of unknowability would be reprehensible. But for anyone formed under the dominion of this “real,” invested (whites and blacks alike) in the moral morass of its tyranny with all its demands and impossible choices, the emotional economy of sympathy no longer works. As Paul Gilroy puts it, “Racial difference obstructs empathy and makes
ethnocentrism inescapable. It becomes impossible even to imagine what it is like to be somebody else” (70). Apartheid society is inherently contradictory. And with its pulls and its pushes—putting limits on some associations and coercing ones that might otherwise be limited, complicating even who is to be considered a person and thus to whom sympathy and identification are owed—the moral force of this emotional system breaks down.

Coetzee’s characters, then, are not the modernist ones whom we met in James, Woolf and Stein. The problem with them is not that they are too dispersed for knowing. They are not lacking centers to hold them steadily in our focus. The undeniable facts of apartheid mean that they are all, more or less, solidly placed in a describable social situation, moving about the world in discrete fashions, reacting to where they are on the basis of what they are. They are even, we might say, “punctual,” or at least potentially punctual. And like the realist inventions of Dickens and other Victorian novelists, they seem to be fully conceived, possessed of a life even outside the novelistic space they are allotted. We might even be able to imagine them walking around in other environments, acting in alternative situations, a thought experiment hard to achieve with modernist characters. But though Coetzee’s characters seem fully intact—restrained and isolated though they all are—their world is not, and their actions have no import and no effect. In the jury-rigged, morally contradictory world that Coetzee represents, they have no stable community in which to exhibit their punctuality. Circulating in an inept and dysfunctional sphere of university professors, farm workers, and families, their feelings and thoughts and beliefs have no companions that might share them, and though people in these novels would seem to be endowed with the capacity for sympathy, they no longer inhabit the social structure to allow its functioning.

47 As Candace Vogler puts it in her study of the use of literary case studies for moral philosophy, “A literary character seems to invite transplanting…a literary character appears as an imaginary being that could retain its qualities in different circumstances…unlike those of its native plot” (“The Moral of the Story,” 28-9).
This is to say that with the backdrop of race wars and violence looming in all of his novels, the claims to moral truth and to the ultimate transparency of “being right,” as we saw it in *The American* and as we find it in the realist tradition more generally, come to seem, for Coetzee, overblown and ultimately incommensurate to the ambiguities of his complicated homeland. More particularly, Jacqueline Rose has shown how Coetzee’s suspicions of the value of truth claims, and specifically his skepticism about the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, are parodied in an early scene in *Disgrace*, a novel I will discuss in detail shortly. Established in 1995, the commission aimed at hearing testimony from both victims and perpetrators of human rights violations, hoping to restore relations between blacks and whites. But the trials often led to inexcusable exonerationations, leaving the truth to seem of little consequence. Knowing is possible, indeed inescapable. But knowing no longer has any import. Language refers. There are blacks and there are whites. But what referring in this way accomplishes, what it can achieve when reference takes place within a system so ethically distorted, becomes opaque. Morality stands as a category: the immorality of apartheid is insistently clear. But for anyone living inside apartheid, the choices which one makes in relation to family, to friends, to the wider community pulled in different directions by it, inevitably comes to seem self-cancelling. Coetzee, like Nadine Gordimer before him, is not so arrogant as to think that one more fiction can solve the problems of South Africa. He knows that a different form of a fiction, one more “fictional,” more ambiguous and less tied to truth claims, like the fiction of post-modernism, say, is but an evasion of the problems that only a return to at least some form of realism can really confront. As Attwell puts it, both writers understand that “the discursive-political consequences of the country’s protracted trauma militate against fictionality” (4). But knowing, too, the inadequacies of realism’s affective solution to the condition of such
trauma, he charts a path in between two genres and so finds a place for fiction, nevertheless, by offering the steady, even inactive, stance of the modernist witness of pathos as the new seat of ethics.

Magda, the main character in an early Coetzee novel, *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), puts it like this: “I was born into a language of hierarchy, of distance and perspective. It was my father tongue. I do not say it is the language my heart wants to speak, I feel too much the pathos of its distances, but it is all we have” (97). Echoing Nietzsche, Magda understands that she lives in a world without community, whose language measures the distance, rather than the intimacy, between people. But living in the reality of such a lack, Coetzee offers the pathos of distance as its own solution, a form of relating even without communion. Not Victorian realism, not lyrical realism, not hysterical realism, but *pathetic* realism, a realism that asks its readers and the other characters to be witnesses to the ambiguities of suffering, to feel, that is, not the nothing that results from the inevitable failure of sympathetic relations, but the something other that emerges when we are situated in a world we can witness but not repair.48

**II. Elizabeth Costello and the Limits of Sympathy**

*Elizabeth Costello* (2003) takes the question of realism—its offerings and its failings—as one of its central themes, following its title character, a faded novelist, on an international speaking tour. In her first lecture, an acceptance speech on receiving the Stowe Award from Altona College in Williamstown, PA, Costello speaks about “What is Realism?” She opens with a meditation on a short story by Kafka, an important touchstone for this novel, called “A Report

---

48 David Foster Wallace seems less sure about the possibility of turning spectatorship into something so noble as witnessing and acerbically writes that contemporary readers are “gapers [who] slow down for car wrecks: they covet a vision of themselves as witnesses” (“E Unibus Pluram,” 1). Still, Coetzee, as I will show, seems to deliver on this vision.
to an Academy,” in which an ape named Red Peter speaks to an audience of humans. As with so many of Costello’s audiences, the one at Altona College seems disappointed, expecting Costello’s reflections on the arc of her career rather than her unfocused musings on literature in general. Of course, in retelling a story about one species speaking to an audience of another species, attempting to be legible to a different kind, that is precisely what she is doing. She is considering the fraught relationship between writer and reader, between lecturer and audience, between herself and others. And in considering that relationship via Kafka, she really is lecturing on “What is Realism,” telling us that it is no longer viable. This is consistently the situation in which Costello finds herself: speaking not only before large audiences of strangers, but also before the estranged audience of her son, sister, and the whole allegorical committee of judges who interrogate her at the end of the novel. She understands that, among people with whom she shares little and to whom she struggles to connect, the sympathetic economy of realism no longer obtains. As she suggests, the problem is in part epistemological: “There used to be a time, we believe, when we could say who we were.” But more than that, it is a matter of conviction in what we say: “Now we are just performers speaking our parts.” “Believe” and “just performers.” In questioning the reality of the world and its inhabitants, Costello is engaging in a traditional Enlightenment debate, echoing the skepticism of some of the period’s greatest thinkers. But her skepticism is more extreme than theirs and expresses some of the modernist disillusion that the Enlightenment does not quite reach. For while even during the period of David Hume the moral and ontological certainty of the world may have only been an illusion, now, as her emphasis on “belief” implies, even that illusion has come undone.

Costello feels like a sham, and she is right to feel so. As the novel began as a Tanner Lecture at Princeton University with a performance by the real-life novelist J.M. Coetzee
speaking in the voice of his invented fictional novelist, Elizabeth Costello, and then burgeoned, in its final novelistic form, into a series of speaking performances by just that fictional novelist, Costello is, indeed, just a performer, even a puppet, speaking her part. And we, the readers, are mere spectators watching her act it out. But while Costello ends her inquiry there, Coetzee does not. For what Costello, in her strained allegiance to Enlightenment thinking, cannot quite grasp, but what Coetzee implicitly shows, is that community is not impossible because of an epistemological problem, but that epistemological problems arise when community no longer functions as such. In particular, community in South Africa is not impossible because people are shams, but people seem like shams because the South African community has become impossible. Thus, though Costello worries about the basis for her being, though she worries that she is not, in Wood’s language, quite “human,” the worry is misplaced, still caught up in a realist debate that fails to grasp the conditions of contemporary life that make her what she is. For as I will show, Coetzee makes clear that whether we can know each other or not, whether we can feel each other’s pain or not, ultimately makes no difference when the moral effects of those capabilities have vanished. Sympathy, understood as a question of epistemology, has import only when it produces a more humane society, when the result of identification is the kind of moral regeneration with which the realist novel is replete. But in the world in which Costello and Coetzee’s other characters live, where sympathy cannot function, the only possibility for human living is emotion disconnected from any regenerative effect, emotion that registers the inefficacy of itself to do anything more than be felt.

This form of pure emotion is pathos, and it emerges not from an attempt to escape the position in which Costello finds herself—as a spectator to another, even as an actor and a sham before another who sits in the audience and witnesses—but from an embrace of it. And, in fact,
this is the relational dynamic that Costello, with her botched lectures, activates. Costello’s audience, including the reader, is a witness to her inability to connect fully, listening to and watching what may be impossible to change, but what demands, even so, to be acknowledged. For that Costello is either positioned as a performer or a spectator, and that the novel itself is a series of performances, indicates the reach of this new position and suggests a whole new emotional economy in which pathos is the operative emotion of the witness, the feeling that marks distance and of which its bearer must take stock.

True enough, Costello does not always seem to be aware of the possibilities of this alternative emotional network, but that is part of the novel’s point. Her questioning, which swings between traditional Enlightenment skepticism and modernist disillusionment, is just what the novel unpacks. Miming a scene from a novel of one of her favorite writers, Costello worries that “‘There used to be a time when we knew. We used to believe that when the text said ‘On the table stood a glass of water,’ there was indeed a table, and a glass of water on it, and we had only to look in the word-mirror of the text to see them. But all that has ended. The word-mirror is broken, irreparably, it seems’” (19). Chiding the belief in stable reality, in the solidity of the world and its objects, Costello’s metaphor redoes, in effect, a scene in *To the Lighthouse*, when Woolf similarly mocks the era of rational, realist belief. Lily wonders what it is, precisely, that the Victorian philosopher Mr. Ramsay studies and asks his son Andrew for an explanation: “‘Subject and object and the nature of reality,’ Andrew had said. And when she said Heavens, she had no notion what that meant. ‘Think of a kitchen table then,’ he told her, ‘when you're not there.’” For Costello, as for Woolf, the realist’s assurance of a stable reality sounds naïve. And under the influence of her hero, Woolf, and Joyce as well, whose novel she takes as her primary inspiration, she questions it. But she does not quite understand, as Woolf’s “heavens, she had no
notion what that meant” signifies, that the questions themselves are moot and that something different is required.

Accordingly, Costello cannot quite stake her ground in modernist territory, cannot build her character and her relation to other characters around it, and sometimes tenuously, sometimes adamantly, she doubles down on the old mode of thinking. In her third lecture to a group of students and professors at Appleton College in Massachusetts, entitled “The Lives of Animals: The Philosophers and the Animals,” Costello opens with an impassioned refutation of Thomas Nagel’s famous paper, “What is it like to be a bat?” For Nagel, what it’s like to be a bat is a problem that cannot be solved. For as humans, we can only imagine what it’s like to be humans imagining ourselves as bats, and the species barrier is impossible to traverse. “As our minds are not bats’ minds,’” Costello explains on behalf of Nagel, they are “‘inadequate to the task’” (76). But Costello has a different position, and invoking the Romantics, she claims that there “are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination” (80). She even offers the example of her own animation of Joyce’s Molly Bloom in her most famous novel, The House on Eccles Street, as proof: “If I can think my way into the existence of a being who has never existed, then I can think my way into the existence of a bat or a chimpanzee or an oyster, any being with whom I share the substrate of life” (80). Her son John, turning his mother into a pseudo Orlando, reiterates this sentiment to a news reporter who insists on Costello’s identity as a female writer. “‘But my mother has been a man….She has also been a dog. She can think her way into other people, into other existences. I have read her; I know. It is within her powers. Isn’t that what is most important about fiction: that it takes us out of ourselves, into other lives?’” (22-3) In part, Costello’s conviction that she can know the life of a bat is an embellishment of her concern for animals, her religious vegetarianism, and her staunch animal rights position, which has come to
occupy much of her intellectual activity, even bringing her, in the same lecture, to compare the slaughtering of animals to the mass killing of Jews at Auschwitz. But her concern for animals, her sense that she can easily get inside their beings, is also a statement about the epistemological capabilities of the human mind and the ethical role of literature, so that even the position of the Martha Nussbaums and Geoffrey Hartmans of the world who, as I have shown, attempt to preserve the world from the wreck of epistemological doubt tout court by limiting its reach, will not do for her. And so, denying even her own emerging skepticism, as I’ve just chronicled, for a view more naively faithful to the possibilities of realist ideology, Costello’s wild swings between ideological systems ultimately points to an alternative that she cannot quite grasp.

Not quite grasping it is frequently a problem in criticism of the novel, too. For Shameem Black, for example, Costello’s vacillation between positions is the result not of her only partial intuition of the outmodedness of the system of realist sympathy, but of her selective use of it. As Black has it, Costello “only imagines subjects who cannot challenge her imaginative projections, and she denies sympathy to those who can” (216). Thus, sympathy is offered to the bat who has no speaking power but denied, as Black notes, to her daughter-in-law, Norma, who challenges the very premise of her beliefs. The problem, as Black sees it, then, is with the limited application of Costello’s sympathy, rather than with sympathy itself. And this is, as I’ve already said, one of the primary problems with sympathy in a segregated world: who is deserving and who is undeserving of it overwhelms its appeal as a universal emotion. But I want to argue something more dramatic than this. For Costello is not merely confronted with the failures and shortcomings of sympathy, but with the ways in which, whether she is able to fully recognize it or not, the categories are completely dead to begin with. The fact, then, that Costello so easily seems to change her mind about the epistemological possibilities of the world, that she at once
upholds the idea that people can be known and rejects the idea that objects can be known, that she inhabits the mind and spirit of a bat but seals herself off from her own flesh and blood, alerts us to the ways in which discussions of epistemology in this novel are purely academic, mere theories meant for scholarly lectures and speaking tours, rather than for intimate conversation about our actual experience of each other and the world. In this way, these debates are a kind of false sign in the novel, and their dominance in Costello’s often failed lectures is an irony that only heightens their impotence in treating the world as she finds it.

Another of Coetzee’s characters, David Lurie of Disgrace, whom I will discuss in detail in the next section, gestures towards the debate that’s really at issue and sheds light on what precisely is it at stake for Coetzee. While teaching Wordsworth’s The Prelude to a group of college students, Lurie pauses over the moment when Wordsworth arrives at Mont Blanc and fails to feel the sublimity of the landscape he thought was guaranteed. Wordsworth is “grieved/To have a soulless image on the eye/That had usurped upon a living thought/That never more could be” (21). Rather than focusing on the epistemological ramifications of this failure, Lurie highlights the failure of “sense experience,” a moment when Wordsworth’s emotional faculties malfunction. As Philip Dickinson has explained, the failure of Wordsworth’s sense experience is also a moment of failed sense experience between Lurie and his students. For while Lurie’s “humanism, liberalism, and egoism are all bound up with a complacent faith in the ethics of the sympathetic imagination” (7), his reactionless students who connect neither to him nor to the poem reveal the gaps in this system. They show, for Dickinson, an “affective incapacity” that comes to plague Lurie throughout the rest of the novel. And the same may be said for Elizabeth Costello, whose conviction about the sympathetic imagination does not yield communion but the disappointment of an audience and a son (and a daughter-in-law) who only barely relate to her.
Yet Dickinson’s term “affective incapacity” is not quite right in assessing the emotional landscape of these characters and these novels. Disappointed by the failures of realist sympathy though they are, Coetzee’s characters are not left with affective incapacity but with affective distance. And over the course of both novels it becomes clear that these are not characters with whom the reader and other characters have no affective relation, only a different one.

This is what critics of Coetzee’s work have missed, the way in which Coetzee does not simply complicate the economy of sympathy but, more fully, reveals its uselessness. Challenging readings of *Disgrace* by Margot Beard and Elleke Boehmer which seek to expand the reach of sympathy, Derek Attridge, Michael Marais and Philip Dickinson, attempt, rather, to limit its reach. But in so doing they merely redefine sympathy’s boundaries and, in fact, reassert its potency, while Coetzee, in my opinion, rejects it outright. Jane Taylor agrees in her review of the novel: “*Disgrace* considers the failure of a Western liberal tradition premised upon an eighteenth-century model of philosophical sympathy.” But again, this reading isn’t quite sufficient. For rather than simply revealing the inadequacies of such a system, I want to highlight the ways in which Coetzee offers a new affective economy altogether. Costello’s son, John, a physics and astronomy professor, hints at it when he says of his mother, “she is by no means a comforting writer” (5). Turning away from questions of epistemology and the attendant emotion of sympathy, John highlights what seems to him the affective fallout of a certain modernist bent, the lack of comfort. And later in the novel, Costello’s sister Blanche introduces herself to a university audience in the same way, asserting defiantly that she has “no message of comfort to bring.” For as the novel gathers, as the lectures build on each other, it is clear that our relation to Costello and her relation to her distanced relations is sustained not on the basis of the comfort of sympathy, which we do not share, nor even on the animation of the question of comfort and
sympathy, which seems like a false sign, but on the basis of a distance constituted by a never ending circle of spectatorship in which Costello herself participates.

Ultimately, the irrelevance of epistemology and the impotence of sympathy, on the one hand, and its replacement by pathos as the affect of the witness, on the other hand, is raised to allegorical status when, in the final chapter, Costello finds herself in some unnamed, Kafkaesque geography waiting to be admitted to some other unknown location through a gate designated for her alone. Like K in *The Trial*, Costello must appeal to a recalcitrant jury which demands a statement of her belief. As an atheist and a writer, Costello claims she has no beliefs, hoping, by virtue of the sincerity of her disbelief to emerge sympathetic. But sincerely disbelieving is an impossible oxymoron for the judges, and her statements fall on deaf ears. Costello is denied admittance, destined to remain on the outside of an inside she can never inhabit.

Here, too, Costello does not quite take the measure of her perceptions. For her, the outside of the gated area is almost equally opaque, and holed up in some half-way house meant for other unsuccessful pleaders like herself, Costello wanders around in a landscape that feels to her like a dream, unclear about what’s real and what’s not and whether this displaced self is the same as the traveling novelist we and she have come to know. In other words, Costello remains dense as ever, returning, almost pathologically, to the language of truth and epistemology. “You ask if I have changed my plea,” Costello says to the jury. “But who am I, who is this I, this you? We change from day to day, and we also stay the same. No I, no you is more fundamental than any other. You might as well ask which is the true Elizabeth Costello: the one who made the first statement or the one who made the second. My answer is, both are true. Both. And neither. *I am other*” (221). The question of who the true Elizabeth Costello is is even more fraught than this peroration suggests. For invented, as I said, as the alter ego of Coetzee himself in his 1997
Tanner Lecture, Elizabeth Costello is the mouthpiece of her author, railing, in that first instance, against the mistreatment of animals in the lecture he delivered called “The Lives of Animals.” Indeed, David Lodge tracks the “teasing similarities” between Costello and “her creator” nicely in his review of the novel in *The New York Review of Books*. Thus, to whom the name Elizabeth Costello refers—to the self who pleads to the jury; to her lecturing, world traveling, novelist self; or to her original self who exists outside the novel proper as a stand-in for J.M. Coetzee—is indeed indeterminate, and no amount of evidence can verify the truth.

But the indeterminateness of selves is of little relevance. Consumed by the old epistemological categories, Costello misreads the committee’s demands as a need for truth, which means to her, the need for a stable, secure self. In point of fact, the committee is only after passion. A fellow petitioner suggests just this to Costello: “[L]et me offer a word of advice. They may say they demand belief, but in practice they will be satisfied with passion. Show them passion and they will let you through” (213). The committee, like any good Kafkaesque bureaucracy, cares little about ontological truth. It insists, instead, on some form of emotional truth, or emotional engagement. But the committee misses the mark too, for in insisting on passion, the judges also refuse to take the measure of society, which no longer makes room for such an emotion. Furthermore, that Costello is told to “show” them passion, that it is suggested that she adopt a stance, rather than actually feel it, reveals that all the committee is after is a *display* of emotion, a simulacrum of affect in which false feeling is taken as authentic and disengagements are swept under the rug. As Coetzee sees it, then, different from both Costello and the committee, neither truth nor passion is Costello’s key through the gated area. Rather, it is only the genuine revelation of emotional distance and disengagement that can admit her and that holds any promise of such community as remains possible. This is to say that only pathos is the
affect appropriate to Costello’s situation. And while the truth of pathos lacks, perhaps, the weight of epistemological truth, on the one hand, and passion, on the other hand, while it is hedged, compromised, and lacking in comfort, it has the virtue, for Coetzee, of accurately capturing the condition of a self who, for better or worse, looks only from a distance and only as a spectator towards her own life and the lives of others.

This, in some sense, is to argue against recent scholarship on witnessing by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, which I mentioned briefly in the Introduction. Or, it is, at least, to argue for a clearer delimitation of it. For them, the role of witness and testifier are almost synonymous, and testifying becomes the sole act and raison d’être of the witness. It is, indeed, what constitutes a person as a witness. But Costello here exhibits something more modest, the role of the witness who speaks but whose speech does not testify, who stands too much outside what she says for witnessing ever to become testimony. And we, as readers, in turn, become just as Laub says, “witness to the process of witnessing itself” (75). A never-ending circle of performing and watching, acting and witnessing is activated, and pathos, as its origins reveal, emerges as the emotion produced by such a stance.

III. Disgrace and the Estrangement of Character

In Coetzee’s fictionalized autobiography, Summertime (2009), an anonymous interviewer treks around the world gathering stories from John Coetzee’s former love interests. The first interviewee, Julia, recounts their passionless affair when John was in his early thirties, sharing a dilapidated house on Tokai Road with his ailing father. To Julia, John lacks emotional depth. He is “incomplete” and “impersonal,” with lovemaking skills that border on “autistic,” and his coldness makes her uneasy. His novels express a similar affective lack, and sounding an awful
lot like the intolerant Wood, Julia confesses, “‘I can’t say I like Dusklands. I know it sounds old-fashioned, but I prefer my books to have proper heroes and heroines, characters you can admire’” (56). Julia is right on two counts. Coetzee offers no characters whom we might call heroes or heroines, and there is certainly no one in his novels whom we admire. But she is also right that requiring such characters is old fashioned. For what modernism has taught the novel is that heroes and heroines are impossible not only because they smack of romantic myths that lack the hard reality of modern life, a fact that the novel even in its earliest iterations in the eighteenth century was well aware of, but more specifically, because as heroes and heroines they are subjects we both must admire and sympathize with, tasks impossible in the condition of spectatorship and witnessing in which modernist fiction and Coetzee’s fiction reside. Thus, Coetzee’s characters, realist in their descriptive qualities, are marked by precisely the absence of admiration and sympathy that once seemed crucial even to the makeup of the early realist novel. Indeed, as Molly Abel Travis has it, Coetzee’s novels display “narrative distancing” by “preventing too easy an empathy with their protagonists” (231). And Jacqueline Rose has said that “Coetzee seems to have gone out of his way [in Disgrace] to create a character with whom it is almost impossible for his reader to sympathize and identify” (192).

David Lurie is that character, an unlikely protagonist. As an adjunct communications professor at the Cape Technical University, “he makes no impression on his students” (4). He makes no real impression on his reader either. He is written about in the third person, but any omniscient narrator who might be doing this narration, any version of some “we,” is hard to locate, and the narrative line seems too in tune with Lurie’s perspective to qualify as “ours.” Detached from friends, detached from family, Lurie expresses little interest in the lives of the people around him and ultimately appears detached even from himself, a witness to his life,
rather than an agent of it. At first glance, this might seem to be realist writing ad absurdum, the Cartesian cogito become distanced even from his own being, a kind of supra self consciousness that places even what’s most intimate at a critical distance, as Charles Taylor has it. It is this distance that Lukács so admires when he writes that “While the modernist writer is uncritical towards many aspects of the modern world, his contemporary, the realist writer, can step back from these things and treat them with the necessary critical detachment” (50-1). Only in Coetzee’s novel, it is not Lukács’s faith in critical detachment that is invoked (in fact, Coetzee has been explicit about his rejection of Lukács), and it is not Descartes’s cogito that is being referenced, except in its denial, as Marianne DeKoven and others have noted. For spectatorship does not make Lurie more self enlightened, but self estranged. Thus, while it might be tempting to assimilate this third person narration to the omniscient narrator of much Victorian fiction (George Eliot comes to mind), the two have striking differences. Because, despite the narrative’s focalization by the consciousness of Lurie, it is not that the views the narrator expresses are limited or distorted—too personal or close for realist evaluation. As I have noted, Lurie is himself a detached observer. Rather, paradoxically, his observations are not, as it were, personal enough. He does not make any of the moral judgments or reflections that someone like George Eliot does. And it is this that foregrounds the possibility of Lurie as a subject of pathos, whose primary relationship to himself and others is observation that leads not to intimacy and self revelation, but to distance and opacity. As Coetzee elsewhere puts it, “One is in danger of not being oneself when one lives at a reflective distance from oneself” (Doubling the Point 268), and he thus creates a character who is at a non reflective distance from himself.

It is for this reason, perhaps, that some lay readers have been dismissive of Lurie and the novel. Blakey Vermeule recounts in the opening of *Why Do We Care About Fictional Characters?* that students in her graduate course at Northwestern were turned off by Lurie. “David Lurie provoked outrage in my students. What was his attitude towards women? Had he learned anything at all by the end of the book?” (ix) For Vermeule, this scene, somewhat counter-intuitively, becomes a lesson in reader over-investment, in readers taking characters too much as real people, a temptation, Vermeule acknowledges and which I note in Chapter One as well, New Criticism has often warned us about. But there are other lessons to be learned: Vermeule’s students are right. David Lurie, like Elizabeth Costello and John Coetzee and the characters in *Dusklands*, isn’t sympathetic. He doesn’t much care about women and he has not really changed by the end of the novel. And yet, it is also a misreading, the same misreading as Philip Dickinson’s, to say that he lacks emotional appeal. He is, for all intents and purposes, a regular character and the center of the narrative’s patient focus. He is the person we follow and the consciousness through whom the story Coetzee has to tell is filtered. It is only that David’s appeal is not that of a realist character with whom we identify. It is not, to be fair, the appeal of a modernist character either, who lacks any coherent subjectivity with which we might identify. It is rather the appeal of a realist character circling in a modernist environment, a character, in other words, with whom, by all counts, we should be able to identify, but who prohibits it not for a lack in his makeup, not for being too dispersed, but for a lack in the community of people among whom he lives.

This isolation from society is not just bad luck on Lurie’s part. He actively pushes away any community to which he might belong. But so does apartheid society itself, and so if he is

---

50 Marianne DeKoven wrongly claims the exact opposite in “Going to the Dogs in *Disgrace*”: “Nowhere else in his oeuvre is Coetzee so ethically decisive. This fact accounts, at least in part, I would argue, for this novel’s wide readership and popular acclaim” (847).
apart from society he is apart as its exemplar. Caught up in a lurid, but passionless, affair that turns into rape with one of his college students, Melanie Isaacs, Lurie is summoned to a university trial to testify. At the hearing, like Costello before the jury, Lurie is asked by the committee of fellow academics to write a statement of apology and then, after some discussion, merely asked to sign a prewritten statement, acknowledging his remorse. But Lurie will have none of it: “‘Frankly, what you want from me is not a response but a confession. Well, I make no confession. I put forward a plea, as is my right. Guilty as charged. That is my plea. That is as far as I am prepared to go’” (51). In Giving an Account of Oneself, Judith Butler explains that for Nietzsche the narrating self comes into being through the threat of punishment. This self “gives an account of himself” only when he is accused of something and is compelled to either admit or refute the charges. This is the situation in which Lurie finds himself, asked to give an account by a committee that challenges the morality of his actions. But Lurie refuses to play. He refuses the demand for some confession of the heart, which he charges is a misappropriation of religious terms in legal proceedings. Even more forcefully than that, as Coetzee sees it, confession does not really work. Subject to an endless cycle of transgression and confession, the process yields nothing but the sanctimony of the confessant who reveals no hidden, inner self but one already in plain sight. And short of religious grace or death, no confessant can absolve himself.51

Worse yet, as many have pointed out, including Peter Brooks who cites Paul de Man’s famous reading of the ribbon scene in Rousseau’s Confessions, confession can often produce sin.

51 See Coetzee’s “Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky” in Doubling the Point.
Thus, “The primal scene of exposure, shame, guilt, is absolutely necessary to the project of making a confession, and if the scene never occurred, one would have to invent something like it in order to motivate and perform the writing of the *Confessions*” (*Troubling Confessions* 20-1). Whether or not Lurie is addicted to this kind of confession, manufacturing sins in order to be exposed and shamed, is not immediately clear. Perhaps, we might speculate, he wishes to sin so that he can, after all, be redeemed from his unredeemable situation, and speculation is all that can be offered about Lurie’s consciousness which, hidden from the reader, cannot be properly studied and psychoanalyzed. But the opacity of Lurie’s mind is beside the point. For whether Lurie does or does not know that what he has done wrong is irrelevant. And that he won’t admit to it is irrelevant too. In point of fact, he does admit to his wrongdoing. He says, outright, that he is guilty. But what he rejects, and what matters most, is confession itself, the so-called change of heart he is meant to exhibit and thus the notion that he is meant to be in some sort of sympathetic relation not just to others but to himself and his wrongdoings as well.

The committee, and in particular Lurie’s closest ally, is indifferent to the nuances of Lurie’s objections and ultimately launches its own assault: “‘Don’t expect sympathy from me, David, and don’t expect sympathy from anyone else either. No sympathy, no mercy, not in this day and age’” (44). Lurie may have the moral high ground: in such a world as he inhabits, confession is bogus. But Butler’s perception holds weight too, the weight of the position of Vermeule’s college students. By refusing to give an account, Lurie refuses to circulate in the economy of sympathy, a denial which though it denies him not only the companionship of his colleagues, but the companionship of his readers, too, has the virtue of refusing just that simulacrum of companionship that sympathy has now become.
The invasiveness Lurie feels from his academic judges accordingly extends to his feelings about the law in general. Rather than confining itself to verdicts like guilty and innocent, it arrogantly appeals to religious categories of confession and psychological categories of the heart. Lurie thinks it has no right, and if it insists anyway, he decides to opt out altogether. Of course, as he will soon see, the law is not some club to which he can decide, willy nilly, to enter and exist in as he pleases. For all of its ineptitude in dealing meaningfully with apartheid, it also becomes Lurie’s last resort, a structure which still organizes the world of communal living around him, as I will soon show. But in the scope of his rejection here, he goes further towards a rejection of sympathy than we’ve seen even in the other modernists. For while Woolf’s Lily Briscoe feels invaded by individuals who seek too much knowledge of her, Lurie feels invaded by the whole network of sociality, and finding a place to settle nonetheless will thus be all the more difficult.

Meanwhile, it is his recalcitrance, Lurie’s refusal to express remorse or exhibit his innermost feelings, that would seem to leave him unable to change, unable to learn and progress as realist protagonists are meant to do. Indeed, as J. Hillis Miller puts it of Victorian characters, they are people “who exist as potentiality, not as actuality, as a hollow perturbation in the midst of the surrounding community. This situation of unsatisfied desire makes them relatively introspective. The narrator concentrates on their sense of themselves as incomplete and follows their attempts to bring themselves to completion” (94). Lurie hardly fits this description. He hardly has desires. Even sex, that most basic desire, is transformed in the first sentence of the novel from a libidinal passion into a “problem” he has solved rather well (1) with weekly visits to a prostitute. Desires thus become puzzles that need solving, or tinkering with, and Lurie
becomes a kind of malfunctioning device that needs fixing rather than a seeker who needs self
discovery and “completion.”

Yet even this damning first proclamation does not mean that Lurie remains static
throughout the novel, though he often insists otherwise. To the nagging academic committee he
asserts that he is “a grown man. I am not receptive to being counselled. I am beyond the reach of
counselling” (49). To his daughter, he denies the whole enterprise of change: “Re-education.
Reformation of character…I would prefer simply to be put against a wall and shot” (66). But
Lurie protests too much, and we see signs of a shift when, after his dismissal from the college in
Cape Town, he moves to the Eastern Cape where his single, lesbian daughter Lucy owns a small
farm. This life outside the city offers another side of South Africa, not the relative, if false,
stability of university life, nor yet the dark underside of black discrimination. For Lucy is
seemingly privileged, a white land owner. Only alone in an unstable landscape, she is vulnerable.
Lurie, partially out of love and partially out of cynicism, is skeptical and dismissive of his
daughter’s rough and tumble life, but eager to get along, he quickly immerses himself in the
work of the farm. He even decides to help out at an animal shelter, assisting Bev and Bill Shaw
in euthanizing unwanted dogs. To be sure, Lurie does not become an animal lover. He is no
Elizabeth Costello, preaching the evils of their inhumane treatment. “Lucy, my dearest, don’t be
cross. Yes, I agree, this is the only life there is. As for animals, by all means let us be kind to
them. But let us not lose perspective. We are of a different order of creation from the animals.
Not higher, necessarily, just different. So if we are going to be kind, let it be out of simple
generosity, not because we feel guilty or fear retribution” (74). In fact, Lurie seems to completely
reverse Costello’s position. Far from being able to know what it’s like to be a bat, Lurie insists
on just the species barrier that Costello denies. But Lurie is not an animal hater either.
Abandoning the idealism of the sympathetic imagination, Lurie offers something much more modest instead, kindness. And in this modesty, Lurie achieves something that Costello cannot quite capture, the relation of one being to another not on the basis of sympathy or deep identification, but on the basis of a mild sort of emotion, a distanced affect yet sufficient unto itself.

Of course, this is not to say, that, in extreme situations, sympathy does not have its allures for Lurie too. As the novel progresses, as Lurie becomes more and more desperate to save his only daughter from the chaos of South Africa, he turns into just the clamoring academic committee he had so forcefully eschewed. Alone one afternoon at the farm house, Lurie and his daughter are attacked by a group of black men who seem to have been sent by his daughter’s workhand, Petrus. Lurie is beaten and burned with ethanol and Lucy is gang raped. Lurie is eager to report the rape to the police, but insisting, as her father had, on the irremediability of her situation, on the impossibility of any other’s concern to ameliorate it, Lucy forbids it. “This is my life…What happened to me is my business, mine alone, not yours, and if there is one right I have it is the right not to be put on trial like this, not to have to justify myself” (133). Like Lurie before the university inquest, Lucy insists on both her privacy, her right to keep her violated body her own, and the inefficacy of sharing her trouble with another whose law or love might help her out of it. Lurie is “outraged, outraged at being treated like an outsider” (141) and feels reliant on the law to rectify what has gone so seriously awry. The pulls of the law and of the economy of sympathy more generally assert themselves on Lurie, and it is easy to see why. In a broken down society, the law seems like the only solution. But just Coetzee’s point is that though it has its compelling qualities, it is inadequate. Nothing can do anything to heal the problems of
apartheid South Africa, and Coetzee’s response is both to highlight that nothing and to offer a way of living in it nevertheless.

Lurie, accordingly, at the end of the novel, undergoes another, if even more subtle change. At the clinic with Bev, Lurie carries in the last dog, “bearing him in his arms like a lamb” (220), but doing nothing to save him from his fate. Bev gives him one last chance, “‘Are you giving him up?’ ‘Yes, I am giving him up’” (220). At first blush it may seem that Lurie has remained cold as ever, having learned nothing from his experiences, having become, even, an automaton in his killing of innocent dogs. But that he carries this dog like a lamb, like a religious sacrifice meant to bear the sins of his people, is a sign, surely, not that Lurie has learned nothing, only that what he has learned has not transformed him as we might wish. Like the novels of Dostoevsky, which Coetzee so admires, religion is the only salvation that yet has no power anymore to save. For living in some ways like a realist character, Lurie still can’t fulfill the realist edict to make himself better, to come up in the world and to learn from his mistakes. Having seen the traumas of the modern world—his specific South African world but also the agentless world of modernity, as Frederic Jameson has described it—he is thrust into modernist disbelief that realist emotion has any power left, and the only salve is pathos, marking what cannot be helped, but that yet needs to be acknowledged. From one perspective, this is Coetzee unable to sustain the project of realism against the backdrop of apartheid South Africa. But from another angle, it is Coetzee offering a daring, though modest, solution to the passing of realist affect, refracting its redemptive project instead through the lens of modernist pathos, which at once preserves and tempers its aims.
Works Cited


---.“Upheavals of Intimacy in *To the Lighthouse.*” *Selected Papers from the 24th International Conference on Virginia Woolf* (forthcoming)


Forster, E.M. *A Passage to India*. 1924. Mariner Books, 1965


---.“Composition as Explanation.” *Look at Me Now and Here I Am: Selected Works 1911-1945.*
---.*The Geographical History of America or the Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind.*
   1980. 4-54.
   America, 1998.
---.*Tender Buttons.* 1914. *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein.* Ed. Carl Van Vechten. New York:
Stein, Gertrude and Amy Feinstein. “The Modern Jew Who Has Given Up the Faith of His


Yeazell, Ruth Bernard. Language and Knowledge in the Late Novels of Henry James. Chicago:
