Interdisciplinary Research in Gender

REFLECTIVE READING AND THE POWER OF NARRATIVE

PRODUCING THE READER

Karyn Sproles

Reflective Reading and the Power of Narrative

Reflective Reading and the Power of Narrative: Producing the Reader is an interdisciplinary exploration into the profound power of narratives to create—and recreate—how we imagine ourselves. It posits that the process of producing a text also produces the reader.

Written from the perspective of a psychoanalytic feminist, Sproles considers a wide array of examples from literature, popular culture, and her own experiences to illustrate what she calls "reflective reading"—a metacognitive reading practice that recognizes the workings of the unconscious to push the reader toward a potentially transformational engagement with narrative. This may manifest as epiphany, recovery from loss or resolution of repressed trauma. Each chapter draws on examples of characters and authors who model a reflective reading process from Jane Austen and Virginia Woolf to Johnny Cash and Alison Bechdel.

By reclaiming the role of the unconscious, Karyn Sproles reinvigorates the theoretical work begun by reader-response criticism and develops a deep understanding of identification and transference as an integral part of the reading process. For students and researchers of cultural studies, psychoanalysis, gender studies and feminist literature and theory, *Reflective Reading and the Power of Narrative* offers innovative and accessible ideas on the relationship between reader and text.

Karyn Sproles is the author of *Desiring Women: The Partnership of Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West* (2006). She is currently the director of the Center for Teaching & Learning at the United States Naval Academy, where she also teaches in the English Department.

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Producing the Reader

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To Pippa and Sadie

Contents

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Permission has been granted to reprint versions of previously published material:

"Cross-Dressing for (Imaginary Battle): Vita Sackville-West's Biography of Joan of Arc" [Title of revised essay/essay chapter] was originally published in a slightly different form in *Biography*, vol. 19, no. 2, 1996, as "Cross-Dressing for Imaginary Battle: Vita Sackville-West's Biography of Joan of Arc," pp. 158–77.

"Reading, Faith, and the Analytic Process of the Starbridge Novels" in *Scandalous Truths: Essays by and about Susan Howatch*, Bruce Johnson and Charles A. Huttar, eds. Susquehanna UP, 2005. 100–121.

A final tribute goes to Max R. Sproles (1934–2015), who taught me to tell stories.

Part 1

Why we need stories and the stability of the subject

1 Quilted quotations and the pleasure of the text

While hunting through the stacks of a university library, I came upon the three-volume edition of Leslie Stephen's *Hours in a Library* (1874–1879). While he is a relatively obscure Victorian man of letters today, Stephen (1832–1904) was well regarded in his day. His first wife was the daughter of William Makepeace Thackeray. His second was the mother of Virginia Woolf. When I opened the last volume to the table of contents, I immediately recognized it as the predecessor of Virginia Woolf's *Common Reader*. Just as she revised her father's template for life writing by transforming the *Dictionary of National Biography* into *A Room of One's Own*,[1] so, too, is her father's own room, the library in which she had (unusually for that time) free rein, the model for her own transformation from the "daughter of [an] educated man" (to paraphrase *Three Guineas*) into a "common reader." Father and daughter published essays of their personal responses to literature that mirror one another, even in the titles:

Table 1.1 Leslie Stephen and Virginia Woolf's published essays

Leslie Stephen	*Virginia Woolf*[2]
Charlotte Brontë	Jane Austen
Charles Kingsley	Lewis Carroll
Godwin and Shelley	Mary Wollstonecraft
Gray and His School	Donne after Three Centuries
Sterne	Sterne
Country Books	Gothic Romance
George Eliot Trials	George Eliot
Autobiography	The Art of Biography
Carlyle's Ethics	Lockhart's Criticism
The State Trials	The Narrow Bridge of Art
Coleridge	Sara Coleridge

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This uncanny family resemblance suggests the extent of Leslie Stephen's literary influence on his daughter. I have exaggerated it by selecting titles from among her essays, but nevertheless, their shared pleasure in reading is powerfully apparent. Woolf borrows from the shelves of her father's own work on reading and pays her respects to Stephen with a direct reference to his work by entitling one of her own essays "Hours in a Library." Her homage is more overt in the essay, "Leslie Stephen," in which she writes:

> Even today there may be parents who would doubt the wisdom of allowing a girl of fifteen the free run of a large and quite unexpurgated library. But my father allowed it…."Read what you like," he said, and all his books…were to be had without asking. To read what one liked because one liked it, never to pretend to admire what one did not—that was his only lesson in the art of reading.
>
> (Woolf, 1967: 79–80)

Woolf's essay about her father is carefully composed for public consumption. More eulogy than memoir, it is full of the faint praise that in private tended toward bitter scorn. After censoring her own feelings about her father, the best she can do is to quote others:

> the praise he would have valued most, for though he was an agnostic nobody believed more profoundly in the worth of human relationships, was [George] Meredith's tribute after his death: "He was the one man to my knowledge worthy to have married your mother."
>
> (ibid.: 80)

Regardless of her ambivalence for her father, the link between them is clear. The titles of their essays reveal the passionate engagement with reading that led them both to spend hours in a library. This is the link—the quilting point[3]—that stitches together father and daughter: both were transformed by reading. They shared that safe space of the library where they spent hours listening to the whisper of pages.

The first volume of Stephen's *Hours in a Library* begins with "Opinions of Authors," six pages of quotations from writers attesting to the power of reading. They describe themselves as outsiders—protected from the noise and expectations of society. They pre-figure Woolf's Outsider's Society of *Three Guineas*, and just as in Woolf's description, they represent a contradiction in terms—a collection of people gathered together to avoid contact with collections of people. Woolf surrounded herself by a safe community in the Bloomsbury Group, a collection of outsiders. To be sure, it is not company that Woolf's outsiders and Stephen's authors are avoiding, but judgment and the pressure to conform and support social institutions that perpetuate violence and oppression. Stephen's authors note this tension between seeking solitude and craving company: "My neighbours think me often alone, and yet

at such time I am in company with more than five hundred [books]" (Laurence Sterne, quoted in Stephen, 1892, vol. 1: vii). Stephen also quotes Emerson: "In a library we are surrounded by many hundreds of dear friends imprisoned by an enchanter in paper and leathern boxes" (ibid.: vii). And Tennyson: "I will bury myself in my books and the devil may pipe to his own" (ibid.: xiii). Stephen, an eminent Victorian, denounced the hypocrisy of religion and state and reveled in the sublime of books and nature. Woolf, a good Modernist, followed in her father's footsteps by reading and walking, even as she denounced him privately and all he stood for publicly. In her writing, she consistently challenges his practice, as the founding editor of the 63 volume *Dictionary of National Biography*, to create stable subjects who are held up as models of virtue.

If libraries are safe places for outsiders, then Jasper Fforde's Thursday Next novels are safe places for readers. Beginning with *The Eyre Affair* (2001), Fforde creates an entire series of metacognitive reading events.[4] Therein resides the pleasure of these texts. A variation on the popular British sub-genre, alternative history,[5] the "what if" question Fforde poses is: what if literature was the most important thing in society? This wonderfully affirming supposition is enough to make any English major's heart skip a beat. In a world in which literature is the most important thing, the theft of the manuscript of *Jane Eyre* is a national emergency. The literature branch of the police and literary detective, Thursday Next, are called upon to solve the crime. The novel quickly moves from alternative history to fantasy cum literary satire in a mixture that is equal parts *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, unrelenting bad puns included. The evil villain is Acheron Hades and Thursday's love interest is Landen Parke-Laine, for example. The real joy for a reader like me begins in the next book in the series, *Lost in a Good Book*, when Thursday refines her ability to read herself into books:

> I relaxed, took a deep breath, cleared my throat and read in a clear, strong and confident voice, expressive and expansive. I added pauses and inflections and raised the tone of my voice where the text required it. I read like I had never read before.
>
> (Fforde, 2002: 173)

Like Alice, Thursday finds herself in a different world, and her wonderland is a library:

> I was in a long, dark, wood-paneled corridor lined with bookshelves that reached from the richly carpeted floor to the vaulted ceiling…The library appeared endless; in both directions the corridor vanished into darkness with no definable end…[the books] felt warm to the touch, so I leaned closer and pressed my ear to the spines. I could hear a distant hum…a million sounds all happening together. And then, in a revelatory moment, the clouds slid back from my mind and a crystal-clear understanding of the very nature of books shone upon me. They weren't just collections of

> words arranged neatly on a page to give the *impression* of reality—each of these volumes *was* reality. The similarity of these books to the copies I had read back home was no more than the similarity a photograph has to its subject. These books *were alive!*
>
> (ibid.: 175, emphasis original)

Thursday has found herself in "BookWorld," and it is immediately recognizable as a magical version of the British Library where there is literally "nothing outside the text" (Derrida, 1988: 136). Thursday is apprenticed to Miss Havisham, who trains Thursday to read herself in and out of books in order to right literary wrongs, attend regular meetings in *Sense and Sensibility*, and defend herself for the literary infraction that results in giving *Jane Eyre* a new, happy ending (it is Thursday, in Fforde's world, who calls out under Jane's window, prompting her to return to Rochester). It goes beyond pleasure into joy to see Miss Havisham, dusty wedding dress trailing, as a brilliant daredevil who appropriates cars, drives them too fast, and takes no prisoners when there are bargains to be had at a book sale. "'Come along,'" she cries to a befuddled Thursday, "'I know of a very good bun shop in *Little Dorrit*—and I'm buying!'" (Fforde, 2002: 214).

Fforde recreates the British Library as a parallel world into which Thursday can escape the dangers of the real world when her day job as a literary detective leads her into danger, which it constantly does. On one occasion in which Thursday's life is threatened by henchmen of the evil Goliath Corporation, Miss Havisham reads them into the washing label on Thursday's trousers and from there into the owner's manual of Thursday's own washing machine (ibid.: 344–345). When Thursday has to get lost for a while, she hides out in an unpublished manuscript for the entirety of the third book in the series, *The Well of Lost Plots*. Getting lost in a good book can be taken literally in this world. Clever as they are, Fforde's novels act out the common reading fantasy of entering the world of fiction.

Another great pleasure Fforde's characters model is re-reading and speculating about books. This is also one of the pleasures of literary criticism. Getting insight and interpretation is a bonus. As Erica Hateley observes:

> Thursday recounts the plot of *Jane Eyre* to Bowden [another literary detective], but of course, as every retelling is necessarily interpretive, certain "assumptions" about the novel, masked as conversational commentary by both Bowden and Thursday, are effectively passed off as neutral recounting where they actually represent heavily loaded assumptions about both *Jane Eyre* and Charlotte Bronte.
>
> (Hateley, 2005: 1031–1032)

Thursday retells, and therefore interprets *Jane Eyre* to Bowden, so not only is literature enjoyed in this novel, its interpretation is valued and social. Reading

is not isolated and marginalized but shared. Talking about literature is part of the creation of community.

Fforde prompts the reader to actively engage with the novels by liberally sprinkling them with puns and allusions the reader must decipher. Not only does this affirm the reader's sense of self-worth, but it also encourages the active, engaged reading that propels Thursday into the life of a book. The books force engagement by layering the bad puns on so thickly that the reader is always working to keep up. Like Thursday, characters throughout literature model the process of interpreting what they have read. In such moments, narratives teach us how to read them. This metacognitive process is the final (and oft omitted) step in a reflective reading experience. Fforde's Thursday Next novels are an entire series of metacognitive readings. Therein resides another pleasure of this text.

Thursday is her own alter-ego as the Jurisfiction detective and the real-world Clark Kent version of herself who is always late with the rent, behind in her paperwork, and walking her pet dodo, Pickwick. Thursday is a resourceful, resilient, creative problem solver, and consummate escape artist. She is an excellent example of a character who uses what Barbara Fredrickson calls "broaden-and-build" in response to difficult situations, and this is another reason the books feel so good to read. Fredrickson's "broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions" elaborates on the function of the safe place that I see paralleled in reading and the psychoanalytic session. According to Fredrickson, "the positive emotions of joy, interest, contentment, pride, and love appear to have a complementary effect: They broaden people's momentary thought-action repertoires, widening the array of the thoughts and actions that come to mind" (Fredrickson, 2001: 220). Thus, in comparison to the limited focus of the fight-or-flight response to fear, feeling safe allows us to creatively expand our responses. Fredrickson's work suggests that a deliberate attempt to find (or recreate) feelings of safety during moments of stress can lead to greater resiliency, better decisions, and an overall increase in a sense of wellbeing. Expanding the realm of responses allows for the possibility of reflection and creative alternatives such as reading oneself into a washing label when no books are available to offer refuge. Reading itself, in my experience, provides a site for expanding positive emotions and engaging in alternatives to repression. BookWorld is the place I have been looking for. If I were there, I just might be able to invite the returned repressed into a conversation I am having with the book I am reading rather than slamming it shut and diving under the quilt for cover.

The question I want to answer about the Thursday Next novels is: why do I get so much pleasure from reading these books? If, as I will suggest, narratives allow us to re-imagine ourselves, then the Thursday Next novels allow me a fantasy that values all of the books I have read and all of the time I have spent reading. Fforde affirms my sense of myself as a reader of literature, and BookWorld, where all writing is equally valued, gives me permission to enjoy the sophomoric pun as much as the esoteric allusion. Fforde's novels value

my knowledge of literature and offer me the pleasure of recognizing myself—as I am a creation of what I have read—in the text.

What makes the reading experience I have described here different from the narcissistic identification of recognizing oneself in a character in a story? There is pleasure in the identification as well, but it is limited to the personal affirmation of seeing oneself reflected in the mirror of the text. The narrative becomes a shiny surface that shows us a familiar image we already know. When we project ourselves onto a character, we are delighted by the approving smile we reflect back to ourselves. I feel energized and affirmed by *Lost in a Good Book* just as I do when wandering the stacks of a library. But my identification is not with Thursday Next, who, wonderful as she is, is more of a superhero than a fully developed character. The transference I experience is with literature, not an individual character. I do not find myself mirrored in these novels; instead, I find recognition. BookWorld is my ideal ego, the place from which I can imagine looking upon myself with approval. From this safe position I can even accept the gaps in the text of my sense of self. This is a good thing, because even as BookWorld approves of me, it also challenges me.

Fforde's BookWorld is safe, but it is in no way stable. BookWorld requires a high level of comfort with ambiguity. Characters jump from book to book, and sometimes words and sentences simply fall apart. Thursday's first assignment for Jurisfiction is to hunt a "grammasite" in the back-story of *Great Expectations*. As Miss Havisham explains, "grammasites" are a "'parasitic life form that live inside books and feed on grammar…They seep through the covers using a process called oozemosis…I've seen grammasites strip a library to nothing but indigestible nouns and page numbers. Ever read Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*?'" (Fforde, 2002: 312–313). The combination of silliness and erudition requires both knowledge of *Tristram Shandy*'s quirkiness and a willingness to make fun of it that demands a certain intellectual flexibility. A knowledge of literature is expected, but one is never allowed to take it seriously. For me, these novels offer the pleasure of *jouissance*, which is not just intellectual orgasmic coming, but also a sort of un-coming or undoing, when one loses oneself. BookWorld doesn't shore up my ego but rather expands my willingness to engage in the challenges of creating a text. Reading reflectively, I recreate myself much as I do when I interpret my dreams.

We glimpse traces of the unconscious in dreams and fantasies. The repressed returns like the twist of a wrench, a knot in the throat, a word misread. Because he was not a very good hypnotist, Freud tried to get his patients to relax their censorship of associations by making them sleepy. Having them lie on a couch in a darkened room without interruptions, he teased out the unconscious, searching for the quilting point that made sense of free associations and pulled the thread of repression into light. I often reproduce this state of sleepy safety when I read, and the transferential relationships that emerge in the reading experience play the role of the analyst in calling back the repressed. If we can allow the unconscious to do its work, we can be transformed.

By remembering the role of the unconscious in the reading process we see how the production of the text is also a production of a reader—both are transformed by the reading process. As texts are by definition intertextual, so too are readers. Made up of a collage of quotations that play within us, we are what we read.

Linking together examples that don't cohere in traditional literary categories, this is not a book on the British novel or life writing, even though there are examples taken from each of those genres, among others. It is a book that seeks moments of transformation, as Woolf and Stephen and Fforde do, when examples come together to suggest a pattern larger than that of their original context. It is the pattern of the reading experience, unbounded by constructed categories, with ragged borders stitched and embroidered and frayed.

The readers I consider throughout this book grapple with the pain that occurs when reading helps them recognize the fantasy they have constructed in order to make their lives feel safe and stable. What is on the other side of this crushing realization? Often it is love and laughter and peace. But not always. These examples have in common the explicit attempt to demonstrate and support the transformation of readers by representing the process of transformation and the pain and pleasure of facing its consequences.

Here is one final transformation: During a time of many changes, I was not sleeping well. It is an old complaint. Awakening regularly at 2:30 each morning I played what I call "the sleeping game" to no avail. A version of free association, in "the sleeping game" I trace the thoughts and worries going through my mind and look for the link. In this case, all the things I thought about made me feel out of control. That was because they were all things I could not control. They were all things that made me feel isolated; because at that time I was isolated. They were all things that were unfamiliar; because they were all unfamiliar. After many weeks of this, I awoke at 2:30 and in complete irritation said to myself, "Why do you keep trying to think of things that keep you awake?" And with that angry question I fell asleep.

"You had a paradigm shift," my colleague Jessica Friedrichs said, when I told her this story the next day. Those are hard to come by, but that is exactly what I have written this book to find. Sometimes, rather than piecing together the fragments into a quilt of unified meaning, it is more productive to fling the fabric across the room and go back to sleep. In graduate school we had a cat, Buster, who habitually knocked a copy of Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* onto the floor. Art Efron, my dissertation director, said the cat knew which books were the painful ones. (Buster also hacked up a hair ball onto every dissertation that entered our house.) I, myself, once threw George Eliot's *Middlemarch* against the bedroom wall. Fortunately it was a paperback copy. I can still remember the release of anger that came with that act, caused by my outrage at Dorothea for marrying that awful Casaubon. What I'm getting at is that transformations happen in any number of different ways—whether one is reading or not. They are not always pleasant, and they are easy to dismiss. I am suggesting that they are also of vital importance, and

that we should seek them out by engaging in a reading practice that recognizes and encourages them.

I brought my favorite quilt into my office with the intention of hanging it on the wall behind my desk. My grandmother made the quilt in the sunbonnet pattern from the dresses my mother wore as a little girl. Squares of white and yellow cotton alternate. There is a blue border. In each of the white squares a little girl in a blue sunbonnet wears a different one of my mother's dresses—dresses my grandmother had also made. My grandmother's even stitches run in diamonds across each quilt square. My grandfather worked the night shift in the mines so that he could farm by day. My grandmother couldn't sleep until he got home. Awake with missing him and worry about the dangers of mining, she sewed all night until he returned at dawn, covered in coal dust, to sleep for a few hours before milking time. This quilt covered my bed when I was a little girl. When I was home sick I made up stories about the girls in their beautiful gingham and calico dresses. My stories lulled me back to sleep.

The office was so over-air conditioned that I never hung the quilt. I used it to stay warm as I typed, threading my way through this book. When my daughter, Sadie, came in after school, I wrapped her up in the quilt while she did her homework. Since my book about Virginia Woolf ended with a craft project ("A Mobile Biography"), it seemed appropriate to conclude this book in the same way. Sadie, wrapped in my grandmother's quilt, pointed out that this book is already a quilt of quotations. And so it is. Thus, I quilt together fragments of quotations to make a warm space to crawl into—with a good book—for a good night's sleep.

Notes

1 For my discussion of this see Sproles, 2006 (123–125).
2 Leslie Stephen's titles replicate the table of contents for Hours in a Library (vol. 3), but I have cheated fairly elaborately by selecting among all of Woolf's essays those that match up best with Stephen's titles. I think this makes the point beautifully as well as being in keeping with this chapter's patchwork theme.
3 This is Lacan's elaboration on the associations that Freud follows in interpreting dreams.
4 There are seven novels in the series: *The Eyre Affair* (2001), *Lost in a Good Book* (2002), *The Well of Lost Plots* (2004), *Something Rotten* (2004), *Thursday Next: First Among Sequels* (2007), *One of Our Thursdays is Missing* (2011), and *The Woman Who Died a Lot* (2012).
5 A popular example of this genre is Robert Harris' *Fatherland*, which takes as its enabling alternative that the Nazis have won the Second World War. For a more thorough discussion of alternative history see Alkon (1994), Hellekson (2000), and Schmunk (2011).

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2 Reflective reading

Beyond reader-response to the unconscious of reading

Disruptive epiphanies: why we need stories

I recently learned something surprising about how stories have influenced me, not just as an academic, but also in the unconscious assumptions that have guided my life choices. Like many of my stories, this one has a point. Bear with me.

I was attending a workshop on the Ice House Entrepreneurship Program conducted by Gary Schoeniger. During the workshop we learned about course materials for developing an "entrepreneurial mind-set" created by the entrepreneurial learning initiative (eli) in partnership with the Kauffman Foundation. Their goal is not to create millions of new start-ups but to encourage students to think critically, solve problems creatively, and have confidence in themselves. The book Gary wrote with Clifton Taulbert, *Who Owns the Ice House?* (Schoeniger and Taulbert, 2010) is the foundation of this work, and the additional course materials are rich and engaging, designed to provide a framework for active learning. Among them is a series of video interviews with successful, and often unlikely, entrepreneurs. In introducing these videos, Gary made the point that people need to hear other people's stories in order to replace the ones that are holding them back. His example is the story of Ryan Blair, whose father always said, "It takes money to make money." Ryan believed that. His family had no money, so he assumed that he never had a chance. He turned to petty crime until he ran into someone with a different story, an entrepreneur who showed him that investors will back a good idea. This new story changed Ryan's life: he went on to be a successful entrepreneur whose story is among those included in the course materials.

Gary's point is that we need to give our students new stories to help them escape the internalized narratives that keep them from learning and taking chances. If they cannot see themselves as successful, they will not succeed. This struck a chord with me. I have been working throughout my career to ensure access to education, and I am frustrated when students don't take full advantage of that chance. Gary was helping me see why they might be unable to do that. Lately I have been struck by a pattern of students deciding to leave college because they are homesick. This reason doesn't make a lot of sense to

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me. Frequently these students live nearby and often do not come from homes that were ideal in the first place. Why would they long to go back? "Homesick" seems to me to be code for a more complex struggle. I have long suspected that it is a struggle over the changes the unspoken assumptions of the college environment pressure them to make. They feel like they are being pulled away from their families and asked to become someone other than the person they think they are.

In America, class position is largely determined by education. Higher education is a pathway into the middle class, but students from working-class backgrounds frequently struggle with the disconnect between academic experiences and family expectations. bell hooks describes this internalized conflict between home and college, writing that her parents "would insist that reading too much would drive me insane. Their ambivalence nurtured in me like uncertainty about the value and significance of intellectual endeavour that took years for me to unlearn" (hooks, 1993: 106). The pressure on identity felt by all college students is exacerbated for students whose social context has not prepared them to value intellectual labour and whose families may see going to college as a threat to their connection to their child, if not a threat to their child's sanity. I think that what students describe as "homesickness" is frequently a way to describe the uncomfortable shift in identity that occurs with education. As I listened to Gary, I realized that another way of thinking about this was that the students were learning—or resisting—new stories that were pulling them away from the stories they had inherited from their families.

Constructing a sense of self by internalizing narratives is consistent with what is now called the "science of learning," which holds that learners construct knowledge in the context of their lived experiences (Ambrose, 2010). This work has its roots in Piaget's constructivist approach to cognition, which was further developed by theorists Lev Vytgosky and Ernst von Glasersfeld. It is supported by current work in brain-based learning. We will return to the science of learning later to consider how it runs in tandem with literary criticism's theories about the reading process.

Narratives are singularly powerful tools for constructing knowledge. Emile Bruneau's current work at MIT's Department of Brain and Cognitive Sciences suggests that reading narratives about rival groups can increase empathy, for example. The stories lessened the degree to which the readers defined themselves in opposition to the rival group. In this way, the stories changed the readers' sense of self. Understanding how narratives work to construct our sense of ourselves opens a door to greater self-knowledge and the promise of transformation. Gary saw students change when they found a new story.

Gary's story prompted me to ask myself: what is my story? What is the internal narrative I unwittingly believe? My first thought was that I could not possibly have a governing narrative that I had left unchallenged. By definition, ideology is undetected. That's how it works. How was I secretly determined by beliefs and responses I had accepted without examination? As I

doodled on my notepad, I realized that I did have a determining narrative that had led me to an over-reaction I could not explain.

A few summers ago I spent four glorious days walking a sixty mile stretch of the footpath that outlines the coast of Wales with my youngest daughter, Sadie, who was a rising high school senior at the time. At least, they should have been glorious days. The first two were. The sun shone on the waves below the narrow cliff edge path we carefully walked. Flowers bloomed. Bees buzzed. We met the occasional friendly fellow hiker. A ruin in the distance made the slender pathway above the ocean seem like a hike into a fairy tale. Then, apropos of nothing—or more likely in response to something I said—my darling daughter announced that she didn't intend to go to college. I thought I was going to throw up. I could not shake the sense of doom that came over me. For the rest of the trip I would catch myself feeling miserable, not wanting to put one foot in front of the other, sickened by the idea that Sadie didn't want to go to college.

I should have asked myself why I was responding to this news as if she had just been diagnosed with an incurable disease, but instead I shared my overwhelming anxiety with friends who had similar responses. Together we imagined ways to change her mind. Then, months later, sitting in the Kauffman Labs in Kansas City, I asked myself: what is your guiding story? And the answer came at once: if you don't go to college you will die.

Put this way, it was clear, even to me, that this is not a logical narrative. In my family, however, it holds a certain truth. That truth has guided my life in ways that might not have held me back, but I was certainly not conscious that this narrative was motivating my decisions. My grandfathers were both coal miners in southwest Virginia, deep in the Appalachian Mountains near Tennessee. By the time he was in his 50s, my father's father had died of black lung. Grim determination and the GI bill got my father to college, and he took my mother out of the mountains with him. His choice was starkly clear: go to college or go into the mines. College or death.

So, I realized as Gary kept talking, that a governing narrative has dominated me, and I've tried to bend my children to its will. Now the question is: what should I do about it? That is a difficult question. But I would never have gotten to this point without the revelation of this internalized, unquestioned narrative that had been for me an ideological truth. Recognition of the false consciousness of my family story allowed me to let my daughter make her own decision without responding like the world was coming to an end. My internalized narrative has determined all of the major decisions I have made in my life. Anyone or anything that got in the way of my education, or my subsequent career in education, had to go. Happily, these have not been bad decisions. While I am grateful that my internalized narrative has had a largely positive influence, it was a shock to the system to realize that a story has been pulling the strings. But why was I so surprised? Writers have been trying to tell me this all my reading life.

J. Hillis Miller begins his essay, "Narrative," by asking: "Exactly what psychological or social functions do stories serve? Just why do we need stories, lots of them, all the time?" (Miller, 2005: 67). Miller's essay, like all of the essays in Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin's brilliantly conceived and executed collection *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, both explains and enacts the term under consideration. This strategy makes for a rich collection of essays that showcase a variety of critical perspectives. Miller's lively deconstruction of "narrative" moves quickly into a dissection of the components required to constitute a narrative: plot, characters, and, most interestingly, "some patterning or repetition of elements surrounding a nuclear figure or complex word" (ibid.: 75). Even narratives that do not have these component parts, Miller attests, depend on our collective understanding that they should. We know at once when we have encountered that rare individual who has eluded the lesson rendered on *Sesame Street* as "every story has a beginning, middle, and end."[1] Out at dinner one night, someone in the group whom I did not know well said, "Oh! I ran into an old friend the other day." We all waited for the rest of the story, but that was it. It takes some storytellers a long time to get to the point, but it is unusual for someone not to have a point at all. This non-story was not surrounded by a pattern or repetition of elements that Miller points to as embedded in narrative. Miller's readings of two poems, A. E. Housman's "The Grizzly Bear" and William Wordsworth's "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal," are *tours de force*, exemplifying both the existence and instability of the elements he marks as essential for all narratives, even the most stripped down narratives exemplified in these two poems.

We need stories, Miller argues, because they never completely satisfy our need for stories. Miller writes, "The human capacity to tell stories is the way men and women collectively build a significant and orderly world around themselves. With fictions we investigate, perhaps invent, the meaning of human life" (ibid.: 69). Running into a friend the other day is not quite enough of a narrative for meaning making. Narrative socializes us. It also provides a forum for social critique. Miller concludes: "There is reason to believe then, that narratives reinforce the dominant culture and put it in question, both at the same time" (ibid.: 70). For Miller, stories help us make sense of the world, and we need to repeat this exercise endlessly "to reinforce that sense making" (ibid.: 70). We need stories because they do not quite provide the stabilizing function we depend on them to provide. On the contrary, even as stories build our world, they also shake it up. Miller's reading of the two poems demonstrates, in good deconstructive fashion, the fissures baked into both the internal and external effects of stories. It is these fissures that propel us into never-ending storytelling.

Miller's analysis of narrative is compelling, as is his central point that we look to stories to help us make sense of the world. An important component of this is the need for stories to help us make sense of ourselves. We continue to need stories not only because no story is complete or completely satisfying,

but also, although Miller does not say so explicitly, we need stories because as we have new experiences we turn to stories to help us make sense of the changing world and of our changing sense of ourselves.

I think we also need stories because stories change us.

The transformation stories make possible is not a simple change. It is not just the accumulation of facts or the pleasure of knowing that someone else understands how you feel. It is the difference between being awake and being asleep. It changes the reader profoundly, psychologically, permanently. The reader might not be aware of this change. If the reader is aware of it, the experience may very well be unpleasant. Change, even for the best, is rarely welcomed—even wet babies cry when they are changed.

The interpretive strategies we use when we actively read a narrative are not limited to reading words on a page. Just as most of Chaucer's audience would have heard his poems read aloud, so, too, do we all hear and interpret stories all day long. Indeed, we do not limit our reading to stories: we read one another and ourselves.

Following Chaucer, there is a long tradition of literature that attempts to represent this kind of transformational experience in representations of readers reading and interpreting, thus encouraging actually existing readers to become similarly engaged and transformed. James Joyce illustrates this type of profound transformation in the epiphanies that structure each of the stories in *Dubliners*.[2] Notable as a pioneering text in Modernism, Joyce's stories move the reader through the inner thoughts of the characters, shifting perspective in what Hugh Kenner (1978) calls the Uncle Charles Principle. Practiced in *Dubliners* and brought to full throttle in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the reader is immersed in the reflections of the characters. In the final story in *Dubliners*, "The Dead," Gabriel Conroy is himself dead, emotionally, until he rereads his wife, Gretta's, story of her first lover, Michael Furey, and actively fills in the gaps in the tale to produce a text that prompts him to reread his own life experience. In the final scenes of the story, we stay imbedded in Gabriel's reflections. After listening to Gretta's story, throughout which Gabriel has experienced a riotous commotion of emotions emerging first from sexual frustration and evolving into a realization that his previous assumptions about her were false, "He watched her while she slept as though he and she had never lived together as man and wife" (Joyce, 1993: 58). He must begin again to know her, now realizing that his shallow feeling for her was not love. He also reviews the events of the evening, and finds surprising affection for his Aunts, about whom he has previously expressed only inner condescension and outward sentimentality. Joyce shows us the process of Gabriel's disruptive epiphanic transformation, as Gabriel, watching Gretta sleep, sorts through her story.

Joyce also shows us the moment of transformation though a visual gap in the text. After Gretta finishes her story she cries, and "Gabriel held her hand for a moment longer, irresolutely, and then, shy of intruding on her grief, let it fall gently and walked quietly to the window" (ibid.: 58). After this sentence

there is a break in the story: a line is skipped and the next paragraph begins after a small gap that indicates that time has passed. During that gap, Gretta falls asleep and Gabriel, presumably, remains at the window. When we see him next he is looking at Gretta, "unresentfully" as she sleeps. As he listened to Gretta's story Gabriel was anything but unresentful. He entered the hotel room aroused, but her story thwarts his intentions. He recognizes that Gretta has her own life and responses; she is not a work of art subject to his interpretation. During the literal gap in the text, Gabriel rereads Gretta's story and recognizes the gap between them as he fills in the gaps in her story: "Perhaps she had not told him all the story" (ibid.: 58). Analysing Gretta's story restores Gabriel's sense of control; he can critique it as he does in the book reviews he is so proud of publishing anonymously in the local newspaper. When he looks out of the window, he finds a safe place in which unconscious processes can construct a new view of himself and the world—a world that now includes western Ireland as well as Dublin. Western Ireland has now become real and accessible to Gabriel through Gretta's story, which is set there. In incorporating the story into his understanding of Gretta and of himself, his world has expanded.[3]

The gap in time indicated by the small white space of paper between the lettered paragraphs visually reproduces the snow-filled window toward which Gabriel walks. It is a space for the reader as well as for Gabriel. My attention was drawn to this break after rereading Miller's essay on narrative. He points to the gap between the two stanzas of Wordsworth's "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" as the site of Lucy's death. The break between the stanzas becomes her grave. This gave me a new way of thinking about the literal gaps in texts. Miller showed me the physicality of the gap on the page as a space where characters and readers are transformed. Lucy goes from being alive to being dead. Gabriel moves to the window, another empty space. The reader moves through this gap as well, filling in what is absent. Together, we approach the blank white space in the narrative and begin to reconsider what we have just heard. The "window" in the page reproduces the narrative gaps that phenomenologist Wolfgang Iser describes as the space in which the reader produces the text. The space also suggests the presence of the unconscious in the safe space of reading. Gabriel is an example of a reader transformed by the process of rereading.

Even when epiphanies are profound, they are not always painless, as the stories in *Dubliners* show. Joyce ends this collection of painful realizations with "The Dead," and an invitation to the reader to join Gabriel in recreating himself through the process of interpreting the story Gretta tells him. With Gabriel, we are invited to look at that blank space, and by giving us so many gaps to fill in, "The Dead" pushes us to follow Gabriel on our own journey to the heart of an identity that may be forgotten or repressed.

Gretta gives Gabriel a new story to replace the one he had created about her. Her story challenges his smug objectification of her that shores up his

status as the hero of all narratives. He is absent from her story, and this gap shifts him from his comfortable role at the center of the story into a new narrative in which he must redefine himself. A similar shift occurs for Elizabeth Bennet in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, a novel overtly concerned with reading and interpretation. When Elizabeth is finally able to imagine things from Mr Darcy's perspective, she not only sees him differently, but this also forces a change in how she sees herself.[4]

Elizabeth comes to this realization by reading and rereading Darcy's letter. There is a lot of reading in *Pride and Prejudice*. Mary reads too much, Lydia and Mrs Bennet read the wrong sorts of stories and thus mistake tragedy for romance. Elizabeth Bennet reads letters and, through them, the characters of their authors:

> She was engaged one day as she walked, in re-perusing [her sister] Jane's last letter, and dwelling on some passages which proved that Jane had not written in spirits.
>
> (Austen, 2003: 159, volume II, ch. 10/33)

And again in the next chapter:

> Elizabeth…chose for her employment the examination of all the letters which Jane had written to her since her being in Kent…in all, and in almost every line of each, there was a want of that cheerfulness which had been used to characterize her style.
>
> (ibid.: 164, volume II, chapter 11/34)

Elizabeth looks for evidence in Jane's letters that she is heartbroken at the loss of her suitor, Mr Bingley. Reserved in person, Elizabeth detects the sadness she suspects only in Jane's letters. We can infer that Elizabeth reads the poetry of William Wordsworth; at one point she even plans a trip to the Lake District (ibid.: 136, volume II, chapter 5/28). As the note in the Longman Cultural edition indicates, Wordsworth's influence is apparent in her assertion that they would remember what they had seen even after the trip was over. It is this same assertion that Wordsworth makes in "Lines (Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1798)," wherein he recognizes the individual's transformation over time and asserts its inescapability. Clocking the difference in his relationship to nature as a child, a youth, and now as a young man, the speaker raises the recognition of the instability of the subject to the level of the sublime. Horrifying and glorious, we do not know who we will be as we change with the changes of our lives. Wordsworth articulates the transformation Elizabeth Bennet exemplifies.

As with Gabriel, Elizabeth changes when she realizes she has been mistaken in her assumptions about others, particularly Mr Darcy, whose proposal of marriage she rejected with a piercing criticism of his character:

> From the very beginning, from the first moment I may almost say, of my acquaintance with you, your manners impressing me with the fullest belief of your arrogance, your conceit, and your selfish disdain of the feelings of others, were such as to form that ground-work of disapprobation, on which succeeding events have built so immoveable a dislike; and I had not known you a month before I felt that you were the last man in the world whom I could ever be prevailed on to marry.
>
> (ibid.: 168; volume II, chapter 12/35)

Like Gabriel, Elizabeth has created her vision of Darcy with herself at the center of the narrative. Who he is in her mind was created as a function of how he has behaved to her. Such an assured critique of Darcy's character will be hard for Elizabeth to reconsider.

Elizabeth and Jane habitually practice character analysis of those around them. They demonstrate this in their discussion of their friend Charlotte's decision to marry Mr Collins, Mr Bingley's sudden indifference to Jane, and Mr Darcy's suspected involvement (ibid.: 119–24, volume II, chapter 1/24). When Elizabeth engages her aunt, Mrs Gardiner, in this analysis, Mrs Gardiner urges Elizabeth toward a more careful and subtle reading of others. In response to Elizabeth's assertion that Bingley was "violently in love" with Jane, Mrs Gardiner suggests that Elizabeth reconsider her analytic practice: "But that expression of 'violently in love' is so hackneyed, so doubtful, so indefinite, that it gives me very little idea. It is as often applied to feelings which arise only from an half hour's acquaintance, as to a real strong attachment. Pray, how *violent was* Mr Bingley's love?" (ibid.: 126, volume II, chapter 2/25, emphasis original). In asking for a definition of the trite phrase "violently in love," Mrs Gardiner suggests a strategy of analysis in which the situation is examined in detail and from multiple perspectives rather than reduced to a passive reliance on commonplace phrases and assumptions that support one's own self-interest. Mrs Gardiner asks Elizabeth to practice close and critical reading.

After she rejects him, Elizabeth receives a letter from Darcy in which he attempts to show her his side of the story—an act prompted by his willingness to consider her criticism of him as justified not because it is accurate but because it accurately reflects the effects his behaviour has had on her. His willingness to assume her standpoint shows him the necessity to show her his perspective, and in doing so he models for her the ability to see a situation from another point of view. Coupled with Mrs Gardiner's call to read actively, Elizabeth is able to read and, more importantly, reread Darcy's letter until she can finally reread their relationship: "'How despicably have I acted!' she cried.—'I, who have prided myself on my discernment! …Till this moment *I never knew myself*'" (ibid.: 180, volume II, chapter 14/37, emphasis added). When Elizabeth and Darcy do become engaged, they reread the story of their courtship once again by discussing her critique of him, his letter to her, and subsequent events, thus demonstrating their compatibility not just as lovers but as readers.

In *S/Z*, Roland Barthes calls for reading to be understood as "rereading" (Barthes, 1974: 15–16, "How Many Readings?"). The result of Gabriel and Elizabeth's reflective rereading is a profound change in their understanding of themselves and their awareness of the extent to which they have misrecognized themselves and others. In both cases the experience was difficult and unpleasant: they both confronted the instability of their subjectivity when the recognition of their false consciousness led to a disintegration and reintegration of their sense of self. They exemplify a practice I will discuss further, which I call "reflective reading."

Beyond reader-response

We typically think of reading as either pleasure reading, which is relatively passive, or critical reading, which is more active. Lydia and Mrs Bennet passively read romances that unconsciously influence their interpretation of life events, so that Lydia's "elopement" with Wickham seems like a romantic escapade rather than the near ruination of Lydia and her family. Elizabeth's critical rereading of Darcy's letter leads to a painful and profound realization of her misreading of her assumptions about his character and herself. Reading is by no means a steady state. Passive and active reading fluctuate throughout the reading experience. We switch into attentive, active reading when a headline in the newspaper we were flipping through catches our eye or a passage in a book grabs our attention. Sometimes during a period of concentrated reading our mind wanders and we slip into reading so passively it amounts to non-reading, and we realize we've turned several pages without any comprehension. Rereading is sometimes reading for the first time. Active reading is alert and purposeful. It might include reading with an eye toward application or analysis. Active reading is oftentimes re-reading. This is the type of reading Roland Barthes calls for in *S/Z*.

Reader-response critics analyse their own active reading experiences—their own process of constructing the meaning of a text. Conclusions may include personal revelations (e.g., Norm Holland's "Hermia's Dream"), but the goal is to shed light on the text, and appropriately so. The foundational premise is that texts exist only when read and are thus produced by the reader, who fills in the gaps in the text. Readers produce texts in a slightly different way (even from one reading to another) depending on their associations. The focus of a reader-response analysis is on *how* the reader produces the text. The questions reader-response asks are: what moves did the reader make to arrive at an understanding of the text? and how did the text itself guide these moves? The result is a complex understanding of the rhetorical strategies of the text and the reader's interaction with them. While theoretically passé, reader-response is still widely used, primarily in undergraduate classrooms, where its focus aligns well with students' desire to privilege their personal responses to what they read (often confusing preference with excellence). As a theory, however, it was driven into a wall by the question of where textual authority lies: in the

text or in the reader? The ostensible leader of this school of criticism, Stanley Fish, used the notion of an interpretive community in an attempt to reel in the anarchy of readers actually responding to what they read. At no point in this debate is it suggested that we consider the effect that reading has on readers. While we value the epiphanies of James Joyce's characters, within the context of literary criticism critics do not similarly value epiphanies readers have about themselves. I suggest that there is a third type of reading: reflective reading. In this type of reading the reader is alert but not necessarily looking to put the reading to an external purpose. This is the type of reading, I suggest, that readers are doing when something they read changes their lives. In this type of reading, the reader recognizes the ways in which constructing the text also constructs the reader.

The genealogy of reading theory can be traced back through reader-response theory, which flourished in the 1970s and '80s, to phenomenologist Wolfgang Iser and on to philosophers Ludwig Wittgenstein and J. L. Austin and the philosophy of language.[5] If we are interested in the metacognitive aspects of the reading process, as we are here, this chronology branches off to Freud, who is among the first modern writers to ask us to think about narrative and how we make sense of it. Within this history, "metacognition" is a recent term. In its first definition of metacognition as: "Awareness and understanding of one's own thought processes, esp. regarded as having a role in direction of those processes"; *The Oxford English Dictionary* cites its first written use in psychology in 1972.[6]

The psychoanalytic process Freud developed could be described as an attempt to engage metacognition. An individual troubled by a symptom that has no discernible physical cause may turn to psychoanalysis for relief. Through the process of free association[7] the individual creates a narrative that can be interpreted, thus making sense of the symptom. In an early case, "Miss Lucy R." came to Freud because she persistently smelled burnt pudding. No physical cause could be found. Freud asked her when she had actually smelt the troubling smell, thus eliciting Lucy's story. She worked as governess for a widower, the managing director of a factory, who had two small children. She imagined that her employer had become fond of her, but then he unfairly reprimanded her. The smell of burnt pudding had become a symptom of a disappointment she did not want to admit, even to herself. She repressed the disappointment, but not well enough. It returned in the form of the associated smell. Once she could make sense of the symptom and face the disappointment, the symptom disappeared. Freud prompted Miss Lucy to re-read the story and become aware of the way it had been created, resulting in her transformation:

> After this last analysis, when, two days later, Miss Lucy visited me once more, I could not help asking her what had happened to make her so happy. She was as though transfigured. She was smiling and carried her head high. I thought for a moment that after all I had been wrong

> about the situation and that the children's governess had become the Director's fiancée.
>
> (Freud, 1966: II:121)

In reproducing her associations, Miss Lucy became "aware of her own thought processes" (OED), even the unconscious process of repressing disappointment. Metacognition gave rise to transformation. When Miss Lucy told her story to Freud, she created a narrative that she re-read and interpreted. Miss Lucy reports to Freud: "'When I woke yesterday morning the weight was no longer on my mind, and since then I have felt well…I certainly am [still in love with the Director], but that makes no difference. After all, I can have thoughts and feelings to myself'" (Freud, 1966: II:212). When Miss Lucy made meaning of her story, repression was no longer required, the symptom disappeared, and she appeared to Freud as if a changed person. Reader-response emphasizes the effect that the reading process has when it understands the reader as the producer of the text. I want to suggest that we also consider the effects of reading on the reader, which we could call the metacognitive aspects of the reading process. How, in other words, does reading produce the reader?

Current research on the reading process is less interested in psychoanalysis, structuralism and semiotics, and more located in assessment-driven cognitive models of learning to read. The influence of behavioural psychology leads to models that are even less engaged with the role of the unconscious in the reading process even as it, like reader-response theory, focuses on the reader as meaning-maker. Fox and Alexander's summary of research in the field includes this broad definition: "Reading is the complex communicative behaviour of deriving meaning from a presented text…Learning to read is becoming able to participate in the behaviour of reading in ways that support one's purposes and satisfy one's needs"(7). Fox and Alexander recognize that readers are located in a context that influences their purpose and needs. They are also aware that the reader's context, including his or her discourse community, changes for developmental or other reasons, thus affecting the meaning a reader may get from a text at any given time (Fox and Alexander, 2011: 13). The research on learning to read concerns itself primarily with the individual reader's internal processes, much as the phenomenologist critic Wolfgang Iser does. Reader-response theory, on the other hand, focuses on the effects reading has on the production of the text, thus reifying the primacy of the text over the reader.

The early work of reader-response critics such as Norman Holland and Stanley Fish produced what is almost a truism: that a reader constructs the "text" during the reading process. The trajectory of this work focuses on the way in which engaged reading interactively transforms inert words on a page into a living, changing text that is new and different for each reader and with each reading. That a large number of people engaged in teaching and writing about literature accept this claim is evidenced by the scant theoretical work currently done in this area. In the ten years following Stanley Fish's

influential *Is There a Text in this Class?* (Fish, 1980), the MLA International Bibliography lists 243 citations in a search of "reader-response" in referred publications in all languages, whereas between 1995 and 2005 there are 148. There were ten in 2005, compared to forty-three in 1986. The trend among recent publications is away from the theory of reader-response to its application, particularly in primary and secondary teaching. This is consistent with the argument Patricia Harkin makes in her insightful essay, "The Reception of Reader-Response Theory." Harkin argues that the erasure of reader-response as a theory resulted from "its having been part *both* of a liberatory political movement *and* of an elitist theory boom. If the theory boom was to remain elitist, it had to deauthorize reader-response. If reader-response was to remain populist, it had to consent to and participate in that deauthorization" (Harkin, 2005: 415). Harkin argues that the foundational arguments of reader-response have become commonly held (and thus uncited and uninterrogated) assumptions, which results in the erasure of reader-response as a theory.

In their surveys of reader-response criticism, Ross Murfin and Jane Tompkins focus on the American development of this theoretical thread. Tompkins traces the potential inception of reader-response criticism back to I. A. Richards in the 1920s. Murfin begins with Louise Rosenblatt's 1969 essay "Towards a Transactional Theory of Reading." Both Tompkins and Murfin see this movement's engagement with the subjective, emotional responses of readers as a reaction against New Criticism's seeming objectivity (Murfin, 1993: 126, Tompkins, 1980: ix). Both also regard Stanley Fish as the most influential of reader-response theorists. Citing Fish's substitution of the formalist's question "What does this sentence mean? [for] another, more operational question—what does this sentence do?" (Fish, 1980: 26), Murfin concludes: "This stress on what pages *do* to minds pervades the writings of most, if not all, reader-response critics" (Murfin, 1993:127).

Fish is not concerned with reading's potential to transform the reader, but rather with the reader's intellectual engagement with the text in order to make meaning from it: "it is the reader's struggle to *make sense* of a challenging work that reader-response critics seek to describe" (Murfin, 1993: 127). The reader-response critic's attempt to describe the reading process (with its implicit interpretive function) is quite different from the formalist emphasis on arguing for a compelling interpretation and implicit evaluation of a work. Reader-response criticism eschews both evaluation and any impulse toward a stable, conclusive interpretation. Its interest in the reading process inclines it toward moments of confusion and indeterminacy. Wolfgang Iser identifies these moments as resulting from "gaps" in the work that call for the reader to make interpretations based on a combination of what is implicit in the work and the reader's associations and expectations.

By filling these gaps, the reader constructs a text (Iser, 1978: 22–25, 107–134, 163–170). The phenomenological process Iser describes is uncannily reminiscent of the free association of psychoanalysis, a process that seeks to attend to the unconscious. The unconscious is by definition indefinable, unknowable,

inconceivable. Yet if we acknowledge it, we also acknowledge its profound effects. To do so, however, requires that we concede our lack of conscious control and admit the instability of the subject (Lacan, 1977). Daily life works to erase this awareness; indeed, the unconscious itself works to ensure its own repression. Psychoanalytically informed critical theorists strive to recognize this force in all of its multiple manifestations. However, despite its origins in linguistic, cognitive, and psychoanalytic studies, reader-response criticism largely ignores the effects of the unconscious on the reading process (Tompkins, 1980).

Like Iser, Stanley Fish is also concerned with the reader's response to, and thus production of, the text. Indeed, he refers to himself as someone who "preach[es] the instability of the text and the unavailability of determinate meanings" (Fish, 1980: 305). Yet he is quick to limit the reader's response: "meanings are the property neither of fixed and stable texts nor of free and independent readers but of interpretive communities that are responsible both for the shape of a reader's activities and for the texts those activities produce" (Fish, 1980: 322). Fish himself recognizes the influence of New Criticism on his work, and its emphasis on the common ownership of language is certainly apparent here (Fish, 1980: 7). My interest is not to reprise the debate over where meaning resides, but to consider the ways in which the process of making meaning affects readers—a consideration strangely elided by reader-response criticism.

Readers are taught early on to have certain expectations about narratives, a topic Fish painstakingly unpacks in "How to Recognize a Poem When You See One" (Fish, 1980: 322–337). A common exercise in elementary school asks young children to make predictions about what will happen next in a story. They are being trained to look for narrative conventions and to anticipate the movement of a plot. It can be delightful or frustrating when a narrative thwarts expectations, but, as J. Hillis Miller points out in his essay "Narrative," even a story that does not follow narrative conventions relies on the reader's knowledge of how a narrative is supposed to work. Iser shows how the gaps in a work engage the reader, stimulating active reading and a sense of ownership over the narrative. Anyone who has seen a film adaptation of a beloved novel has no doubt experienced a gap she has filled in one way being filled in another by the filmmakers. The resulting disappointment frequently leads to the platitude that the book is always better than the film. The casting of a film is a common source of disappointment: "That's not the way I imagined Hermione would look!" my oldest daughter said in outraged dismay when she saw the first Harry Potter movie. She had filled in that gap so vividly it seemed to her that everyone saw the character as she did. In *Tristram Shandy*, Laurence Sterne plays with this process when, rather than describing the Widow Wadman, he presents a blank page and the instruction that the reader imagine this character "as like your mistress as you can—as unlike your wife as your conscience will let you" (Sterne, 1965: 356). That Sterne can play with narrative conventions in 1761, so early on in the development of the novel

form, is an indication of how pervasive assumptions already were about how narratives operate for western readers. This leads, despite differences in interpretations, to a certain commonality in readers' responses. Murfin succinctly describes Fish's position: "the 'stability of interpretation among readers' is a function of shared 'interpretive strategies.' These strategies, which exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the 'shape of what is read,' are held in common by 'interpretive communities.'" (Murfin, 1993: 129; Fish, 1980: 167).

Learning theorist Ernst von Glasersfeld's nuanced understanding of the ways in which learners construct knowledge within what he calls a "consensual domain" (von Glasersfeld, 2013: 7) recognizes the constraints of the learner's environment even as the learner struggles to make sense of new experiences. Following Piaget, von Glasersfeld argues that "knowledge is actively built up by the cognizing subject" (4) within a physical and social context. Thus, von Glasersfeld balances the either/or of Fish's conflict between interpretation as "anything goes" versus limits set by the ideal reader with a dynamic model of knowledge creation or "radical constructivism." The emphasis on the proper reading of literary texts acquired through schooling leads to the internalization of accepted reading strategies.

When I teach theory to undergraduates, reader-response is hands down the most popular and least understood critical position. While students correctly believe that reader-response recognizes and validates their personal responses to literature, they mistakenly believe that a reader-response reading of literature is an essay in which they get to say what they think the work means. It is a misunderstanding on many levels. Reader-response is concerned not with the content of their responses but the process of having a response. It requires active reading (which is rarely practiced), and meta-criticism. The question guiding a reader-response analysis would be: how did I come to produce this meaning? rather than what does this mean to me? Reader-response is not interested in evaluating a work of literature; whereas, students often feel that it validates their confidence that what they "like" is identical to what is "good." Finally, reader-response rejects the notion of a stable meaning for a literary work (even for one reader). Each act of reading produces the text anew. I think my students' misunderstanding of reader-response is the result of two omissions in the narrative of the development of this critical practice. The first omission is of the European influences on reader-response, particularly Roland Barthes, but also more generally theorists such as Michel Foucault, Michael Bakhtin, and Julia Kristeva. The second is the elision of psychoanalysis.

European theorists, including philosophers of language (particularly Wittgenstein and J. L. Austin) laid the groundwork for reader-response criticism. Indeed, Foucault calls for it in his essay "What is an Author?" much as Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* calls for semiotics. Arguing that the author functions to limit interpretive possibilities, Foucault concludes:

> I think that, as our society changes, at the very moment when it is in the process of changing, the author-function will disappear, and in such a manner that fiction and its polysemic texts will once again function according to another mode, but still with a system of constraint—one which will no longer be the author, but which will have to be determined or, perhaps, experienced.
>
> (Foucault, 1979: 988)

Reader-response takes up Foucault's call to "experience" literature without the constraints of the notion of authorial intent, and it has grappled, as he predicted, with questions of what, then, does limit interpretation; Fish's answer is that it is limited by discourse communities.

Similarly prescient are Bakhtin's notions of heteroglossia, in which meaning is dependent on context (Bakhtin, 1981: 429) and the text as the potential site of carnivalesque disruption proposes an engaged reader who actively constructs this textual experience (Bakhtin, 1981: 236–242, Bakhtin, 1984). Likewise, Kristeva's notion of intertextuality presupposes a reader who interacts with what he or she reads, bringing a wealth of personal associations and cultural references to a process of literary production that is just as reciprocal between author and reader as it is between literary works (Kristeva, 1980) .

While it may not be useful to describe Barthes as a theorist of reader-response, I would argue that *S/Z* is perhaps the single greatest exemplar of the reading and meta-reading practice reader-response seeks to describe. Indeed, Barthes concept of the "writerly" (*scriptable*) reader defines the active reading process required to produce a text: "Why is writerly our value? Because the goal of literary work…is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text" (Barthes, 1974: 4). While Barthes's announced goal in *S/Z* is to produce a semiotics of Zola's story "Sarasine," and while his representation of this process launches structuralism into post-structuralism through his ninety-three "divagations" (the term is Richard Howard's, from his translation of *S/Z* (Barthes, 1974: *x*)), Barthes is also demonstrating reader-response by showing us a reader actively reading and interrogating his own responses while "writing" the text. Reader-response is only one component of Barthes' work, and this is no doubt responsible for his omission from Murfin and Tompkins' surveys. I think the omission of Barthes also suggests why reader-response quickly reached its critical limits: *S/Z* demonstrates that reader-response is a crucial component of a theoretical practice rather than a theoretical position.

The repression of psychoanalysis from the history of the development of reader-response theory is even more vexing and telling. Its elision from a theoretical practice centered on emotion and subjectivity in which key developments were contributed by psychoanalytic critics, particularly Norman Holland,[8] suggests greater anxiety over what it might reveal: the importance of the unconscious in the reading process. It is one thing to suggest that the text is produced by active readers and therefore changes with each reading; it

is quite another to face the instability of the subject that a recognition of the unconscious insists upon. Even if we acknowledge the unconscious, we can largely ignore it, but a psychoanalytically based reader-response practice would require the constant recognition of the loss of control we have over ourselves as well as our texts. In large part then, unless we are willing to challenge the dominant culture's self-interested maintenance of stability, we must repress what is most radical about reader-response.

This repression was built into the development of reader-response criticism, which largely ignores the effects of reading on the reader beyond the act of interpretation. The reader's response is repressed even as it is required. Control is a fundamental conflict in reader-response criticism as it seeks to rebel against the formalist limits of New Criticism without interrogating its anxiety over subjectivity. Even the psychoanalytically informed work of Norman Holland can be read reductively to repress the unconscious in the reading process, leading Iser to criticize Holland for reducing the reader to an acontextualized, disembodied "reader function" that makes meaning according to critically prescribed codes (Iser, 1978: 39). Holland's tendency to follow late-Freudian model making opens him up to criticism that the individual reader is replaced with predicable response system based on identity patterns.

Fish insists that he supports instability and determinacy (Fish, 1980: 305), but he, like Holland, is quick to limit, and thus stabilize, the reader's response: "meanings are the property neither of fixed and stable texts nor of free and independent readers but of interpretive communities that are responsible both for the shape of a reader's activities and for the texts those activities produce" (Fish, 1980: 322). Fish famously demonstrates how the process of reading creates a text in "How to Recognize a Poem When You See One" (322–337), but the transformation he describes is limited to the changing understanding of the words written on the board he challenged his class to interpret (thus leading them to produce a poem where none was "intended"). No larger self-realizations are described as resulting from this exercise. Fish's self-deconstruction in his "Introduction" to *Is There a Text in This Class?* illustrates his version of active reading by following an imagined reader through a four-line sentence of *Paradise Lost*, during which one might first imagine one meaning and then another for a pronoun: "This understanding, however, must be revised when the reader enters line 12 and discovers…" (Fish, 1980: 4). Fish's claim is that the entire reading process, not just the ultimate interpretation, is rich and valuable. Fish's implication that the reader is undergoing a journey—the reader *enters* line 12 rather than reads it—underscores his emphasis on reading as active even as it also assumes a common destination. To use critic Rachel Bowlby's powerful metaphor, the trained reader runs on carefully laid tracks (Bowlby, 1988: 37–41).

Fish's location of the reader within the text creates a reader who is disembodied and acontextualized (except by text and interpretive community): "the meanings and texts produced by an interpretive community are not subjective because they do not proceed from an isolated individual but from a

public and conventional point of view" (Fish, 1980: 14). This is necessary for Fish's model of reader-response, in which the process of meaning making is ultimately stable, predictable, and open to evaluation not of the work but of the reader. Active readers are good readers. Woe betides the reader who reads passively or who is from the wrong side of the interpretive community tracks. Fish's parsing of the reading process assumes a common experience for all well-educated readers, who arrive at fixed and stable meanings even if their journeys vary. Thus, Fish himself concedes that he tried to have it both ways:

> What I didn't see was that I could not consistently make the two arguments at the same time…When someone would charge that an emphasis on the reader leads directly to solipsism and anarchy, I would reply by insisting on the constraints imposed on readers by the text; and when someone would characterize my position as nothing more than the most recent turn of the new-critical screw, I would reply by saying that in my model the reader was freed from the tyranny of the text and given the central role in production of meaning.
>
> (Fish, 1980: 7)

Fish locates the underlying assumption of this conflict in his fear of subjectivity (Fish, 1980: 9), which he recognizes even as he holds it at bay with the help of the "interpretive community (ibid.: 14). Thus, he displaces the constraints he originally located within the text back onto the reader, who both creates and is created by the interpretive community within which he travels—he lays the track on which he runs, to extend Bowlby's analogy. By embracing his own conflict, Fish handily resolves it by deconstructing his own critical process: "the claims of objectivity and subjectivity can no longer be debated because the authorizing agency, the center of interpretive authority, is at once both and neither" (ibid.: 14). Locating the meaning making process within the interpretive community even as he locates the reader within the text, Fish goes beyond ignoring the unconscious by repressing the individual reader whose constructed and constructing location ultimately becomes another textual gap filled by Fish. The reader is the ultimate text in the class.

If we do not repress the reader by reproducing him or her as a sort of "reader function," then we might wonder what effect the process of textual construction might have on the one doing the constructing. Surely the interaction is reciprocal in some way, in which case shouldn't we consider how the reader is constructed by the reading process? Even when Holland explores the ways in which textual production stems from the reader's associations and reveals telling signs of the reader's identity in *Five Readers Reading*, and while his readings of readers reading may reveal clues as to the reader's identity, Holland sees this as a relatively static model—unlike the text, Holland's reader is unchanged by the reading process. Indeed, Iser criticizes Holland for using "psychoanalytical concepts…as tools for systematization and not for exploration (Iser, 1978: 39). In Holland's formulation, readers' responses are

derived from their identities, and thus those responses can be read back to establish the reader's "identity theme." An analysis of a reader's responses may lead to insight into that reader, and in Holland's masterful readings there is much to be gained about the literary work as well, but such knowledge is revealing rather than transforming. Taking himself as a reader, Holland constructs the text in his own image; the text is a mirror that reflects his fantasy of a stable and unified identity ("Hermia's Dream").

Even as reader-response theorists proposed an unstable model for textual production, they struggled to control the process. Fish's notion of the "interpretive community" that constrains the various responses an informed reader might have to a text limits interpretation and returns us to a model of proper reading that can only be accomplished by those with access to the right kind of education. Holland's static identity theme can be discerned via the responses readers have to reading. Holland thus proposes a stabilizing model of the psyche that overtly represses the (by definition unstable and unrepresentable) unconscious. These trajectories of approaching the instability of the subject only to repress it parallel Lacan's view of Freud's late notion of the tripartite structure of the unconscious (id-ego-superego) as imposing stability on the unconscious and thus exercising the very resistance into which analysis attempts to intervene.[9] Reluctance to recognize the unconscious manifests itself in the repression of the reader's responses to the text those responses produced.

Fish energetically challenges the New Critical premise that meaning is in the text. However, Fish argues that the text is constructed by the reader reading within a socially constructed interpretive community that is so much like the New Critical position that readers are shareholders in a common language (which is being used by the text) that Fish and the New Critics arrive at essentially the same place. This position also allows Fish to defend himself against charges of subjectivity, since we are too much embedded in interpretive communities for that to be a serious concern (Fish, 1980: 335). Fish thus insists on the instability of the text even as he insists on the stability of its production—an inherent contradiction he himself ultimately realizes and justifies as rhetorical—he is quite candid in revealing his goal as limited to trying to win the theoretical fight (ibid.: 7). The effect of this double punch is to repress the reader doing the reading. Despite its emphasis on the responses of readers, reader-response criticism has difficulty fully imagining readers.

What, then, is the effect of reading on the reader beyond the construction of a text? What role, for example, is played by the unconscious, which one might describe as an interpretive community of its own working alongside all the others, more subjectively perhaps due to the idiosyncratic associations Fish is desperate to avoid? Just as Freud's late career model of id-ego-superego creates a stable structure in which to safely contain the unconscious by eliding the critical agency,[10] so too does Fish's model make room for and thus constrain the reader's response as external to both text and reader—the effect of

the individual reader on the text is managed by the normative control of the interpretive community, and the potential for the effect of the text on the reader beyond the urge to interpret it is never entertained. My critique of reader-response theory comes from an attempt to understand how a theory seemingly centered on the reader fails to account for the effects of literature on readers, whose subjectivity is repressed in an effort to maintain a sense of control that would be challenged by the recognition of the unconscious. If the reader produces the text, does the act of reading influence the reader's production of self? Is the reader changed by reading? What effects might reading have on the reader's self-constructed identity? What, in essence, are the unconscious effects of reading?

Reader-response criticism itself is ignored in much the same way that the unconscious is: we pay them lip service while avoiding their radical implications because both demand an acceptance of instability. Both the text and its reader are unknowable. We can describe the ways in which they function, but we cannot say what they are, what they mean, or what is true. We are inoculated, in Barthes' phrase (Barthes, 1957: 150–151) to both of these instabilities: we have incorporated just enough of them to be impervious to their greater implications, which, as a culture, we largely ignore. Commonly, reader-response theory is misused (anything goes), undermined (the text and/or the interpretive community limits interpretation, so anything does not go), and misunderstood (personal responses are called reader-response analysis). The upshot of these positions is that we agree that readers (and their unconscious) construct texts, but we continue to function as if they don't. Intellectual acceptance and practical ignorance persists, and the work (if not the author) is still at the center of our analysis. My students still want to know what the author meant. No matter how many times I explain Saussure and post-structuralism, they believe in their hearts that there is one true meaning, that the author knows it, that their goal is to find it, and that if I don't know it then I have no business teaching.

Here is the (true) story I tell to try to get them to reconsider: I invited a nationally recognized poet to come to class to discuss her latest book of poetry. One of the students asked her to explain the frequent references to birds in her poems. Do birds, he asked, symbolize death? The poet (who was off her meds at the time) responded, "last week I got on a bus and saw my father sitting in one of the seats. He was eating peanuts. He has been dead for quite a few years now." She clearly believed that she had answered the student's question. In the next class meeting, the students agreed that the writer doesn't always know the true meaning of the work. But they were not happy about it, and I suspect they considered this case to be an exception rather than an unusually overt example of the way in which the meaning of language is not transparent even to an author.

A reader-response theory that acknowledges the unconscious would recognize that the filling in of the gaps in the narrative that produces the text is an activity influenced by the unconscious. A reader's associations to a work are

thus likely to be more telling about the reader than enlightening about the work. This completely shifts the focus of literary analysis to include, if not predominately become, self-analysis, and to the recognition that we read because literature speaks to us. It changes us. But we can't write our dissertations on that. While this direction was recognized and practiced by Holland (see "Hermia's Dream" for a particularly good example that locates reader-response within the context of the development of psychoanalytic literary criticism), it has rarely been followed by other critics. Fish's own focus on the impersonal and rhetorical is much more in keeping with the culturally enforced drive for the interpretative stability of one true meaning. Reader-response dead-ended with the question of how the reader produces the text. I propose smashing through the barricades of repression to ask how producing the text produces the reader.

Reflective reading: a radical approach

Why do we need a theory of reading? We have theories of how we read (Iser), why we read (Miller), how we respond to what we read (reader-response criticism), and how we internalize what we have read (Piaget and von Glasersfeld). In literary criticism we find pieces of a theory of reading fractured into various critical perspectives. If we go back to Saussure we find the origin of these attempts to describe how we making meaning. Semiotics moves quickly from an analysis of the process of meaning making to efforts to produce new meaning in the form of literary criticism that itself invites reader interpretation (Barthes). Literary criticism typically stops with an interpretation of a text or a response to another interpretation, rarely circling back around to the impact the process of reading—which is also a process of interpretation—has on the reader. One text gives rise to another, and that is certainly evidence of the impact reading has had on a reader who responds by writing. Poe's short story "The Purloined Letter" generated a rich literary and critical response, for example, giving rise to detective stories as well as the wonderful debate between Lacan and Derrida that was joined by Barbara Johnson and Jane Gallop, among others (see Muller and Richardson, 1987). In all of this work, however, the impact of reading on the reader is evident in the artefact of another text. The reader, as such, can only be inferred. Reading generates more texts to be read, which then become the inspiration for the generation of more texts. While this is a wondrous thing, reading also has an impact on readers, which may or may not lead to another text.

I am searching for a theory of reading that integrates the component parts of literary theory and also considers the impact reading has on readers. This metacognitive process has its seed in literary theory, constructivism, and literature itself. Our tendency to focus on the external results of reading—an interpretation to be defended or attacked—represses the transformational process of coming to that interpretation and the impact that process has on the reader. Readers are not (always) the same upon finishing upon the reading

experience. The externalized interpretation is merely a sign of the internal process of arriving at what can now be a tidy, disembodied conclusion that elides the messy ambiguity and idiosyncrasy of the process that occurs within the conscious—and unconscious—of the reader. The repression of the reader is a symptom of our wish for stability and clarity. It is the false consciousness that urges us toward control.

We need a theory of reading that puts the reader into theory. Let's start this quest by considering a theory of learning, radical constructivism, that puts the learning back into the learning process.

In the introduction to an issue of *Pedagogy* on reading, guest editors Mariolina Rizzi Salvatori and Patricia Donahue call for scholarship that makes the reading process explicit: "The attempts at making visible the mental moves that produce and are produced by an encounter with a text also make it possible to reflect on what has shaped that process" (Salvatori and Donahue, 2016: 8). This is precisely what I wish to do here by considering the question of what shapes the process of reading that results in life-changing realizations?

There has been a great deal of renewed attention to learning theory,[11] much of which reprises the ground-breaking work of Piaget and the educational theorists following him: John Dewey, Lev Vygotsky, and von Glasersfeld. Taken together with psychoanalysis and literary criticism, I believe that learning theory can help us push through the current stagnation of literary theory. Infused in the 1980s with continental philosophy, which led to the divisive but exhilarating theory wars of the 1990s, literary theory has become somewhat dormant, despite rigorous and insightful work by critics such as Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best, who call for "surface reading" in a swing back toward the close reading of the New Critics (Marcus and Best, 2009).[12] This traditional play of thesis and antithesis calls for a praxis that integrates the seeming polarization of reading and theory. In what follows I will propose we adopt what I will call "reflective reading," an integration of literary and learning theories, in order to achieve a robust understanding of how stories change our lives.

As I conceive it, reflective reading is a critical practice that recognizes the reciprocal effects of reading on the text and on the reader—which are constructed through an active reading process that produces both text and reader.

Reflective reading differs from just reading because it postulates readers reading mindfully—not just for content but also for the impact of that content on themselves. Reflective readers are aware of their role in the production of the text and the reciprocal impact of the text on the reader. Post-structuralist critics are engaged with what they can do to a text. Reflective readers, exemplified by Elizabeth Bennet and Gabriel, are also aware of what the production of the text does to them.

Let me warn you now that what I propose draws heavily on learning theory, which has been relegated to education departments, and to psychoanalysis, which I realize is currently out of fashion. Nevertheless, I believe

these theories are key to reinvigorating critical theory because they make manifest the unconscious process that is repressed in critical practice. Barthes replaces the psychological with the social as semiotics looks to external forces of meaning making; Iser's phenomenological approach does much the same; Fish engages in battles of authority (whether with the text or in campus politics); Holland come closest to engaging psychological processes but then turns to model making. Reflective reading recognizes the unconscious of reading.

Why is reflective reading radical? For one, it recognizes the influence of the unconscious, which holds a web of associations and responses we cannot actively access, but which have a profound impact on our daily lives. The dramatic changes that reading can impose happen primarily at the unconscious level. The sensation that reading has changed our lives is the conscious manifestation of an unconscious process. This moment of realization is a fissure, not unlike a dream, that offers a (veiled and largely ignored) glimpse into the unconscious. We can read these moments, much as we can read dreams and free associations, to unlock repressed content.

Why would we want to do that? When content is fully repressed and undisturbed, there is no reason to disrupt it. When it returns from the repressed—in dreams, associations, as transference responses—we can try all we want to restore repression, but it will likely become disruptive.

Why do we need reflective reading? Poststructuralist criticism is stuck, dismissed before its time. The superego's repression is ascendant (e.g., surface reading). Learning theory can help us name the reading practice we strive for and validate the experience of reading.

In his explication of the philosophical and psychological foundation of the theory of learning he calls radical constructivism, Ernst von Glasersfeld points to pioneering psychologist and educational theorist Jean Piaget's notion of "reflected abstraction" as crucial to the learning process.[13] Von Glasersfeld describes reflected abstraction as reflecting on the process of reflecting, a metacognitive practice in which subjects think about how they have been thinking. We could think of this as mindful, or intentional, reflection.[14] "Reflected abstraction" is represented by Jane Austen, James Joyce, and countless other authors in profiles of characters who are conscious of their own reflective process and its impact on their understanding of themselves.

Central to von Glasersfeld's understanding of Piaget is Piaget's background as an evolutionary biologist. The evolutionary process is replicated in the learning process: new knowledge is acquired and tested. If it is supported by experience it survives; if it is not supported by experience it is jettisoned. A clear example of this process is seen in the famous interviews with Harvard graduates about the reason for the seasons. In spite of being able to accurately repeat the cause of the seasons on an exam, the knowledge that seasonal change is created by the angle of light from the sun is not confirmed by the graduates' experience, which insists that it is distance, not angle, that increases warmth. Their governing metaphor for this concept is their own experience of

being close to or farther from a relatively close heat source, with no ability to imagine the effect of angle over a vast distance. What they have temporarily learned (and can repeat accurately on an exam) is not integrated into their conceptual model of heat transfer at the cosmic level. Greater reflection on the situation has the potential to change the mental model, but there is no imperative to do so. Thus, we construct mental models as they are necessary to explain our experience. Elizabeth Bennet's mental model of Mr Darcy as a proud man fully explained his behaviour. When he presents an alternative perspective, her mental model is challenged. Upon reflection, she is able to reconstruct a model of Darcy that more fully explains his behaviour throughout their relationship that is consistent with both his initial aloofness and his subsequent proposal of marriage, which previously had been an anomaly her model could not explain. Rejecting her original model for one that better explains all of Darcy's behaviour is no easy feat, but once she can imagine it, her position quickly (albeit painfully) shifts until she sees not just him, but also herself, differently.

This understanding of the learning process is consistent with current research in brain-based learning, which recognizes the creation of new synaptic pathways as the result of new learning experiences. Our brains literally make new connections when we learn something new (Ambrose, 2010).

The notion of a stable "truth" is one of these constructs, driven by the inability to live with ambiguity and instability. "Truth" represents the understandable need for stability. The reality does not change, but our construction of it does, and the extent to which that construct is shared with others is limited. Black and white thinking imposes a greater degree of shared "truth," by externalizing and making normative internal constructs. But, as we saw in the Harvard Yard study, social agreement and internal constructions are often in discord.

My call for reflective reading is not so much a proposal for a new theory but for a re-reading of literary theory with attention to its implications for reading and the reader. What can literary theory tell us about how reading changes our lives? I think it tells us a good deal if we approach it from that question and include theories of learning in our query to support our understanding of the reading process. In what follows, I knit together literary theory and learning theory. I begin this integration by recognizing the connections between the work of biologist Jean Piaget and structuralist linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure inspired structuralist approaches that expanded into many disciplines that inform 20th-century literary theory: Roland Barthes and semiotics, Vladimir Propp and the Russian Formalists, and historian Michel Foucault, to name a few. Structuralism almost immediately bred poststructuralism, since the recognition of the constructed nature of seemingly natural things like language led naturally to inquiry into that construction. Thus we find Jacques Derrida's development of deconstruction, which asks how such structures are created and enabled. Theorists like Jacques Lacan reinterpreted the work of Sigmund Freud to create a structuralist

reading of psychoanalysis that awakened psychoanalytic literary criticism into poststructuralism. In *Radical Constructivism: A Way of Knowing and Learning*, Ernst von Glasersfeld similarly reinterprets the work of Jean Piaget to expose a structuralist theory of learning. Glasersfeld contends that Piaget's work was overshadowed within the discipline of psychology by behaviourists like B. F. Skinner, and thus never received the widespread attention it deserved (von Glasersfeld, 2013: 163). Long recognized as foundational in departments of education, Piaget's insights are being discovered as if new by current work in learning theory (e.g., Ambrose) and brain-based learning (Jensen).

Literary theory fractured into camps during what are commonly referred to as the theory wars that began in the mid-1980s only to become stalled in what Jeffrey Williams calls "a holding pattern":

> Instead of the heady manifestos and rampant invention of the late 1960's through the early 1980s, it now has turned retrospective, still set on the theoretical platforms of poststructuralism and the work of its major figures, like Foucault, Lacan, Derrida, and so on. Once discursive bomb-throwers and banes of traditionalists, they are now standard authorities to be cited in due course.
>
> (Williams, 2014: 25)

Likewise, reader-response criticism, which promised to inform our understanding of reading, quickly hit a wall and appears to have nothing much more to say. Literary theory can be reinvigorated if we incorporate into it the work of Piaget and other learning theorists, such as John Dewey and Ernst von Glasersfeld. In this merger we discover a rich and powerful theory of reading that can move us forward towards an integration of theory and experience, textual analysis and reader-response, intellect and emotion.

Summarized by Clarence Joldersma in his thorough account of von Glasersfeld's position: "knowledge develops internally, by means of learners' cognitive self-organization, where they transcend particular conceptual structures through reorganization" (Joldersma, 2013: 277). Learning is thus an active process that requires the learner to process new information not simply to store it in long-term memory, but in order to reimagine, or reorganize, the subject at hand. Whether the temporal variation of the seasons, calculus, or Mr Darcy, learning engages the learner in the internal restructuring of mental models. As Joldersma writes, "Von Glasersfeld's epistemological stance can be summarized as the process of making more deliberate the conscious construction of the cognitive structures by which the experiencing subject understands" (ibid.: 278). Von Glasersfeld focused on mathematics education, but his theories, when applied to the reading process, deepen our understanding of how reading changes our lives.

In showing us characters engaged in "reflected abstraction," Joyce and Austen not only show us characters transformed by interpreting narratives, but they also give us insight into the process of transformation in which

metacognition is a key element. To change (or embrace) the unconscious narratives that guide us, we must first become conscious of them. I experienced this when I realized that many of my decisions were driven by my internalization of my father's story that education is the only alternative to hard labor and an early death. This disruptive epiphany was momentarily disconcerting. Like Elizabeth Bennet, I realized that until that moment, I had not fully known myself. But even in that moment, my sense of self both dissolved and was immediately reconstituted integrating this new insight.

Joyce and Austen detail the painstaking work of interpretation and reflection upon interpretation that lead Gabriel and Elizabeth to their epiphanies. They untwist the bent strands of narrative into meaning as they integrate more complex narratives into their sense of who they have been and who they are becoming. In reinterpreting the past, they construct a different present. Reading first disrupts—and then produces—the reader.

We can achieve the fulsome response to narrative that Dewey describes a viewer having to a work of art in *Art as Experience* (Dewey, 2005). Dewey imagines the viewer standing close up, overwhelmed by the emotions called up by the piece, then stepping back to view with a critical eye. Finally, the viewer integrates the emotional and intellectual into a holistic experience of the work. This integration of initial response and critical reflection is akin to rereading. Through the integration of responses comes what Dewey calls the "experience" of a work of art. This process produces a response that has the potential to be transformational for the respondent. The respondent understands the work differently, more deeply, and with greater complexity. There is also an increased chance that this experience will change the respondent's life. Interpretive experiences transform the way respondents see the work—and possibly how they see themselves. This is how interpretation or "reading" changes our lives.

When considered as a theory of reading, 20th-century critical theory emerges not as a series of abandoned theory wars, but as a coherent movement toward an integrated understanding of the impact of narrative on the conscious and unconscious identity formation of readers. Reflective reading is a way of reading that can be part of any critical perspective. We should use whatever tools are in our toolboxes—every bent screw and twisted wrench—that help us understand how meaning making creates our understanding of ourselves. Readers are bricoleurs, to use Lévi-Strauss's term, who produce ourselves as we read.

Notes

1 See Nancy Holland's delightful essay on this *Sesame Street* segment (Holland, 1990).

2 A robust critical tradition surrounds Joyce's use of epiphany, which he noted in his notebooks as the organizing moment in each of the stories in *Dubliners*, and which is central to Stephan Dedalus's aesthetic theory in "Stephen Hero," *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and *Ulysses*. Zack Bowen (Bowen, 1981–1982) reprises the

discussion at its zenith, and more recently Jacobs includes an eloquent summary of the critical work on this topic (Jacobs, 2009). The critical commentary often centers around the content of the epiphany (i.e., what exactly did Gabriel realize), the relationship of Joyce's own critical theory and that of his character Stephen Dedalus, and the connections between the works. It is not my ambition to engage this field, but rather to hold up "The Dead" as an example of reading as transformative. See also the Bedford edition of "The Dead" for exemplary critical survey and responses illustrating different critical perspectives from Daniel Schwarz (psychoanalytic), Peter Rabinowitz (reader-response), Michael Levenson (New Historical), Margot Norris (feminist), and John Paul Riquelme (deconstruction).

3 Gabriel's recognition of the west of Ireland is foreshadowed by a conversation he has with Miss Ivors, in which she proposes a trip to the west of Ireland (which Gretta enthusiastically supported) and then teases him about being more English than Irish. The context for this conversation is the Irish Nationalist movement.

4 Felicia Bonaparte also focuses on this moment of reading in *Pride and Prejudice* to introduce her argument that "The narrative is thus a quest for an epistemological principle on which a suitable hypothesis of reality can rest" (Bonaparte, 2005: 2). As with Joyce, above, it is not my intention to reprise the rich critical and appreciative tradition inspired by Austen, but rather to consider the model presented by Elizabeth Bennet as a re-reader. The Longman Cultural edition of the novel provides excellent notes and context for the novel.

5 The genealogy of reading theory is clearly more complex than I have outlined here. It is, among other things, intertwined with both psychology and philosophy of language. From Wittgenstein and Austin philosophy of language branches off to Jacques Derrida and deconstruction just as it also moves from Freud through Hegel to Lacan.

6 The citation is: "L. R. Gleitman et al. in *Cognition***1** 161 The lower-order process often proceeds without any meta-cognition…Examples of meta-cognition in memory are recollection…and intentional learning" (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.).

7 The chain of associations is more elaborate than my simplified version of this case implies. The smell of burnt pudding is a screen for the smell of cigar smoke, which evokes a yet another memory in which Miss Lucy realizes that she is wrong to think that the Director has feelings for her.

8 Full disclosure: I was a student of Holland's at the University of Buffalo, where I attended the last Delphi Seminar he offered there (Fall 1982) before his move to the University of Florida.

9 See, as below, Françoise Meltzer's essay "Unconscious" (Meltzer, 2005) for a notably nuanced discussion of the concept.

10 Françoise Meltzer's extraordinary essay "Unconscious" is a profound and succinct explanation and investigation of this term. I refer, and defer, to her.

11 See Ambrose et al. (2010) for an excellent aggregation of this work, as well as how to apply it in the classroom.

12 See Jeffrey Williams's *How to Be an Intellectual* (Williams, 2014) for a history of theory wars and the subsequent apparent standstill of critical theory.

13 In von Glasersfeld's interpretation, Piaget identifies four distinct types of abstraction: "One is called 'empirical' because it abstracts sensorimotor properties from experiential situations [e.g., remembering the experience of skiing]. The first of the three reflective abstractions projects and reorganizes, on another conceptual level, a coordination or pattern of the subject's own activities or operations [transference of knowledge]. The next is similar in that it also involves patterns of activities or operations, but it includes the subject's awareness of what has been abstracted and is therefore called 'reflected abstraction' [metacognition]. The last is called

'pseudo-empirical' because, like empirical abstractions, it can take place only if suitable sensorimotor material is available [e.g., using an abacus for the first time]." (von Glasersfeld, 2013: 105)

14 Piaget's concept of "reflected abstraction" distinguishes Radical Constructivism from learning theories such as Kolb's which include reflection as part of the learning process without the metacognitive component of self-awareness in reflection. This stage in the learning process is simplified by David Kolb (2014) as simply "reflection," which fails to capture the element of understanding the function and impact of reflection Piaget insists upon. Elizabeth Bennet, for example, recognizes the moment in which her reflection leads her to see Mr. Darcy and herself differently. Compare this moment to her mother's response to Lydia and Wickham's forced marriage, where she insists she has known something all along that she has actually just learned.

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3 Out classed

The family romance as fantasy of upward mobility

Why can't we talk about class?

It is difficult to get students to talk about psychoanalysis. I once tried to back into the subject by starting with class in a course called "Class and Subjectivity in British Modernism." In the first half we practiced Marxist literary criticism and in the second half we tried psychoanalytic literary criticism with the goal that by the end of the course we would integrate the two. I designed the course as a way to challenge myself to bring these two perspectives together instead of writing about them alternately. I wanted to write about Virginia Woolf and sexuality as a psychoanalytic, materialist feminist, but I was having a hard time maintaining class as a central part of my argument. Nancy Chodorow does so well in the *The Reproduction of Mothering* where she argues that the way we are gendered supports the labor market, but I was struggling. The students were more receptive to Marx than I had expected. Of course I had chosen literary examples that lent themselves to Marxist readings: *Sons and Lovers, Eminent Victorians, Dubliners, Howards End*; but even as I was pleased, I was concerned that the students would not make the transition to psychoanalysis. I need not have worried. As soon as we started reading Freud, they never looked back. They seemed relieved, not a response I typically associate with discussions of hysteria and the Oedipal complex. There was no question of integrating Marxist and psychoanalytic perspectives. It was as much as I could do to keep them from revising all of their previous Marxist interpretations into what they now found to be so much more persuasive. Why, I wondered each week, are they so much more comfortable with Freud than with Marx? It is a question I have learned to ask of myself. I still have been unable to integrate a class analysis into my investigations of sexuality. Recently it occurred to me that there was a connection between this inability and another topic about which I have been unable to write: my own family.

I have already mentioned that both of my grandfathers were coalminers in southwest Virginia. My mother married my father on the afternoon she graduated from high school and worked to put him through college. I was born just before he began his master's degree in Civil Engineering. My father has been very successful. He retired after serving as chairman of a national

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organization of engineering and construction firms—the sort of organization that has lobbyists and raises PAC money. His story could have been written by Horatio Alger. Any one of Alger's well-known titles would fit my father's story: *Bound to Rise or Up the Ladder, Strive and Succeed or Struggling Upward*. Or maybe a new one should be created just for him: *Max, Son of the Coalmines* has a ring to it. The ironic twist at the end is that, although he never smoked a cigarette in his life, my father died of lung cancer. His father died of black lung when I was nine, and even though my father escaped a life of mining, the environmental conditions of his childhood caused a cancer that completely surrounded the outside of both of his lungs. It is difficult not to see a story here. My father was a great storyteller, and I have long thought of his stories as my inheritance. I promised him that I would write them down. But while he was alive, I couldn't do it.

For more than twenty years I have wondered how to write this story that I always assumed I would someday write. It sometimes seems like a charm of some sort—that until I write this story I won't be able to write anything else. One reason is obvious to me. I have heard these stories as my father's stories, and I don't know how to turn them into my stories. If I did, I wonder if it would disappoint my father, who told these stories to me, not about me. I am never in them.

My mother's family had land. Her grandfather George Osborne had quite a lot of land that he farmed in tobacco or planted in orchards. After working in the mines, my granddaddy Fletcher Osborne would check in with his father to find out what he was supposed to do on the farm. He saved for his own farm and built a brick house for his wife and three daughters. But daughters could not work the farm, and he was kept busy working for his father as a son should, not to mention his full-time job working nights in the mine. Fletcher made a deal with a friend from the mines. This was my father's father, Ival Sproles. Ival was also saving for land, but it would take him longer since he rented a company house for his large family. Among the large family were five sons; my father was the eldest. Fletcher offered to provide the land if Ival would provide the labor; they would split the profits. So Fletcher taught my sixteen-year-old father to walk behind a plough, and my twelve-year-old mother brought them lemonade. When my father's family had enough to buy land for a house of their own it was directly across the hollow from my mother's. My father would stand on the barn roof and wave to my mother as she stood in the yard a mile away.

Table 3.1 My family tree (for the purpose of my father's stories)

George Osborne	*Claude Sproles*
Fletcher Osborne + many younger siblings	Ival Sproles + many younger siblings
My mother + 2 younger sisters	My father + 7 younger siblings

These stories seemed very romantic to me. And since, as Freud says, a girl takes her mother's story for her own, I expected a love story of my own. When I turned 30 and was unmarried and childless, I assumed that I would never have children and mourned the failure of my life despite having a PhD and a tenure-track job. There was no way to write myself into my father's stories.

There was also no way to bring these stories into my world. In Minnesota, where I taught for 10 years, students and colleagues flatly denied my claim to be from the South. "You don't have an accent, and you are not racially prejudiced" they would explain patiently. They might have added: you are not illiterate. It was very important that I stop trying to disrupt their notions of Southerners; I was from back East and that was that. At a workshop on ethnicity, I tried to explain that my overriding sense of identity was as a Southerner. I'm not usually so uncooperative. I understood that the point was that none of us in that room were actually from America, but I was frustrated with well-meaning attempts to simplify ethnic identity.

"No, no," the group leader explained, losing patience with my obstinacy. "I was asking where your family came from. Where did they live 100 years ago?"

"Virginia."

"Okay, 200 years ago?"

"Virginia."

"Before that?"

"Ireland."

"Okay, then so you are Irish."

Not even a little. By then I had had enough of being the person who disrupts the entire proceedings. But she couldn't have been more wrong.

As near as we can tell, my family traveled from Cowden, Scotland with a 90-year stopover in Donegal, Ireland, down the Shenandoah Valley in the 1750s. It seems they just kept going until around about Russell County, almost to Tennessee. That's when they stopped running into other people. They settled deep into the Blue Ridge Mountains. There are some deeds, marked with the X of James Sproul. The spelling of his name and his sons' names changed enough to make tracking them a bit tricky. My father and I saw many of these documents in courthouses and archives before the genealogy craze made it prudent to stop letting folks wander about among the records. The Osbornes also stopped in Russell County, while my father's mother's family, the Klines, settled in North Carolina and my mother's family are still in West Virginia. Some of them fought in the Battle of King's Mountain in the Revolutionary War. All of them hid during the Civil War. They still avoid the law and celebrate the birthday of long-time president of the United Mine Workers, John L. Lewis. We are not really DAR material.

And this is how my story is not really my story. A post-Marxist colleague once told me approvingly that no one could come close to me when it came to class credentials. I think about my cousins, the kids I played with at holidays as I was growing up. My mother's cousin, just a few years older than me, was

killed in a mine explosion. One of my cousins has been in hiding for his participation in attacks on scabs during a strike against the Pittston Coal Company. He made the jack rocks that were tossed in his father's driveway. Jack rocks are ingenious. Two large nails, sharpened at all ends and welded together just like the jacks I played with as a child. When the trucks carrying the scabs drove over them, they would pierce a tire and lodge in the tread. As the truck drove on, the jack was rolled into the tire, shredding it. Of course, the scabs, hungry for any work they could get, just walked the rest of the way up the mountain. But it slowed things down and made it easier to attack the scabs hand to hand. I still keep a jack rock on my desk to remind me what side I'm on. It's a dangerous memento of the fantasy that the people will rise up and throw off their chains. In the days before voicemail my assistant used it like a spindle. I would return to the office to find it decorated with half a dozen pink "while you were out" notes. I recently caught a glimpse of this cousin leaving his father's funeral by the back door. His father, my uncle James, died of lung cancer like his father before him. Family tragedy apparently gives me authenticity.

But it doesn't really. In part I think that my working class background ultimately works against me as way of dismissing me as an intellectual. Which is ironic, since being an intellectual alienates me from my family. I might be able to claim some sort of experiential authority, but my academic world is still a world in which intellectual capital is the only kind you can spend. Just as being a woman might give a person greater authority as a feminist, that advantage has always been more than offset by the lack of authority that comes from being a woman in the first place. It doesn't even out; women still end up lacking. The same seems to be the case with class. It might be exotic to come from the working class, but that is not a position of power; at best it's a curiosity and most likely it undermines whatever access to culture I've managed to scrabble together. My story of a Thanksgiving with four different kinds of meat including road kill deer and a bear shot in self-defense with a bow may be hilarious, but I also think it makes people wonder about my table manners.

Being working class is not an authentic position for me. I have never lived in a mining town. I grew up in the suburbs. And while I was raised by parents whose values are more working class than they realized, I never doubted that I would go to college, even though this is an extremely rare accomplishment for women in my extended and immediate family—neither my mother nor my sister have college degrees. So I'm not sure what sort of "credentials" I have. But I do know that my background has been confusing. I would like to think that it has been rich and empowering, but I have not been able to see this side of it very often. I know that when I was nine and we moved from Raleigh to Northern Virginia, not only were we farther away from my grandparents in distance, but even though we were in the same state—the state I was born in—I felt like an outsider. My fourth grade class was dominated by kids whose fathers had just been transferred from Poughkeepsie by IBM. There

was a fairly clear hierarchy among these kids that I later realized was determined by their father's salaries and positions at IBM. They knew how much their dads made (when my mother refused me this information, I was told that we did not discuss such things) and who was the boss of whom. Obviously I didn't fit into this paradigm, but one thing was sure: I talked funny. My southern accent coded me as poor and dumb, a stereotype I have never seen discussed, perhaps because, like my Minnesota colleagues, we believe it is true. This was not a good thing to be labeled in fourth grade. I think that might have been the beginning of my family romance fantasy.

Family romance as class consciousness

Issues of class are not explicitly central to Freud's work. Focusing as he does on internal processes, his analytic method seemingly decontextualizes the individual by narrowing in so tightly that larger socio-economic conditions remain outside the frame of inquiry.[1] His essay "Family Romances" (Freud, 1966, IX: 235–244) includes a rare consideration of class status in his work. In this fantasy, the child daydreams that her real parents are royalty, and that someday she will be rescued from the horrible family where she is suffering and misunderstood. In imagining that she is royalty, the child escapes the family and feels a powerful sense of autonomy because she is no longer under the authority of the parent. Common accusations along the lines of "You're not the boss of me!" and "You're not my real mother!" give voice to this fantasy of escape.

The fantasy also enables the child's painful but compelling need to establish an identity that is separate from the parent with whom he most identifies, usually the parent of the same sex (Freud, 1966, IX:237 and Chodorow, 1978). Ambivalence is at the core of the child's identification with a parent (see Freud's "Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego," (Freud, 1966, XVIII:67–144)). It makes identification painful: the girl is like her mother, but she is not her mother. It is a struggle for a child to develop a sense of self that is in many ways similar to (perhaps even based on) his parent, while knowing that he can never actually become his father. The obverse of "You're not my real mother" might be: "I want to be just like you when I grow up." This is an expression of affection that both parent and child might wish for, but it is unlikely to be realized (Chodorow, 1978). In the fantasy of the Family Romance, the child is no longer bound to the identity of the same sex parent, which allows her to avoid the conflict inherent in identification and thus the guilt of her angry and even murderous feelings. Disowning the family in fantasy is an acceptable way to eliminate parental authority. "You're not my real mother" becomes a statement of fact rather than an angry wish. The fantasy allows the child to gain distance without guilt.

The fantasy of the Family Romance also makes the child feel powerful because she has a secret. Not only is the child free from parental authority and secure in a new and autonomous identity, but she also knows something

the parents don't know. This knowledge is a powerful weapon that could be used at any moment to destroy the parents' position in the child's life. This secret knowledge gives the child much longed for power. The fantasy must remain secret because its power comes from having knowledge that no one else in the family has. From a practical point of view, it cannot be exposed in order to prevent it from being dismissed or refuted. But there is a reason for harboring this fantasy as a secret that goes beyond the usual reasons for secrecy: it is based on the discovery of the mother's and father's weakness. According to the fantasy, the child's real parents (and thus the child) are royalty, while these people pretending to be parents are mere commoners. The child's real father is a King; this mean man she is forced to live with now is not. This pretend father is not a King but a subject with an inferior class position. When the child's real parents come back to claim the child, she will be a princess who will count her surrogate parents among her subjects. She may be merciful, or not, depending on the degree to which she has been mistreated by them.[2] The Family Romance exposes the parents' inferior class status, a weakness that the child could expose in order to wound.

Out classing the father

To cope with fourth grade I did several things: I began to keep a journal, I learned to handle my insomnia by reading at night (and sometimes into the morning), and I lost my southern accent. I do not know how I managed the latter, but it was the beginning of a never-ending program of self-education. Even now I read four pages of Freud before bed each night, as if that will somehow help.

My family romance was the fantasy of education—not so much formal education as cultural education. My "real" parents listened to opera, watched PBS, and cooked with fresh herbs. I imagined that I could learn to be a part of another class. My family passed as middle class, but culturally we were still back in the mountains. This is clearly a child's fantasy—no professional goals were associated with it, and I was never able to incorporate anything more specific than "travel" into my fantasy future. This fantasy was not revealed by my analysis, and I think that is because nine years of lying on the couch was just one more way of fulfilling the fantasy. During my first visit, kindly Dr. Horton asked me why I was there. "Because I want to have an analysis," I said. "Where are you from?" he asked. "No one from Minnesota would say that."

A successful analysis would accomplish the transformation into the princess I dreamed of becoming—a princess no longer mired in the psychodrama of my family or stuck between classes (middle-class income, working class values, hyper-privileged education). I think I expected to be welcomed into some sort of club of the analyzed holier than thou. Instead, it is an invisible position that most people don't know about and fewer understand. If it ever comes up in conversation, I sense that what immediately follows is the assumption that it indicates a level of instability I must have learned well to

conceal. At best it is a vulnerability. At worst it's a confession of mental illness my Prozac and Ambien taking colleagues do not wish to discuss further. I sought analysis because I had been trained as a psychoanalytic literary critic. Instead of taking my mother's story for my own, I took my teacher's—Norman Holland. He went to the Boston Psychoanalytic Institute, where he underwent a Freudian analysis. I did the same, with Keith Horton, who went on to found the Minnesota Institute. Having an analysis was the logical next step in my post-doctoral work. I had no intention of becoming an analyst. During a session, I expressed concern that since I was not training at one of the institutes I would not have the authority that came with clinical experience. "No clinical experience?" said Dr. Horton. "What's this we've been doing? Chopped liver?" Having successfully completed an analysis (terminated is the technical term, but it sounds a bit dire), I feel like I have a rare credential. But it is not recognized as such by my institution or even by colleagues who know the impact it has made on my life and work. This part of my story—a part that is central and profound—is as secret as a family romance.

My analysis is something those around me seem to need to repress. My mother, for example, asked me not to talk about it in front of her, and my father insisted that he had not known I had ever "sought help." Being analyzed has become like being Southern or being a coal miner's granddaughter: it is an essential part of my identity that is either misunderstood or rejected or both. As an academic I am a princess in so far as I am outside of class. But the price is exile from my family in a land that sees me as a foreigner with no claim to the throne.

The potential to wound our parents by chiding them with their lack of social status is not just a fantasy. The child has discovered a real sore spot for many adults. Freud was well aware of this weakness in his own father, and he despised him for it. Freud recounts a childhood conversation with his father in which his father reveals that he has been humiliated by a Christian who knocked his new hat into the gutter, from which he meekly retrieved it. The young Freud, wishing for a father who could stand up for himself, was ashamed by the father's submissive response (Gay, 1988: 11–12). Freud devotes his career to refusing to submit to his attackers. He resolutely defends himself and his field against all who attempt to knock his hat off, thus fulfilling the fantasy that, unlike his father, he is a prince who does not have to submit to orders. His father's weakness allows him to separate from and feel superior to his father, but it is, nevertheless, a secret source of shame. As much as he wished to surpass his father, he still wished for his father to be the impervious authority figure who could withstand any attack. Such is the conflict that produces repression.

Ideology and the unconscious

If we are born into language and ideology, and the unconscious (according to Lacan's formulation) is created during the mirror stage, ushering in the

process of acquiring language (a.k.a. ideology), then wouldn't it seem that during the six months or so of this mirror stage process, that the unconscious is structured like ideology even as it is structured like language (Lacan, 1977)? Perhaps the question I need to ask is not: is the unconscious ideological, but is language? In a conversation with my colleague, literary historian Jason Shaffer, I said:

"Of course Slavoj Žižek is helpful with this—if only I could find my notes on *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. Everything that comes from the unconscious comes via ideology. But that's not the same as the unconscious being ideologically structured."

Jason said, "It's one thing if ideology is mediating an essentially lawless unconscious and quite another if they share the same structure."

Is the symbolic order a less politically loaded name for ideology? This seems so obvious that I'm sure everyone but me has already figured that out.

Once the unconscious is created it receives traumatic material, so that material enters the unconscious from the symbolic order and thus brings ideology into the unconscious. Also, what is traumatic is determined by ideology. Ideological Oedipus. Or is the unconscious defined by its lack of ideology? Is it the place where desiring one's mother can live without fear of being blinded? Freud's Family Romance is an evasion of Oedipal dynamics, but the fantasy repeats the actual plot of *Oedipus Rex*. The royal child is sent at birth to live with peasants. If Oedipus imagines that his real parents are the king and queen, then he is right. The only thing the Family Romance is missing is that meeting the real father at the crossroads leads not to patricide but recognition of the lost son, who is returned to his rightful place as heir to the throne. Recognition, for Lacan, is key to the Oedipal battle, which he reads as the playing out of Hegel's master-slave narrative.[3] There is not an obvious version of this story for women. Cinderella comes closest. But in *Oedipus Rex* the fate of Jocasta is off-stage, her limp and disempowered body is the image of the final resolution for a woman in this plot (Oedipus's daughters notwithstanding).

I've always imagined the unconscious as a sort of bad dream, filled with all the horrors one cannot face. But what if, instead of some sort of hell dimension, it's a place where the butt-kicking slayer of ideology has to leave perfectly good fantasies in peace. The unconscious would be a sort of Eden before the fall, just waiting for us to realize that the knowledge of good and evil isn't helping very much. Instead of lying on the couch for nine years trying to tease trauma out of there, I could have climbed in and let the party get started.

If the unconscious is a mixture of pre-ideological and post-ideological (i.e., traumatic) fantasies, then it has the power to challenge and disrupt ideology. If the unconscious has this ability, then that would explain why psychoanalysis is so threatening and Freud is denounced instead of just forgotten. This also explains Freud's focus on sexuality, since this is among the disruptions to ideology (e.g., that women and children have sexual desires) that he could face (not being personally implicated by the insight). Class consciousness, on the other hand, would threaten him because he needed to believe in his

rise in class as a sign of his triumph over his father, who picked up that hat rather than challenge the social order. This is how the Oedipus complex works: the challenge to the father leads to approval for the son who can then be a man (like the father, but never actually the father) who is invested in the patriarchal system in which he has succeeded. Freud very much needed to believe that psychoanalysis was a science, a truth he has discovered, not the by-product of his own Family Romance.

Freud says that in the fantasy of the Family Romance the original "ambitious" stage (Freud 1966, IX:238) screens the sexual stage. In this later edition of the fantasy, the child, now aware of the "sexual processes" (ibid.: 239), realizes that his mother has to be his mother, but that the identity of his father is less secure. In the new version of the fantasy, only the father is replaced. For Freud, the repressed content is the fantasy of the mother's infidelity and thus the mother's sexuality. But the criminality of a woman's faithlessness lies in her ability to disrupt the line of succession. Having no fixed class position of her own, she can alter the class status of her child without detection. Thus, children of Kings can be raised as peasants, and children of peasants can become King. Anxiety over women's sexuality represses the greater anxiety over our ability to manipulate capital. An adulteress is called a slut, and this accusation simply discourages (and represses) her power as a revolutionary. Similarly, Freud emphasizes the revised fantasy (of the royal father and the sexually promiscuous mother), suggesting that it is screened by the original fantasy (of having royal parents), when it seems more likely that the reverse is the case and that the revised fantasy is actually easier to live with than the original one in which the child's contact with her family is severed completely and she gains a superior class position. How could the first fantasy screen the second? It just doesn't work that way. This construction is Freud's screen for discomfort with ambition. Just as, as Lacan formulates, Freud's formulation of the Id, Ego, Superego, serves to repress his earlier postulation of the unconscious, so too does the fear of the mother's sexuality (over which the child is openly curious and therefore not repressing) screen the child's delight in surpassing his family in class status.

I want to build on Freud's observations to suggest that the final step in the fantasy of the Family Romance occurs when the child represses the fantasy of his own class superiority and thus represses his newly found class consciousness. Because of the associations produced by the fantasy, discussions of class arouse repressed feelings of shame over the parents whose inferior social status has been discovered as well as the more obvious feelings of guilt at wishing to disown them and assert one's own superiority. This doubly negative reaction to the topic of class understandably produces resistance in many people, often in the form of denial ("America does not have a class system"), defensiveness ("What are you, a Communist?"), and forgetting ("What is the superstructure exactly?" or "Can we run through Hegel again?")[4]

Talking about class threatens to awaken the repressed fantasy of parents wounded by the knowledge that their class status is lower than the fantasy

parents in our Family Romance. In fantasy, the child denies his father and surpasses him. The dream of really being a princess is not just a fantasy of escaping from your family, it is also an escape from your class, and the repression of that fantasy represses class-consciousness.

Class panic

One more family story: The coal mining town in which my father grew up—ten people in a two bedroom house—was pronounced to rhyme with "ain't": Dain't. It wasn't until I noticed the sign on the way into town that I realized it was really Dante, someone's perverse joke for a town on the mouth of a coalmine. At the mouth of hell, the town was in constant danger from the slagheap, the pile of rock picked out of the mined coal that was discarded on the mountainside above the town. I remember standing as a child on the back porch of my great-grandfather's house watching the rock roll down the hill into the open sewer (referred to as the creek) between the hill and the porch that was cantilevered over the water. We threw stones at the turds floating by. On top of the ridge, above the slagheap, were the mansions for the company executives. It was a gated community of about half a dozen houses. I never went there as a child, but in the winter you could see the lights. At the bottom of the hill is a road my father describes as being like a chicken foot. The long middle toe runs through Straight Hollow, where he was raised. To the left is Bear Wallow Hollow, where the black miners lived, and to the right is Poor Hollow where the Hungarian miners lived. In front of my great grandfather's house was a narrow porch that butted right up to the street. On the other side of the street was the track for the railroad that took the coal out of the valley. Right next to the track was the face of the mountain.

My great-grandfather Claude had been unhitching a coal car when the brake failed. The coupling caught his leg and pulled him up over top of the car and then dragged him all the way down the mountain, shattering his kneecap. Since he couldn't squat down in the mineshaft, he spent the rest of his life on disability until he died at age 96. So he was home when the slagheap fell on the upper part of Straight Hollow. I remember him as a small, white-haired man who wore button-down shirts, khakis with suspenders, and black high-top Converse All-Stars. He always stood up very straight. He gave my sister and me a pack of Juicy Fruit gum when we visited. He watched soap operas after lunch. In between the stories on TV he told us about the time the train fell over, right into the side of the mountain. No one was hurt. The mountain propped it up at a 60-degree angle. When he told us about the slagheap falling it was to say that it was the loudest sound he had ever heard. In my father's version of the story the slag covered several of the houses just up from where his family lived. All the women and children poured out into the street. My great-grandfather came up in a stiff-legged run. A woman was screaming. The baby was still in its crib under the collapsed roof of their house. Her five other children were pulling on her and crying. My great

grandfather lifted up the porch roof and crawled through the shattered door to rescue the baby.

A few years ago when we were buying flowers at the mud-hole store, now the site of the only traffic light in the county, the cashier looked at my father's credit card for a while and said, "are you any relation to Claude Sproles?" My father said that he was and that he had grown up in Dante. "Do you remember when the slagheap fell?" the cashier continued. "I do," said my father. "I was there." "Do you remember that Claude Sproles crawled into a crushed house to save a baby?" When my father nodded, she said "I was that baby."

Psychoanalysis tells us that sexuality is repressed in modern society. Is class the repressed of psychoanalysis? What if it is? What are the implications if class is indeed the repressed of psychoanalysis and the unconscious is structured like ideology?

Psychoanalysis is certainly structured around ideology. Freud's assumption that male experience is the only kind there is (an assumption corrected by Chodorow, Mitchell, and Rose among others) creates a system that functions at best half of the time. The universalizing of class and ethnic experience in psychoanalysis is a larger problem, segregating the practical application of its theoretical insights to upper middle-class westerners. I think psychoanalysis helps us understand why we can't talk about class. But a question more important to the future of psychoanalysis remains: does psychoanalysis have any application outside of a narrow socio-economic group, and if so, how can we reconstruct it in order to facilitate this application?

Another way to ask this question, a personal way that psychoanalysis should embrace, is this: can the stories I can tell about my family help me understand who I am? Adam Philips writes that the value of psychoanalysis is that it "turns panic into meaning." (Philips, 1995: xii). If, as Chodorow and Deleuze and Guattari (1985) argue, the Oedipal structure reinforces the social expectations and stratifications of capitalism by making us seek salve for our psychic wounds in individual ambition within the system, then we turn to the analysis of this story in order to throw off the chains of its reproductive power. But how can we do this when the tools to make meaning of economic repression repress economic forces? I need to externalize my repressed fantasies about class so that I can think about how class privileged Virginia Woolf was, even as her social position repressed her sexuality. She pushed back on the latter, but I don't think her privilege was something she often recognized. I need to read my family stories reflectively so that the guiding narratives of my life can become transparent. My unconscious belief that my choice was college or death stood me in good stead, but it threatened my relationship with my youngest daughter, whose working-class life is economically unstable but filled with joy. And joy is all I have ever wanted for her.

We must lift up the roof of false-consciousness and crawl back into our crushed family romances to find the panicked baby, safe in its crib, not wounded but only imagined so. If we face the guilt of wishing for parents who are kings and queens and the shame of having parents who are not, then

maybe we define success in terms that are not economic. I know of only one system, psychoanalysis, that will talk us through such a rescue attempt. It is a wounded system. But not talking about it is not the cure. We need our families' stories to rock us to sleep filled with dreams of poetry where loss is confronted, mourning is cherished, and transformation is more than a fantasy.

Notes

1 There are important exceptions to this generalization, including the work of Lucien Goldmann, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Roland Barthes and other members of *Tel Quel*, and of course Michel Foucault. Jacques Lacan, especially through the influence of Hegel, models an unparalleled integration of psychoanalysis and politics.
2 Fairy tales come to mind as narratives in which revenge is achieved in this way. See Bettelheim's *Uses of Enchantment* (Bettelheim, 1976) for psychoanalytic commentary on such stories and the way in which they assist children in negotiating feelings of anger and weakness.
3 See Chapter 7 for a reading of Johnny Cash's rendition of Shel Silverstein's "A Boy Named Sue" as an Oedipal resolution that leaves all men standing.
4 These are actual comments students have made in class. They are also responses to subjects that reinforce class distinction and challenge the conflation of Capitalism with democracy. In a recent class discussion of diversity and ideology, one of the students shared her epiphany that our system "doesn't work" to create equal opportunities for all. My response, "Capitalism works, it's just not fair" elicited actual gasps from members of the class.

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4 To write a different story

Reflective reading as a pedagogical practice of restorative justice for racial oppression

White privilege

I am white. My privileges are many. One of my privileges is that I don't even notice how privileged I am. My daughter Pippa's best friend from middle school, Shani, is African American. They are in their mid-twenties now. For as long as I can remember, Shani has called me mom. I introduce her as my daughter. From time to time she comes to stay with me. Pippa, Shani, and I ran into to one another by accident at the liquor store recently. I was there buying wine for them, and they came in to buy wine for me. I turned around when Shani called "Mom!" as she came into the store. When we were leaving Shani joined Pippa and me in line. Shani put a bottle of wine on the counter next to my bottle. "Are you together?" the clerk asked suspiciously, like the black woman behind me was trying to sneak something into my purchases. "Yes," I said, putting my hand on Shani's shoulder. "We're all one family." Then I said to Shani, "Honey, why don't you pick out a nice bottle of vodka?" I smiled brightly at the clerk, but he wasn't making eye contact with me anymore. Shani didn't seem to notice this microaggression, Derald Wing Sue's term for the small slights that can be directed at any marginalized group (Sue, 2010: 13). They exhaust and diminish. I realize that it's just her everyday.

Recently Shani and I were watching Pink perform on "Saturday Night Live." We both like Pink, but we like Beyoncé more. We're obsessed with *Lemonade*.

ME: "I want to teach Beyoncé in my first-year composition class, but I'm not sure I really understand her well enough."
SHANI: "You don't."
ME: "What can I do to understand Beyoncé?"
SHANI: "Be black."

Shani is right. I'm pretty sure I should not teach *Lemonade*. But I can't just stay stuck in my recognition that there are experiences and works that are outside my ken.

I was talking to a colleague about this book project when she asked me what book changed my life. It's strange, but I had never thought of this. I

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can't think of one book that changed my life, but reading did. My big epiphany came when I was about 9 or 10. I somehow managed to get permission to check books out of the adult section at the library, so I was reading novels with no direction at all. I picked them by the color of their spines. I still remember reaching up for a metallic silver book that was something by Vladimir Nabokov. It wasn't *Lolita*; although, it could have been. It might have been *Ada*. All I remember is the promise of the silver spine. I also read the paperbacks my father bought at airports and the historical fiction my mother read in bed. I was used to reading things that were not age appropriate. What I remember most was a moment in a book that might have been *The Valley of the Dolls* when, having read a chapter told from one character's point of view, the next chapter switched perspectives and retold the same scene from a different side. I was astonished at how differently the same events could be interpreted. Both were equally reasonable even when they led the characters to different conclusions. They didn't understand one another at all, but I did. I had stumbled upon Peter Goldie's definition of empathy: "Empathizing with another person is an essentially simulationist approach, and involves *imagining the experience of a narrative* from that other person's point of view" (Goldie, 2000: 178, emphasis original).[1] The events in the novel instantly made more sense. I understood that there were different motivations and that behaviors that seemed cruel or inexplicable were perfectly logical. I tried imaging the novel from the perspective of other characters, and I found that I could easily discover more and more ways to see the story.

Then came the epiphany: this was true in life too. I only saw my side of things, but if I tried, I could figure out how things looked to my mother, my sister, my father, my friends, my teachers. I had a lot of work ahead of me as I tried to see things from everyone else's point of view. It was exhilarating. I was shocked that I had never understood this before. I was further shocked to discover that few people I knew felt the same urge to see the world through the eyes of others. The more I practiced, the easier it was to make sense of other people. It was a natural next step to empathize with them as well. I empathize with Shani. I care about her. I've watched her grow up. But I have no idea what her life is like.

In the first chapter I mentioned Emile Bruneau's experiments with reading narratives about rival groups that led to increased empathy; for example, "in an impressive large-scale field study, a radio drama in Rwanda depicting positive intergroup interactions increased empathy of Hutus toward Tutsis" (Cikara et al., 2011: 151).[2] Bruneau is also interested in the failure of empathy. In "Us and Them: Intergroup Failures of Empathy," Mina Cikara, Emile Bruneau and Rebecca R. Saxe survey studies measuring brain activity and muscular reactions that track the presence or absence of involuntary empathetic responses. The studies demonstrate that "Black and White participants show 'empathetic resonance' (i.e., sensorimotor contagion, indexed by modulation of motor evoked potentials in matched hand muscles) when watching an ingroup member's hand (or even an artificially colored, purple hand) being

pricked by a pin, but this response is *absent* when the hand belongs to an outgroup member" (ibid.: 150, emphasis original). In other words, the participants in these studies flinched involuntarily when they saw a hand pricked with a pin if that hand was the same color as their own hand. They even flinched when the hand was purple. But white participants did not respond when the hand was black. And black participants did not respond when the hand was white. Describing one such study by Avenanit et al., Joan Y. Chiao and Vani A. Mathur conclude: "Taken together, their results suggest that an empathic neural response to the physical suffering of others occurs readily, but unconscious racial prejudice can lessen the extent to which empathy for other race targets occurs and persists" (Chiao and Mathur, 2010: R479). Even our physical responses, then, are overwritten by racial prejudice. In spite of all the science, we are still driven by internalized narratives. You can try a version of this experiment (without the component of physical pain) in an online test developed by social psychologists Anthony Greenwald and Mahzarin Banaji that measures unconscious bias on race, gender, and sexual orientation as part of Harvard's "Project Implicit": www.implicit.harvard.edu.

We see the power of unconscious internalized narratives to direct our responses in what Claude Steele calls "stereotype threat": "the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype" (Steele, 1999). Steele's book, *Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We can Do*, is an accessible version of his extensive research on the ways that any suggestion that women, for example, are not good at math, actually reduces their performance due to increased anxiety about conforming to the stereotype or even believing it.[3] This often leads to what Steele calls "disidentification." I see this when my students announce: "I'm not a good writer." Anxiety about failure leads them to feel more comfortable giving up than facing criticism. Derald Wing Sue relies on Steele's work in his popular book *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation*, concluding "at the cognitive level the person tells himself or herself that the situation doesn't mean much, thereby separating self-esteem from outcome" (Sue, 2010: 102). Stereotype threat sets us up to fail because we are afraid that if we do, we will confirm the stereotype. It is less threatening to give up on success altogether. The damage goes beyond lost opportunities. As Sue explains, "Cognitive energy expenditure, disruption, deflection, and fatigue may all result from microaggressions" (ibid.: 102). Micoaggressions are particularly pernicious when they tap into the unacknowledged stereotypes we have internalized.

I desperately want increased empathy to help rid us of the exhaustive erosion of self-esteem caused by microaggressions. I want my hand to flinch just as much when Shani's hand is pricked by a pin as when Pippa's is. I listen to Shani's stories. I try to give her different ones. Like Gary Schoeniger's work with Ice House discussed in the first chapter, I want to give my children and my students new stories that will help them thrive. But mostly I have taught narratives that I hoped would increase empathy.

My internalized belief that without an education a person will die no doubt informed my desire to teach. I went into the college classroom confident that access to literacy was a way to level the playing field. I learned this from my father, who claimed that it was a course in public speaking that helped him succeed even more than his degree in Civil Engineering. As part of this conviction, I have taught narratives of oppression. I'm sure you all will recognize the standards: *Wide Sargasso Sea, The Yellow Wallpaper, The Awakening*, "Sonny's Blues," *Song of Solomon, The Well of Loneliness, The Color Purple.* The idea is that reading narratives such as these builds empathy, helping students recognize their own internalized oppression and feel for the sufferings of others. I have seen this work. In a seminar on Virginia Woolf, a white male student who went by "Meat," wrote a moving essay about Woolf's *Orlando*, explaining that he had so identified with the privileged white, male Orlando that when Orlando became a woman he was "tricked" into continuing to care about the character and was then outraged by the way the female Orlando was treated by men. Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* rewrites accepted narratives of race, gender, class, and imperialism. Teaching *Wide Sargasso Sea* has ruined *Jane Eyre* for scores of my students. I have used novels to help students imagine how to reframe their own stories and find their own voices. I wanted to show them how to write a different story for themselves.

But what have I really been showing them? And whom have I been trying to reach? I desperately wanted my white male students to recognize their privilege and the ways in which sexism oppresses men as well as women. I wanted my straight students to have a similar awakening. I wanted my white students to feel empathy for people of color. Peggy McIntosh's magnificent essay "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" (McIntosh, 1992) is still helpful for this. Her examples of the hidden privilege white people carry still stun me: band aides match my skin. "Nude" pantyhose is (sort of) the color of my legs. The exercises in this essay bear regular repeating.

Since I teach in an English department, literature has been the primary vehicle for me to use in attempting to raise social consciousness. This instinct has merit. Constructing a sense of self by internalizing narratives is consistent with what is now called the "science of learning," which holds that learners construct knowledge in the context of their lived experiences (Ambrose et al., 2010). This work has its roots in Piaget's constructivist approach to cognition, which was further developed by theorists Lev Vitgosky and Ernst von Glasersfeld. It is supported by current work in brain-based learning. Emile Bruneau's work indicates that reading narratives about rival groups increases empathy by lessened the degree to which the readers defined themselves in opposition to another group. In this way, the stories changed the readers' sense of self. Claude Steele's work on stereotype threat has helped us understand the ways in which internalized narratives have the potential to undermine the confidence and abilities of women and people of color. Understanding how narratives work to construct our sense of ourselves should lead naturally to social justice and reparation.

But now I ask myself: who am I teaching? When I ask my students to identify with characters who struggle with oppression and injustice, am I really helping to change the internalized narratives that hold them back?[4] By selecting narratives geared to create empathy in white men, I have been failing to give my women students and students of color alternatives to narratives of oppression. Instead of practicing restorative justice, I have been teaching to the privileged.

When I guest lecture in classes about psychoanalytic literary theory I begin by asking the class to create a list of things they know about Freud. This list is predictable: everything is about sex, the Oedipus Complex, id-ego-superego. When pressed, they don't really understand any of these ideas. What they think they know about Freud comes largely from introduction to psychology classes that present his ideas as one theory among others and as outdated. I think a lot of the misunderstandings that lead to the easy dismissal of Freud are the result of the simplifying done by Jung, who, for example, reduced Freud's dream theory to a chart of symbols (cave = vagina, snake = penis). For Freud all interpretations came from the individual's associations, not from a chart. The paradigm shift Freud created was so successful we don't even realize he created it: the extent to which we are driven by the unconscious and that women have sexual desire. We might believe these things, but we still need to repress them. When interpreting associations, Freud suggested that when the associating got stuck it was likely that what was repressed was sex or violence—the greatest social taboos. Racism is inherently violent, and as much as it is currently in the social consciousness, our own internalized, repressed racism comes out in microaggressions.

American social psychologists such as Claude Steele and Derald Wing Sue never refer to Freud, but their work is grounded in his understanding of the repression of violence. Claude Steele grew up in Chicago in the 1950s and'60s. He begins his book *Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do* by describing the day he first realized he was black. He was seven or eight when he realized he was allowed to swim at the public pool only on Wednesdays (Steele, 2011: 1). Steele's investigations into stereotype threat were inspired by Jane Elliott, a third-grade teacher in Iowa who performed an experiment in 1968 in which she privileged first the blue-eyed children and, the next day, the brown-eyed children. The experiment was inspired by the assassination of Martin Luther King; she wanted her students to understand the effects of discrimination and to learn to protest them. The experiment was reenacted for the ABC News documentary "The Eye of the Storm." Steele began his decades-long research with a series of experiments in which equal numbers of male and female students who had proven themselves to be equally talented in mathematics were given a segment of the GRE subject test in math. Working with his research partner Steve Spencer, in one experiment half of the group were told: "You may have heard that women don't do as well as men on difficult standardized math tests, but that's not true for this *particular* test, women always do as well as men" (ibid.: 38, emphasis

original). In the group that did not receive that information, women did not perform as well as men. But in the group that was told that women perform equally as well "*women performed at the same high level as equally skilled men. Their underperformance was gone.* It is no exaggeration to say that these findings changed the course of our research lives" (ibid.: 40, emphasis original). The next phase of Steele's research focused on the similar effects of stereotype threat on African Americans, which led him to conclude:

> Our research was revealing a profound importance of social identity: that the contingencies that go with them in specific places at specific times, while often subtle enough to be beneath our awareness, can nonetheless significantly affect things as important as our intellectual functioning. It also suggested, in turn, that these effects might play a significant role in the underperformance in school and on standardized tests of major groups in our society.
>
> (ibid.: 61)

Steele and other researchers and collaborators continue to discover aspects of stereotype threat that lead to underperformance. Among the discoveries Steele reports is that the anxiety produced by feeling one must prove oneself is usually unconscious, and that the stress limits working memory as well as raising blood pressure. The more a person cares about performing well, the worse these unconscious, internalized threats become and the more energy is redirected into managing the stress. This leads to a cycle of underperforming, anxiety about underperforming, and increased underperforming. I suspect this is what many people are struggling with when they say they have "text anxiety."

Steele's work led him to understand strategies for reducing the anxiety produced by stereotype threat: telling women taking a math test that women and men do equally well on that particular test (ibid.: 40), telling black men and women that they were completing a task, not a test that measured intellectual ability (ibid.: 58), arranging for students to studying in groups instead of self-isolating (ibid.: 103–104), creating critical mass in classes or small groups to relieve the feeling of marginalization (ibid.: 140). Steele's conclusion is that "identity threat is not the threat of prejudice alone; it's the threat of contingencies" (ibid.: 142). Contingencies emerge in the subtle cues that bring attention to the ways in which our identities call our abilities into question. Hundreds of factors play into situations in which individuals feel identity threat: having a southern accent anywhere except the south, being a white man on the basketball court, being a conservative in a predominantly liberal faculty, being a woman in a STEM class, being African American in college. Steele recounts experiments designed to create identity threat that demonstrate that even seemingly imperceptible contingencies result in underperformance and physiological stress measured by increased blood pressure, heart rate and perspiration. Steele's work is ultimately hopeful, because these experiments

identify ways in which identity threat can be reduced: "if enough cues in a setting can lead members of a group to feel 'identity safe,' it might neutralize the impact of other cues in the setting that could otherwise threaten them" (ibid.: 147). His research shows that even small changes can be enough to reduce stereotype threat. Universities and instructors can mitigate contingencies. There are simple things we should be doing to help women and people of color who care about their educations who tend to either double down—working harder, but unable to relieve the ever increasing need to prove themselves that continues to limit their ability to perform—or assume a position of disinterest so that their self-esteem will not be damaged by the failure they fear. One of the things Steele's work shows me is that students cannot address the issue of stereotype threat themselves; however, instructors can do so fairly easily through the atmosphere we establish in the classroom, the instructions we give before tests, the assignments we create, and the way in which feedback is delivered.

First-year composition is a natural course in which to include a high density of practices for reducing the contingencies that lead to identity threat. Not only do most students have to take it, but it is often one of the only small classes students have. This was certainly true for the students in the composition classes I taught as a teaching assistant at the University of Buffalo and later as a professor at James Madison University in Virginia. But even when I have taught at small liberal arts colleges, first-year composition was the class where students could talk openly about their experiences and responses. It is a class that relies on building community. Trust is necessary to overcome identity threat and the best way to do this is by establishing a personal relationship with students. The class discussions, conferences, and personal essays that are the backbone of most composition class help build these relationships—and relationships help all students succeed in these activities. Indeed, that is something I have learned over time: activities that help women students and students of color succeed help the white men succeed, too. Everyone wins.

Steele describes an experiment conducted by Geoffrey Cohen and Lee Ross. The evaluators told students in the experiment that their essays were evaluated using high standards and that the evaluator believed the student could meet those standards. The result was that "black students trusted this feedback as much as white students, and trusting it powerfully motivated them to improve their essay" (ibid.: 163). Another experiment Steele describes was designed to affirm students' identity. Third grade students were asked to list their most important values and then write briefly about "why these values were important to them—that is, to put these value statements in the form of a personal narrative" (ibid.: 174). This exercise improved the performance of most of the black students in *all* of their classes. The exercise allowed them to create a positive and deliberate narrative to counteract the internalized negative narratives they had unwittingly taken on board. I have frequently given students assignments that have worked to affirm their beliefs and experiences, but I have done this accidentally. After reading Steele's work, I determined to do it deliberately.

Reflective reading and the pedagogy of the repressed

In Chapter 2 I wrote about how my internalized narrative that if you don't go to college you will die had shaped my choices and responses. It also had a profound effect on my teaching. Because the Naval Academy, where I now teach, has a mandate to admit one student from every congressional district, my first-year composition classes are wonderfully diverse by race, ethnicity, class, and region. I realized that I needed to give *all* of my students stories that provide alternatives that show them they can overcome oppression—not just the authentic voices of James Baldwin and Toni Morrison, but also narratives that give them a way to imagine their own success and to recognize the beliefs that were holding them back. It is common for students to begin paper conferences with the statement: "I was never good at writing," for example. When the internalized narrative that they cannot write is combined with other internalized stereotype threats, students can become paralyzed. Because I believe that providing access to literacy is a manifestation of my personal and political commitment to offer alternatives to poverty, oppression, and injustice, I need to convince them that the story they have internalized about their lack of writing ability does not have to be true. This is not only true for my students of color, but for all of my students. I realized early on in my teaching career that when I choose readings and writing assignments deliberately created to empower my women students, it was empowering for all of us. Now, when I try to help my students of color find their voices and reject internalized stereotypes, I see revelations in all of my students. I have always believed that helping my students become better communicators was a gift to lift them out of limited options. Now I realize that I also have to help them identify their guiding narratives and find their own empowering stories so that internalized stereotypes will not dominate the way they see themselves and others.

The context for the essay assignments is a constructivist classroom in which students have a primary role in creating the structures of the course. I first learned that my philosophy of teaching had a name in a conversation with a colleague in educational psychology. I was describing my composition class to her.

"Oh, you're a radical constructivist," she said.

"I guess I should find out what that means," I said.

"You might not know what it means," she said, "but you're doing it."

I learned more about constructivism from a reading group led by Lori Cavey at James Madison University. Ed Parker, who had been a graduate student of topologist Robert Moore (developer of the Moore Method) and mentor to my colleague Amy Ksir, was in that group. Now I am more deliberate about engaging students in creating the course and making them the agents of their own learning. Together we create the guidelines for expectations as well as the rubrics used for evaluating their work. We write the class's plagiarism policy, expectations for students and the instructor, rubrics for evaluation of class discussion and essays. I have developed high confidence in this process.

The students are more rigorous than I would be—they create the high standards that will be used to determine their grades. They pick the readings, and we develop the essay assignments together. I pick the books and the topics, but they participate in shaping all of the expectations for their performance. Brent and Felder's *Teaching and Learning STEM* is an excellent practical resource for all classes—not just STEM classes. They present strategies for creating engaged experiences that hold students accountable. The theory behind this is best articulated by Ernst von Glasersfeld, whose work in mathematics pedagogy translates into all fields. Tracing the position of the radical constructivism back to the Skeptics, von Glasersfeld concludes that "the assumption that whatever ideas or knowledge we have must have been derived in some way from our experience, which includes sensing, acting, and thinking. If this is the case, we have no way of checking the truth of our knowledge with the world presumed to be lying beyond our experiential interface, because to do this, we would need an access to such a world that does not involve our experiencing it" (von Glasersfeld, 1990: 1). It is a practical position: if what we learn fits into our experience, we can assimilate this new knowledge. If it does not fit, we might answer the test questions correctly, but the knowledge will not become part of our internalized narrative. We do not learn anything truly new unless we intervene in the narrative we already believe. Heavily influenced by the evolutionary biologist and educational psychologist Jean Piaget, von Glasersfeld posits these principles for acquiring new knowledge:

(1a) Knowledge is not passively received either through the senses or by way of communication;
(1b) knowledge is actively built up by the cognizing subject.
(2a) The function of cognition is adaptive, in the biological sense of the term, tending towards fit or viability;
(2b) cognition serves the subject's organization of the experiential world, not the discovery of an objective ontological reality.

(von Glasersfeld, 1990: 4)

Von Glasersfeld goes on to write:

> None of this is developed in a free, wholly arbitrary fashion. Every individual's abstraction of experiential items is constrained (and thus guided) by social interaction and the need of collaboration and communication with other members of the group in which he or she grows up. No individual can afford not to establish a relative fit with the consensual domain of the social environment.
>
> (ibid.: 7)

In other words, students construct their own knowledge in a way that fits their experience, which is heavily influenced by the implied expectations, or

contingencies, of their environment. Instructors can be guides, but our influence is limited. One thing we can do is to try to reduce the contingencies that reinforce negative stereotypes. Nevertheless, the internalized narratives students bring into the classroom with them will profoundly affect their ability to learn. Steele has helped us see how powerful these narratives can be. If students believe that they cannot write, no amount of teaching will change that narrative. Assignments design to demonstrate to them that they are indeed writers can help them write a new narrative about themselves.

Robert Scholes, Nancy Comley and Gregory Ulmer's *Text Book: Writing through Literature* is a suburb example of carefully scaffolded readings and writing assignments that turn students into writers. The final assignment, "The Signature," includes challenging but playful excerpts from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Ralph Ellison's "Hidden Name and Complex Fate," James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, and Jacques Derrida's *Glas*, among others, that explore and complicate the notion of names and naming. Helping students become comfortable as readers of challenging texts is part of the process of helping them become writers. Often they just need to learn to slow down and to feel comfortable asking questions as they read. We frequently read a difficult piece aloud in class, stopping the minute anyone has a question. Sometimes we don't make it past the first few words. I have even used this strategy in graduate theory courses. The experience of gradually understanding a difficult text gives students confidence and reduces their anxiety about reading in general. I have gotten extraordinary papers as a result of the "Signature" assignments. One of my favorites asks students to research their own names. The assignment is introduced with a discussion of Derrida's "signature" experiment:

> To test his theory that literature functions not only as an object of study but also as a source of knowledge, Derrida designed an experiment involving one of the oldest and most honored topics in the humanistic tradition: "Know thyself"…. Derrida proposes to investigate not so much our identity in "life" but our identity in language—the identity not of our person but of our name.
>
> (Scholes et al., 2001: 314)

I admire the ways in which *Text Book* asks students to think about complex ideas without dumbing them down or taking them too seriously. Students in my first-year composition classes are unlikely to have encountered Derrida before, and this introduction humanizes him in a way that helps students engage his ideas rather than his reputation. *Text Book*'s description of Derrida's work as an "experiment" retains the playfulness of his writing without losing the gravity of his purpose. Derrida is "test[ing] his theory" as a scientist would, and the results are not a foregone conclusion. Students are then invited to respond with an experiment of their own:

> You know something about names in general. What do you know about your own names—or what can you find out? Using your library's resources…and

> calling upon older members of your family, find out what you can about the meaning and history of the names you use regularly…. Assemble your material so that you can present information about your names in the form or an oral or written report.
>
> (Scholes et al., 2001: 317–318)

This assignment affirms students' identities, families, and knowledge even as it gently leads them to do research on a subject in which they are invested: their own names. One student's essay about being named for his father, Ray, described his feeling of being a "ray" from the sun. It brought tears to my eyes.

I now start many assignments by asking students to reflectively read something they have already written in order to establish that they are indeed writers. The strategy of having students analyze their own writing develops their critical thinking and argumentative writing skills. In "Introduction to Poetry" they write a sonnet to be used in their final papers on the function of poetry in society.[5] I have also found that they respond more powerfully to music than to the "classics" I also want them to know and understand. I teach them to scan poetry and then we practice with songs. I often let them pick the songs, but sometimes I ask them to listen to something they think is old school. Prince's "Little Red Corvette," for example, is organized in a series of octaves and sestets that they recognize from our study of the sonnet form. It even has a volta, in which it becomes clear that the corvette is an extended metaphor for the women of the song who arrives "with a pocket full of Trojans, some of them used." I start the class by announcing that I aim to convince them that "Little Red Corvette" was written using the principles of the sonnet. They work in groups to scan the song. By the end of class they have found the sonnet structure in the song—they have done the analysis and are delighted to conclude that Prince is indeed a sonneteer.

The final paper for the course, "What is the function of poetry in society today?" is assigned on the first day of class. Students kept a poetry journal to track their responses throughout the semester. We write together in these journals for the first five minutes of class—I keep a journal throughout the semester, too. I think it is important that we begin class as writers together, and the prompts I give them push them to think reflectively about poetry. I ask them to respond to questions such as "which of the poems assigned for today did you like best? Why?" And "read the handout about the Nine Muses; how do they figure in Billy Collins's poem "Forgetfulness"? In addition to the material from their journals, their final paper must address a sonnet they have written. The sonnet is ungraded; it just has to conform to the rules of the poetic form. It is their analysis that is evaluated. One student, Ricco Price, wrote:

> The function of poetry is long attributed to thoughts of love, broadcasted through lutes and leggings to the performer's own Juliet. Recently, I asked several friends of mine what they believed was the purpose of poetry in society. Most responses contained sentences such as, "to impress a potential

> date," "to provide imagery in the form of words," and (my personal favorite) "to keep me from passing my English classes." There was one response that stood above the others: "the art of poetry serves as a therapeutic outlet for overflowing emotions." Examples such as Billy Collins's poem "The Iron Bridge," Acsi's song "Boy Meets Girl," and even my own sonnet called "Why Am I Here?" not only allow the reader to peer into the emotional status of the poet, but they also serve as a form of discount therapy session in which the writer can express emotions in a constructive way.
>
> (Price, 2017: 1)

Another student, Caroline Dooley, wrote her sonnet about her experience on rowing crew. In her essay she writes: "In my sonnet I used mundane sounds and basic noises to connect my reader to the poem. By adding the sound of the oars feathering I brought readers to the water. I put them inside the boat so they could feel the oar twist between their hands and their legs rushing up the slide" (Dooley, 2017: 2). In both of these essays the students write about their sonnets in ways that demonstrate that they see themselves as authors. Price includes his own sonnet among examples that support his thesis that poetry helps authors and readers express emotion. Dooley's reference to "my reader" shows that she was thinking about the effect she was trying to produce in readers of her sonnet. She consciously used strategies she had learned from other poems we had studied to create a sense of physicality and immediacy.

In the first semester of composition, we also write for five minutes at the beginning of every class, this time about what it is like to be in college. I offer optional prompts such as: write about sleeping, studying, food, what you are missing most. Every Friday the prompt is: write about what made you happy this week. The journal entries provide opportunities for self-affirmation and demonstrate to the students that they are writers. The final paper asks them to use their journals as source material for a focused essay on one aspect of their experience during the semester. They are frequently surprised by the patterns that emerge when they read back over their journals. One student commented: "I wish I hadn't written so much about how tired I feel." These papers are almost always the strongest writing I get from students all semester. Their reflections are often moving and reveal to them their growth over the semester when they look back at the early entries. They can see that their writing has improved, and they can see they that have grown as a result of their experiences and challenges. I encourage them to share these essays with their families. I have taught composition to a wide range of students, including adults going back to college after being laid off as a result of wide-scale factory closures. The students I teach now are all 18 or 19 year-olds who are typically away from home for the first time. It is not unusual for students to come back in the spring to tell me that their essays made their parents cry. They are proud that they have been able to communicate something important to their families. They are proud that their parents see them as writers.

Another one of the ways I have tried to create this multivalent awareness is to get students to think about their own identity construction through a paper on their first memory. Steele's research on stereotype threat reveals the difficulty of constructing an identity free from internalized narratives about race, gender, and class that stifle alternatives. Guided journaling and personal essays in first-year composition classes expose internalized narratives and foster agency and increased resilience. I want to create assignments that help students see themselves as writers and that ask them to read their own narratives reflectively.

In order to help students find their own voice, value their own experience, and rest their conclusions on detailed development, I ask them to write papers in which they first describe and then analyze their earliest memory. Assignments that value students' cultural context help them bridge the gap between where they are going and where they've come from. The metacognitive aspect of such assignments can help students discover that the culture they are feeling increasingly separated from has created in them strong and distinct voices that become the foundation for academic success. I developed the "First Memory" paper many years ago when working with a population of largely first generation college students from working class backgrounds at the University of Buffalo, a large state university. Since their first-year composition class was typically the only small class they were taking, an inordinate amount of emotional turmoil emerged in their essays, conferences, and peer groups. In an attempt to redirect their cathexis with the class—including me personally (it's not unusual for students to accidentally call me "mom" instead of Professor Sproles)—onto the material we were reading and the work they were doing in their writing, I developed an essay that combined personal narrative with analysis. As an in-class writing assignment, I ask them to describe an early memory in as much detail as possible. Starting out a paper with a "task" is supported by Steele's research that such an assignment is less likely to activate performance anxiety for students of color who have internalized social assumptions about their intellectual abilities. In order to demonstrate that a memory could be a very small and seemingly insignificant thing, I go first and describe my own first memory: the color red. That's it. All I remember is red, and I have a sense of this rich vivid color close to my face, blocking out all else, followed by the sensation of fuzziness in my mouth.

After this tiny description, I ask students to write their own, then I give them the full paper assignment, which is to analyze this memory. What they have just written, then, becomes the text they are to write about. Again, I use my own memory of the color red to illustrate. I begin by describing how I came to remember it, which also solves the mystery of why the color red is significant for me. I was in a class in my first semester in graduate school at Buffalo, a long way from my family in Virginia. I went to American University in Washington, DC so this was the first time I had been separated from my parents by a distance. One of my classmates brought Tootsie Pops to class to celebrate her birthday. Without thinking or waiting my turn, I leaned

across the seminar table to reach into the bag saying, "I want a red one!" I ripped off the wrapper and put the candy into my mouth. As soon as it touched my tongue I felt a tremendous sense of disappointment—I had inexplicably expected it to be fuzzy. It took a while before I understood this seemingly bizarre response. The explanation came when I remembered that when I was a very young child—perhaps about two years old—my mother made me little yarn dolls—all that my parents could afford at the time. I even remember my father going out into a rainy evening to buy yarn so that my mother could make me a new doll—a red one. So my memory revealed itself as putting this new red yarn doll into my mouth, a gesture I am assuming brought with it comfort and joy. Furthermore, as I thought about this, I realized that when I had been preparing to leave for graduate school, I had purchased no less than five red blouses on separate occasions, only realizing this seemingly odd coincidence when I was unpacking in Buffalo. The memory made it clear that I had sought out red clothes in a gesture of self-comfort. I knew I was going to miss my mom, and I had provided myself with another version of the red yarn doll. The significance of this memory was clear: I was alone, far away from home, doing intellectual labor that was changing my voice in a way that further separated me from my family, but even so, my family had given me the resources to stay connected to them and to feel safe and loved in this strange new place. Much like the Affirmation Assignment Steele describes, it was a wonderful memory upon which to build my sense of self.

Students pair up to share their memories and talk about their potential significance. The discussions typically lead students to remember additional details and context for the memory. The goal is to both revise their in-class writing to create a description that is as vivid as possible as well as to analyze the description by asking the question: if, to some extent, our sense of ourselves is made up of the combination of our memories, what is it about your earliest memory that offers insight into who you are now? My illustration of the memory of the color red demonstrates that even if you don't have much to go on, you can produce an analysis that has some substance. In all of my assignments I emphasize that the more focused the paper, the more there is to say about the topic. This feels so counter-intuitive to students that it bears repeating daily. This assignment was one of my more successful attempts to demonstrate this principle. The assignment has other benefits: since it relies on the student's own text, it is difficult to plagiarize, and perhaps more importantly, the papers they write are not only papers *they want to write*, but they are also papers *I want to read*—this has been a career long search.

This sort of assignment also leads to excellent conversations in conferences and peer groups that build trust and relationships that Steele argues are essential for giving students meaningful feedback. Students are typically genuinely interested in the topic, and through these discussions we all get to know one another. Despite my example, students tend to pick big, life changing topics. Common examples are broken bones, a new sibling, moving, and parents divorcing. Students really bond with one another over these shared

experiences. This experience of finding a personal connection in an academic class is a powerful retention tool, especially at a large school where students don't have early relationships with an advisor or a connection to a major. Even as they analyze their memories in trying to answer the assignment's question of "Why is this memory so important that it provides the foundation of how you think about yourself?" they also engage in an exploration of their families and of memory itself. Their peer group discussions are rich and engaged because they actually want to tell these stories and to hear them. Their writing, their past, and their choice to be in college are all simultaneously valued and validated. Their resistance lowers, and they can begin to see the value in thinking about writing and identity.

I strategically place this assignment so that it straddles the Thanksgiving or Spring Break, thus giving students something with an academic focus to talk to their families about. I encourage them to ask their families to help them with this paper by asking for more details about the memory. When they return, we talk about their family's perspective on their memories and how that has influenced their own thinking about them. Sometimes they realize that what they thought was a memory was really a story they had been told or inspired by a photograph they have seen. Finding the real memory can become half of the project, and this raises interesting questions about memory itself. Some students even start over at this point, searching for a memory that other family members don't share so that they can be sure it hasn't been "planted." There are obvious connections to essays and films that can help students further problematize these questions. The much-anthologized E. B. White essay, "Once More to the Lake," is an excellent example. Films like *Blade Runner* and *Inception* also have resonance, although students always have more current references to contribute to this discussion.

The First Memory assignment offers an opportunity to reconnect with family, connect past and present selves, and offers a bridge for the transition into college by supporting both past and present identities—even as it emphasizes the notion that there will inevitably be a difference between those two selves. Writing becomes a safe place in which to make a transition, even as it normalizes the instability of the subject—within the essay, the "I" is both younger in the memory and wiser as the writer, who is part of the family of origin and part of a new community. The slippage between ages and communities is deliberately recognized as part of an assignment that allows room for a change of mind and position without demanding a refutation of the past. Identity is allowed to have a both/and status that helps push the writer into a less panicked position in which both past and change can be claimed.

The assignment helps students engage by giving them an opportunity to write about themselves, consider their changing identities, and validates their experience as worthy of analysis. It also highlights process in an interesting way—the process of creating a text, and then reflectively reading that text is complicated by the fact of the "text" being one's own life. As Amy Robillard and Ron Fortune describe it: "if students are encouraged to keep track of the

compositional histories of the texts they create and to reflect on the stories underlying the creation of these texts, they will be performing the kind of work called for in [Ann] Berthoff's concept of a 'dialectical notebook'" (Robillard and Fortune, 2007: 13) and [Mariolina] Salvatori's "triadic (and recursive) sequence" (Salvatori, 1996: 447). As Berthoff, Salvatori, and others have demonstrated, "this work is essential to their becoming the active learners conscious of choices and the effects of these choices that critical writing and reading require" (Robillard and Fortune, 2007: 198).

The First Memory assignment values student experience and authorship. This gesture of respect permeates the course. I'm not suggesting using this particular assignment, but I am suggesting that we consider how to construct assignments that demonstrate our respect for students as individuals and as writers. As Nick Tingle writes in "Self and Liberatory Pedagogy":

> What most distinguishes *radical* pedagogy is the attempt, as Henry Giroux puts it, to have students rise to a critical self-consciousness with respect to the impact of ideology upon their "inner" lives, to the ways in which ideology may suppress, repress, or generally determine their wants and needs (150). This is what I see myself doing when I ask students not to assume a detached or contemplative stance toward what they read but to attempt to achieve toward it, in the Freudian word, a cathexis as this arises from their values and beliefs.
>
> (Tingle, 1992: 78)

Remembering who I have been and how I came to find an academic voice is an important part of this assignment, and perhaps why, of all of the writing assignments I have given over the years, it is still my favorite; Steele's work has help me understand why it is so effective. When students forge new connections with one another and the academic world, even as they hold onto and make sense of the past, they are liberated from the either/or choice that it often feels like going to college presents. Thinking critically and contextually about their own identities is as radical as it familiar.

I now realize that I need to help students find stories that show them alternatives. I want to help them overcome oppression instead of just forcing them to hear the authentic voice of oppression in works by Jean Rhys or James Baldwin. I also want them to read and write narratives that show them the way out of oppression. I might not be able to teach Beyoncé, but I now search for narratives that provide a different story. Singer-song writer STEW's TED Talk "Black Men Ski" (STEW, 2006) directly confronts the ways that stereotypes permeate our culture. STEW is the stage name of Mark Stewart, founder, in the 1990s of the band The Negro Problem. In "Black Men Ski" STEW tells the story of going to Aspen with a group of his friends. It is funny, disarming, and easy to relate to, even as it provides an alternative narrative that interrogates stereotypes and white appropriation of African American culture. In Aspen, they "giggle at the questions their mere presence

seems to raise" and "get taken for men we don't resemble in the least." And they ski, "elegantly." One verse lists the ways in which dreds, RAP, jazz, and soul food have been appropriated by the dominant culture; STEW comments, "We can tell you how cool looks, but cannot show you how it feels." STEW celebrates black men and African American culture even as he paints a picture of a vacation in Aspen ordering sushi, making postmodern art, listening to Beethoven, and, of course, skiing. The concluding verse turns serious, addressing head-on the difficulty of being misrecognized: "I have poems about sunsets, flowers, and the rain / I've read them to policemen, but it was all in vain. So black men ski." STEW writes his own narrative in which he recognizes cultural expectations and refuses to meet them. He will not change the mind of the policeman who cannot recognize him as a poet, but instead of internalizing the stereotypes, he giggles at them. He acknowledges the contingencies that surround him in Aspen and remains impervious to the identity threat they create. Despite the uncomfortable questions, he still skis.

And so should we.

Restorative justice in Benin's public classroom

I have been working for the State Department in a project of soft diplomacy in which resources are offered to African military educational institutions. There is a high demand for faculty development at these academies and staff colleges. I have been traveling to Francophone countries to introduce active learning to faculties made up of military officers whose education has been dominated by the traditional lecture/exam format of the French educational system. In doing this work I traveled with Angela Yu, the deputy director of the Naval Academy's International Programs Office, to The Republic of Benin, a small coastal country in West Africa bordered by Togo to the east and Nigeria to the west. Benin is reputed to be the safest country in Africa. It has had a stable democracy since 1975. In 1991 the Marxist-Leninist regime lost an election to a multi-party government and a peaceful transition ensued. This peace and stability is a departure from Benin's violent history: it was in Ouidah, a city on the Bay of Benin, that the West African slave trade originated and flourished for over 300 years until it was abolished in 1807.

The slave trade was established in 1472 with an agreement initiated by the Portuguese merchant, Franciso de Souza, known as "Chacha" (1754–1849). Chacha and the rulers of Ouidah and Benin became wealthy and powerful men. The practices they introduced were designed to dehumanize those they captured who were systematically raped and rendered nameless. Walking through Ouidah today is a walk through the history of that time from the perspective of the slaves who were brutalized there.

United States ambassador, Lucy Tamlin told me proudly about Benin President Mathieu Kérékou's public apology to African Americans for his country's role in the slave trade. Ambassador Tamlin is passionate about Benin's recent history of stability and democracy as well as its bravery in

facing its violent past. President Kérékou extended this apology beyond American to the entire world:

> In 1999, Kérékou began a global apology tour, including multiple stops in America. He and members of his government appealed to the religious conception of forgiveness to frame the act of reconciliation as a divine pursuit that would make whole the relationship between offending states and the victims' offspring. *"We cry forgiveness and reconciliation,"* said Luc Gnacadja, Benin's minister of environment and housing, on a visit to [Richmond,] Virginia in 2000. "The slave trade is a shame, and we do repent for it"
>
> (Johnson, 2014, emphasis added)

Benin faced its horrific history and created a narrative of reparation made manifest, not just in official apologies, but also in the creation of a public classroom in the Historic City of Ouidah, the location of the slave market. Ouidah is now a site of confrontation with the past that visibly demonstrates Benin's determination to create a different present. In Ouidah the history of the slave trade—and its eradication—is told in public spaces throughout the city. These spaces are monuments that co-exist with the city's public life of tolerance and integration.[6]

When Benin decided to turn Ouidah into a history lesson, funding was allocated to relocate 2,000 residents of the historic central city. But the people of Ouidah refused to leave. They live among the slave market. They live in the old slave quarters. At the Market Center young men and women learn to farm the dusty land. The thriving Catholic Basilica is directly across from the Temple of the Pythons, where Vodun, or Voodoo, is practiced. Ouidah is the spiritual center of Beninese Vodun. Throughout the city there are Vodun icons to protect the people from the night and other dangers.

Our lesson began at the Museum of History with our Catholic driver Arnauld and our Vodun guide Hyppolite, whose facial scarifications reproduce the markings of his protector, the cobra. The museum was created in the Fort of São João Baptista de Ajudá (the Fort of St. John the Baptist). Originally built in 1680, the fort is where slaves were brought after capture for valuation after being bound and raped—men and women alike. Hyppolite took us to the room in the fort where women were forced to lie on their backs and men were forced to lie on their stomachs to be raped. The outdoor slave market has also been preserved. We saw the quarters where slaves were held pending transport. This holding period allowed the sick to die prior to sale. The quarters are now occupied by the townspeople of Guidah. The juxtaposition of the town's violent past and joyous current life was chilling, but it also inspired a hope that made it possible to imagine the lives that had been destroyed there. Confronting its history is part of the way that Benin celebrates its present.

The site of the common burial pit of the slaves is now a sacred monument. We took off our shoes as a gesture of honor before walking over the grave filled with untold bodies. From the slave quarters it is a three-mile walk to the sea, down the *Route des Esclaves* (the Slave Route) to the Door of No Return.

Through the door was the beach where the ships awaited. Since the slaves would have made that walk shackled together, they hopped and were beaten when they fell. A monument to their suffering, a real "Door of No Return" has been created on the beach. The path we take through Ouidah has us walking in the footsteps of those bound in slavery. We approach the Door of No Return from the *Route des Esclaves*. From the Door of No Return we can see the ocean for the first time and imagine the ships awaiting their human cargo.

In the central square of Ouidah there are eight life-sized statues facing one another across the plaza: the four men responsible for creating the slave trade are placed on one side, facing the four men and women honored for their commitment to ending oppression and bringing democracy, tolerance, and compassion to the country. Children play in the square among the statues. Finding new narratives frees us from guilt and immobility and the ease of saying we just don't understand the experiences of the oppressed.

After going to Guidah, we went to Ganvié, a city built on an island in the middle of the enormous Lake Tofinu. Slaves who escaped from the slave market hid on the island and created Ganvié. Eventually the island couldn't hold them all so they built out onto the lake itself, houses on long poles. We traveled by boat from one outpost to another. The descendants of the escaped slaves live there now, looking very different than the people of Benin. Many practice voodoo, but there is also a mosque, a Catholic church and an evangelical church. The older women cover their faces if they think someone is taking a photo of them that will steal their spirit. The men fish and the women take the fish by boat into market. There is also a café and a number of artists: painters and jewelry makers and seamstresses. There is no electricity, no running water, no Internet. Cell phones are the only sign of the modern world. Like the children playing in the living museum that has been created in Ouidah, Ganvié symbolizes hope and reparation. The resourceful descendants of escaped slaves have created a peaceful thriving community that is economically poor but full of joy. You would have to see Ganvié to believe it.

Rather than repress the past by removing old monuments and other traces of the shame of slavery, Benin choose to read its past reflectively, searching for the version of history that had been silenced. In Guidah the country retells the story of slavery from the point of view of the men and women sold into slavery. In creating the historic city of Guidah as a public classroom, where children play in the streets on weekends and come with school groups to learn their country's history on week days, Benin has incorporated the narrative of its shameful past into its understanding of its current state: one of peace and democracy. It lives with its past. The narrative of Ganvié tells a different but no less powerful story. Holding on for dear life, balanced on poles barely above the lake water, those who escaped made a life for themselves that is still thriving. Benin is no longer a wealthy country. It is a country that has asked the African diaspora for forgiveness. "We cry for forgiveness and reconciliation," Cabinet Minister Luc Gnacadja said. With this cry, Benin models how to tell a different story.

Notes

1 Goldie states three rules for distinguishing empathy from responses such as sympathy: "First, it is necessary for empathy that I be aware of the other as a center of consciousness distinct from myself. Secondly, it is necessary for empathy that the other should be someone of whom I have a substantial characterization. Thirdly, it is necessary that I have a grasp of the narrative which I can imaginatively enact, with the other as a narrator" (Goldie, 2000: 195,).

2 The study is detailed in E. L. Paluck's "Reducing Intergroup Prejudice and Conflict Using the Media: A Field Experiment in Rwanda." (Paluck, 2009). Summarized in Cikara et al., 2011.

3 There is a rich and growing literature on race and education; central to this is Beverly Tatum's *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria and Other Conversations About Race*, first published in 1997. Other important work focuses on retaining black men in college; see Claude Steele's "Thin Ice: 'Stereotype Threat' and Black College Students" (Steele, 1999). Also see Irene Lietz's work on confronting race in the composition classroom (Lietz, forthcoming) and the University of Michigan's National Intergroup Dialog Institute (https://igr.umich.edu/about). Other important work in this area includes the collection *Race, Rhetoric, and Composition* edited by Keith Gilyard (Heinemann, 1999); Krista Ratcliffe's *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness; Studies in Rhetorics and Feminisms* edited by Shirley Glen (Southern Illinois University Press, 2005); Shirley Wilson Logan, Beverly Tatum and Teresa Perry's *Can We Talk About Race? And Other Conversations in an Era of School Resegregation* (Beacon Press, 2007); and Jennifer Seibel Trainor's *Rethinking Racism: Emotion, Persuasion, and Literacy Education in an All-White High School* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2005). Special thanks to Irene Lietz for this primer on race and education.

4 Leah Anderst notes this problem; citing Amy Shuman (2005) and Ann Jurecic (2011), Anderst explains: "Like Shuman, Jurecic highlights the power of the empathizer over the empathized as well as the unacknowledged falseness of the feeling or the depth of understanding that may arise when we empathize with others or when a reader empathizes with a character" (Anderst, 2015: 274). Empathy, in other words, does not help the one with whom we empathize.

5 This is the prompt and exercise I use for this assignment:

For your fourth and final paper you have been asked to write a 4–6 page essay addressing the question: What is the function of poetry in society? In other words, "why do we have poetry?"

A successful paper will be narrowly focused, and the argument should be supported by specific, thoroughly analyzed examples of work we have discussed in class that lead to a significant answer to the question in the prompt.

Here are some resources you should consult:

- Your journal entries for the semester
- Your answers to the poetry quiz questions
- *Introduction to Poetry*
- J. Hillis Miller's essay, "Narrative"
- The 3 novels we read
- Your previous papers—especially the comments from your peer group and the instructor

Exercise: Outline an Essay

Working with your peer group find 3 specific examples + your own sonnets to create an outline for a hypothetical essay. How do your examples help you and your reader fill in the conclusion: "As these examples demonstrate, the function of poetry in society is: _____."

6 Ouidah was placed on the tentative list for designation as one of UNESCO's World Heritage Sites in 1996.

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Part 2

History as méconnaissance

5 Modernist biography and méconnaissance

The Bloomsbury Group's Oedipal resolution

Jacques Lacan uses the term méconnaissance or misrecognition in his description of the mirror stage in creating a sense of ourselves that is bounded and autonomous when reflected back to us through the eyes of another. Constructed in the Imaginary Order, our experience of ourselves and the world is always mediated, but we have the illusion of independence necessary to function. We also have the constant desire for the admiring gaze that dominates even as it liberates. Desire, Lacan says, is constant. It is the subject that is unstable. We tell ourselves stories about who we are in order to repress this division in our subjectivity. Modernists self-consciously defined themselves against the Victorians with a palpable anxiety of influence (Bloom, 1997). Thus, even as they scorned Victorian form and values, they still sought recognition and praise. As much as they wanted to conquer the fathers at the crossroads, they still wished for an "Atta boy!" for doing so. Historians as well as poets took this position. Seeking an Oedipal resolution, they redefined themselves even as they recreated history.

As far as narratives that tell the stories of our lives go, biography owns the field. With its drive to package the subject as stable and knowable through telling anecdotes fleshing out the skeleton of facts, the genre of biography represses the divided subject and replaces it with the model of success, typified by Thomas Carlyle's "great men." This, perhaps, is the opposite of stereotype threat. As long as one is white and male and educated, it is a form of "stereotype promise." Victorian biographies typically offer narratives of a unified subject who rises to greatness as the result of character, hard work, clean living, and unearned privilege (which goes unacknowledged). If it fits, it is a hard narrative to resist. Modernists, not unlike STEW, sought to expose this governing narrative and create an alternative that resists dominant assumptions of morality and success.

Among the English Modernists, the Bloomsbury Group is unusual in working as a loosely organized team to take on history and historians, most emphatically Leslie Stephen, father of Virginia Woolf, and the first editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography* – a sort of *Fox's Book of Martyrs* for the edification of the late Victorian era.

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The English biographical tradition

Biography's narrative elements control the production of identity. Traditional biography nonetheless persists in a quest toward the reductive rather than the transformational, and narrative expectations support this preference for stability. Biography gives life narrative shape, a stabilizing impulse Modernist literature challenges with its emphasis on interiority, experimentation, and iconoclasm. While it is not an established category of the genre, we could reasonably expect a "Modernist biography" such as Sackville-West's *Joan of Arc* to challenge the conventions of the genre by resisting the traditional narrative arc, exploring the interior world of the biographical subject, and even positing different definitions for those worthy of biographical attention while promoting a radical re-reading of past heroes and proposing alternative versions of what it means to be a great man—or woman. Biographies written by Modernist writers did all of that and more.

First, let us consider the traditional issues that constrain the genre before we look more carefully at biographies by Modernists. I want to focus especially on a small subsection of this surprisingly large number of Modernist biographies by attending to those written by members of the Bloomsbury Group, specifically to Lytton Strachey, David Garnett, and Virginia Woolf. Not only do these examples afford a variety of styles and subjects, but they also attempt to make interventions in both public and private notions of biography and the subject. While Sackville-West's *Joan of Arc* unselfconsciously accomplishes this feat, Strachey, Garnett, and Woolf are quite deliberate in giving space to their well-articulated theories of narrative and subjectivity—positions all three saw as having political as well as literary implications. Ultimately, I will suggest that regardless of the innovations within the form and the recognition of the instability of the subject, writing a biography can provide a welcome sense of stability for the biographer. While this might reinforce the illusion of the unified subject, it might also promote identification, transference, and working-through—a process in which the traditional biography frequently resists allowing the reader to engage. The controlled fantasy of life as a narrative provided a safe space for transformation.

Modernist writers such as Lytton Strachey, Virginia Woolf, and Harold Nicolson made overt attempts to analyze and alter biographical practice, but that is not to say that biography has not undergone alterations.[1] We tend to think of the current biographical tradition as beginning in the eighteenth century with Samuel Johnson and James Boswell. But biography can trace its origins well beyond *Beowulf* and Plutarch (c. AD 46–120) through the Bible to epitaphs and cenotaphs in a tradition Nicolson calls biography's "commemorative instinct" (Nicolson, 1927: 17). Throughout, biography has taken various forms and pursued diverse cultural purposes in eulogies, chronicles, hagiographies, and histories. Even in its more familiar narrative form, there have been significant differences in the characteristics dominating the genre at any given time. If we think of it in the broadest sense, biography is among the

earliest types of literature in English. It has taken various forms and served various purposes as it evolved from the chronicle to the (not dissimilar) standard nineteenth century multi-volume life and works model that is prevalent even today.

Loosely defined as a non-fiction narrative of the life of an individual, biography can be distinguished from autobiography, in which the author and the subject are one and the same, and from memoir, in which historical evidence is replaced by the author's memories. While surveys of the genre often begin with an attempt to demarcate the boundaries of the form, it quickly becomes apparent that this genre resists facile categorization.[2] In describing English biography as "delicate" and "decent," Carlyle chastises biographical practices that carefully enhance the subject's reputation and operate largely to spare the feelings of the family—an audience with whom the biographer must contend if he or she wants access to the letters and private papers that will shed light that must immediately be snuffed out. Biography is cowardly, but it is also at odds with itself. "Mealy-mouthed" biography is often neither one thing nor another but often both. Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, for example, might be said to be as much about Boswell as it is about Johnson. Where does biography stop and autobiography take over? Indeed, focusing as it does on the last twenty years of Johnson's life—the period in which he knew Boswell—it would be reasonable to conclude that much of that influential work is memoir.[3] As a great stylist, do we read Lytton Strachey's work as much for its literary as for its historic value? Are there not elements of fiction in his essays that make them more dramatic than factual?[4]

Even the discipline to which biography belongs can be called into question. Most obviously a branch of history, it is commonly practiced by literary critics. The lives of writers, literary biographies, form a large subset of the field, so large that many of the best studies of biography (e.g., Richard Altick, Leon Edel, Ira Bruce Nadel) are circumscribed by that perimeter. Illustrating nicely the difficulties of interdisciplinarity, one would search in vain for a course on biography in either English or History Departments at most universities, while biographies are commonly assigned in both departments as secondary resources. Despite its longevity and apparent stability as a genre, the definition of biography is easily complicated. Perhaps that was its appeal for the Modernists who challenged these distinctions, as they challenged all of the assumptions about biography inherited from the Victorian tradition of life writing. Apart from Lytton Strachey and Virginia Woolf, Modernists are not widely recognized for their contributions to biography, yet we will see that a surprisingly substantial number of Modernists—and nearly all members of the Bloomsbury Group—wrote biographies.[5]

Influenced by Boswell and dominated by Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881), Victorian biography can be characterized by a reverence for facts and the promotion of morality. Virginia Woolf describes the subjects of Victorian biography as "noble, upright, chaste, severe" (Woolf, 1966). The appropriate subject of a biography was a great man, such as Boswell's *Johnson* or Carlyle's

Frederick the Great. Having made significant contributions to literature or history, a great man was a role model. During the course of the nineteenth century, the extended examination of the details of the lives of these men was joined by collections of shorter lives. One popular series, George Lillie Craik's *The Pursuit of Knowledge Under Difficulties Illustrated by Anecdotes* was revised and reissued periodically between 1830 and 1906. Craik preached hard work and clean living as the keys to success. The American version of these instructive narratives might be the novels of Horatio Alger (1832–99). Overtly instructive, these popular biographies provided models of morality and self-improvement designed to be emulated by a growing reading public.

In *The Development of English Biography* (1927), Harold Nicolson, blames this type of dogmatic proselytizing for the ills of the genre in the early twentieth century: "the full and sparkling stream of our riper [biographical] tradition [was] rendered fat and sluggish by the evangelicalism of the Victorians" (Nicolson, 1927: 111). Concluding his thorough study of the biographical tradition with a lively Modernist polemic against Victorian biography, Nicolson joins his voice with Virginia Woolf's in calling for a new biographical practice that challenges the assumptions dominating the genre.

The one aspect of biography that seems almost continuously in flux is the source of the biographer's authority and the manner in which this is represented. For the Bloomsbury Group, this power struggle was both personal and political. But it is not an issue that began there. Boswell's preoccupation with this problem is evidenced by his introductory self-justification:

> As I had the honour and happiness of enjoying [Johnson's] friendship for upwards of twenty years; as I had the scheme of writing his life constantly in view…I flatter myself that few biographers have entered upon such a work as this with more advantages….
>
> Since my work was announced several Lives and Memoirs of Dr. Johnson have been published, the most voluminous of which is one compiled for the booksellers of London, by Sir John Hawkins, Knight, a man whom, during my long intimacy with Dr. Johnson, I never saw in his company, I think, but once, and I am sure not above twice.
>
> (Boswell, 2008: 2)

Far from fearing charges of self-interest or lack of objectivity, Boswell establishes his credentials as biographer on the strength of his personal knowledge of the subject, petulantly dismissing the claims of one he deems less familiar. The defensive tone of Boswell's self-promotion suggests that there is more at stake than calling dibs on the biography; nevertheless, Boswell appeals to greater intimacy as the touchstone of authority. This position came from Dr. Johnson himself, who held that an adequate biography could result only from personal knowledge of the subject (paraphrased in Nadel, 1984: 120). Johnson exemplifies this principle in his early biography, *Life of Savage* (1744), about his friend, poet Richard Savage, which was later included in

Lives of the English Poets (1781). Johnson's mixture of biography, literary criticism, and personal anecdote set the standard for literary biography—as well as literary criticism—for the next 200 years, ensuring that critical authority, which only comes through access to great men, was synonymous with privilege.

In his 1919 introduction to novelist Elizabeth Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Bronte* (1857), Clement Shorter makes the same appeal to personal knowledge in support of Gaskell's biographical authority:

> Her qualifications for the task were obvious. She was an accomplished novelist with an agreeable style. *She had enjoyed the friendship of Charlotte Bronte*, although she had never seen Emily and Anne. *She was a woman of fine sympathies, and sympathy is ever necessary in the art of biography.*
>
> (Shorter, 2017: v, emphasis added)

In *The Great Biographers* (1936), Albert Britt attests to the validity of Gaskell's qualifications as they were defined in the mid-nineteenth century:

> [*Gaskell*] *was a sympathetic, admiring friend*, who wrote at close range of a kindred spirit perplexed in many ways by similar problems, doubts, and handicaps. It is only in our time that this state of affairs would be held to constitute a disability. In fact, in the time in which Charlotte lived and Mrs. Gaskell wrote of her, friendship, sympathy, contemporary experience were all held to be superior qualifications for such authorship, if not, in fact the only desirable and reliable qualifications.
>
> (Britt, 1936: 120, emphasis added)

Britt suggests that a significant change in expectations has occurred during the eighty years that separate his history and Gaskell's work. During that time, biographical authority has come to be established by knowledge of facts rather than propinquity to the subject. In addition to other misrepresentations and inaccuracies, Gaskell's biography raised a great hue and cry by describing an affair between Brontë's brother and a married woman, who denied the report and threatened a libel action.[6] This material, which amounted to two pages, according to Shorter, was omitted from the third edition of the biography. Britt demonstrates the change in our expectations for biographers by including Gaskell as a negative example of biography, which was set right by the fact-findings of a subsequent biographer and fellow novelist, E. F. Benson (1933).

In praising Gaskell's "fine sympathies," Shorter suggests that she is a woman of refinement and taste. Britt points to the change in our understanding of "sympathy" to argue that Gaskell's friendship with Brontë prevented Gaskell from seeing the truth of her subject because she was misled by sympathetic identification. Shorter's introduction begins with the passive claim: "That

Mrs. Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Bronte* is one of the best biographies in the English language is generally agreed" (Shorter, 2017: v), and goes on to actively defend Gaskell's narrative, cleverly reintroducing the "libelous" story by explaining the circumstances of its removal. Despite his defense and the book's popularity, critical opinion turned against Gaskell in the early twentieth century. Harold Nicolson denounced the work as a biography: "The book is an excellent sentimental novel replete with local color; but it is not a biography, since one of the central conceptions…is sheer inexcusable fiction" (Nicolson, 1927: 128). Britt's conclusion is equally dismissive:

> It is a fair assumption that the picture of Charlotte Bronte presented by Mrs. Gaskell as an abused, misunderstood tortured spirit, beating her wings against the bars of poverty and cruelty, is largely one that the egoistic Charlotte herself presented.
>
> (Britt, 1936: 125)

Despite this harsh criticism, Gaskell's Romantic version of Charlotte Brontë still dominates popular perception.

Gaskell illustrates the rewards and perils of an authority founded on friendship with the subject. The heated and prolonged controversy surrounding the work suggests that Gaskell's biography is situated in a time when the biographer's authority was shifting from that of personal to factual knowledge. It is not coincidental that this is also the period of the emergence of the professional biographer, whose authority necessarily resides in research rather than friendship. In contrast, Thomas Carlyle's authority derives from the strength of his personal feelings about the subject. Carlyle saw himself as more historian than biographer; his focus on great men served to organize his narrative rather than restrict his insights to a single individual.

The voice of authority wielded by the Victorian biographer is the sound that most dominates my imagination when I think of biography. There is no doubt; there is no hesitancy. The biographer has done his homework (or hers in the case of Mrs. Gaskell, who might not have[7]) and rests upon the stable foundation of the facts and a clear understanding of morality, which the subject (to be a subject fit for biography) illustrates. As the founding editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography* (*DNB*) (1882–1890), Virginia Woolf's father, Leslie Stephen, illustrates this authority well. The *DNB* is a testimony to the nineteenth century's increasing interest in biography, and, despite its encyclopedic scope, it nevertheless succeeds in emphasizing morality in its condensed and fact-filled narratives.[8] Although heavily influenced by Carlyle, Stephen carefully avoids the inner life to concentrate on the moral and social qualities of each subject. Stephen set the tone for the *DNB*, writing 378 entries himself, and became enormously influential in the development of biography and the definition of the professional biographer. His daughter, Virginia Woolf, would later insist that the problem with biography is its concern with facts ("The New Biography"). This concern was central to her father's

project and the basis of his authority as a biographer. As Reed Whittemore observes, "Of course [Stephen] knew well that there were other ingredients to the genre than facts, but working for eight years at the *DNB* made it hard for him to think of them" (Whittemore, 1989: 62). Departing from Carlyle's search for essences, the *DNB* reestablished biography as a narrative of the public life. The significant change this made in the genre was in *who* is deemed worthy of receiving a biographer's attention. Under Leslie Stephen's watch, the subjects worthy of biography expanded considerably to include, among others, women.

In his two-volume study of the history of biography, *Pure Lives* (1988) and *Whole Lives* (1989), poet and biographer Reed Whittemore traces biographical practice up through Boswell (and notes its revival in Leslie Stephen's *Dictionary of National Biography*) as an attempt to represent the public life of great men. Whittemore sees a change in the direction of biography with Thomas Carlyle's desire to seek the essence of the individual (Whittemore, 1989: 41), a direction that is further developed under the influence of Freud and psychoanalysis. In Whittemore's view, it is with Carlyle that the subject proper to biography becomes not just a chronicle of facts, but a more complex attempt to understand the individual, evidenced by Carlyle's inclusion of the early life of Frederick the Great. In a variation on Peter Nagourney's argument that biography depends on the telling anecdote, psychoanalysis thus becomes the tool for achieving a public, rather than private, narrative in which the subject's childhood and psychology provide insight into his or her character, thus reinforcing the narrative of a consistent, stable subject.

Whittemore sees this strain of biography developed in Freud's case studies, particularly those, such as his "Leonardo," that are not based on his own clinical experience. Writing at a time when psychoanalysis was first influencing biographical practice, Harold Nicolson imagined it becoming so dominant within biography that the genre would ultimately split into works of psychological investigation and works of fiction. In *Lives and Letters: A History of Literary Biography in England and America* (1966), Richard D. Altick notes: "literary biography has shared in, and profited by, the general shift of literary interest from external action to the inner spectacle of the mind and feelings" (Altick, 1966: xi).

But the expansion of biography to include the early life and the inner life, has not necessarily led to a radically altered view of the individual. Altick sees the concern for the inner life as consistent with our interest in the writer as exemplar of "a sensitive and self-aware human spirit" (ibid.: xi); biography is not a psychological investigation but a modern form of Romanticism that "opens the windows of the soul" (ibid.: xi). Similarly, there are critics who insist that Plutarch was as successful at discovering the inner life as any biographer influenced by Freud has been.[9] Thus we see a willful misunderstanding of the assumptions and implications of psychoanalysis and its potential impact on the practice of biography. At the core of this misconception is the elision of the unconscious.

Nevertheless, biography creates multiple sites for identification and transference. Freud's observation that biographers identify with their subjects (Freud, 1966, XI:130) certainly suggests the notion that the more the reader identifies with the subject of the biography the more pleasurable the reading experience. The biographer attempts to capture the subject and the reader hopes to be captured by the subject. The feminist-psychoanalyst Juliet Mitchell describes the child finding itself in the images of others in a way that will be familiar to readers of biographies: "It is a question of finding the self-image and the image of another, and of constituting the self in that discovered image" (Mitchell, 1974: 39). Biographies build whole self-images in their attempts to create whole selves. Perhaps, in part, we read biographies to see ourselves reflected as whole and unified, as mirrored in the ideal subject of biography.

As places we can go to find such images, traditional biographies offer a comfortable reading experience. In giving shape and form to lives, they act as mirrors in which the image is seen as whole, coordinated, unified. Biographies are mirrors; while reading a biography I find myself looking to find and build a whole image of myself. I am excited by the similarities, however coincidental and inconsequential. It is affirming to discover a connection, even if I have to work hard to establish one: Virginia Woolf knew that her name would have been Chad if she had been born a boy; I know what my name would have been if I had been born a boy too! Desperation for such connections can be strong and feel powerfully personal. The stakes, then, are high for the writer who seeks to transform biography. To crack such a mirror risks shattering the biographical glass completely.

The biography presented a special challenge to Modernists, but it was not a challenge they eschewed. Modernism's interest in psychological interiority would seem to make experimentation with the study of a central subject ideal. But grounded as it is in historical fact, the Victorian biographical tradition resists all but the most cursory attempts to represent the subject's inner life. It is in this way, with the development of psychobiography, that the genre at large has most changed (e.g., Leon Edel's *Henry James*, Elizabeth Young-Bruehl's *Anna Freud*) since Modernism.

Even beyond the distinction between public and private that Victorian biography began to trouble, what is acceptable to include in a biography continues to expand. Most recently discussing the subject's sexuality has gone from being taboo to being required. In his introduction to the 1987 one-volume edition of his acclaimed biography of Henry James, Leon Edel notes that even in the time since the publication of the first volume in 1953 it had become possible to significantly expand the discussion of James' sexuality:

> The earlier portions of the biography had been written more than a quarter of a century ago. They required a certain amount of updating. But there was something more important I had to do: to keep constantly in mind the changes that have occurred in biographical writing and in social attitudes toward privacy and our sexual lives…we are able to offer

> a more forthright record of personal relations, of deeper emotions and sexual fantasies, and need no longer wrap indiscretions and adulteries in Victorian gauze.
>
> (Edel, 1987: xi–xii)

Mary Evans points to Michael Holroyd's biography of Lytton Strachey (1961) as groundbreaking because of Holroyd's frank discussions of Strachey's homosexuality (Evans, 1999: 19). During the second half of the twentieth century, what one could say in public increased, and this, in Edel's experience, had a direct effect on the contents of biographies. In this regard, Modernists continued to challenge the genre of biography, not just as biographers, but also as subjects of biography.

During the last two centuries, the biographer's claims to authority have changed and the scope of biography has increased to include childhood, the inner life, sexuality, and subjects who are not great men. While this expansion is significant, it is more a widening of focus than a radical intervention into the structure of the genre or the construction of the biographical subject. Peter Nagourney's essay, "The Basic Assumptions of Literary Biography," posits three enabling biographical assumptions: "the premise of a unified subject" (Nagourney, 1978: 92), "the use of anecdotal evidence" (ibid.: 93), and "the assumption of development and growth" (ibid.: 97).[10] These assumptions about how a biographical subject is presented, Nagourney argues, are created by the very form of biography, so that even as our conception of identity changes, readability requires the stagnation of the biographical project:

> We can state these assumptions about literary biography fairly easily, and recognize in them cultural biases which are so basic as to seem inevitable to us: a biography should present a unified life, should reveal this unity with specific anecdotal evidence, and should demonstrate change, development, and/or growth with the passage of time. The question we are considering now is whether these prominent characteristics of literary biography derive from the nature of life or from the nature of writing about life.
>
> (ibid.: 88)

Nagourney concludes that biography is not responding to life as it is, but carefully constructs identities that can be represented in terms of the assumptions that enable biographies to be written. Unlike Edel's reactive biography, Nagourney posits biography as an active (albeit unconscious) cultural influence, which is instrumental in constructing the lives of the subjects about whom it appears to report. It is the biographical form itself, Nagourney theorizes, that frustrates change for both the biography and for our conception of the subject.

If we consider the history of English biography, we can see the development of these enabling aspects of biography. Hagiography, the lives of the saints, emphasizes progress as the often unindividuated subject moves toward

salvation and beatification. Johnson and Boswell stress anecdote. Carlyle's search for the essence of the great man emphasizes the unity of the subject, and Stephen's encapsulated entries in the *DNB* give us the unified subject exemplified by anecdote and progress. In some eras one aspect is more important than another, but the predominance of one characteristic does not result in challenges to the others.

Nagourney predicts that the repetition of traditional biographies will ultimately fail to satisfy readers: "Older biographers could simplify their subjects to satisfy their audience's expectations; modern biographers will never be able to make their works sufficiently complex" (Nagourney, 1978: 100). Nagourney speculates that the traditional biography's unified subject will be unsatisfying to readers who see identity as incoherent, unstable, and lacking unity. Writing in the late 1970s, Nagourney imagines that readers, having adopted post-structural models of identity, will expect biographies to represent their subjects accordingly. Nagourney overestimates the extent to which post-structural concepts of identity would come to be accepted—even among academics—and the extent to which even those who do accept these assumptions might still wish to see the subject represented. Indeed, it is not unlikely that readers will increasingly seek comfort in the stability of the subject the biography appears to maintain. As psychic fragmentation becomes more difficult to deny and avoid, the lack of pleasure resulting from facing our constant desires and divided subjectivity may well require support from visions of the subject as whole and stable. Similarly, the taxing nature of active reading understandably leads many readers to seek respite in reliable genres that reinforce our desire for the world to be safe and just. The murder mystery, the romance, and the biography have largely remained safe places in which to reconstruct ourselves as whole and autonomous in fantasy worlds in which justice, true love, and strength of character reign. To intervene in such comfort-genres would be, to some extent, to invite a lack of appreciation.

It is the illusion of the unified subject that leads to the structures of progress and anecdote, both of which characterize the subject as stable and predictable. Despite the obstacles, Modernists did write biographies. They may be little known works of a well-known writer, such as Virginia Woolf's *Roger Fry* or E. M. Forster's *Marianne Thornton,* or the work of a writer now neglected, such as David Garnett or May Sinclair. It is easy to overlook the fact that Modernists were highly interested in biography and used the genre as the site of some of their most varied and extreme experiments in form and in the representation of identity.

Modernist biography's questioning of the biographer's authority anticipated post-modern recognition of the limitations of biography and the representation of the subject. This is well summarized by Ira B. Nadel:

> The decentered writing of the late twentieth century, and the theoretical re-positionings initiated by Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, and others, have

> undermined the idea of the unifying biographical vision and voice. Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* prefigured many of the problems of biographical construction, while its stress on the multiple lives of a single subject initiated the deconstruction of the so-called magisterial voice and unified vision.
>
> (Nadel, 2000: 763)

Modernists, writing in the 1920s and '30s, anticipated the recognition of the divided subject and sought new narrative forms in which to represent identity. In *Eminent Victorians* (1919), Lytton Strachey challenged progress with an ironic narrator who shows that such valiant figures as Florence Nightingale had feet of clay. David Garnett's *Pocahontas* critiques imperialism and Virginia Woolf challenged the unified subject in *Orlando: A Biography* as well as *A Room of One's Own*. In her essay "The New Biography" Woolf calls for the use of fiction to give us the rainbow of personality along with the granite of truth.

Lytton Strachey challenges Nagourney's notion of the need for biography to narrate progress with his ironic narrator, and Woolf challenges the unified subject (*Orlando*) and the need for facts to provide truth—raising the anecdote to new importance. Influenced by the talking cure of psychoanalysis, Modernist narratives may privilege association over chronology. Similarly, stream of consciousness leads to psychological insights that challenge our concept of identity and pushes biography into new forms for representing the subject. With the subject no longer seen as unified, the model of progress is revealed as a narrative construct supported by the illusion that anecdote reveals inner character. While the three enabling aspects of biography identified by Nagourney work together to repress the unconscious, Modernist biography searches for new ways to represent the subject without participating in the need to maintain the illusion of stability. This has implications for politics and religion as well as psychology. Modernist biographers repudiate the nationalist agenda to describe Britain as the ruler of the waves as the result of progress or moral superiority. Similarly, religion is viewed as another enabling illusion of capitalism and imperialism. Vita Sackville-West's biography of Joan of Arc (about which more later) is an excellent example of the omission of religion—even from the biography of a saint.

The assumptions Nagourney outlines along with the dominant practices informing biographical authority, interiority, and sexuality are challenged by Modernist biographies. By failing to comply with the "older biographers'" strategy of simplifying the subject, Modernist biographies become "sufficiently complex." And, as Nagourney suggests, this greater complexity is available because they defy the traditional form of the biography. Perhaps this failure to satisfy readers' expectations about biography explains Modernist biographies' general lack of lasting popularity, for in challenging the conventions of biography they also challenge the reader.[11] The enabling assumptions Nagourney identifies are also the narrative structures that support resistance to transformation. Instead, they confirm expectations and support

unexamined identification. While still creating the safe space of a reassuring genre, Modernist biographies intervene in the safe fantasies of the dominant culture. I am not suggesting that Modernist writers' intervention in biography was a systematic or unified project any more than Modernism itself was. However, we can see in the biographies written by Modernists a series of experiments with traditional form and attempts to challenge dominant notions of identity as it was represented and even conceived.

Bloomsbury's public and private spaces: Modernist biography as personal and political

Even in light of our brief history of English biography, life writing still presents itself as a stable and under-theorized genre. From Plutarch to Carlyle to Leslie Stephen's *Dictionary of National Biography*, accounts of the lives of great men follow in a succession of fact-filled narratives that celebrate public success. The material deemed appropriate to include in biographies has expanded as discussions of sexuality have gone from taboo to required, but the basic structure that dominates the form has remained essentially unaltered: the subject is born, rises to greatness, and dies. While post-modern critics may argue that the unproblematized unified subject died along with the author, from a pragmatic perspective I think we can generally agree that the subject is alive and well and living in biographies. Indeed, I suspect that reading biography shores up the traditional notion of the unified subject and that this might very well explain its steady popular appeal.

Let us say that Freud wrote the first Modernist biography with his study of Leonardo da Vinci in 1910. Subsequent biographies have followed Freud's lead by addressing the subject's childhood, emotional lives, and sexuality. In its way, this has been revolutionary. While frequently dismissed, often in a tone of protesting too much, Freud's influence has irrevocably changed our conception of subjectivity. But by and large, this transformation has resulted in a cultural inoculation (to use Roland Barthes' term (Barthes, 1957: 150)) in which a little bit of psychoanalysis has been internalized in order to protect us against its more radical effects. Biographies have evolved in accordance with this limited acceptance of Freud's work to include more information about childhood and sexuality, but they do not ask us to conceive of the subject as split by the unconscious.

It is the illusion of the unified subject that leads to the structures of progress and anecdote, both of which, Nagourney posits, characterize the subject as stable and predictable. This is not to say that there are no experimental biographies, just that the traditional form has largely resisted radical experimentation. However, there was a short time in which I think biography was the site of both formal experimentation and inquiry into the nature of subjectivity. In different ways, Modernists anticipated the divided subject and thus sought new narrative forms in which to represent identity. Modernist biographers challenge each of Nagourney's enabling assumptions of biography: the unified

subject, the telling anecdote, the rise to greatness as part of a reconsideration of historical truth. Playing with biography as they played with literary forms, Modernists explored alternative biographical practices. I believe that these experiments have had a lasting influence, not so much on biography, but on all of literature.

Given biography's attachment to tradition, the number of Modernist writers who wrote biographies is surprising. We immediately think of Lytton Strachey, and increased recognition of Virginia Woolf has brought attention to *Orlando*, but biographies may be the least known works of Modernism. Consider, for example, E. M. Forster's *Marianne Thornton*, Ford Maddox Ford's *The Fifth Queen*, David Garnett's *Pocahontas*, D. H. Lawrence's *The Man Who Died*, May Sinclair's *Three Sisters*, or Vita Sackville-West's *Joan of Arc*, none of which have received significant critical attention. Many Modernists were highly interested in biography and used the genre as the site of some of their most varied and extreme experiments in form and in the representation of identity. Nowhere was this truer than among the members of the Bloomsbury Group.

Not an official "group" in any sense, what we refer to as the Bloomsbury Group was an evolving collection of friends, many of whom lived in the Bloomsbury district of London. The initial group had been members of the Apostles, a secret debating society at Cambridge: art critic Clive Bell (1881–1964), economist Maynard Keynes (1883–1946), historian Lytton Strachey (1880–1932), Thoby Stephen (1880–1906), and Saxon Sydney-Turner (1880–1962) who took a double first and then gained a coveted position in the Treasury. At this time, Thoby Stephen's sisters Vanessa and Virginia Stephen—soon to be Vanessa Bell (1879–1961), the post-impressionist painter, and the novelist Virginia Woolf (1882–1941)—set up house in Bloomsbury as a consequence of the death of their father, eminent biographer Leslie Stephen, who died on 22 February 1904. Their brother, Thoby Stephen, who died two years later of typhus, joined his sisters in Bloomsbury and invited his Cambridge friends to weekly Thursday evening "at homes." This initial group was soon joined by novelist E. M. Forster (1879–1970), art historian Roger Fry (1866–1934), novelist David Garnett (1892–1981), painter Duncan Grant (1885–1978), literary and theater critic Desmond McCarthy (1877–1952), and, upon his return from the Civil Service in Ceylon, Leonard Woolf (1880–1969). The composition of the group changed over time; Molly McCarthy, Desmond's wife joined in, as did, eventually, Vanessa Bell's children. Even as the group evolved, it consistently provided a safe space in which its members could be open about their sexuality, engage one another intellectually, and develop themselves without fear of the censorship or rush to judgment that dominated the public spaces of English society during the first third of the twentieth century.

Virginia Woolf writes about the group's origins in her essay "Old Bloomsbury," a memoir that constructs an anecdotal history—and identity—for this group of friends that centers around their ability to talk openly about sex. Striving toward both individual and group identity is evident in the

establishment by Molly McCarthy of the Memoir Club in 1920. It was Molly McCarthy who reportedly coined the term "bloomsberries" to refer to the group. In calling them together for the express purpose of sharing memoirs even though most members of the group were only in their early forties, she was overtly attempting to create a more formal writing group in order to encourage her husband, Desmond, to produce a manuscript for publication. "In organizing the Memoir Club," Leon Edel writes, "the [Bloomsbury] group proved (in spite of denials) that it was an entity; that it belonged to history—literary and artistic and even economic and political; and that it had funds of common memory to draw upon" (Edel, 1979: 258). I would like to suggest that Edel's claim applies not just to the work of the Memoir Club but also to the biographies the Group wrote. The Bloomsbury Group belongs to history, as Edel says, but history also belongs to the Bloomsbury Group. In keeping with the Modernist tradition they helped to establish, the biographies written by members of the Bloomsbury Group challenge expectations established by Victorian biographical practice. By taking up—and critiquing—the Victorian practice of retelling history through the lives of great men, they created the past in the biographies they wrote even as they created themselves.

S. P. Rosenbaum, who collected many of the Bloomsbury Group's biographical essays and sketches, writes: "Biography long and short was a major form of Bloomsbury's writing, and one of their most important legacies" (Rosenbaum, 1993: 51). Edel counts all of Bloomsbury as biographers, placing Vanessa Bell, Duncan Grant, and Roger Fry's portraits alongside Strachey's *Queen Victoria* and Woolf's *Flush*, a biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's cocker spaniel. These examples are testimony to the ways in which Bloomsbury biographies transformed the genre. Modernism's interest in psychological interiority would seem to invite the study of a central subject, but grounded as it is in the historical fact, the biographical tradition resists all but the most cursory attempts to represent the subject's inner life. The Bloomsbury Group worked against the limitations of the biographical tradition to create what Virginia Woolf called the "New Biography."

Many of these biographies are of highly respected, even mythic, women who defied social expectations. These women did not conform to social standards but ultimately became respected and influential, a goal shared by the members of the Bloomsbury Group themselves, who, even as they rebelled against the oppressive social structure that they believed controlled England as a legacy of Victorian taste and morality, nevertheless wished for recognition and approval. The women they wrote about achieved this goal—at least in their revised histories. Their attitude toward these women is also something they shared as a group. Highly critical of the dominant culture, the biographies express admiration for their subjects when they resist colluding with the dominant power structure and criticize them when they comply with social expectations.

In "The New Biography," Virginia Woolf calls for a move away from the collection of facts as a representation of historical truth. The short-lived

"New Biography" is generally characterized as traditional biography with the addition of the subject's inner life (Hoberman and Cockshut, 1987). I would like to suggest that this biographical practice is more than that. Woolf, Strachey, and Garnett deliberately attempted to transform the genre of biography and push readers to reconceive themselves.

A radical consequence of their reconceived self is the individual's relationship to authority as evidenced in politics, religion, and sexuality. Authority is externalized and therefore subject to questioning and defiance. For the subject of Modernist biographies, the Victorian sense of duty has been replaced with uncertainty about their relationship to God, morality, country, family, patriarchy, and the influence of the unconscious. Strachey's introduction of the ironic narrator in *Eminent Victorians*, Garnett's anticipation of post-colonialism and feminist standpoint theory in *Pocahontas*, and the representation of the instability of the subject in Woolf's *Orlando* are all examples of a biographical practice that redefines literature, politics and religion even as it reconceives identity itself. Finally, Woolf's biographical sketches in *A Room of One's Own* directly address her father's work in the *DNB*, uniting the personal and political challenge to the Victorian biographical tradition.

The iconoclastic work of Lytton Strachey, Modernism's most recognized biographer, *Eminent Victorians*, decentered the genre by questioning the greatness of the subject. Here is his introduction for reimagining Florence Nightingale:

> Everyone knows the popular conception of Florence Nightingale. The saintly, self-sacrificing woman, the delicate maiden of high degree who threw aside the pleasures of a life of ease to succor the afflicted, the Lady with the Lamp…But the truth was different. The Miss Nightingale of fact was not as facile fancy painted her. She worked in another fashion, and towards another end; she moved under the stress of an impetus which finds no place in the popular imagination. A Demon possessed her. Now demons, whatever else they may be, are full of interest. And so it happens that in the real Miss Nightingale there was more that was interesting than in the legendary one; there was also less that was agreeable.
>
> (Strachey, 1990: 111)

Strachey used the assumptions of biography and popular fantasy to undermine cultural assumptions about great public figures. The tone of his narrative voice opened the door for more radical challenges to the genre.

In accordance with Nagourney, Strachey relied heavily on anecdote to establish the characters of his ground-breaking *Eminent Victorians*. Indeed, his creation of dramatic scenes led to ongoing criticism that he made things up. Nadel writes: "Strachey describes Florence Nightingale's dying in a 'shaded chamber' when, in fact, her room faced south, had no curtains and was open to the fresh air and sunlight. But to sustain the romantic quality of legend, Strachey creates a mysterious room" (Nadel, 1984: 5). Leon Edel

pronounces conclusively: "We know that Strachey displayed his subjects in the dark mirrors of his own antipathies and that this hardly gave him the objectivity we expect of a biographer" (Edel, 1979: xii–xiii). That Strachey's critical distance is taken as a failure of objectivity, whereas identification—even hero worship—can be considered impartial suggests the extent to which a divided biography produces discomfort. This seems especially true since the most his critics can charge Strachey with are changes I think we would agree are largely inconsequential. We can see Strachey not as unreliable but as illustrating Woolf's call for the integration of the techniques of fiction into biography. In doing so, he moved biography away from the recitation of fact and celebration of duty and morality that epitomizes late Victorian biographies. This drift away from chronicle toward narrative has a significant impact on the reading experience; Strachey invites the reader to re-imagine Florence Nightingale, to see her as less agreeable but more interesting. He creates gaps in the narrative that he encourages the reader to fill, thus urging active, engaged reading that empowers the reader rather than maintaining the dominant power structures in which the function of biography is to praise famous men and provide moral instruction.

Strachey's work is influenced by James Anthony Froude, whose *Life of Carlyle* (1882) not only refused to lionize Carlyle but also included intimate and unflattering personal details, most notably Carlyle's callus treatment of his wife. Similarly, Strachey's portraits are not tributes. When Strachey published *Eminent Victorians* in 1918, the biographical tradition still maintained its Victorian insistence on facts and admiration. Strachey challenged cultural assumptions about great public figures, recasting them in narratives that showed them not as self-sacrificing public heroes but as individuals driven by complex psychological conflicts. Strachey's narrator is transparent; his perspective is known to the reader, and thus he is more honest and less manipulative than the narrator who offers hagiography in the guise of objectivity.

Strachey's narrative strategy, described by many critics as "ironic," splits the biographical perspective between the narrator and the subject to demonstrate the false consciousness that led the subject to believe him or herself worthy of accolades even as we now see that such a sense of duty was produced by unconscious urges that are not necessarily laudable, nor are they blameworthy. Influenced by Freud—Strachey's brother James and sister-in-law Alex translated *The Standard Edition of the Works of Sigmund Freud*, which was published by Leonard and Virginia's Woolf publishing house, the Hogarth Press—the narrator of *Eminent Victorians*' dramatic narratives functions as interrogating analyst: "why," asks the narrator, "as a child in the nursery, when her sister had shown a healthy pleasure in tearing her dolls to pieces, had *she* shown an almost morbid one in sewing them up again?" (Strachey, 1990: 112). Suggesting that there is more to the young Florence than might first meet the eye, the narrator becomes the analyst, the subject supposed to know, and invites the reader to participate in the analysis.

The division between Florence Nightingale and the narrator's perspectives represents the beginnings of the recognition of the instability of the social construction of the subject and even hints at a division within the subject by suggesting, for example, that the young Florence's unnatural interest in healing had unconscious motives. Strachey's dramatic technique invites the reader to participate in the narrative rather than to assume the position of passive receptor of facts. In her analysis of Strachey's rhetorical strategies, Ruth Hoberman comments: "Strachey's frequent use of words like 'surprising,' 'perplexing,' and 'curious' blur the boundary between narrator and reader by anticipating and echoing, in his responses to his characters, his reader's responses to his narrative" (Hoberman and Cockshut, 1987: 47). Rather than stuffing the gaps in his narrative with instructive facts that provide the illusion of control over the subject, Strachey cracks the icon and invites the reader to respond personally to the political myths that have dominated cultural fantasies. Taken in the context of Bloomsbury's shared biographical project, Strachey can be seen, not as unreliable, but as exemplifying Woolf's later call for the integration of the techniques of fiction into biography.

Nineteenth century biographies often served as normative political tools. Under the editorship of Virginia Woolf's father, Leslie Stephen, *The Dictionary of National Biography* democratized the genre, expanding it from Carlyle's great men to include what Stephen called second-rate men, and even a few women. These biographies emphasized public service and private morality. David Garnett defies historical and cultural context by infusing his biography of the legendary Pocahontas with psychological speculation. While this makes the book seem like a flat-footed, romantic fantasy, such a move allows him to recast the myth of Pocahontas as a tragedy that anticipates post-colonial theory.

In many ways consistent with Peter Hulme's revision of the story in *Colonial Encounters*, published 53 years later, instead of reinterpreting the highly questionable story of Smith's rescue from the standpoint of the father, Powhatan, as Hulme does, Garnett retells the rescue and its consequences from the standpoint of Pocahontas. Making Pocahontas a psychologically well-developed character rather than an icon, Garnett tells a story of neither love nor conquest, but of the systematic silencing and betrayal of Pocahontas by John Smith, her father, and her husband, John Rolfe. Equally a critique of twentieth century patriarchy and seventeenth century imperialism and colonization, Garnett asks us to identify with Pocahontas against Smith and Rolfe, who are shown to be self-interested imperialist oppressors. Garnett thus illustrates in this biography the political position he articulates in his memoir *The Golden Echo*, where he writes: "It is the duty of an honest patriot to see his country as it is seen by other peoples" (Garnett, 1952: 60). This position anticipates the feminist standpoint approach defined by Nancy Hartsock and Sandra Harding. Hartsock explains: "the powerful vision of both the perverseness and reality of class domination made possible by Marx's adoption of the standpoint of the proletariat suggests that the specifically

feminist standpoint could allow for a much more profound critique of phallocratic ideologies and institutions" (Hartsock, 1983: 288). Garnett challenges the hegemony of western imperialism from the beginning of the book, which opens with the child Pocahontas on the shores of the river, Werowocomoco. Garnett uses the strategy of standpoint theory to show the west how it looked from that riverbank before it was "discovered" as the James River and to imply that we still need to look at ourselves from that perspective.

In Garnett's hands, the story is transformed from the morality play of nineteenth century works such as "My Lady Pocahontas," in which Pocahontas is seen as a sort of guardian angel whose welcoming protection legitimizes the British, into a critique of capitalism, imperialism, and patriarchy as inherently destructive. In Garnett's eyes, oppressive systems silence their victims and thus carry the seeds of their own destruction. In a scene near the end of the book, Garnett deliberately parallels Pocahontas's legendary rescue of John Smith. By contrasting her responses, we see the effects of systematic oppression. In this scene, set during Pocahontas's famous visit to London, Rolfe takes Pocahontas to watch a man accused of assault being hanged: "Pocahontas, standing beside Rolfe, watched the scene with aloof and cool disgust. The time was gone by when she could thrust herself forward and interfere on such an occasion" (Garnett, 1972: 295). Her contact with Western culture has succeeding silencing her, and in this way the English imperialists have destroyed in her the impulse that originally saved them. By creating this fantasy of Pocahontas's internal life, Garnett allows readers to identify with her—and against representatives of the dominant culture—in a creative act called for by Virginia Woolf as well as by Hartsock and Harding. Identification with Pocahontas leads instantly to condemnation of English imperialism. In this way, Garnett potentially splits readers' loyalties by asking for a reconsideration of cultural and political positions generally accepted by British and American readers in the 1930s, when *Pocahontas* was a featured selection of the Book of the Month Club. He creates a narrative space that encourages active reading that leads the reader to confront the gaps in his or her ideologically constructed sense of self.

Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography* is even more disruptive—intentionally so. Woolf wrote to Sackville-West that *Orlando* would "revolutionize biography in a night" (Woolf, 1975–1977, *Letters*, 9 October 1927, 3: 429). The book is a composite biography of the Sackville-West family, a love-letter to Sackville-West, who was Woolf's lover at the time, and many more things besides. Even more confusing than the sight of the crossing-dressing Joan of Arc, Orlando starts out as a man, turns into a woman, and lives for over 300 years. Leon Edel calls the book "a fable for biographers," and "a full-fledged theory of biography" (Edel, 1979: 139). We can also say that it is a full-fledged theory of the instability of the subject, which renders traditional biography an illusion. Woolf's narrator comments on the difficulty of writing biographies throughout, and especially near the end:

> The true length of a person's life, whatever the *Dictionary of National Biography* may say, is always a matter of dispute…For if there are (at a venture) seventy-six different times all ticking in the mind at once, how many different people are there not—Heaven help us—all having lodgment at one time or another in the human spirit? Some say two thousand and fifty-two.
>
> (Woolf, 1956: 305, 308)

Woolf then spins us through some of Orlando's selves, demonstrating that identity is an "and" as well as an "or" game.

As Sackville-West does later in *Saint Joan of Arc*, Woolf challenges the unified subject by intruding the subjectivity of the biographer into the narrative to create an awareness of the constructed nature of the biography and the biographical subject. Woolf overtly rejects the enabling assumptions of biography to create a portrait of Vita Sackville-West (which is also a sort of composite portrait of the Sackvilles as they have culminated in Sackville-West as well as a parody of *Knole and the Sackvilles*, Sackville-West's history of her family). Woolf's portrait was so compelling that Sackville-West wrote to Woolf upon reading the manuscript: "you have invented a new kind of narcissism; I am in love with Orlando" (Woolf, 1975–1977, *Letters*, 11 October 1928, 289).

Orlando also addresses sexuality. Woolf wrote in her initial description of the book: "sapphism is to be suggested" (Woolf, 1980, *Diary*, 14 March 1927, 3:131), as when the female Orlando, cross-dressed to pass as a man, picks up a woman on the street. The fictionalization of biography also allows Woolf and other Modernists to include in biography those elements they saw as central to identity that until now had been banned from biography: psychology and sexuality (including homo- and bisexuality). Avoiding censorship and scandal, Woolf wrote love letters as biography and facts as fiction.

Woolf challenges the past—historically and personally—by rewriting the lives of women writers in the fourth chapter of *A Room of One's Own*. In this chapter, Woolf gives a history of British women writers beginning with Lady Winchilsea (Anne Finch) and including Margaret of Newcastle (Margaret Cavendish), Aphra Behn, Fanny Burney, Eliza Carter, Jane Austen, Charlotte and Emily Brontë, and George Eliot. Note that their last names all occur between A and F. Rachel Bowlby credits Woolf with initiating the rescue of women writers,[12] but all of the women writers Woolf mentions are included in the first 21 volumes of the *DNB*, which were completed under the editorship of her father (1885–1890). Leslie Stephen himself wrote the entries for Fanny Burney, the Brontës, Jane Austen, and George Eliot. The *DNB* entry for Victorian photographer Julia Margaret Cameron, of whom Woolf writes elsewhere, was contributed by Woolf's mother, who was Cameron's niece and frequent model. Stephen became editor of the *DNB* the year Virginia Woolf was born, and the first volume was published when Woolf was 3 years old. Thus, the first eight years of her life were dominated by its production.

Writing about the effects of the *DNB* on the household, she notes in her diary: "Poor old Adrian!…Undoubtedly [Edmund Sidney Pollock] Haynes was right: the D. N. B. crushed his life out before he was born. It gave me a twist of the head too. I shouldn't have been so clever, but I should have been more stable, without that contribution to the history of England" (Woolf, 1980, *Diary*, 3 December 1923, 2:277). Since Woolf's brother Adrian Stephen was a practicing psychoanalyst, her diagnosis is particularly amusing, but there is also a decided note of bitterness pointedly directed at Leslie Stephen and the *DNB*.

Woolf does, as Bowlby suggests, keep the work of these women alive, but I would argue that her more radical act is in the attitude she takes toward them. She treats them as serious writers impeded by familial expectations and financial restrictions. More importantly she treats them as intimates, as women with whom she—and by extension readers—can identify. She models an ability to see them as role models because they were real people rather than unapproachable ideals. This is not a relationship encouraged by Leslie Stephen's focus on facts and strict judgments of literary and personal merits. His extensive entry for Charlotte Brontë, for example, is more judgmental family portrait than biography. The 15-column entry begins with 3 columns on the father, Patrick Brontë, and even includes a history of Emily Brontë's dog. There is no separate listing for Emily or Anne Brontë, who are treated under their sister's heading along with their father and brother. In keeping with the style of literary criticism predominant at this time, Stephen pronounces judgment upon the Brontë sisters based upon his own social authority:

> In point of style [*Wuthering Heights*] is superior [to *Jane Eyre*], but it is the nightmare of a recluse, not a direct representation of facts seen by genius. Though enthusiastically admired by good judges, it will hardly be widely appreciated.
>
> (Stephen, 2018, "Charlotte Brontë," *DNB* 2:1319)

While we might instantly bristle at Stephen's characterization of Emily Brontë as a "recluse" (with implications of mental instability) and Charlotte Brontë as a genius, we are likely even more disconcerted by Stephen's patronizing tone—an assertion of authority over both the Brontës and their readers. We might also be surprised to learn that despite his insistence on presenting facts, Stephen's research was limited to summarizing secondary sources. In the case of Charlotte Brontë, the entry attributes its "facts" to the biography of Brontë by Mrs. Gaskell.

Woolf's revision of her father's biographies focuses on the material conditions of the subjects' lives as writers rather than their family relations. Leslie Stephen, for example, gives particular attention to the thoughtful way in which Charlotte Brontë arranged her marriage so as not to disrupt her father's comfort. Woolf, instead, speculates on the potential success Brontë would have had under more favorable circumstances: "One could not but play

for a moment with the thought of what might have happened if Charlotte Brontë had possessed say 300 a year" (Woolf, 1957: 73). This comment evokes the legacy that enabled Woolf to become independent (ibid.: 37), and reminds us that she was forcefully aware of the ways in which fathers impede their daughters. A month after giving the lectures that were to become *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf wrote in her diary:

> Father's birthday. He would have been…96, yes, today; & could have been 96, like other people one has known; but mercifully was not. His life would have entirely ended mine. What would have happened: No writing, no books;—inconceivable.
>
> (Woolf, 1980, *Diary*, 28 November 1928, 3: 208)

In drawing this direct comparison to her own happier circumstances, Woolf not only makes her point about the ways in which Brontë's material conditions crippled her work and the close call she herself had, but she also engages us as readers in a sympathetic identification with Brontë, and indeed with all women writers. In this way Woolf unites women across time just as Jane Marcus argues she unites them across economic differences: "The rhetorical strategies of *A Room of One's Own* construct an erotic relationship between the woman writer, her audience present in the text, and the woman reader. Seduction serves the political purpose of uniting women across class" (Marcus, 1987: 186).

Woolf's speculation is a variation on the New Biography's mingling of fact and fiction. At the beginning of *A Room of One's Own* she warns us that "Fiction here is likely to contain more truth than fact…it is for you to seek out this truth and to decide whether any part of it is worth keeping" (Woolf, 1957: 4). It is for us to choose because the function of her biographical revision is not just to set the record straight, but also to intervene in our ability to imagine the past. Woolf not only rescues these women writers from potential obscurity, but also transforms our relationship to them. She doesn't just call for us to think back through our mothers or think ahead to the new Judith Shakespeares, she also rewrites history so that we have mothers to whom we can think back. She models a way of thinking about the past that frees us from the restraints imposed by Victorian biography by guiltlessly celebrating the death of the biographer-father.

A Room of One's Own joins *Eminent Victorians* and *Pocahontas*, as well as other Bloomsbury biographies as an alternative biographical practice that emerges out of a redefined relationship to authority and to history. It models a new role for the biographer. No longer the authority on the facts of her subject's life, Woolf's three narrative alter egos, Mary Seton, Mary Beton and Mary Carmichael, are alternative biographers who enjoy imagining their subjects and invite readers to do the same. Bloomsbury biographies offer identification rather than late Victorian adulation and judgment. One important difference in this relational structure is that identification is ambivalent; it

allows for sympathy and also criticism. This was a key component within the Bloomsbury Group, and the gap it creates introduces the possibility of a transference relationship that can be transformational. In Strachey's Florence Nightingale, for example, Knoepflmacher argues that aggression screens an affectionate and "highly personal self-inscription" (Knoepflmacher, 1990: 2).

The transformation of the biographer into a more flexible historian—in terms of both facts and attitude—testifies to the resolution of the Oedipal struggle with the Victorian father-biographers. Not only have Bloomsbury biographers successfully assumed the role of the father, but they have also done so without repeating the dynamics of the struggle. The New Biographer is no longer the upholder of the law and repository of the facts, but rather an artist who encourages the reader to join in the critical speculation of a constructed past.

Just as fiction, politics, and feminism create a break in the biographer's idealization of the past, so, too, is there both a connection and a separation between biographer and reader. This space allows for identification as well as shifting perspectives, complexity, and even instability. By transforming the subject into the unstable object of a shared fantasy, Bloomsbury biographies create an audience who might approve of the biographer, rather than demand a reader of whom the biographer will approve. In Bloomsbury, biography was transformed in content, style, and politics. The "funds of common memory" Edel says the group drew upon in The Memoir Club, become funds of common history in Bloomsbury biographies that make readers into active participants in the creation of the group. The reader is transformed; history is remade; and the Bloomsbury Group is created after resolving a public and private Oedipal complex to arrive in the loving arms of the readers created by the process.

It is not surprising that the influence of psychoanalysis led to the experimentations we see in these and other Modernist biographies. Like literature and history, the subject is no longer as unified and stable; the model of progress is revealed as a narrative construct supported by the illusion that anecdote reveals the inner character. Nagourney's three enabling aspects of biography are challenged as Modernist biography sought new ways to represent identity without participating in the need to maintain the illusion of stability. This has implications for politics and religion as well as narrative. Modernist biographers repudiate the nationalist agenda as the result of progress or moral superiority. Similarly, religion is viewed as another enabling illusion of capitalism and imperialism. While not all Modernist biographers were engaged with this struggle—indeed, Virginia Woolf's *Roger Fry* seems more concerned with pleasing his family and protecting his reputation than with narrative experimentation—we can see in many biographies written by Modernists a series of experiments with traditional form and attempts to challenge dominant notions of identity and history as it was represented and even conceived.

Separately and together, members of the Bloomsbury Group created a safe place in which to challenge tradition. Beginning in the private space of

Vanessa and Virginia Stephen's Bloomsbury drawing room, they moved out into public spaces where, supported by compassionate friendship and honest criticism, they created safe public places in the biographies they published to recognize emotional and sexual feelings that had been repressed in the nineteenth century. These spaces are manifest in the Bloomsbury district of London in which "Blue Plaques" make their private homes public just they themselves created parallel spaces for public and private transformation. The one in Gordon Square is particularly satisfyingly in its refusal to pin down the membership as well as temporal and physical location of the Bloomsbury Group: "Here and in neighbouring houses during the first half of the 20th century there lived several members of the Bloomsbury Group including Virginia Woolf, Clive Bell and the Stracheys." Even as Roger Fry's Post-Impressionist Exhibitions (1911 & 1912) and public lectures transformed the art world, his Omega Workshops created textiles and murals that transformed private spaces. Virginia Woolf's private letters and diaries (Woolf, 1975–1977; Woolf, 1980) chronicle her private epiphanies even as her novels and essays stimulate public exclamations and private identifications from critics and readers. The publishing company she established with her husband, Leonard Woolf, helped transform private manuscripts into public statements. Ultimately, the Bloomsbury Group's private views became predominate in the critical positions they published on art, theater, literature, and politics. I would argue that as painters, writers, publishers, economists, and radicals—The Bloomsbury Group turned social networking into an art form and gave us a key to that safe space—public and private—in which to challenge the dominant culture. Their biographies, I suggest, were an important space in which they were able to work out the dimensions of this space and recognize that it was vast.

It is hard to say whether or not the work of Modernist biographers such as Strachey, Garnett, and Woolf had the political impact it clearly attempts to achieve. Even though their experiments in biography have had seemingly little impact on the genre, I do think their work has been influential in the ways in which contemporary fiction engages history. Neither historical fiction nor fictionalized biography, works such as Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion*, Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*, and Julian Barnes' *Flaubert's Parrot* blend fact and fiction to achieve the sort of truth I think Woolf had in mind. I recently noticed a bookstore display that included: *The Red Tent, The Girl with a Pearl Earring, Artemisia,* and *The Kelly Gang*, all works of fiction that strive to make private history public. Modernist experiments in biography may not have intervened in biographical practice, but they seem to be continuing in literature that blends fact and fiction, not to create historical fiction, which uses the details of a particular period for setting, or fictionalized biography in which narrative techniques are used to convey factually based information, but to create novels that merge fact and fiction and historical and fictional figures co-exist in a world that seems historically real and fictionally alive.

Appendix: Biographical writing by members of the Bloomsbury Group (first and second generation)[13]

Clive Bell (1881–1964), *Old Friends*
Quentin Bell (1910–1996), *Virginia Woolf*
Vanessa Bell (1879–1961), numerous portraits including Virginia Woolf, Lytton Strachey, Aldous Huxley, Roger Fry, the Memoir Club
Francis Birrell (1889–1935), General Editor, *Representative Women*
E. M. Forster (1879–1970), *Marianne Thornton*
Roger Fry (1866–1934), numerous portraits including Vanessa Bell, Edward Carpenter, Edith Sitwell
David Garnett (1892–1981), *Pocahontas*
Duncan Grant, Portraits (1885–1978), numerous portraits including John Maynard Keynes, Virginia Woolf, and many of Vanessa Bell
John Maynard Keynes (1883–1946), *Essays in Biography*
Desmond McCarthy (1877–1952), *Portraits*
Molly McCarthy (1882–1953), *A Nineteenth Century Childhood* (1924)
Adrian Stephen (1883–1948), *The Dreadnought Hoax*.
Lytton Strachey (1880–1932), *Eminent Victorians, Queen Victoria, Elizabeth and Essex*
Virginia Woolf (1882–1941), *The Art of Biography, Flush: A Biography*, "The New Biography", "Old Bloomsbury," *Orlando: A Biography, Roger Fry, A Room of One's Own* (chapter four)

Notes

1 See the appendix to this chapter for an index of biographies written by members of the Bloomsbury Group.
2 Harold Nicolson, who, as noted in the previous chapter, was the husband of Vita Sackville-West, begins his thorough and, I think, underrated *Development of English Biography* with a dictionary definition upon which he comments: "This definition is convenient" (Nicolson, 1927: 7). What follows is Nicolson's attempt to distinguish "pure" from "impure" biography so that he can proceed to separate "good" biography from "bad."
3 Several critics have commented on this aspect of *The Life of Johnson*. Harold Nicolson calculates that "out of a rough total of 1250 pages, 1000 are devoted to Johnson after he had met Boswell, and only 250 to his pre-Boswell period" (Nicolson, 1927: 103). Nicolson, who goes to great lengths to demonstrate that the work, although thoroughly entertaining is not particularly admirable, describes it as "about a highly alarming eccentric by a singularly observant buffoon" (ibid.: 88). Edel describes Boswell as a "stage manager" who arranged the very scenes he wished to record (Edel, 1957: 45–55).
4 Edel is both appreciative and critical of this tendency in Strachey (Edel, 1979: 76–82, 181–183), as is Nadel, whose important book *Biography: Fiction, Fact and Form,* investigates the rhetorical strategies of biographies.
5 In writing about Woolf, Whittemore says her notions about biography are: "a replica of dozens of other artist-views out of which modern art and literature rebelliously sprang. What is fascinating about Virginia's personal rebellion is that it should have been so often focused on a genre not usually tied to the Modernist revolution at all" (71).

6 For details see Shorter, whose introduction cleverly restores the omitted story of Branwell Brontë and Mrs. Robinson (Shorter, 2017: v–vii), and Britt (1936: 119–127).
7 Despite factual disputes, Gaskell's biography was enormously popular and Gaskell is significant as an example of a nineteenth century woman biographer. Aside from his ultimately negative reference to Gaskell, Britt includes not a single woman in *The Great Biographers*. Gaskell, Britt concludes: "by modern standards…was hardly qualified for such a task" (Britt, 1936: 120). Woolf's consistent reference to the biographer who narrates *Orlando* as a man is testimony to the predominately male voice of the authoritative biographer.
8 See Nadel (1984) for a detailed history of the development and rise of the series (13–102). See Whittemore (1989) for a discussion of Leslie Stephen's moral influence on the *DNB* (47–65). Whittemore focuses on Stephen's influence by and departure from Carlyle. See Nadel (1984) on Plutarch's formal influence on shorter nineteenth century biography (15–22).
9 Nadel says that this self-awareness was introduced by Plutarch: "the virtues of these great men serve me as a sort of looking glass, in which I may see how to adjust and adorn my own life" ("Timoleon," 293; quoted in Nadel, 1984: 21). While Plutarch's concern is with public actions, the use of the mirror metaphor is striking.
10 Nadel lists five qualities, developed in the nineteenth century, that dominate twentieth century biography: "These include illustrative detail, symbolic action, thematic organization, psychological interpretation and character analysis" (Nadel, 1984: 31). Nadel is not claiming that these qualities exist in all biographies, however. I am grateful to the late James Breslin, for bringing Nagourney's important article to my attention.
11 Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* is an exception to this generalization; however, its recent reception of critical interest appears to be the result of increased interest in sexuality rather than from a consideration of the work as an example of an experimental biography. See, for example, Gilbert, Knopp, McNaron, and Meese.
12 Bowlby writes that Woolf "pioneered the work of making known the writing of women whose existence had previously been obscured, covered over, by the weight of the masculine canon…" (Bowlby, 'The Trained Mind: A Room of One's Own' in Homans 1993: 180).
13 Also see S. P. Rosenbaum's collection of memoirs by and about members of the Bloomsbury Group in *The Bloomsbury Group* (Rosenbaum, 1975)and *A Bloomsbury Reader* (Rosenbaum, 1993) as well as Richard Shone's *Bloomsbury Portraits* (Shone, 1993) for a wonderful collection of reprints of paintings by Vanessa Bell, Duncan Grant, and Roger Fry.

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6 The quilting point[1]

Vita Sackville-West's secular Joan of Arc

Biographical research: a Sissinghurst journal

In England today, Vita Sackville-West (1892–1962) is as well known for creating the magnificent gardens at Sissinghurst as she is for her novels, poems, and affair with Virginia Woolf. A noted poet and novelist, Sackville-West was more popular in her day than Woolf, winning the prestigious Hawthornden Prize in 1926 for her long poem *The Land* and again in 1933 for her *Collected Poems*.[2] Sackville-West is not known for her biographies, even though she wrote quite a few of them.[3] Her first plunge into biographical research, *Knole and the Sackvilles* (1922), is a history of her family, which Woolf later parodies in her experimental biography of Sackville-West, *Orlando*. Sackville-West is not typically considered a Modernist. She did not engage in the formal experiments that dominate discussions of Modernism; however, her subject matter is very much in keeping with the Modernist obsession with breaking from tradition. Indeed, I will argue that her concern with gender and sexuality makes her work both revolutionary and influential. Furthermore, while she only engages in theorizing in her journal, her actions performed her revolt against normative heterosexuality. She insisted that she was not a feminist, for example, but she (unlike Woolf) kept her name. Her relationship to history is personal and initially appears reverential rather than iconoclastic. But she was engaged in many of the same struggles to define herself in opposition to the Victorian tradition that fueled the biographical work of the Bloomsbury Group. She, too, rewrote the past, and for her, the personal was political.

Sackville-West was raised at Knole, the largest house in England, the only child of two cousins, Victoria West and Lionel Sackville-West, the 3rd Baron Sackville. In 1566 Queen Elizabeth gave Knole to Thomas Sackville to thank him for delivering the news to Mary, Queen of Scots, that she was to be executed. He delivered the news so compassionately, that Queen Mary gave him an altar that was relocated to the chapel at Knole. Since she was a girl—a fact much bemoaned by her mother—Sackville-West could not inherit Knole, which went to her male cousin upon her father's death. This was a lifelong bereavement and symbol of the disinheritance determined by her sex. Her historical writing reclaimed this loss. In *Knole and the Sackvilles* (1922) she

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writes her family history, owning Knole in print as she could not own it in reality. She also celebrated the lawlessness of her maternal grandmother, Pepita, in a biography that reclaims the outsider as heroine. Her biography of Joan of Arc remakes Joan into a political martyr rather than a saint.

Her son, Nigel Nicolson, included her journal in *Portrait of a Marriage*, his biography of his parents. Sackville-West's journal is a candid exploration of her own gender and sexuality, including her affair with Rosamund Grovesner before and throughout her engagement to Harold Nicolson. It also includes an extensive account of her experiments with gender roles, including her conclusion that she is equally masculine and feminine and cross-dressing to pass. Woolf wrote in code about Sackville-West's gender exploration in *Orlando*, an experimental biography that posits gender fluidity and sexuality constructed by desire. No saint (indeed if anything Sackville-West was areligious), perhaps it is cross-dressing that is the point of identification, which Lacan calls the *point de capiton* or quilting point (Lacan, 1993: 268–269) between Sackville-West and Joan of Arc. This focus on Joan's appearance is the opening point of Sackville-West's biography, which is dominated by a concern for clothes and a desire to pin down the historical facts. The quest for a stable story of Joan transformed Sackville-West into an historian, doing archival research and traveling throughout France to inspect the sites of Joan's triumphs. Nowhere in her biography does Sackville-West mention Joan's recent canonization or the religious inspiration that drove her. Sackville-West creates a purely secular Joan of Arc, a courageous woman dressed as a man, someone with whom Sackville-West could identify.

This raises the question of my own imaginary relationship with Sackville-West. I identify with her as a writer and gardener, but I do not have strong feelings for her beyond being dazzled by the romance of her life. There was a moment, however, when my research on Sackville-West strikingly paralleled her research on Joan of Arc, whose painted image she hunted across Europe. After I submitted the completed manuscript of my book about Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West, the editor called to say that they wanted to include photographs. This was an amazing request—I immediately imagined how photographs would bring the book to life. But it was also frustrating, because, had I known, I would have written about the photographs in the book (as it was, I ended up writing paragraph-long captions to explain them). It was frustrating in another way, too. I knew that the photographs I wanted to use were at Sissinghurst, home, until his recent death, of Sackville-West's son, Nigel Nicolson. Nigel Nicolson had a reputation for being generous to scholars, but now I did not even know who was in possession of the estate.

Sissinghurst is now owned by the National Trust, and the public flocks to its lavish, extensive gardens. I wrote to the head gardener to find out who had inherited Sissinghurst. That is how I got in touch with Nigel Nicolson's son, author Adam Nicolson (*God's Secretaries*), who proved to be just as gracious and generous as his father.

I spent a day combing through Nigel Nicolson's study—untouched since his death—looking for treasures. I had some photographs in mind—those I had seen in Victoria Glendinning's biography of Sackville-West and in the many biographies of Virginia Woolf. But what I sought was a photo of the two of them together. Since they mostly took pictures of one another, this was improbable in the days before selfies (just imagine what the two of them would have done with an iPhone!), but I was on the hunt nevertheless.

Here is my journal from the trip:

> London: Bus to tube and on to Goodge St. Room 25 at Aran House was right at the very top—4th floor—in the front. It was 90 degrees and airless in the tiny room. I had to stand on the bed to open the single window. No breeze stirred and now it was very noisy from the street.
>
> After meeting an old friend for lunch, I realized that I had a free afternoon in the place I'd most like to have a free afternoon. Wandered in the British Museum. Saw the Sutton Hoo exhibit and the Lewis chessmen and—the reason I was there—14th century astrolabes of the sort Chaucer would have used.
>
> Bought the card game my daughter, Pippa, wanted (Top Trumps) at the toy store near the British Museum. Wandered in Waterstones for an hour or so looking for Adam Nicolson's books. Bought his latest, *Atlantic Britain*, which I finished during the course of the week. Reminded me of Sackville-West's writing in so far as it seems unedited, although it clearly is not. There is an ease and intimacy about their writing that makes me feel like I've picked up a manuscript no one else has read. It isn't fussy or overworked but rather has the charm of something tossed off with brilliance by someone both intelligent and adventurous. Adam Nicolson himself made this comparison when he signed the book with a self-deprecating reference to Woolf's biting criticism of Sackville-West: "why she writes, which she does with complete competency, and a pen of brass, is a puzzle to me" (Woolf, 1977: 150). In his inscription in my book Adam Nicolson wrote: "The pen of brass is clearly a genetic thing." Went into Book Marks (the socialist bookstore) and the used bookstore on Bloomsbury St. Bought 2 books by Rowan Williams at Waterstones in anticipation of my Honors talk this fall. Also bought a travel alarm clock—I'd forgotten mine.
>
> **Wednesday**
> Walked down through the City and across Hungerford Bridge to the Tate Modern. Stood on the bridge as I always do, looking down the Thames to Tower Bridge and St. Paul's thinking: I am here! Here! Here! The place I most want to be. I realize that I am in love with this city.
>
> So good to see Christine [Watson—the painter]. We spent 3 hours at the Frieda Kahlo exhibit. I walked back across Waterloo Bridge and up to Lincoln's Inn Fields to the Sir John Soane House—fascinating. Such a

good spirit. I asked a docent about the lavender in the chairs, and he went on for 45 minutes as a complex deconstructive argument unfolded. He described Soane as a revolutionary who tried to transform architecture and art—mixing the 2 and crossing the plane between indoors and out (skylights, ceilings painted to draw your eye up or outside) but within conventional structures so as not to raise too many eyebrows.

Met Charlotte for the nicest dinner at Mildred's—mushroom pie and mushy peas with mint pesto and a starter of a lovely salad with Gouda. We walked back through Soho. Charlotte and Jerry are buying a cottage in the country. I've promised to come out to see them for the day next year. She told me that the building directly across from Aran House had been occupied by squatters associated with the Wombles (which explains the HUGE party last night—complete with live band blaring through broken-out windows until 6 am).

Thursday

I was quite anxious about the trip to Sissinghurst. I bought this notebook when I realized I had NO paper to make notes on.

Went to East Finchley to see Vicky and Katie. Really nice visit. After lunch we went to the church to help hang the local art exhibit. Then to Amia's for peach juice.

From there I went back to Aran House for my bag and on to Charing Cross for the train to Kent. It was not a pretty train journey. Very disappointing. Cab to the B & B. Then I walked back to the village for a steak dinner with 3 veg and a glass of wine.

Friday

Full English breakfast. All salt and oil—good toast and lemon curd. Even tried a bit of black pudding. Changed twice—pretty white and blue flowered shift recommended by Pippa exchanged for dowdy green linen dress with flowered silk shirt over it and old Ann Taylor belt.

Walked around the corner to Sissinghurst and arrived at 9 on the dot (as usual—a friend once described me as "compulsively on time"). Pat Stevens, the owner of the B & B, had pointed the door out the night before. She and James were so sweet and supportive—almost as excited as I was: the first scholar to visit since Nigel Nicolson's death last September.

Adam Nicolson is lovely and gracious and generous. Made me coffee, showed me the drawers of photos and the cabinet of albums.

9:40 am

I am sitting at Nigel Nicolson's writing desk in his study at Sissinghurst. In the hall is a cabinet, shelves, cubbies, and 7 drawers stuffed with photographs to sort through. It's a treasure hunt. In the cubby holes I've found the bank book from the account opened for the £10,000 to disperse upon Harold Nicolson's death in 1969, and, tucked away among

postcards—some of Sissinghurst and some I have bought myself: portraits of Kings of England—is Harold Nicolson's passport issued in 1953 absolutely packed with stamps. The last ones to Hong Kong, Viet Nam, and Cambodia in 1959.

The desk is an old school desk, ringed from coffee cups.

The photographs are amazing—more of them than I had even hoped for:

- "Pepita [Sackville-West's maternal grandmother] and my mother in about 1869" written in pencil on the back of a photograph of Pepita looking very respectably Victorian with Victoria West resting her hand on her mother's shoulder
- Victoria West brushing her hair, which reaches almost to her knees, her back to the camera as she looks into the mirror
- Virginia Woolf at Knole with Ben and Nigel Nicolson when they were boys
- A folder at the bottom of the drawer is labeled "Illustrations to Pepita"—the biography Sackville-West wrote of her unconventional grandmother
- Woolf in France in 1928 (mislabeled in Glendinning's biography as Vita Sackville-West. Labeled "Virginia" on the back in Sackville-West's handwriting)
- Nigel Nicolson's copy of *Vita*, which is heavily annotated—mostly with corrections, including correcting the subject of the photo of Woolf in France. Stuck inside the front cover is review of Adorable Fire: Letters of Duff and Diana Cooper from *The Spectator*, 1 October 1983. The type written carbon of Nigel Nicolson's review of *Vita* for *The Spectator*, September 1983, is in the back.
- The 1920 portrait of Sackville-West's lover Violet Trefusis by Sir John Laveny. Noted on the envelope containing the negative: "£100 reproduction rights due to Anstruther Trust"
- Dreamy-eyed Sackville-West captioned "(from a photograph by Swane)"

From time to time I find something I think Adam or his sister Julia might like to see. I show him a photo of the 2 as children sitting on one of the benches designed for Sissinghurst by architect Edwin Lutyens (who was having an affair with Sackville-West's mother when Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson bought the ruined castle and began creating its magnificent gardens). Adam and Julia are sitting with their grandfather, Harold Nicolson. Adam is entranced. "We look so gloomy," he says. "Ah…that was the day Vita died."

At lunchtime Adam went out to the village and returned with fresh bread and cheese and salmon for lunch followed by strawberries and cream. We talked about my book and his new project on emotionalism in Homer. Adam suggested I call my book: "Making Virginia Better,"

which I do think Sackville-West did. Mostly we talked about his father and how *Portrait of a Marriage* was, Adam thinks, an attempt to invent loving parents for himself, a notion Nigel Nicolson puts paid to in his autobiography, which Adam describes as very sad and "not to be published" because he doesn't think that's the way Nigel Nicolson would like to be remembered. Adam also described the pleasure Nigel Nicolson had in working with Joanne Trautman on Woolf's diaries.

6:45 pm

Back at Sissinghurst waiting for Adam Nicolson so I can make the final selection of photographs for the book. We were set to meet at 6:15, but he's running late. Funny to be bumping around Sissinghurst after being let in by his high jumping 11-year-old daughter.

Adam was so frustrated on my behalf that I had not been able to find a photograph of Sackville-West and Woolf together that we wandered around the house looking for more photos. Suddenly he remembers that there are albums in a cupboard set into the side of the stairs. This door has clearly not been opened in years. It has swollen shut, and when we finally get it open the smell of mildew spills into the hallway. It is filled with photo albums—half a dozen or so. I look through them while Adam opens a bottle of champagne to celebrate my book, to celebrate this day. I peeled back the pages glued together with damp and find snap shots of Harold Nicolson's male lovers, Sackville-West on her travels, and then suddenly, Woolf and Sackville-West together.

They stand together in a field in Northumberland. Sackville-West is wearing a fur coat. Woolf's coat is trimmed with fur at the collar and cuffs. Both wear brimmed hats, as in the misidentified photo in France. Woolf holds a book. There is a group of other people in the background. Harold Nicolson must have taken this when they all traveled north to witness a total eclipse of the sun. There were special trains that took people from London into the countryside to get away from the soot and fog. The date is 29 June 1927. Sackville-West would have been 39. Woolf 49. I am struck by how similar they look. It's the hats, I think, more than anything else. I can see how they could be interchanged. Sackville-West wears her wealth easily, her hands in the pockets of her fur coat. She is looking at the photographer. Woolf, I imagine from her gesture—right hand raised to her coat collar—has just spoken. It is likely a rare moment alone on this trip with their two husbands, one of whom captures their tête-à-tête on film. It is an intrusion I am grateful for: my one chance to catch a glimpse of them together.

Saturday

I wandered for 3 hours in the gardens at Sissinghurst this morning before going back to London. I could see the dark windows of Nigel Nicolson's study where I had been the day before. It felt like a secret.

Walked up from Charing Cross through Covent Garden. Shopped at Tesco's for the chocolate we came to love when we lived here for six

months while I was directing a semester abroad program. Went overboard with Mars Bars and Curley Wurley's and Wonder Balls for the girls; Green & Black Organic 70% dark for the office and Orange and Spices for me. More shopping at Paperchase—funky mag bags and a pink wallet for my younger daughter, Sadie. So much fun to buy presents for the girls. Back at Aran House that night I cried at the thought of leaving London.

Sunday
Driving through London at 6:30 on a Sunday morning was a treat. No traffic, so we went through Trafalgar Square and past Buckingham Palace. It was like the opening montage of a film. Watched the Frieda Kahlo biopic and cried for Trotsky. Missing London returned like a stone I carry in my gut.

Reading over this journal years later I was filled with nostalgia for London. I miss my friends and the daily life I had when we lived there. The everyday things are the sweetest: going to the theater three or four times a week, reading on the tube, sitting in the back garden with the *Guardian* and a mug of tea. I miss the angle of the light and the feel of the air. Even at the time I was aware of how much I would miss this when it was gone. London is the different story I have created for myself. It is a place where I am fearless, a place where there are no boundaries. I was amazed at how easy it was to live in London. So many of the things that felt like burdens in the States were gone. A seemingly small thing was not having a car. I felt freer on the Tube and in trains than I did when I had to navigate and park and make sure my daughters were belted in and not fighting. This is the same feeling Sackville-West describes when, dressed as a man, "I never felt so free as when I stepped off the kerb, down Piccadilly, alone, knowing that if I met my own mother face to face she would take no notice of me" (Nicolson, 1973: 110). The new story I created for myself in London allowed me to also become an adventurer, to feel unhampered by laws and expectations. Like Sackville-West, I was lawless. I was not a lawbreaker; I was outside of the law.

My mother, raised in Appalachia in a family of coalminers in a house surrounded by tobacco fields, raised me to be a proper Southern lady. That was her aspiration for me. Like Sackville-West, I had disappointed her by not being a boy. My name would have been Myles. The "y" in my own first name is the trace of the tragedy of my birth. In this I identify with Sackville-West. We were both failed heirs. This is a quilting point—the tiny stich that sews together two disparate pieces of material. She also defied her mother's expectations by not behaving in a ladylike fashion. We both strode through London in contempt of the social pressures that would keep us safely inside the narratives our mothers whispered to us in our cradles. I have not become a good Southern lady. My mother sullenly accuses me of putting my career before my children. In her view I am an unfit mother. Not long ago she

admonished me to be more submissive to men. "You will never keep a man," she hissed, "if you do not learn to be more deferential." Yes, "deferential" was the actual word she used. In London I did not feel the conflict between being a mother and being a scholar. The girls were right there with me on this great adventure, and when I picked them up at the school gates I chatted easily with the other parents about books and plays and films. In the States I felt judged by my family and other parents as a single parent, a working mother, an intellectual snob.

Strangely, I think what allowed me to make friends so easily in England, in addition to the absence of the anti-intellectualism I struggle with in the States, is class. As soon as the parents at the school gates found out I was an academic, I was immediately accepted into a circle of lawyers, painters, musicians, and other professors. Academics are respected in Europe, as they are not in America. I had not noticed that there were cliques at the school gate, but as soon as I became part of one, only the parents in that group interacted comfortably with me. It was striking how people I had chatted with previously would only talk to me when I was on my own now, and then hesitantly. That was when I realized that I was now part of the class system. Instead of being a pariah, now I was privileged. I was invited to parties, and lunches, and dinners. We picked up one another's children from school and gave them their tea, and then we drank wine and ate pasta together. I made the group's first Thanksgiving dinner. I had to make three turkeys because the British birds are still a normal size. Stuffing was a revelation. I guess they don't do that there. One of my friends ended up just taking the bowl into her lap and eating what was left with a spoon. At Christmas-time we caroled, made angel ornaments to sell at the school bazar, went to a Pantomime, drank glasses of wine in the church narthex after midnight mass. It was wonderful. Now Sissinghurst, a place of even greater privilege, is a part of that story.

In response to a draft of this section, my colleague, Jason Shaffer, wrote: "Say more about being a single parent/working mother. Perhaps London and the class privileges you were afforded there offered a (limited) way out of the straitjacket of American womanhood in the same way that Joan of Arc offered Sackville-West a complex alternative ideal ego." I think he is exactly right. I used the same strategies that Sackville-West used to create a new narrative for myself. In London I invented an alter ego who could stride boldly while managing teaching, scholarship, and children into an integrated life that was rich with friends and travel. The boundaries I struggled against were gone. I felt unencumbered by my mother's expectations and social pressure that constructed an internalized driving narrative I had fought against daily.

I have been playing Jane McGonigal's book *SuperBetter* with my friend, the mathematician Amy Ksir. McGonigal proposes that we live more "gamefully" so that challenges feel like trying to reach another level in a game. When we don't reach another level in Candy Crush, we don't get depressed, McGonigal points out. We keep playing (McGonigal 2015: 2). Part of the game her book asks us to play is to create a secret identity. Amy and I are both struggling with

this. The idea is that it is easier to imagine a response to a difficult situation when you do it in the third person. "What would Amy say in this situation?" I ask Amy. This is even easier if you have a secret identity that reminds you of your gifts and powers. Friends often do this for us. I have a dear friend who sings me the Wonder Woman theme song, ending it "Wonder Karyn!" My friend Reid says I'm ElastiGirl. It cheers me up a great deal. But I'm not a superhero. I cannot fly (No capes!) and nothing happens when I cross my wrists together. Now I realize that instead of trying to create an alter-ego mash up of Thursday Next, Vertigo, and Counselor Troi, I already have the vision of myself sitting at Nigel Nicolson's writing desk, wandering the British Museum, and discussing the shortlist for the Booker Prize at the school gates. I'm in love with London because I love the self that I am when I am there. Instead of mourning London, I can live in the new story that being there taught me to tell about myself. It is only in writing this that I have realized that. The new narrative I invented for myself in London was the one I was trying to have for myself all along.

Being accepted because of who I am was a new experience. I am privileged in the States as white and middle class, but the privilege I experienced in London came with friends and a reverence for my life as an academic. My scholarship got me to Sissinghurst, and my day there was a glimpse into a world of greater privilege, one I could only just barely imagine. While writing my dissertation on D. H. Lawrence, I went to visit his boyhood home in Eastwood, Nottinghamshire, a town of tiny miner's houses on a grid of streets with lush country behind them. The streets led into each other, creating a tight box of a town. You couldn't walk into the countryside—but you can see it outside the boundaries of streets and houses. Standing in the street in front of the house he grew up in, trying to figure out how to get into the countryside he loved, I instantly understood more about Lawrence than I had from all of the biographies and essays about him I had read. He had been trapped in this town literally as well as metaphorically. Just as it was for my family, education was Lawrence's only way out of the mines. Sackville-West lived in houses full of family history, which is also the history of England, growing up at Knole and ending her life in a ruined castle. Hers was a rich world that was also heavy with boundaries. Joan of Arc offered Sackville-West a different story. It is a narrative in which boundaries are crossed and destroyed. Joan stepped off the kerb into battle. She rode at the front of the French army. This is a story Sackville-West could tell about Joan of Arc and about herself.

Cross-dressing for (imaginary) battle: Vita Sackville-West's fantasy of Joan of Arc

Throughout *Saint Joan of Arc* (1936) Sackville-West seems to be searching for a narrative that will make sense of Joan's story, but desire is constantly deferred. Joan never speaks, and Sackville-West can never quite find her: she is the swirling empty center of the story (Sackville-West, 1991: 242). Freud

points out that "Biographers are fixated on their hero in a quite particular way. They choose that hero in the first place…because they feel a strong affection for him; their work is in consequence almost bound to be an exercise in idealization" (Freud, 1966: XI:130). Sackville-West does, I believe, idealize Joan of Arc—not as a saint or a visionary, but as an active woman who led the life of a man without becoming male. For Sackville-West, Joan was triumphantly, what Joan's contemporary, the Duke of Bedford described her as: "'a disorderly woman dressed as a man'" (quoted by Sackville-West, 217). Cross-dressing is the stabilizing point of identification, the Lacanian *point de capiton*, the quilting point (Lacan, 1993: 268), for Sackville-West and Joan. Sackville-West's construction of Joan rests on this quilting point—the point of identification between Joan and her biographer. Entry via dress into the male world of power unites the saint and the novelist, connects the mystic and the historian. Joan of Arc was Sackville-West's "subject supposed to know," Lacan's term for the one (for Lacan this is the analyst) whom we believe can read our minds, see our desires, and know the truth about us (Lacan, 1981: 233). As the subject supposed to know Sackville-West, Joan stimulated a powerful transference fantasy that allowed Sackville-West to create, in her biography of Joan of Arc, a safe place to explore herself.

Dressing as a man is integral to the public perception of Joan of Arc. It represents her as strong and fearless. Mounted and in armor is a safe place for Joan of Arc, but dressing like a man was not a safe place for Sackville-West. It epitomized all of her personal and social conflicts about sexuality and gender roles. It was a secret, and as such, a vulnerability. But it was also a vulnerability that made her feel powerful. This was a conflict she sought to explore in her research on Joan of Arc.

Sackville-West narrates her own experience as a cross-dresser in a journal that was posthumously published in her son's joint biography of her and his father, diplomat and biographer Harold Nicolson, *Portrait of a Marriage*. In order to appear publicly with her lover, Violet Trefusis, Sackville-West dressed as a man and took a man's name, Julian. On several occasions just after the end of the Great War, she passed for a man in England and France, dining and dancing publicly with the woman she loved. In order to represent her desires openly, she disguised her gender. Joan of Arc also dressed as a man in order to pursue her desires–or rather, God's—but there is an important difference. Joan was not trying to pass as a man. She was a woman dressed as a man, and her clothing, though necessary to the pursuit of her task, did not alter her identity. Dressing like a man, in Sackville-West's version of the story, is essential to Joan's ability to be active, but it does not change her—it is powerfully enabling, not transformative. When Joan changes clothes, she does not, like Sackville-West, change her name and her gender. This constancy of identity is what, lacking it herself, Sackville-West searches for in the story of Joan of Arc. By displacing inconsistencies of character onto the narrative, Sackville-West uses the biography she writes to create a unified subject for Joan of Arc and for herself.

Sackville-West's biography is preoccupied with the construction of Joan's identity by Joan herself, her contemporaries, and other historians. In contrast to these versions, Sackville-West self-consciously creates a Joan of Arc who is not a miracle worker, whose sainthood goes almost unmentioned, but who led a remarkable, even heroic, life as a woman in the world of men. Sackville-West insists that "the real miracle was [Joan's] whole career, not a few isolated incidents" (Sackville-West, 1991: 363). Sackville-West creates a Joan who became a hero because of the active life she was able to lead when she dressed, like a man, for battle.

Much attention has been paid to Joan's attire. Sackville-West emphasizes early on in the biography "that her adoption of boy's clothes was later held against her as one of the principal articles of her accusation" (25). Sackville-West gives the common explanations for Joan's cross-dressing: ease of movement and fear of rape (86–87, 286–90, 303). However, Joan's dress, like her behavior, challenged the male dominated power structure of army, church, and state. She put on armor and told King, Bishop, and generals how to wage war—and she was right. That she was acting as a mouthpiece for God might explain her powerful information, but it could not excuse her appearance in full battle attire at the head of the army. Joan usurped male power when she dressed for battle.

Sackville-West begins her biography by looking at the various portraits by which we have come to imagine Joan, and in this gesture Sackville-West exposes her obsession with the interrelated problem of what Joan looked like and who Joan was. There is never a single answer to this question and the multiple answers Sackville-West finds are irreconcilable. "The initial difficulty" Sackville-West admits up front, "lies in disentangling the twisted strands of history before the pattern of Jeanne[4] can stand out, clear-cut, simple, uncompromising" (13). But if Sackville-West sees her task as the traditional construction of a unified identity for the biographical subject then she also faces, from the start, the uncertainty and the doubleness of Joan's identity. Sackville-West's first sentence, "No contemporary portrait of Jeanne d'Arc is known to exist" (1), initiates the biography's negotiation of speculation, memory, reconstruction, and theory that surround Joan like the clouds of butterflies that accompanied her standard (1). What emerges from Sackville-West's painstaking research is an attempt to organize images of Joan that present the contradiction inherent in the historical data and suggest nothing less than the instability of the subject itself:

> Pen and ink, equally active, have lent their services to the willing imagination, so that from these various mediums of the artist and the historian a double image clearly emerges: the image of Jeanne pensive and pastoral, or the image of Jeanne embattled and heroic…If these interpreters are to be believed, then Jeanne the peasant sat permanently with folded hands and upturned eyes, and Jeanne the captain permanently bestrode a charger whose forelegs never touched the ground.
>
> (2)

Sackville-West is critical of attempts to simplify Joan, to make her either the passive recipient of the word of God *or* the active leader of armies, peasant *or* warrior, maiden *or* soldier, feminine *or* masculine. Scorn is equally leveled at sentimentalizing versions of Joan: "you may be told that an English soldier made two pieces of wood into a cross, and gave it to her as the flames rose round her on the pyre. Such romantic facts and details have taken a hold on the general mind, abetted by such brilliant and untrustworthy artists as Mr. Bernard Shaw and M. Anatole France" (12). Sackville-West's desire for a "clear-cut, simple, uncompromising" Joan is not a wish for simplification. Sackville-West is not willing to give up the complexity of Joan's character, the confusion of her gender identity, the changes in her clothing, in order to produce a unified Joan. Sackville-West seems to be calling for a subject that can be imagined clearly even as it vacillates. Such a position, however, is not articulated. Like the images of Joan, Sackville-West is conflicted. She calls for a consistent identity for her subject, and yet she refuses to construct one at the expense of any of the contradictory aspects of Joan's life: Sackville-West has discovered the instability of the subject position, and, although she does not theorize it or even like it, she will not closet it away. Sackville-West resists the conventions that enable the traditional biography, but unlike Johnny Cash, she does not embrace the transformational potential such instability invites. The reading of Joan of Arc that Sackville-West reproduces in the biography is a complex example of resistance to the transformational potential of narrative, which is made even more striking by the remarkable transformation modeled by Joan herself.

In addition to the destabilizing effects of cross-dressing, there are other connections that Sackville-West points to between herself and Joan. Overtly sympathetic comments are common, as, when the Army is disbanded, Sackville-West writes: "Jeanne is sad to contemplate at this moment" (223). The biography is both the story of Joan's life and the story of Sackville-West's response to that story. It is also about the research that went into constructing it. The latter narrative is not just the story of Sackville-West's considerable difficulties and painstaking fact checking, but also of her own transformation into an historian. This is as much a cross-dressed position as Joan's, in that the biography adopts a masculine model of authority and knowledge, especially in its desire for totality and the covering over of lack. However, while neither her research nor her talents (foremost among them her fluency in French) can necessarily be faulted, in the role of biographer Sackville-West doesn't pretend to assume a traditional male role when she calls attention to, instead of omitting or filling, gaps in the narrative. Sackville-West is a biographer in drag, allowing the gaps in the armor to show that underneath, poking through at every joint, there is a woman writing about a woman.

Equally in breach of the traditional (i.e., masculine) historian's role are moments of identification that come in the form of asides that would suggest a coincidence only to someone looking for one:

> How queerly life turns out! How impossible that Jeanne, in spite of all her prescience, could have foreseen that I, trying in 1935 to interpret the facts of her existence from 1412 to 1428, should receive a visiting card from the *Cure Doyen de Domremy-la-Pucelle, Chanonine honoraire de Saint Die et d'Orleans, Chapelain d'honneur de Jeanne d'Arc, telephone Greux 7*.
>
> (77)

Sackville-West's excitement is palpable, but despite reproducing the entire visiting card of the Cure from Joan's hometown, Sackville-West makes no other comment on the incident.

Another striking personal moment is Sackville-West's response to a visit to Joan's birthplace, which she describes as if through the eyes of Joan herself: "If Jeanne were to return to Domremy to-day, she would notice but little change in the features of the landscape. She could stand at the top of the hill, and look across the valley at the hills opposite, with the same flat, characteristic, table-like top" (35). There is no need to add: as I have stood, and as I have seen. Sackville-West's assumption of Joan's position is obvious, and it is by no means an unusual fantasy. Indeed, it is commonplace to walk in the steps of any historical figure and imagine oneself to be either transported into the past or to resurrect the dead in the present. The rather purple, three-page description of Domremy openly points to a powerful moment in Sackville-West's fantasized connection with her heroine.

Joan is a powerful transference object for Sackville-West because Joan represents what Sackville-West sees herself as—not a woman passing as a man, as the outside world might occasionally see her, but a woman in a man's clothes, masculine and feminine at once. It is in this very way that Sackville-West describes Joan: "that inexplicable character, the girl-boy-captain—La Pucelle" (162). What Sackville-West sees when she looks at Joan is the ambiguity of her own gender identity. But what she also sees is a woman, not a child.

In avoiding easy answers that stabilize Joan's identity, Sackville-West opens up a space for uncertainty. This does not lead Sackville-West to speculation about Joan's uncertain sexuality but to elide it. Sackville-West does not open up the uncertainty of the inherently unstable subject position, but hysterically acts out the crisis of women in patriarchy. Catherine Clément calls hysteria "femininity in crisis" (Clément, 1983: 9) and femininity is certainly what Sackville-West both points out and wishes to repress in Joan. This conflict in representation is itself a crisis. In cross-dressing by a woman to pass as a man, the crisis of femininity is outwardly resolved by a denial of femininity altogether–femininity is hidden, repressed. Such a cross-dresser could be taken as a symbol of hysteria. Whether male to female or female to male, the cross-dresser represents the oscillation between masculine and feminine. Stable sexual identity is presented to the outside world, but for the cross-dresser, sexual identity is in perpetual flux. This is not the case for Joan of Arc, who does not

wear men's clothes to disguise her sex. She is a woman in men's clothes and therefore a representation of instability to all who see her. Repressing her gender identity is the active, albeit unconscious, task of her representers. Sackville-West does this not by forcing her to be either masculine or feminine but by seeing her as neither.

Freud's early definition of the cause of hysteria as an idea "intentionally [but not necessarily consciously] repressed from consciousness" (Freud, 1966, II:116) describes Sackville-West's strategy in the biography, which is filled with such repressions. Trying to avoid the sexual basis of an association, the hysteric transforms her fantasy into something more acceptable, more banal. The symptoms of hysteria come out of the less threatening fantasy: the smell of burnt pudding in the case of Miss Lucy R. (Freud, 1966, II:116), hearing the voice of God in the case of Joan of Arc. Lacan's understanding of hysteria as the inability to come to terms with feminine sexuality (Lacan, 1993: 170–5), pinpoints the origin of Sackville-West's repressions. By focusing on her clothes, Sackville-West never has to undress the object of her idealization.

Fascination with what Joan of Arc was wearing doubly covers up fascination with her (sexualized) body—even when what she wore is unknown: "It is not stated whether Jeanne was still wearing her own clothes when she saw Robert de Baudricourt for the second time, or whether she had already acquired the [male] servant's garb. In either case, he must have been considerably surprised by her reappearance" (Sackville-West, 1991: 87). Sackville-West shifts the attention from the story's crucial mysteries—how Joan gathered supporters and what her motivations were, how to account for the miracles—to another, more easily dismissed question of when, exactly, she first put on men's clothes. Sackville-West elides those things in Joan that cause discomfort: the spiritual voices she revealed and the physical body she concealed.

Along with Joan's voices, the manifest symptom of what we might now be tempted to describe as hysteria, Sackville-West skirts Joan's sexuality:

> I think it is not unfair to qualify her as unattractive. Men attempted no rape, nor were women jealous. She made war, but not love. Those who choose to take the purely religious point of view may maintain that some spiritual quality in her personality exalted her above all such human failings. Possibly. But human beings are human beings, slow to recognize the exceptional spiritual qualities, and there is no reason to suppose that they were less human in the fifteenth century than they are today…But somehow or other, for all the excitement of her startling notoriety, she clearly aroused neither the natural desire of men nor the competitive mistrust of women.
>
> (6–7)

From Joan's apparent lack of sexual attractiveness Sackville-West infers a total lack of sexuality. Joan neither provokes nor, it would seem, has sexual desires.

Sackville-West seems to be basing her deductions on common sense, a characteristic she values highly when she attributes it to Joan (3–4). But common sense tends to blindly accept the sweeping generalizations and traditional gender role assumptions of the dominant perspective. If Joan received no sexual attention it must be because men didn't find her attractive. This is a deeply troubling assumption, an uncritical strategy Sackville-West also uses to summarily dismiss spiritual explanations that would bar her own identification with Joan. In the last chapter Sackville-West says, "I am not, myself, what is called a 'religious' person in the orthodox sense of the phrase, nor yet a practicing member of any organized Church" (327).[5] Joan of Arc could be an object of identification if only the religious element could be omitted. Sackville-West does just that by refusing to explore the etiology of the mystical (or hysterical) voices Joan claimed to have heard.

Catherine Clément describes the hysteric as "one who was able to repeat in the register of symptoms all the history written in feminine mythologies and who suffered from the reminiscence of the other[s]…the hysteric resumes and assumes the memories of the others" [the suffering women of the past; e.g., the madwoman, the sorceress] (Clément, 1983: 4–5). Joan of Arc, as she is popularly fantasized, is easily added to this group of pre-hysterics, and Sackville-West is her hysterical rememberer. But Sackville-West represses the hysterical symptom, the voices. Freud, according to Clément "traverses [hysteria] with ears open but eyes shut" (ibid.: 5). The opposite is true of Sackville-West's encounter with hysteria in Joan of Arc. In Joan, Sackville-West sees herself clearly, but she does not listen to Joan's voices or her own. Joan's initial experience of the voices of Saint Catherine and Saint Margaret are reported, along with Joan's other miracles, in a matter of fact way. We get just the facts, as Joan recounted them at her trial, as if the incident was a point of information no more important than the household tasks Joan performed. All affect—both Joan's and the narrator's—is depressed, a typical affective state in hysteria.

In contrast, on other occasions Sackville-West's narrative voice is peppered with personal responses that are quickly hushed up by the more conventional voice of the historian who backs up each point with quotations and multiple references until she is disguised as a crisscross-dressed historian—a woman dressed as a man dressed as a lady.[6] This false-falsetto voice of authority is in turn undermined by digressions, throwing the entire narrative into hysterical undecidability.

Sackville-West tries to build an integrated identity for Joan that resists omission. In trying to do this, the biography illustrates the disruption between the desire to create the illusion of an integrated subject and the inability to sustain such an illusion without repressing inconsistencies in the subject. Sackville-West's conflicted aim is acted out in a persistent rhetorical strategy that presents itself as a logical examining of contradictions in Joan's story but in fact is itself a disruption of the narrative just before it reveals its gaps. The narrative is disrupted to consider unsolvable contradictions about

insignificant details. Sackville-West seems genuinely distressed by sources who cannot agree, omissions of information, minute gaps in the story line. At one point in the narrative she complains: "One wishes that these witnesses could agree better. It makes it terribly confusing for anybody who wants to discover what actually happened" (Sackville-West, 1991: 171n). Such frustration is understandable enough—we have all been frustrated during our research—but we usually leave such moments out of the final draft. Sackville-West not only includes, but also emphasizes, the points at which her story fails to come together completely. The lack of consistency usually centers around inconsequential details: difficulty in pinpointing everyone's exact whereabouts at every moment and inconsistencies over minor points. Like the Cure's visiting card, they seem like items that would be ignored by anyone not specifically on the lookout for them.

Sackville-West does seem to be on the lookout, searching all available information for trouble spots. In part this has the effect of showing her to be a thorough, relentless researcher. But it also makes one wonder why she bothers to mention each disturbance. Her laudable cross-referencing and fact checking has not produced the tight narrative such methods indicate she is trying to construct. If this story is based on facts, then the absence of them constitutes a moment in the narrative that ends up being highlighted rather than elided, in large part because it is a moment of emotional intensity for the narrator.

Calling attention to the gaps, discussing them in detail and attempting to resolve them, increases at points of heightened intensity in the narrative, so that Joan's most remarkable actions are deferred again and again by a discussion of the difficulty of the research. Describing the momentous day the Dauphin's troops arrived at Orleans, for example, after she positions Joan at the brink of meeting the army, "At dawn on the following morning, May 4th, the eve of Ascension, the army then being only a league away, she rode out… with five hundred men, to meet them," Sackville-West interrupts with a quibble preceded by a complaint that brings the story to a grinding halt:

> It is a little difficult to discover who was where on this occasion. In fact, the accounts of different witnesses and chroniclers of Jeanne's history are sometimes so much at variance in their details that it turns into a sort of picture puzzle whose pieces refuse to fit. Where, for instance, was La Hire?
>
> (167)

Unable to come to any conclusions about this question, the narrative of the battle of Orleans continues until Sackville-West interrupts again: "At this point, the reading of the various accounts produces a kind of uproar in the head, much as the actual occasion must have produced an uproar…The witnesses become confused, and we are left with an impression of scared people running hither and thither, with Jeanne raging and storming in the midst of them" (169). Joan is the stable point, the eye of the storm that the narrative

whirls round and round, defining her as a negative space. And Joan is a negative space in the various narratives, having contributed no written documentation of her own.

Like the resistant subject in analysis, Sackville-West does her best to distract us from this powerful vortex by inserting, at this point, comments that call our attention to the one aspect of Joan Sackville-West is comfortable discussing: her clothes. And this time, on the brink of the action that gains her fame, even her clothes, or rather who put them on her, are in dispute: "D'Aulon says that he got up at once, and armed her as quickly as he could. Louis de Contes, her little page, says that her hostess and the child Charlotte armed her" (169). A footnote presents more information about the inconsequential puzzle: "Here again, there is a slight confusion, for Louis de Contes says she came down to him *before* she had put on her armor, but was armed by the time he returned with her horse. Simon Beucroix, Aignan Viole, a lawyer of Orleans, and Colette Millet, the wife of a clerk, all endorse the story of Jeanne's sudden uprising [from a nap]" (170, emphasis in the original). It is only after raising a further conflict that the footnote concludes and allows us to return to the narrative it has interrupted, duplicated with repeated testimony, and confounded with a problem that carries no significance in terms of the events of the day. The witnesses could be said to agree about more than not, all of them placing Joan in the exact same situation, sleeping, at the outbreak of the battle, but Sackville-West insists on their differences and thus confounds the story not so much by the trivial question of whether Joan was armed or not when she descended the stairs but by interrupting the action to consider such a point. Sackville-West calls our attention to the story's construction by possibly unreliable and contradictory accounts given by real, fallible, ordinary people. The result is that Joan's story becomes less the tale of a saint and more the description of a series of confusing events that had consequences greater than their somewhat everyday appearance (due to Sackville-West's emphasis on naps and meals and dressing) would at first indicate.

Sackville-West's narrative duplicates the structure of an analysis being resisted. The narrative continues, compulsively speaking of the details of the life being examined, but constant disruptions are used to focus attention on problems of the moment. Concern about Joan's attire delays her entry into battle. Attention is diverted to petty distractions, to the day residue, so that symptoms are examined instead of allowed to speak. Sackville-West repeatedly interrupts to dispute, by implication, the possibility of reconstructing the story of Joan's victory. This narrative unreliability represents the emergence, against Sackville-West's will, of the disunified subject—the unconscious speaking in spite of the analysand's attempts at repression. This is the voice of the symptom.

Sackville-West's determination to consider all information results in an inability to conclude that subverts the authority of the text and ultimately its ability to do what (even historical) narratives are traditionally expected to do: create a coherent/unified story, a stable/unified portrait of an individual.

The rhetorical devices Sackville-West uses in her struggle to create a non-contradictory narrative thus reproduce the contradictions she wishes to eradicate, but they are more safely located in the story than in its subject. Sackville-West displaces instability onto the narrative so that it is disrupted and disruptive while Joan is protected, the stable point of identification and control. The narrative, like the witness, may "become confused" as long as Joan can "rage…and storm…in the midst of them" (169). She may or may not be dressed, but we always know exactly where she is.

Sackville-West is not interested in Joan as a saint, and that is partly the reason for the halting gait of the narrative as it approaches her moments of triumph. Joan's canonization, which had occurred only sixteen years prior to the publication of Sackville-West's biography, is noted only on the title page. Joan's miracles are considered in much the same way that the contradictions in the witness's stories are handled, with every attempt made to reconcile them with a consistent and non-miraculous explanation of events. "How are we to account for this extraordinary story?" (256), Sackville-West asks about the incident in which Joan apparently leaps from a sixty-foot tall tower and lands unharmed. Sackville-West's commentary emphasizes the peculiar rather than potentially divine nature of this event: "It is all very inexplicable and contradictory. And even could we explain the psychological mystery [why she jumped] the physical aspect remains equally baffling" (257). Sackville-West goes so far as to consult an orthopedic surgeon about a theory that, at the age of nineteen, Joan's bones might have been pliable enough to resist breaking at impact (257–8). When attempts to explain the event fail, the narrative simply moves on after summing up the impossible solutions:

> We are left, therefore, to take our choice of the explanations. Either it was some extraordinary chance which preserved Jeanne from injury, or else she did actually suffer some injury but remained unaware of it, or else she was upheld by some inexplicable agency. In any case, the incident is, to say the least of it, remarkable.
>
> (258)

Sackville-West cannot, at all costs, consider the explanation that made Joan a saint. God, in Sackville-West's account, is at most an "inexplicable agency." Never can she consider the central point of uncertainty: were Joan's voices the voices of saints or was she hysterical? Sackville-West sidesteps this question, dismissing it by saying that Joan certainly believed that she was genuinely hearing the voices of saints (257). The central instability of the story is clouded by the smaller uncertainties of detail that compulsively repeat as they act out Sackville-West's struggle. The distractions are symptoms of the larger undecidability of Joan's character, which represents the instability of all identity. Sackville-West can ask: what did she look like? What did she wear? But these questions are stand-ins for: who was she? To answer, we are both women dressed as men, represses the question even as it allows us all to act.

In order to continue to write about Joan of Arc, Sackville-West had to avoid asking certain questions. God could not be responsible for Joan's voices; however, if the mystical explanation for the voices is rejected, they become a symptom of hysteria and as such they are evidence of Joan's conflicted sexuality. Neither solution allows Sackville-West to continue an unproblematic identification with Joan, an identification in which Joan is taken as the biographer's ideal ego.

Sackville-West disrupts the narrative with some petty concern about armor or the flexibility of bones at the point when Joan is moving away from the dyadic position of the imaginary ideal ego, in which Sackville-West can identify with her directly, and approaching the mediated ego-ideal in the symbolic. Slovoj Žižek distinguishes these two positions in this way:

> The relation between imaginary and symbolic identification—between the ideal ego [Idealich] and the ego-ideal [Ich-Ideal]—is—to use the distinction made by Jacques-Alain Miller (in his unpublished Seminar)—that between "constituted" and "constitutive" identification: to put it simply, imaginary identification is identification with the image in which we appear likeable to ourselves, with the image representing "what we would like to be," and symbolic identification, identification with the very place *from where* we are being observed, *from where* we look at ourselves so that we appear to ourselves likeable, worthy of love.
>
> (Žižek, 1989: 105, emphasis original)

Sackville-West can identify with Joan in the imaginary: Joan is the image of the woman she would like to be. This is the mirror-stage misrecognition of oneself as whole. Symbolic identification requires a third term. The father disrupts the mother-infant bond and introduces law, language, individuation at the expense of wholeness. Sackville-West's identification with Joan of Arc is disrupted by God.

Sackville-West, in recreating Joan in the 20th Century, has lost the ability to believe, as she insists Joan did, that God is really speaking to his saint: no muse inspires this biography. Sackville-West needs Joan to be the ideal image with which she can identify. For Sackville-West, Joan is an active woman, a cross-dresser not a saint. This ignores the image Sackville-West says Joan had of herself. Joan is the perfect woman/saint not from her own imaginary perspective, but as she sees herself from God's perspective. Because the Joan Sackville-West sees is different from the way Sackville-West believes Joan saw herself, there are all sorts of contradictions in the story which Sackville-West, in trying to create a unified portrait in an uncracked mirror, desperately struggles to resolve.

Sackville-West's constant problematizing of Joan's story distracts from its central problem: the voices. This is a problem Sackville-West, if she is to retain the imaginary whole of Joan as ideal ego must avoid. Sackville-West constantly asserts, without really asking the question, that Joan believed the

voices were real. But this solves nothing since a Joan (re)created by an unbelieving Sackville-West could only be a fake or a hysteric. Sackville-West rejects both possibilities to stand uneasily in front of a mirror whose unified image is kept whole by displacing its constant fragmenting onto the frame. The problems in the story occur because historical accounts are filled with gaps, the witnesses cannot agree, and other biographies sentimentalize. Sackville-West recreates in the character of Joan herself the very problems she locates in the other narratives of Joan's life. Sackville-West points out the inconsistencies of her sources, while her construction of Joan is founded on a refusal to acknowledge, much less confront, the "inconsistency" of Joan's character as she imagined it in the 20th century.

The desire to write a traditional biography that tells a unified life-story forces Sackville-West to confront Joan's lack of unity. Joan is either a liar or insane, a hysteric or a psychotic. To save her biography and her fantasy Sackville-West would have to sacrifice Joan, and this she cannot do, since the function of her biography is the creation, through Joan, of an ideal ego for the biographer. For Sackville-West to recognize the instability of Joan would mean recognizing it in herself. This would disrupt the illusion of a unified subject position—and lead to the recognition of the lack in the Other (Lacan, 1977: 292–324). Sackville-West would be forced to hear, in answer to her question as biographer: what do you want? what do you (Joan) want of me (Sackville-West)?, not the answer: be my biographer, construct my image (in your own image/for your own image); but instead: I want nothing of you. Loss of a unified Joan would mean loss of self and loss of the *objet a* or "object cause of desire" (Lacan, 1981: 179). The *objet a*, giving as it does the illusion of satisfaction, the sense that if we could have it we would have made a real and intimate connection to another, is, in this case, *Joan of Arc* the biography. Recognition of the instability of the subject would threaten Sackville-West's identity as it is constituted by her identification with Joan and as a writer of biographies.

Sackville-West cannot allow Joan to be a saint (the ego-ideal). Her life is what made her saintly, Sackville-West says, not her contact with the afterlife, not her symbolic identification with God. Sackville-West attributes intermittencies to the story of Joan's life, thus protecting the stable construct of Joan's identity. This process is identical to that which Lacan describes as occurring within the individual's construction of a sense of a stable identity. According to Lacan the subject "transfers the permanence of his desire to an ego that is nevertheless intermittent, and inversely, protects himself from his desire [which it would be impossible to satisfy] by attributing to it [the desire] these very intermittencies" (Lacan, 1977 : 312–13).

We cannot tolerate the idea of an intermittent ego, so we say that it is desire that manifests itself intermittently. We cannot tolerate the idea of constant desire, so we say that it is the ego that is constant. This is the strategy of Sackville-West's biography, and for the same reason: ego/Joan must seem whole; desire/story therefore is seen as intermittent, inconsistent. The

narrative strategy of this biography comes to the brink of the subversion of the subject and retreats to preserve the unified subject position. The details of the story don't add up, but Joan of Arc, regardless of her clothes, is stable. This stability is what Sackville-West seems to need from Joan. Joan becomes a model of active femininity–not secret, closeted desire, but openly female, fiercely active.

Christopher Reed makes the important observation that "Constantly behind—or metaphorized within—the varieties of intellectual charges made against Bloomsbury is the group's transgression of patriarchy's ultimate prohibition: the feminized man" (59). Hand in hand with this transgression is its obverse: the masculine woman. While I wouldn't want to argue about whether this prohibition is even more ultimate, simply penultimate, or equally ultimate with the prohibition against the feminized man, I will argue that it is, in the work of the Bloomsbury Group, more hidden and more easily dismissed. While there were many male members who were, within the safety of the group, openly gay, the lesbianism of the female members was largely ignored by this group of friends.[7] Virginia Woolf complains about this in a letter to Vita Sackville-West:

> "Then Morgan [E. M. Forster] says he's worked it out and one spends 3 hours on food, 6 on sleep, 4 on work, 2 on love. Lytton [Strachey] says 10 on love. I say the whole day on love. I say its [sic] seeing things through a purple shade. But you've never been in love they say."
>
> (Woolf, 1975–1977, *Letters*, 18 Feb. 1927, 3:334)

Sackville-West was not so reticent; it is clear from the journal included in *Portrait of a Marriage* that Sackville-West enjoyed an active sex life with several female partners and that this included elaborate and extended episodes of cross-dressing.[8]

While the aspect of Sackville-West passing as a man is not unfamiliar to readers of *Orlando*, Woolf's love letter to her "friend," it might be easy for us today to ignore the brazen quality of this activity. Not only is it commonplace for women to wear men's clothes, and even passing as a man and getting found out would not, now, lead to being burned at the stake, but it is also easy to ignore the "masculinized woman" because, as Marjorie Garber points out, from the dominant perspective in which femininity is devalued, there's nothing strange about women wanting to be men. Who wouldn't want to be powerful, successful, heroic, and, just simply, better in the eyes of society? No matter how much we might wish to deny it, in a patriarchal society penis envy is a fact for women. Even if a woman does not want an actual penis, she certainly may want to be treated like someone who has one. Cross-dressing to pass for a man is a sure way to satisfy this desire. Patriarchy breeds hysteria, but hysteria challenges patriarchy. To dismiss Sackville-West (as Julian or as Orlando) as just playing dress up is to ignore the role appearance plays in the construction of identity. For Sackville-West clothes are about sex—one's own

sex as well as the sex one has with others. In her struggle for self-definition, she made herself over, imagined herself different, and that difference has to do centrally with having an active place in the world that was largely available only to men—or to women dressed like men.

Changing clothes is a powerful moment in Sackville-West's fantasy of Joan, so powerful it cannot be examined without a certain befuddlement. Clothes become the arena for staging rebellion. For Sackville-West cross-dressing represents the entrance into the active world of masculinity: it is a way of coming out of the closet in a new set of clothes. This is not a rejection of herself or her beloved Joan as women, but a rejection of the passivity that is expected to accompany femininity.

In her novel *All Passion Spent* Sackville-West makes this point clear:

> the rift between herself and life was not the rift between man and woman, but the rift between the worker and the dreamer…She would go no further than to acknowledge that the fact of her being a woman made the situation a degree more difficult.
>
> (Sackville-West, 1984: 164)

Lady Slane explicitly does not blame her husband for imposing expectations on her that made it impossible for her to pursue her dreams of becoming a painter: "He was not to blame. He had only taken for granted the things he was entitled to take for granted, thereby…entering into the general conspiracy to defraud her of her chosen life" (164). Everyone expected her to be a good wife to her husband, and Lady Slane buckled in the face of these expectations. She labels herself a dreamer, not a worker. The first step in imagining herself as a worker is to imagine herself free of the additional degree of difficulty that comes from being a woman. In her fantasies of success, she imagines herself as a young man: "The image of the girl faded, and in its place stood a slender boy. He was a boy, but essentially he was a sexless creature, a mere symbol and emanation of youth" (149). Even in her fiction Sackville-West creates fantasies in which to be active is to be masculine and sexuality is repressed.

Clothes hold out freedom. One does not have to become a man, just pass for one. Masculinity, like femininity, is only a matter of dress up. Sackville-West writes a fantasy of power and activity that Joan of Arc acted out. Sackville-West identifies with Joan because of a physical transformation that is about more than just clothes. It is a challenge to sexual identity, a rejection of feminine passivity, and the assumption, with masculine dress, of the masculine power to assert (feminine) desire.

In the journal entries describing cross-dressing during her affair with Violet Trefusis, Sackville-West writes:

> I dressed as a boy. It was easy…I never felt so free as when I stepped off the kerb, down Piccadilly, alone….. I walked along, smoking a cigarette,

> buying a newspaper off a little boy who called me "sir," and being accosted now and then by women…(The extraordinary thing was, how natural it all was for me.).
>
> (109–110)

and:

> I never appreciated anything so much as living like that with my tongue perpetually in my cheek, and in defiance of every policeman I passed.
>
> (116)

Men's clothes gave Sackville-West access to a feeling of defiant power, a place in the outside world. They allowed her freedom of movement—not just because they are easier to move in. Dressed as a man, free from the constraints of traditional femininity, she imagined active lives for women that include sexual desire, anger, and fighting battles—all miracles. For Sackville-West, cross-dressing is the first step toward throwing off the constraints of femininity, which are in her view as superficial as a petticoat—not inherent qualities but a matter of wardrobe.

Joan of Arc is the fulfillment of Sackville-West's fantasy, and in her biography she struggles to make a narrative, to create an analysis, in which all the puzzle pieces fit into place. She shakes the box of history and the pieces jump, but they fall again in disarray. Sackville-West points to the uncomfortable overlaps and unfillable gaps, but she cannot look at the pieces themselves. Joan of Arc was a disorderly woman dressed as a man; Sackville-West, characteristically dressed in gardening boots, trousers, and pearls can celebrate Joan's clothes and the triumphant disorder she brought to the war she believed she could win, but the biography cannot look at the disorder of her identity. Her sexuality, her hysteria, her mysticism are repressed.

In *Vested Interests* Marjorie Garber argues that to see a cross-dresser as a man passing for a woman or a woman passing for a man—descriptions that lead to such glib conclusions as X is really a woman—is to miss the point. Indeed, cross-dressing disrupts our notions of stable gender identity, a disruption that is restabilized by pinning down the subject's "real" gender. Garber argues that cross-dressing does more than swing two binaries into oscillation. In her thesis, the cross-dresser posits a third position: "we could argue that Joan of Arc articulates a 'third' category called 'maid'" (11).[9] This position, Garber argues, is comparable to the Lacanian symbolic order, which, in Garber's definition "is, likewise, not a realm apart, but the transference onto the level of the signifying chain of those binary structures that, in the imaginary dimension, relate everything back to a fictional 'one'" (12). The child identifies the mother as either "like me" or "not like me" depending on the child's sex. The cross-dresser cannot be simply "like me" or "not like me" because in such a case gender is forced to be realized as a construct in the symbolic. Sackville-West at first might appear to be moving into this mode of

identification with Joan, seeing her as, "like me," a woman dressed as a man, but this identification for Sackville-West is really a return to the imaginary identification of the child seeing her reflection in the eyes of the mother who unites and unifies the child's sense of self, creating a misrecognition of wholeness. Joan is thus Sackville West's mirror/mother, holding the biographer in her imagined arms to present the unified self in which even cross-dressed gender is stable.

Joan is a stable figure of fantasy for Sackville-West, a fantasy that works as long as it has no gaps. Because it has no gaps it cannot be translated into a figure outside of fantasy—it cannot be a model for Sackville-West herself, who is not the active woman she fantasizes Joan to be, but either Julian or a shy recluse hiding in her garden. Sackville-West's biography fails to do more than imagine active femininity as drag—not a third option but simply the masculinization of women. In failing to confront the crisis of feminine sexuality, the biography presents hysteria instead of working-through the conflicts its symptoms disguise. Joan remains an imaginary ideal ego, not a possible model for action in the symbolic. Sackville-West cannot allow her one-to-one identification with Joan to be disrupted by a third term. Such a disruption of the dyad, which introduces awareness of sexual difference and problematizes desire, creates the instability Sackville-West could not tolerate.

Perhaps one reason for the difficulties in Sackville-West's biography is in her position as outsider. She was born into the aristocracy, but she could not inherit her family estate, Knole, because she was a girl. She wrote for a living, but she was not accepted into literary circles. Even as she was falling in love with her, Virginia Woolf famously described Sackville-West as "writing with a pen of brass" (Letter to Jacques Raverat, 26 Dec. 1924; Woolf, 1975–1977, *Letters*: 3:150). She wrote openly of sexuality to her husband, Harold Nicolson, but both were largely closeted publicly. It is hard not to fantasize a supportive group of friends that could have given Sackville-West a safe space in which to explore identity and desire. For the male, and to a limited extent the female, members of the Bloomsbury Group, the stability of a community with shared political goals provided the security necessary for throwing gender and identity into confusion. They had a safe place from which to speak, unlike Sackville-West who was mired in relationships (with parents, husband, children) that demanded a pretense of traditional gender roles. Sackville-West turned to the charade of assuming the opposite role as Julian, but cross-dressing to pass as a man does not challenge the structure of heterosexual relationships. Similarly, Sackville-West insures that Joan doesn't challenge the traditional roles of wife and mother by avoiding any mention of Joan's sexuality. Granted, whatever she might say would be speculation, and Sackville-West, speculate though she often does, is determined to dress like a real historian. Like Julian, Joan of Arc is a fantasy that provides a safe place from which to speak—but not from which to fight.

In our commonly held fantasies of Joan of Arc it seems to me that she oscillates between girl (female child) and man (male adult). Donning armor

not only changes her gender, it matures her, makes her grow up. We are surprised to discover that she was only 19 when she died. But Sackville-West constantly reminds us of Joan's age. It is important to her that regardless of gender Joan remains as young as possible. Sackville-West refuses to allow Joan to grow up, keeping her a prepubescent tomboy from whom any behavior might be expected and tolerated. The fantasy is a regression to a time before sexual desire creates conflict and society imposes control on (feminine) desire through rigid gender roles. As we saw in the previous chapter, the male members of the Bloomsbury Group itself were able to make use of the group as a family in which they could work-through their fantasies—using them to construct shared alternatives—and grow up safely, but for Sackville-West, circling the periphery of the group, there was only regressive acting out that turned away from aroused desire.

As I have argued elsewhere, Sackville-West's concern with gender and sexuality influenced Virginia Woolf's work. During their affair, Woolf began to write more openly about feminine sexuality—notably in *Orlando*—and to imagine strong, self-contained women who struggled to find a voice through which to express their experience. In *A Room of One's Own* Woolf draws on Sackville-West's biography of Aphra Behn when she rewrites literary history through the biographies of women writers. Sackville-West's construction of Joan of Arc as a woman and fearless warrior who marches through a great war is in keeping with Bloomsbury Group biographies that remake history through a recognition of powerful women as central characters. Sackville-West goes a step further when she gives us Joan as a driving force—a woman armed for battle. Sackville-West may misrecognize herself in Joan, but it is a méconnaissance of empowerment. This is the quilting point between many Modernist biographies.

Notes

1 Author's note: I would like to thank the members of the University of Minnesota Lacan Study Group, and especially Peter Canning, Michelle Lekas, and Jack Marmorstein, for providing a safe space in which to think through the central ideas on Sackville-West and Joan of Arc. Without conversations with Jason Shaffer I would not have been pushed to work-though the Sissinghurst journal material. I am grateful to him for the realizations that work brought me to as much as for his contributions throughout this chapter.

2 Sackville-West is in good company. Other winners of the Hawthornden Prize include Ted Hughes (1961), Graham Greene (1941), Evelyn Waugh (1936) Robert Graves (1936), Seán O'Casey (1925), and David Garnett (1923).

3 Sackville-West's biographies include: *Knole and the Sackvilles* (1922), *Aphra Behn* (1927), *Andrew Marvell* (1929), *Pepita* (1937), and *The Eagle and the Dove* (1943).

4 Except in the title and foreword, Sackville-West consistently uses the French spelling, Jeanne, to refer to her subject. In this way, Sackville-West introduces yet another doubleness into the question of Joan of Arc's identity. There has been scant critical work on Sackville-West's biography of Joan of Arc. The most extensive analysis is in Suzanne Raitt, *Vita and Virginia: The Work and Friendship of V. Sackville-West and Virginia Woolf* (Raitt, 1993: 117–145). Raitt reads Sackville-

West's *Saint Joan of Arc* and *The Eagle and the Dove: A Study in Contrasts, St. Teresa of Avila, St Thérèse of Lisieux* in the context of Sackville-West's relationship with her sister-in-law, Gwen St. Aubyn and their search "for some kind of spiritual solution to the problems of their lives" (118). Raitt reads Sackville-West's biographies in terms of Lacan (although not in Lacanian terms), in order to "trace a tradition of mystic companionships between women, and suggest an alternative reading of the image of the female mystic to that proposed by French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan" (118). Stevens' views support Raitt's on the subject of Sackville-West's motives for writing about Joan of Arc (Stevens, 1973: 63–64). His discussion of Sackville-West as a biographer (91–97) engages contemporary reviews including the *Times Literary Supplement*, 6 June, 1936, p. 469 (64); *Manchester Guardian*, 10 July 1936, p. 7 (94); *Liverpool Daily Post*, 10 June 1936; and *The Church Times* (94), 1 June 1936 (94–95). Watson's book on Sackville-West for the Twayne series includes a descriptive section on *Saint Joan of Arc* (Watson, 1972: 46–50).

5 Sackville-West's portrayal of Joan, with its neglect of the religious aspect of Joan's story, prefigures Hélène Cixous' own wish for Joan as a non-religious role model:

> I have gone back and forth in vain through the ages and through the stories within my reading, yet find no woman into whom I can slip…I can never lay down my arms. Of course, Joan of Arc is someone; but for me, a Jew and suspicious of anything related to the Church and its ideological rule, she is totally uninhabitable. But otherwise I am with her—for her energy, her unique confidence, the stark simplicity of her action, her clear-cut relationship with men—and for her trial and her stake.
>
> (Cixous, 1988: 77)

6 In "Blessings in Disguise" Susan Gubar writes, "What I am suggesting, then, is that the male narrator is at least metaphorically a kind of mask worn by the feminine writer to attain the trappings of authority" (Gubar, 1981: 485).

7 In his "Love Letter," Jacques Lacan refers to the woman's identification with the "hommosexual" man as the only way to love him, a position that throws her into hysteria. According to Lacan, man's discomfort with woman as the *object a* led him to replace her with God, where the discomfort could be better tolerated since it provided a model for goodness (man could strive to be as good as God was good) and a means of pride and ability to comfort each other for bearing up under the strain. Men then related, not to women, but to God and to each other in their struggles to be as good as God. Lacan calls the relationship between men "hommosexual." The only position for women in this social construct is to love men for loving God and to identify with men (who love God). This male identification forces women who love into the position of hysterics (Lacan, 1975: 73–82, translated in Mitchell and Rose, 1982: 149–161). This dynamic seems to be largely replicated in the Bloomsbury Group, which consisted of, primarily, gay men who suffered, not for God but for ideas, and women who—barred from open lesbianism—could only wish they were like the men. They got their wish by being successful artists, too, but their lack of emotional stability (in the case of Virginia Woolf most obviously) is testimony to the hysterical position they were forced to occupy. I am indebted here, as elsewhere, to Peter Canning's interpretation of *Encore* for my understanding of Lacan. See Jane Marcus for a discussion of Woolf's attitude toward and attack on the "terrible reality of academic homosexual misogyny" (Marcus, 1987: 164) in *A Room of One's Own* (*Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy*, chapter 8).

8 See Glendinning, 1983, Marcus, 1987, Lee, 1968, Barrett and Cramer, 1997, Sproles, 2006 and, especially, the women's letters to one another.

9 Sackville-West makes the same point, without the theoretical framework, when she refers to Joan as "that inexplicable character, the girl-boy-captain—La Pucelle [maid or virgin]" (162).

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Part 3

Narrative instability

7 Reflective reading, faith, and transformation in Susan Howatch's Church of England novels

Transference of faith

Various as psychoanalytic approaches to literature are, they do not often consider the parallels between reading fiction and clinical practices. Early use of reader-response techniques, exemplified by Norman Holland's now classic *Five Readers Reading,* encouraged the application and analysis of readers' associations to texts in order to deepen literary insights. More recently, Dominick LaCapra (1994) has explored the tense distinction between "acting out" and "working-through" as responses to the trauma of the Holocaust. Building on these clinically and theoretically informed approaches, I explore Howatch's fiction for insight into the mechanism of transference, which can occur within the analytic and reading experiences. As part of my investigation of this elusive concept, I challenged myself to conduct a self-analysis in which I focus on the transferential responses I experienced as a reader of Howatch's work. I intersperse the material of this self-analysis throughout the more traditional critical essay that follows in the hope that critical and associative responses will combine into a deeper exploration of what we read and who we are as readers than either alone could achieve.[1]

Each of Susan Howatch's six novels dramatizing the evolution of the Church of England in the twentieth century replicates the structure of a classic psychoanalysis. The first novel in the series, *Glittering Images*, does this most directly. We are told the series of events that lead up to the narrator's, or analysand's, entry into analysis; then the bulk of the narrative focuses on the analysis itself, which takes far more time than the events it seems to be about. The analyst, in this case Father Jon Darrow, is more directive than we would expect his Freudian counterpart to be, but he shares the quality essential for a successful analysis: he can command the analysand's transferential responses, and he can control his own counter-transference. Darrow, like the analyst, is, in Lacanian terms, "supposed to know."

This phrase, like most of Lacan's phrases, means at least two things.[2] The analysand believes that the analyst is entitled know what the analysand will say, and the analysand expects the analyst to know already. But to know what? To know how the analysis is supposed to be conducted? To know how

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the analysis is supposed to turn out? To know what the analysand is going to say next? To know what is going on in the analysand's mind? To know what is going on in the analysand's unconscious? The analyst is "supposed" to know all of these things for the analyst is supposed to know the truth about analysis and about the analysand. The analysand may be the first-person narrator of the analysis, but the analyst is not, as we might imagine, the ideal reader who sympathetically understands context and nuance. For the analysand, the analyst is the author of the analysis.

The analysand's supposition is what gives the analysand confidence in the analyst and the analytic process. It makes the analysis a safe place in which to speak and remember and understand. It makes analysis possible. This is the beginning of the transference. Initiated by the analysand's faith in the analyst's authority, transference occurs as the analysand shifts the powerful emotional responses he has for others onto the analyst. Transference responses can be positive or negative. For an analysis to be complete, both positive and negative transference must occur. Carefully trained to understand this process and control her reactions (or counter-transference), the analyst helps the analysand recognize and "work-through" these emotional responses by finding their sources in past traumas.

Trauma results from a conflict within the analysand. When we are unable to come to terms with powerful emotional responses, our traumatic feelings can be repressed. Incomplete repression can produce inexplicable symptoms that appear unrelated to the trauma or impulsive, uncharacteristic behavior, which Freud refers to as "acting out" (Freud, 1966: XII:151 and XXIII:176). Powerful emotional conflicts typically revolve around people about whom the analysand feels intense ambivalence. For Father Charles Ashworth, the first person narrator of *Glittering Images*, this is his judgmental stepfather, whom he both loves and fears.

Ashworth seeks spiritual counsel from Father Jon Darrow at a time of emotional crisis. He is not seeking an analysis, but something very like it: sanctuary. Ashworth needs a safe place, and it is Darrow's authority, his ability to be someone supposed to know, that comforts Ashworth. Ashworth is a priest and scholar. Having been sent by his archbishop to investigate the behavior of Bishop Jardine of Starbridge, Ashworth is confounded by the discovery that the scandal he has been sent to discover is worse than anyone had imagined. Indiscretion is actual impropriety. Not only is Bishop Jardine having an affair with his wife's companion, Lyle, but this proves to be a long-standing arrangement in which all three have conspired. Ashworth's shock is more than the result of having his delicate sensibilities startled by ecclesiastic scandal. The crisis goes deeper than this.

Ashworth has unwittingly entered into a ménage strikingly like his own family. Jardine is uncannily reminiscent of Ashworth's dominating stepfather. This is a powerful transference relationship, which Darrow immediately recognizes. Darrow also understands that this sort of re-experience of one's childhood relationships leads to acting out on a grand scale, which is exactly

what occurs when Ashworth marries the pregnant Lyle, who plays the role of his own mother in this transposed scheme.

Ashworth is willing to accept Darrow as the one "supposed to know" for several reasons: Darrow has the authority of the church behind him, he has the bearing, and he can read minds. The analyst's ability to interpret may make her seem clairvoyant, paralleling Darrow's psychic abilities. Whether extrasensory perception or just perception, the ability to know more (as opposed to knowing best[3]) confers authority on the analyst and the confessor. Charles Ashworth believes not only that Darrow knows what is going on but also that he should know what is going on. Darrow's ability to literally read minds makes good Ashworth's double supposition and makes Darrow the perfect analyst—perhaps too perfect. Ashworth's positive father-transference to Jon Darrow allows him to work-through much of the repressed trauma of his childhood. But he is unable to complete the analysis by working-through his negative feelings for his stepfather, whom he felt he could never please, within his relationship with Darrow.

Jardine has already engaged Ashworth's negative transference; this is what instigated the acting out flight to Darrow. Even though he is finally able to gain access to the positive side of his ambivalence and thus contact his real father, Ashworth is unable to transfer the negative feelings he has for his stepfather to Darrow. This is due, at least in part, to Darrow's insecurity and need for admiration, which has such disastrous effects in the next novel in the sequence, *Glamorous Powers*. Because of his need for approval, Darrow has only partial control over his counter-transference. Unable to complete the analysis, Ashworth continues to act out by condemning Jardine and marrying Lyle. Darrow recognizes Ashworth's behavior as acting out, but he does not realize his own role in it; appropriately, the revelation of his incomplete success as a healer is saved for the next novel, which focuses on Darrow himself. In *Glittering Images* Ashworth tells his own story, and an enormous amount of the novel is devoted to his conversations with Darrow and subsequent reflections on these conversations.

As in an analysis, the story of the events leading up to the treatment, the manifest content, soon gives way to the latent content, which is the material the analysand has more or less successfully repressed until current events reawaken the buried trauma. In Ashworth's case, his troubled relationship with his stepfather is replicated when he meets Archbishop Jardine. Ashworth's distress at the crisis in Jardine's household turns out to be located in Ashworth's own past. This accurately represents the experience of analysis, even down to the frenzied (and usually pointless) activities Ashworth uses to redirect attention onto the present crisis and avoid confronting his ghosts. In the end, while still stuck with the consequences of acting out, most notably his marriage to Lyle, Ashworth has worked-through his oedipal conflict to an impressive extent. What is left over will be reawakened by Lyle's death in the sixth novel, *Absolute Truths,* where Father Lewis Hall takes Jon Darrow's place as analyst. Because he has ambivalent feelings about Hall from the

start, Ashworth is able to complete the analysis begun with Jon Darrow by having both a positive and negative transference with Hall.

Working-through to forgiveness: learning to read yourself

Apart from simply being impressed by the parallels between Howatch's novels and the analytic process, I want to consider the distinction I have just made between acting out and working-through, which Howatch carefully illustrates.[4] I further want to consider how this process of working-through is made available to the reader of Howatch's novels, who, at least in my experience, is able to participate in this therapeutic process along with the character. In psychoanalytic terms, acting out is a response initiated by the return of the repressed. Laplanche and Pontalis define it as "action in which the subject, in the grip of his unconscious wishes and fantasies, relives these in the present with a sensation of immediacy which is heightened by his refusal to recognize their source and their repetitive character" (4).[5] The response is motivated by the subject's reaction to repressed trauma, and is often a repetition of behaviors instigated by that trauma, but acting out feels like a response to what is happening in the present moment. It functions to distract the subject from the repressed material and focuses attention on current events. In this way, it supports resistance. Acting out maintains the repression of traumatic material and avoids any possibility of working-through. Working-through, like transference within which it operates, is more mysterious. I think this is because it is a process that occurs wholly within the unconscious and is therefore inaccessible to language. It is a process that occurs after resistance has been removed and the analysand has recovered the repressed material. Working-through is what is absent in reductive Hollywood versions of psychoanalysis, in which the revelation of the trauma instantaneously restores the analysand's psychological health. It is more generally the case that the analysand will seem little changed by the revelation of traumatic material and may even exhibit increased resistance. A breakthrough in the resistance occurs through some unconscious process whereby the analysand comes not only to accept an interpretation but also to integrate that interpretation, thus creating a modified sense of self.

The anonymous analyst Janet Malcolm interviewed for *Psychoanalysis: The Impossible Profession*, describes the analytic process as "an operation. It rearranges things inside the mind the way surgery rearranges things inside the body" (Malcolm, 1982: 102). In my association to this statement I imagine the psyche as a jigsaw puzzle with pieces that will interlock in many different ways. Analysis shakes up the puzzle pieces. They fly gently up into the air before falling back together into a new pattern. The moment at the top of the arc, in which the pieces hang suspended before falling, is when working-through occurs. That unseen tug of gravity that pulls the pieces back together again instead of allowing them to fly apart is a process that turns the corner for the analysand. Working-through restores order, but it is a slightly

different order. It is an order that integrates the repressed trauma and therefore is no longer disrupted by it.

While acting out and working-through are illustrated in each of the Starbridge novels, the distinction between them is actually articulated by Father Hall in *Absolute Truths* when he gives Ashworth a dual translation of working-through as part of the exorcism of Starbridge Cathedral.[6] Convinced that the cathedral is being haunted by the restless ghost of Archbishop Jardine, a man Ashworth cannot forgive, Ashworth goes to Hall to request an exorcism of the building. This is an excellent example of acting out. Just as in the first Starbridge novel, when confronted with traumatic material, Ashworth distracts himself by proclaiming the imperfections of his rival.

Jardine's sins are obvious: he seduced his wife's companion, who became pregnant while all three lived together at the Bishop's palace. Ashworth discovered the situation and instead of confronting the repressed trauma of his own childhood, which it recalled, acted out by "rescuing" the companion, whom he married, and raising Jardine's child, Charley, as his own in a move that almost exactly replicates his own stepfather's behavior. Once again, Ashworth distracts himself from his own traumas by pointing to Jardine, but Jardine is not the restless ghost haunting the cathedral. The apparition is Ashworth's uncharitable inability to forgive Jardine.

Unable to face the manifestation of his haunted past, Ashworth runs from the scene in a frenzy of acting out. Ashworth seeks Hall as he once sought Lyle, but this time Ashworth finds an exorcist instead of an accomplice who shares his wish to repress the past. In the role of the exorcist, or the analyst who is supposed to know, Hall enables Ashworth to face the ghost in the cathedral (whose identity Ashworth carefully conceals from Hall) and to embrace the past it exhumes. Along with Hall, Ashworth returns to the repressed, literally going back to the possessed cathedral to reenact the sighting of Jardine's ghost.

Hall performs the dramatic exposure of the trauma by discovering that Ashworth's ghost is indeed Jardine. But, as in analysis, this moment of interpretation does not produce a breakthrough for Ashworth. The shock of the revelation lowers Ashworth's defenses against Hall, in part by affirming Hall's status as the one "supposed to know," since he does know the secret identity of the ghost. But Hall's interpretation is only just beginning. Hall explains the mode of interpretation he will use in his analysis:

> "There are two languages which we have to take into account. There's the classical paranormal language in which the word 'ghost' is used, and there's the modern psychological language which talks of a projection from the unconscious mind. But no matter which string of verbal symbols we use, the phenomenon you encountered remains the same: you experienced, very keenly, the presence of a dead man."
>
> (Howatch 1994: 499)

Cleverly tucked into this explication of the parallel and thus nonconflictual nature of the two systems of analysis is the rerouting of focus from the ghost to the observer of the ghost. It is not the cathedral that needs an exorcism but Ashworth. Ashworth asks Hall, "What exactly was it that happened when I made my disastrous attempt to pray?" Hall responds: "The ghost [which he has redefined as Ashworth's memories of Jardine] closed in and a demon [Ashworth's guilt over misleading his nominal son, Charley, about Jardine's character as a result of jealousy and insecurity] erupted" (ibid.: 501). Hall says to Ashworth,

> "It seems fairly clear that for some reason or other you were working yourself into a state about Jardine and this generated great tension. I think that the ghost was present to you as soon as you entered the Cathedral—and was even presenting himself to you as you approached it. He was knocking on the door of your mind, and when you knelt in front of that throne [the Bishop's throne, which Jardine had occupied and which Ashworth now occupies] he began not just to knock but to hammer. You fought to keep the door closed, but—"

Ashworth finishes the sentence: "The lock broke" (ibid.: 501–502). Their description of the appearance of the ghost suggests Freud's analogy of the interrupting unconscious in *Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*. Freud asks his audience to imagine that someone is creating a disturbance during the lecture. Members of the audience escort the interrupter outside. The heckler is thus repressed. He tries to get back into the auditorium. Chairs are put up against the door to prevent his return; this is resistance. But, Freud continues, "the repression has been unsuccessful; for now he is making an intolerable exhibition of himself outside the room, and his shouting and banging on the door with his fists interfere with my lecture even more than his bad behavior did before." The only solution is to let the interrupter into the auditorium (Freud, 1966, XI:27).[7] Thus, in an explanation that bears an uncanny resemblance to Freud's own, Hall interprets, or exorcises, Ashworth's acting out ghost by letting him in and identifying him. Ashworth indicates that he has overcome his resistance when he shows that he understands the analytic process Hall initiates and asks Hall to complete the interpretation: "I think I at last see why you keep using the old-fashioned language. By projecting the trouble outward on to coded symbols [the ghost], you're protecting me. Once I start looking inwards I can't cope" (ibid.: 506). Ashworth thus indicates that he now recognizes the ghost as a symbol of his own repressed trauma and acknowledges that it is he who must cope with the responses he has avoided by acting out. He agrees with Hall that he is "beginning to cope" and asks Hall to "translate some more" (ibid.: 506). When Hall Socratically leads Ashworth to the realization that it is himself he must forgive, Ashworth is able to incorporate the interpretation and thus remake his identity by bringing that part of himself which he had projected onto Jardine back into a fully integrated sense of self:

> "It was as if I were staring straight into the black void of my guilt. I said: 'I destroyed that man. I showed him no mercy, no compassion. It was as if I killed him.' But when I dragged those words out of my mind as painfully as if they were knives embedded deep in my flesh, I found I could grieve at last for Jardine…who by his failure had become a symbol of my darker self, the self I had no wish to know.
>
> (ibid.: 508)

Shortly afterward, following further discussion with Hall, which parallels the period of termination in psychoanalysis,[8] Ashworth narrates: "The long haunting had come to an end" (ibid.: 512).

Ashworth, like the analysand in the final stage of an analysis, demonstrates that he can now function as his own analyst. No longer in need of an exorcist who is supposed to know, Ashworth can narrate the story of his traumatic relationship with Jardine without acting out in order to avoid repressed guilt. He has learned to read himself. Ashworth was ready to hear Hall's interpretation, having given it himself earlier in a conversation he is having with his sons Michael and Charley:

> "We all have our reasons for feeling guilty and distressed, and that guilt and distress must be faced, acknowledged and owned. It's no good denying those feelings or trying to project them on to someone else. That's no solution. That's the road to neurosis and dislocation. The guilt and distress have to be owned so that they can be regretted, because only regret can ensure the changes which will mean our failures here won't happen again."
>
> (ibid.: 452)

Taking on for his sons the role Hall will take on in the haunted cathedral, Ashworth reprises the cyclical structure of repentance and forgiveness in a way that makes clear the parallels between the practices of the church and psychoanalysis as he continues his lecture:

> "Charley, Michael's not uneducated in Christianity. He doesn't need to be reminded that Jesus accepted people as they were, forgave them their errors, wiped out their guilt and restored their sense of self-worth so that a new beginning was possible. I merely wanted to underline to you both that this healing process is as relevant today as it was two thousand years ago. Modern psychological studies have made it very clear that one can't embark on a new life with any real success if one's carrying around a crippling load of unacknowledged guilt from the past."
>
> (ibid.: 452–453)

Ashworth's speech indicates that he is preparing to face his own guilt. This speech calls up the ghost of his past and indicates the start of his ability to

cope with that ghost without the defense of acting out. In Charley, as in Jardine, he sees his own darker self. He identifies with their psychological structures, but he needs Hall, the authority who is supposed to know, to feel secure enough to face what he himself already knows, as he tells Charley: "We have to forgive because in the end we all need to be forgiven" (475).

Reading aloud to God

The novels help us better understand the analytic process even as the analytic process gives us one way to understand the novels. I am also interested in making a larger and more speculative claim that these novels can actually perform an analysis for the reader. I have argued that *Absolute Truths* illustrates and articulates the process of working-through; I would like to suggest that the process Ashworth experiences is something the reader can also experience. By what mechanism is this process engaged for the reader? If the novel does more than model and explain the analytic process, then how does reading allow a reader to work-through his or her own psychic trauma? To return to the question I asked at the beginning of this book: how can reading transform the reader?

When one reads a novel, who is "supposed to know"? For me, there are more than two answers to this question, since novel reading was a largely secret activity in my childhood. But apart from my fears of being discovered reading through the night, there is clearly one who is supposed to know: the author. The author knows how it all will end. As a child, I imagined the author knew everything. I often find that it is crucially important to readers to hold this belief. Books were a safe place where I knew someone was in control. When I read, I lower my defenses just as Ashworth does when he realizes that Hall, like the author, knows the identity of the ghost in the cathedral. Hall reads Ashworth, and Ashworth learns by example to read himself; I read my book. There are no secrets. There is nothing to hide. There is nowhere to run. Reading, I am less resistant. I can bear to hear my ghosts named. In this way, I would suggest, reading is an act of faith.

My first sentence, according to my mother, was "Read me." Since I was holding a book up to her, she took this request at face value. I understand it more generally as a request for attention. For my children, asking to be read to is an acceptable way to say: stop and sit down with me. Hold me and read to me. Understand me even as you understand the book you are reading. Sitting on the floor with my youngest daughter in my lap, my chin on the top of her head, our hearts beat to the sound of my voice.

I remember my mother reading to me only once. Soon after my sister was born my mother told me that while the baby was napping was our special time when we could do anything I wanted. At nearly four, going from having all day alone with my mother to having to share her with my sister must have been difficult. I can imagine my mother devising the promise of naptime as a way to give me attention at the sacrifice of her own time to rest. It was also a

clever way to keep me from waking the baby, since then my special time would come to an end. It was a puzzle for a four-year-old to figure out what I could want to do during naptime that I would be allowed to do. I really wanted to go to the playground to swing, but since I couldn't make noise or go outside our apartment, the choices were limited. Later I remember coloring by myself while my mother lay on the floor elevating her legs on the couch. Sometimes I would make trains by lining up spools of thread. Once I made a labyrinthine city for my Barbie doll out of stacked Jell-O boxes. But the first thing I asked was for my mother to read *Alice in Wonderland* to me.

I do not know how I had heard of this book, but I imagined that it was very long and would take days of naptimes to complete. I wanted the assurance of continued attention. My mother insisted that the story was too grown-up for me, but I was adamant. She read a heavily edited version, quickly turning the pages in the children's supplement to the encyclopedia that still occupies the bottom shelf of the big bookcase my father built.

This scene epitomizes my hope that reading would bring me all at once many things I desperately needed. In this case, as always perhaps, I wanted my mother's attention, but I also wanted to know about the world outside of the safe, limited space my mother allotted to me. I wanted permission to go outside, if only in my imagination. I wanted to be told that it was okay to grow up. She needed me to grow up. She needed me to help with the baby. But I wanted to be like Alice and play in a world I couldn't control. If I couldn't go to the playground, at least I could go to Wonderland.

I do not remember ever asking my mother to read to me again, although I'm sure she must have. In some important way, though, this was the last time I asked her for help getting to the bigger world outside. What I remember about reading together that day is her saying, before beginning the story, "This isn't true. This is just about a funny dream Alice had. It couldn't really happen." This is a typical warning from my mother, who still wants everything to be safe and small. In other books, she scratched out words that might upset me, like "rain" and "night," leaving holes in the sentences that I was presumably too young to notice. The warning about Alice was devastating. I sat rigid, not listening to the story. If Wonderland were not real, it would not help me escape from the indoor world of my baby sister. This was a moment, one of many, in which I lost faith.

When Howatch's characters struggle with their faith, I think of Wonderland and the time when I still believed that stories were true. That was what it was like to have faith. How can I get back to a time when I could believe everything I read? Howatch's novels are fiction, but the characters' struggles with faith are real to me. Their desire for a church that is as safe as a mother's lap is my desire. If they find their way to Wonderland, perhaps I can follow them. In the meantime, they take me to church.

My family started going to church when I was five. Inside the stone building of St. Timothy's Episcopal Church, it was dark and cool, even during Raleigh's hot August mornings. In kindergarten that year we went to chapel

every Wednesday. My sister says that chapel was the most influential experience of her religious life. We share this memory, three grades apart, of having a set of doors three feet off the floor in a corner of our classroom opened and movable wooden steps pulled up to the opening. It was like walking into a closet, then the passage turned and led us into the very front of the stone church. We sang "I sing a song of the saints of God, patient and brave and true" (Scott Hymn #243). It was a sort of accidental career counseling. I learned that saints could be girls and have any number of occupations, like queen or shepherdess. At the end, when we sang, "For the saints of God are just folk like me, and I mean to be one too," I imagined not becoming a saint, but doing all the things the saints in the song did, like going on trains or out to sea. If being a saint would get me out into the world, I was all for sainthood.

I liked being read to in church. More important, my intellectual life, my curiosity about the world, was nurtured there. After we moved to Virginia, I listened carefully to the sermons. Sundays were the one time of the week when I got to see someone who had thought deeply about something and who was respected for doing this. Father Henry always answered my questions about the sermon and the readings, and my mother allowed me to ask. Usually, at the doctor's for example, when I would ask what some machine or instrument was for, and the doctor began to tell me, she would interrupt, "The doctor doesn't have time for that, Karyn." I could tell by the way she said my name that we would discuss this later. Questions in church were usually okay, especially if they stuck to the sermon. Asking my father how, if Adam and Eve had two sons, the sons ever had children, was not such a good idea. He did not like my suggestion that the sons would have to have children with Eve. But his answer opened up a whole new world to me. "Adam and Eve are just examples," he said. "There were other families like them all over. After they all left Eden, they met each other and started a city." As a civil engineer, city planning usually found its way into most of my father's answers. This fast thinking on his part got me where I am today, only now I call making things up about what I've read "literary criticism."

It is easier to write about books than to write about faith. Books are a sanctuary for me. They protect me from the world. Wonderland might be scary and unpredictable, but it is never really out of control. Alice does not know what will happen next, but even without my mother's warning, I knew she was in safe hands. She was in a book. Books led me safely into the world and helped me find my way home again.

Geoffrey Chaucer's great fourteenth-century poem *The Book of the Duchess* begins with the poet saying, "I do not know how I can go on living. I'm numb from lack of sleep. I cannot tell the difference between joy and sorrow" (Chaucer, 1987: lines 1–11). The poet then picks up a book to read himself to sleep. This has been the story of my life. Once, while reading this passage out loud to a class on medieval literature, I actually wept. I think insomnia began sometime during first grade. We were learning to read. Perhaps it was the anxiety of performing in the reading group. For a while, I cried every day

before my group was called. "Please," I begged the other children at my table, "don't tell Miss Fisher." I bent my head low over the connect-the-dots sheets to hide my face until the pages were too wet to write on. Inevitably, my mother would be called to take me home. But if it was reading that I feared, it was reading that also saved me. Allowed to read myself to sleep, I read instead of sleeping. And then, like Chaucer's sleepless poet, I wrote down what reading led me to imagine.

Reading and writing late into each night of my childhood, I staved off the demons that kept me awake. One of my students asked me to explain what Gerard Manley Hopkins was talking about when he wrote:

> I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day.
> What hours, O what black hours we have spent
> This night!
>
> (Hopkins, 1967: 101)

"He can't sleep," I responded. To me, this is enough to explain despair. "Isn't he having a crisis of faith?" asked another student. I see little difference in these two explanations. "I am gall, I am heartburn…The lost are like this," Hopkins writes (ibid.:). Sleeplessness is faithlessness. Reading is hope. Whether it is *Alice in Wonderland* or the New Testament, reading saves me from the small, sad space of a sleepless night. Like Alice's, Christ's world is a wonderland, full of miracles and risks and changes in size and shape. Fishes multiply, water turns to wine, the dead rise up. If you asked him, he would read to you all day long.

In my dissertation, I wrote about a book length case study of the analysis of a schizophrenic by psychoanalyst, Marion Milner. The book is entitled *The Hands of the Living God.* Milner takes this title from a poem by D. H. Lawrence, which begins: "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God / But it is a much more fearful thing to fall out of them" (Lawrence, 1978: 699, lines 1–2).[9] These lines prompted an epiphany for Milner by helping her see that her patient needed to feel loved and safe and protected during their sessions, as if she were in the hands of God. Milner offered this security in the form of an analysis in which the analysand could feel safe enough to recall her past pain without the fear of being destroyed by it (Milner, 1969) .

Opening a book feels to me like the opening up of God's closed hands, not to drop me out, as Lawrence fearfully fantasized, but to take me in, again, for the first time. This is a moment in which transference is possible. It is a moment of great excitement and greater vulnerability. It might be that nothing will happen. This is a disappointment and a relief. The alternative is that something does happen. This is what I hope for. It is also what I fear. When Ashworth goes first to Darrow and then to Hall, he allows them to identify his ghosts. What if, when they discover his secret past, they open up their hands and let him fall? Freud implies that facing one's symptoms requires "moral courage".[10] I believe this is true. In *The Wonder Worker,* Father Hall

initially protects himself from temptation by refusing to replace his arthritic hip. His work with Nicholas Darrow at St. Benet's Healing Centre has shown him that healing has a price: what if it does not work? What if it does? Walking into the Healing Centre to ask for help requires courage in oneself, faith in others. It is easier to go on "enjoying your symptoms" (Žižek, 2000)[11] than to try to exorcise them. Reading a book that might change your life is a courageous act. Ashworth helps me see that it is also an act of faith. For me, this is a fearful moment. It is like holding myself up to God and saying "read me."

Exorcising trauma

Analysis takes courage. The analysand must feel safe and learn to forgive himself. Being told how forgiveness works is ineffective, as Charles Ashworth's lecture to his sons demonstrates: the effect is on Ashworth himself. The writing process, much like Ashworth's speech, provides a forum in which the writer can conduct a sort of self-analysis. Father Hall's journal in *The Wonder Worker* exemplifies this process and emphasizes the parallel between spiritual and psychological exploration that Hall has explained to Ashworth earlier. Hall uses his journal consciously to conduct a self-analysis, first writing an entry and then, in a following section labeled "Comment," reflecting on the narrative he has just written. Hall frequently ends the "Comment" section of his journal with a prayer. This demonstrates the journal's function as spiritual exercise in which self-reflection leads to the integration of analytic interpretations. While the journal entry often begins in emotional confusion, Hall's concluding prayer suggests clarity of direction and purpose. He knows what to pray for, and he is demonstrating that he has remembered that, as a priest, he is called to pray.

Hall's process of writing first the narrative, then the comment, and finally a prayer, parallels the structure of psychoanalysis and the Starbridge novels, with the important difference that Hall is playing the role of both analysand and analyst. When the crisis in the action occurs, Hall realizes the role the journal has in sorting it all out: "I don't want to record what happened but I know I've got to try. I always regard writing this journal as a form of therapy. There's a healing dimension to it. Or there can be, if one's not feeling too beaten up to be healed" (Howatch, 1997: 164).

Hall is well aware of the journal's role in helping him uncover his repressed fantasies. He is determined to work-through trauma and recognizes the temptation to act out. He uses the journal deliberately for self-analysis. Writers can experience the analytic effects of writing without explicitly seeking such a goal. Virginia Woolf writes about this process in her diary: "I used to think of [my father] & mother daily; but writing [To] The Lighthouse, laid them in my mind. And now he [her father] comes back sometimes, but differently. (I believe this to be true—that I was obsessed by them both, unhealthily; and writing of them was a necessary act)" (Woolf, 1980, *Diary*, 3:208, 28 November 1928). Woolf's diary considers the therapeutic effects of

writing fiction, while the fictional Hall writes directly about his experiences. Regardless of genre, it is not surprising that the writing process can call up identifications that lead to intense transference relationships in which repressed emotional responses can be confronted. We repress our response to trauma when we cannot cope with the emotional intensity of that response. Inability to cope may be a result of age, emotional maturity or stability, emotions that are in conflict, or ones that simply take us off guard. When our responses return from the repressed, it is often an indication that we are ready to face them. When we write, we open up a space in which to meet them.

Reading can also provide such a safe space. A transference relationship recalls repressed responses. It is not surprising to find such a powerful relationship between a reader and a character, but what elements are required to push the reader to work-through rather than act out as a result? In the case of Howatch's novels, a prior question also emerges: how can the identification I have presupposed as necessary occur between her characters, most of whom are middle-aged priests in the Church of England, and her audience, most of whom, I think it is safe to assume, are not? More crucial to me is the specific question: how is it that I find the novels to be so compelling—indeed haunting—when I find the characters in them to be at best unfamiliar. Not only do I not see myself in them, but I find them and their specific problems to be largely uninteresting.

Difficult as it is to understand the process Ashworth goes through, it is even more difficult to understand its effects on the reader. It seems to me that Howatch is able, in this series of novels, to engage the reader's unconscious in such a way as to facilitate the working-through process because the reader relates to the emotional responses of a character who is undergoing this process and *not* to the character himself. The novels perform the difficult task of representing a character who vividly describes his emotional responses, thus making himself available for identification, who actually works-through trauma and pulls the reader along.

We would expect that a strong, positive identification with a character would lead to acting out, evidenced by a reader's often inexplicable attachment to a work, an identification that makes it difficult, for example, to listen to criticism of the work by those less sympathetic. This loss of objectivity is often accompanied by an inability to separate reaction from response. In such a situation, "I liked this book" comes to be synonymous with "this is a good book," but the reader is really saying: "I see myself in this text." The reading experience reinforces ego boundaries and solidifies defenses through an exclusively positive transference. As in Ashworth's early relationship with Darrow, the reader feels better and even attains significant insights but is not fundamentally transformed.

While this sort of identification may well be available to readers of Howatch, I experienced a very different sort of fascination with the process her characters undergo. My lack of identification with Ashworth himself allows for ambivalence to him that makes positive and negative transference

responses possible. Freud defines identification as fundamentally ambiguous: the subject finds the object of identification to be like himself even as he realizes that the two of them are different (Freud, 1966, XVIII:105–110). The subject's experience is of likeness, not sameness. Thus, identification carries with it the recognition of both closeness and distance: we are alike, but we are not the same. You are not me; we are two separate people. If I found in Ashworth a character who was just like me, I would sympathize with him entirely. Caring too much about his fate, I would be defensive rather than have the critical distance required to engage my own repressed traumatic responses. In a process that parallels Ashworth's relationship to Hall, Howatch describes the process of the unconscious by showing its effects on a character who realizes he is being acted upon by unconscious forces. "The lock broke," Ashworth says (Howatch, 1994: [*Absolute Truths*] 501), understanding the metaphor he himself created when he saw Jardine haunting the cathedral. Just as Hall can name Ashworth's ghost, Ashworth gives a name to mine.

Ashworth can now bury the dead Jardine, and this may parallel the reader's experience of the novel. The reader who has been engaged in working-through might feel, as one does about a successfully terminated analysis, a sort of disinterest accompanied by subtle changes in attitude or life that may not be obvious to the reader or which the reader may not connect with the reading experience. Several years ago, for example, I began going to church, a practice that surprised me considerably, and that I told myself had nothing to do with faith. It was not until writing this paper that it occurred to me that it might well have been the result of reading Howatch's novels. I explained to the pastor at great length and with a certain trepidation that I could not join the church because I could not profess to accept Jesus as my personal Savior. "I have," I told her, "a faith deficit." "You are closer than you think," she told me. She is supposed to know.

It is a common experience in psychoanalysis to discover that one is closer than one thinks. We discover what we already know. Symptoms go away seemingly by themselves after the exploration of trauma that is not obviously related. The end of analysis, in Lacanian terms, is the moment when one "traverses the fantasy" and realizes that the "subject supposed to know" does not know (Fink, 1995: ix–xv). This is the feeling I get at the end of each of Howatch's Church of England novels. Despite (or perhaps because) there are more novels about these characters to come, I have the sense that I know everything the author knows. There is a sense of closure so complete that I no longer suppose that she knows more than I do.

The reader experiences enormous security in the conventional nature of Howatch's novels. I think the use of first-person narrators and the lack of stylistic innovation are both crucial to the novels' ability to promote unconscious work. The first-person narrative replicates the analytic experience even as it heightens the reader's potential to identify with the narrator. The reader is not distracted by the writing, which does not call attention to itself with such diversions as fast-pacing, postmodern pyrotechnics, or any other self-conscious

or "writerly" (in Roland Barthes's term from *S/Z*) technique (Barthes, 1974). This is the literary equivalent of lying on the couch, where the analyst is the omniscient author (the supposed to know) of the first person narrative that makes up the text of the analysis. Promoting passive reading frees up the reader's energy for the unconscious processes for which the novel provides a safe space. Instead of using language to demonstrate psychic processes, as Lacan does, Howatch instead reproduces this process in the reader. Whereas Lacan's language makes us conscious of his attempt to replicate or comment upon the psychic process, Howatch sneaks in with a traditional narrative that, because it does not challenge us intellectually, can work on us unconsciously. Umberto Eco makes a related point: "It is only natural that life should be more like *Ulysses* than like *The Three Musketeers*; and yet we are all more inclined to think of it in terms of *The Three Musketeers* than in terms of *Ulysses*—or rather, I can only remember and judge life if I think of it as a traditional novel" (quoted in Iser, 1978: 125). By giving us a traditional narrative in which to imagine ourselves confronting repressed trauma, Howatch makes it possible for us to do so—she makes it imaginable. She does not challenge us with her style; she makes us begin the internal process of working-through that the intellectual process of writerly reading would help us defend against.

Finally, Howatch offers us something more that is essential for the process of working-through. In Freud's anecdote of the disrupted lecture, Freud imagines that the interrupter was returned to the auditorium through the intervention of Dr. Stanley Hall, the president of Clark University, where the lectures were being delivered: Dr Hall "would have a talk with the unruly person outside and would then come to us with a request that he should be re-admitted after all: he himself would guarantee that the man would now behave better. On Dr. Hall's authority we decide to lift the repression" (Freud, 1966, XI:27). Just as Freud looked to the highest local authority to ensure the audience's safety after the return of the repressed, so too does Howatch offer us one of the dominant culture's highest authorities to guarantee our safety when we open the door to our own ghosts. In the guise of the Church of England, she gives us a structure in which there is one who is supposed to know. The structure of patriarchal authority provided by the church that gives Jon Darrow and Lewis Hall the ability to counsel Ashworth is also available to the reader. Similarly, questions of faith cannot be dismissed as insignificant in the same way that anxiety is often dismissed. Supported by the undeniability of the significance of a shared moral code, the church houses the analytic process, gives it authority, and provides the security necessary for the analysand. In order to confront resistance rather than act out, the analysand must feel safe. The analytic setting can provide this safety since the analyst who is supposed to know can be trusted—there is no need to withhold anything from someone who knows everything already. The God of the Church of England is also in this position. So the novels give the reader permission to take his or her feelings seriously and a safe place—the traditional church and the traditional narrative—in which to feel them.

I do not want to suggest that this response to these novels is universal, or even necessarily common. But I do believe that the novels provide the elements necessary to facilitate a therapeutic experience for the reader and that this is rare in literature. Howatch's ability to reduce the reader's resistance allows our interrupting ghosts to return and to be embraced. Her novels can give us the courage to read ourselves because she gives us characters who model this struggle to find self-knowledge. I identify with Ashworth because we both need to exorcise our ghosts, and we both need help to do this. Analysis is a process in which one learns to read oneself. Before we read ourselves, someone must be there to read us.

Ashworth and I need someone with open hands who is never too sad or busy to read us. Jon Darrow is always there for Ashworth. Lewis Hall is willing to go along with Ashworth's crazy request to exorcise a cathedral. When there is a midnight knock at the healing center, Hall is there to open the door (Howatch, 1997: 189). The church is always there, and books are always there. I once believed that what I wanted most in the world was someone to talk to in the night when I could not sleep. Now I know this is too much to ask. "I am gall," as Hopkins wrote. "Nothing makes me feel anything," said Chaucer's sleepless poet. That is the moment when God's hands tremble, ready to open. Instead of falling, I open a book—a healing center when the center does not hold. Without a sound, I read aloud to God. It is not prayer; it is fiction. It is close enough.

Notes

1 I want to thank the many people who have responded to this essay's attempts to layer a discussion of the psychoanalytic process with an exemplification of that process: Bruce Johnson, who introduced me to Howatch's work and first engaged me in discussing the healing value of reading and Howatch's novels; Susan Facknitz; Marina Favila; Ann Reed Held, who asked me to write about faith; Jack Marmorstein; and the members of the James Madison University Faculty Research Group: Suzanne Bost, Lucy Corin, Dabney Bankert, Michelle Brown, Sharon Cote, Brady Earnhart, Bart Keeton, and Emily Scott.

2 Lacan's introduction of "the subject who is supposed to know" emphasizes the parallel between religion and psychoanalysis: "Does Descartes, then, remain caught, as everyone up to him did…on the fact that God is supposed to know?…I would remind you…[that] the subject who is supposed to know, in analysis, is the analyst" (Lacan, 1981, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*). See also the subsequent chapter, "of the Subject who is supposed to know, of the First Dyad, and of the Good" (230–243). Slavoj Žižek translates the phrase as "the subject presumed to know" in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, where he answers the question of what the analyst is supposed to know by saying that she is presumed "to know the meaning of the patient's symptoms" (Žižek, 1989: 185).

3 The distinction between knowing more and knowing best belongs to Dr. Keith Horton, to whom I am indebted for my understanding of the clinical side of psychoanalysis.

4 Dominick LaCapra emphasizes the difference between acting out and working-through in his analysis of representations of the Holocaust. The same mechanism, of course, is in place in personal as well as cultural trauma.

5 For Freud's discussion of acting out and working-through, see "Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through" (Freud, 1966, XII:151 [1914]) and "An Outline of Psycho-Analysis" (Freud, 1966, XXIII:176 [1940]).
6 Hall describes his parallel explanations as derived from Christian and Jungian sources. While the Jungian perspective allows for a sympathetic crossover audience by way of universal symbols, my focus on clinical practice, which is more thoroughly developed and articulated by Freud, argues for maintaining a Freudian framework. Since I do not want to distract from Howatch's work by elaborating Jung's differences from Freud, I will instead rely upon their basic agreement in clinical practice to support a Freudian reading of Hall's exorcism.
7 The biblical reference is also invoked here: "Knock and it shall be opened." I thank Marina Favila, my ideal reader, for this association, as well as for the suggestion that the process of identifying the ghost has parallels in folklore and fairy tales. By identifying the supernatural creature, one gains control over it. Consider, for example, "Rumpelstiltskin."
8 Termination is the final stage of an analysis, during which the analysand becomes increasingly independent of the analyst. Ideally, the terminating analysand should be able to recognize his own transferential responses and interpret them himself in order to facilitate the working-through process. Thus, the analysand ultimately takes the place of the analyst.
9 Lawrence's text is from Hebrews (10:31): "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." John Donne's Sermon 76 is on this text as well. The similarity between Donne's and Lawrence's responses suggests that Lawrence knew Donne's sermon, which comments upon the biblical text: "but to fall out of the hands of the living God is a horror beyond our expression, beyond our imagination" (Donne, 1984: "Sermon 76", 1110).
10 Freud makes this suggestion in one of his early case studies on hysteria, "Miss Lucy R." Miss Lucy does have the moral courage to face the fantasies that have produced her symptoms, and Freud is warm in his praise of her. On the use of repression to postpone confronting conflicting emotions, Freud writes: "Often enough we have to admit that fending off increasing excitations by the generation of hysteria is, in the circumstances, the most expedient thing to do; more frequently, of course we shall conclude that a greater amount of moral courage would have been of advantage to the person concerned" (Freud, 1966, II:123). Freud here suggests that despite the potential consequence of hysteria, repression is an effective means of avoiding unpleasant or traumatic responses. However, given the problems that result from hysterical symptoms, it would probably be better if we could just face our fantasies head on. The goal of psychoanalysis is to help us learn to do this.
11 This phrase is Slavoj Žižek's, who uses it to indicate that there is greater pleasure in "acting out" than in working-through (Žižek: 2000).

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8 Walking contradiction

Johnny Cash and the instability of the subject

Reflective reading and the return of the Man in Black

In "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud (1966) contrasts mourning, in which loss is worked-through, with melancholia, in which loss is experienced as a loss of self through narcissistic identification. Cash is easily recognized as a symbol of loss, but the story he tells about himself challenges the stability of the cultural icon of the Man in Black to instead demonstrate the process of transformation. Cash carries competing narratives with him: he is the outlaw who wears black for that man he shot in Reno, *Walk the Line* replaces this narrative with another fantasy of the man who can never life up to his father's expectations, and there is his own recognition that his identity is constructed and unstable. He is an icon of melancholy and masculinity. I also see Cash as a performer of reflective analysis on stage to intervene in melancholy and even enact an oedipal resolution.

It is not by accident that I propose an exemplar who is not a member of an academic interpretive community—and who thus challenges unspoken assumptions about the profile of an educated reader and production of sophisticated literary texts. Not only does Cash perform a transformative reading process, but he also embodies loss, becoming, as the Man in Black, emblematic of the mourning/melancholy stalemate that offers a parallel for the relationship between reading and working-through. Unlike critics who dismiss personal responses, Cash is very much aware of his readers' responses and his own. Ultimately, my question is this: When we construct a text, how do we (re)construct ourselves in the process? Cash also struggled to address this question. It is a question that asks us to recognize the role of the unconscious in the reading process and to accept, therefore, the limits of our conscious knowledge and control.

It may be enough to simply point to Cash as the Man in Black to establish him as a cultural icon for that perpetual state of sadness, melancholy.[1] Unlike mourning, a process through which loss is worked-through, melancholy is unchanged and unchanging. In her interpretation of Ferenczi, Maria Torok (1968) emphasizes mourning, or introjection, as a process: "By broadening and enriching the ego, introjection seeks to introduce into it the unconscious,

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nameless, or repressed libido" (Torok, 1994: 113). Melancholia, in contrast, is static, a fantasy, in Torok's terms, in which the loss is "swallowed" or incorporated (Torok,1994: 126) and thus maintained unchanged: "Like a commemorative monument, the incorporated object betokens the place, the date, and the circumstances in which desires were banished from introjection: they stand like tombs in the life of the ego" (Torok, 1994: 114). Freud makes this distinction neatly in "Mourning and Melancholia" when he writes, "In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself" (Freud, 1966, XIV:246).

Cash as the Man in Black represents this empty ego as a walking suit of regret. Cash himself participated, accepted, and struggled with this constructed identity. Indeed, *Man in Black* (Cash, 1975) is the title of Cash's first autobiography, which is chronologically narrative and gives a detailed account of his addiction to amphetamines and barbiturates. In his second autobiography, *Cash* (Cash, 1997), he answers the question of why he habitually wore black on stage by referencing his song "Man in Black" (1971), commenting: "Apart from the Vietnam War being over, I don't see much reason to change my position today. The old are still neglected, the poor are still poor, the young are still dying before their time, and we're not making many moves to make things right" (Cash, 1997: 85–86). In a move characteristic of the second autobiography's resistance to narrative consistency, Cash goes on to give two additional reasons: one historically contextualized (black shirts were the only presentable thing all of the members of his original band owned) and one personal: "it just felt right. I wore black because I liked it" (ibid.: 86). His song "Man in Black" reinforces his melancholic image even as it tries to redefine it as a political rather than personal statement. In the song, Cash explains that he wears black in protest against social injustices not in penance for a crime or out of personal grief. He lists those he is publicly mourning, including the poor, prisoners, aged, and those dying in the Vietnam War. The lyrics of Cash's song assert an identity with a history, an icon with another context. It is a challenge to the inaccurate popular version of him as the remorseful ex-con who embodies a murderous past he cannot put behind him.

Johnny Cash is self-fashioned; he is also a text constructed by his audience. Mapping the narrative of "Folsom Prison Blues" onto him, fans often assumed that Cash wore black as a sign of remorse because of that man he shot in Reno. Indeed, my mother told me a carefully edited version of that story when I was a child, hastily flipping the radio off when the June Carter/Johnny Cash duet "Jackson" came on. My mother's censorship no doubt had multiple motives. "Jackson" is a rather steamy song for young ears, and I imagine she could easily anticipate that my next question would have something to do with why having a fever could be cured by marriage.

In his second autobiography (Cash, 1997), Johnny Cash writes that there are three questions he is asked over and over. Two are how he writes songs and why he always wears black, but the most frequently asked question is why he was in prison. His answer is succinct: "I never was" (ibid.: 76). Yet the

notion is persistent. Cash as ex-con is an easily categorized, stable figure who can evoke a powerful identification, as was the case for many prisoners, with whom Cash also identified. In either instance, the Man in Black has become a way to avoid a more complex, painful, and potentially transformational relationship. This is the narcissistic identification the loss of which Freud associates with melancholia. Transformational potential resides in the transference (rather than identification) possible in a more complete recognition of someone like Cash and the messy story of his life.

The icon of Cash as repentant murderer maintains the structure of resistance: even as the narrator tells the story in "Folsom Prison Blues" there is no emotional engagement with the traumatic event that put him in jail. The most powerful emotion is the "torture" of knowing that other people can move about freely while, even though he accepts his fate, he cannot. The traumatic event is represented, but it is not re-experienced by either the narrator or (presumably) the listener, who might identify strongly with the incarcerated man as Cash himself says he did, but in this song there is no transformation: everyone is stuck in jail. The pleasure of stable identification is what is so powerful about this icon of loss.

As narratives that impose structure on lives, biographies illustrate well the ways in which narrative strategies work as a hedge against the re-creation of trauma. While "Folsom Prison Blues" is not biographical, it has often been read as if it were. Peter Nagourney's analysis of the enabling assumptions of biography demonstrates the ways in which these strategies serve to stabilize the subject and repress the unconscious. Nagourney identifies three characteristics common to traditional biography. One is the notion of progress: the story of the subject's life is the story of his or her rise to greatness. This assumes a coherent and consistent narrative structure for the individual. Another is the telling anecdote, which is supposed to give the reader insight into the individual. Again there is an assumption of coherency within the subject and of transparency between who the individual is and what he or she does. When this strategy was first deployed by biographers, there was no expectation that the anecdote had any basis in fact; its function was symbolic. An excellent example of this is nineteenth century biographer Mason Locke Weems' story of George Washington chopping down the cherry tree and then confessing because he could not tell a lie. The anecdote functioned to illustrate Washington's truthfulness and to create an icon of honesty. That the story was entirely invented by the biographer was understood. However, the image was so effective that it now functions as if it has truth-value. As Frank Lentricchia observes: "biography is often—when the famous person is also exemplary—a concentrated representation of the idealized story that a culture would like to tell about itself" (Lentricchia, 1985: 321). The story of an individual's life and the anecdote that gives insight into his or her character both rest on what I see as the central assumption Nagourney argues the biographical form imposes, and that is the assumption of the unified subject. This is the assumption that there is a consistent, knowable subject for the biography. This

assumption has many significant implications, perhaps most profound is its erasure of the unconscious, which by its very existence renders the subject unstable and unknowable to itself or anyone else.[2]

The assumptions Nagourney posits are readily apparent in James Mangold's 2005 biopic of Johnny Cash, *Walk the Line* (2005). Mangold's reading of Cash is an especially good illustration of the narrative issues I want to address because it is the story of Cash as a wounded man—emblemized by his iconic status as the Man in Black. *Walk the Line* strives to replace the biography constructed from "Folsom Prison Blues" with a more complex Cash, one who is grieving for the brother he might have been able to save, and stuck in an oedipal conflict with a father who says aloud that the wrong son was taken. While more complex, and perhaps even more historically and psychologically accurate, this is still another stable icon of grief. *Walk the Line* takes a shot at transforming the icon, but it does not watch him die. Because of its reliance on traditional narrative strategies, which reinforce the enabling assumptions of biography that are identified by Nagourney and reinforced by well-trained interpretive communities, the film ultimately succeeds only in replacing one icon with another.

With its early scene of Cash thumbing the saw blade in the prison workroom, which provides a transition to the extended flashback of his childhood, *Walk the Line* begins to redress the inaccurate popular icon of the Man in Black as perpetually remorseful killer. Cash is in prison, all right, these opening scenes cleverly imply, but is it the prison of memory that tortures him. He is doing a different sort of hard time. However, the film's seemingly more complex version of Cash as wounded by his brother's death and father's rejection is just another more overtly oedipal version of the Man in Black. Its narrative strategies work carefully to simultaneously represent and repress trauma. The film shows trauma aplenty, but unlike the lived experience, narratives typically give us plenty of warning in large part because we know narrative conventions (every story has a beginning, middle, and an end, as a "Sesame Street" song puts it[3]). A key element Freud identified when working with trauma victims was surprise (Freud, 1966, XVIII:31). He concluded that we are more likely to have a traumatic response when we are unprepared. Indeed, sometimes surprise is the difference between the mundane and the traumatic. One narrative convention that particularly guards against surprise is foreshadowing. If done well, foreshadowing prepares the reader almost unconsciously for the next plot point, and it protects the reader from the surprise that can result in a traumatic response.

The saw blade early in the film provides both an associational transition to childhood memories and a double foreshadowing. When we see Cash watching his older brother Jack cutting boards on the table saw, we are already alert to the significance of the scene. The early jump of the saw tells us all we need to know about what will happen the next time he is working twisted wood with damaged tools. The first time Cash cuts the motor, the next time Cash has gone off fishing and his brother dies. Anxiety in this film is not about

performing but about being absent at the moment during which one's performance is called for. Cash wasn't backstage waiting to go on at the right moment, and the viewer can see the trauma coming from the very first scene of the film. In *Walk the Line*, the origin of the Man in Black is Jack's death. Cash is stuck in melancholy, unable to mourn his brother because of guilt over his own absence and survival. Drugs and alcohol equally enable repression and are symptomatic of ill-repressed trauma. The film shows us first the symptom, then the originating trauma. This is a familiar story. The predictability of the narrative structure allows trauma to be represented without engaging us beyond a potential narcissistic identification. This in turn reifies the biography's enabling notion of the stability of the subject and passive reading (or viewing), which allows the reader to witness trauma without engaging disruptive unconscious processes.

Cash is transformed in the movie, mourns his brother, and reconciles with his father. The process of this transformation is not represented however; the implication is that Cash is saved by another cliché: the love of a good woman. June Carter is the perfect loving woman whose own story is elided. She is a problematic figure not least because she was twice divorced when divorce was unacceptable. (That may have been another reason my mother clicked "Jackson" off the radio.) In *Walk the Line* we are shown little of her life beyond that which will make her appear sympathetic. She is sad and polite to the mean woman in the drug store who scolds her for getting divorced, friendly and diplomatic to Cash's wife, lovingly supported by her parents. She is unpretentious, dresses modestly, and loves to fish. She is primarily a physical presence, a perfect body, who represents the trophy Cash will win by walking the line. This icon of the grieving man saved by true love is just as stable and appealing as the icon the film attempts to overthrow.

It is not insignificant that June Carter was a member of the Carter family, country music royalty. Her importance for Cash is foreshadowed in the film just as Jack's death is. Listening to the radio after he is supposed to be asleep, the young Cash quizzes his brother on which of the Carter sisters is singing. When Jack guesses incorrectly Cash whispers, "Nope, it's June." Cash may have the fame and the record deals, but June Carter's presence on his tour gives him country credibility. In the film's version of the story, June Carter is the princess whose kiss turns the jumped-up frog into a prince, and when she agrees to marry him, Cash's family romance fantasy comes true. He has been rescued from the Arkansas cotton fields and taken into his "real" family.

Thus, the film gives us the new icon through a familiar plot: the Man in Black, mourning and guilty, stuck in an oedipal complex until he is redeemed by true love. It imposes a plot that makes life into biography. Traditional plotting, by its very nature, creates predictability, as opposed to the traumatic response that might occur because of the subject's lack of preparation. Narrative structures, then, support the readers' resistance to transformation. Readers bear witness to traumatic events, and may identify with the characters experiencing trauma, but the reading (or viewing) experience, however

powerful, is not likely to be transformational. Thus fans of "Folsom Prison Blues" often insist, despite Cash's own protests, that the song is true. They need to believe in the stable reality of the words so that their identification with Cash can remain intact. The reader may feel deep emotion, but the reader is not profoundly changed. However, there are aspects of narrative that can intervene in this resistance.

The image of a man stuck in grief, unable to mourn or be forgiven, is powerful. It works against the possibility of transformation with its insistence on the impossibility of recovery. It is a stable identity, and thus easily recognized and quickly understood. It challenges neither interpretation nor response. It blocks the production of a text. In his second autobiography, Cash addresses this: "There are those who just don't want to accept the nonfelonious version of me, and on occasion I've had to argue with people firmly convinced that whatever I might say, I once lived a life of violent crime" (Cash,1997: 76). In denying the icon, Cash is careful not to simply replace it with another: "nonfelonious" is a "version of me" rather than an identity. Cash further complicates this by explaining that while the persona of "Folsom Prison Blues" "is imaginative, not autobiographical" (ibid.: 76) it was a perspective that came "to mind quite easily" (ibid.: 77). The complexity of what is me, what is a version of me, and what is not me but easily could be me keeps the autobiography from settling into comfortable narrative stability.

Cash intervenes in his own iconography in his second autobiography, a gesture he signals by giving the autobiography his own name, *Cash*, as opposed to the first biography's iconic title, *Man in Black*. In the second autobiography Cash denies the "Folsom Prison" myth and emphasizes the political protest of wearing black, even as he refuses to construct a stable narrative or persona. Similarly, he refuses to objectivise June Carter. Rather than idealized, in Cash's version she is represented by her behaviour, which includes story-telling, praying, and shopping. His descriptions of her expose a rare sense of intimacy and teasing humour: "She's got charm, she's got brains, she's got style, she's got class. She's got silver, she's got gold, she got jewellery, she's got furniture, she's got china…" (ibid.: 315, ellipsis original). Cash jokes about Carter's love of shopping but also asserts her right to it since she has worked for what she has. She is not the ministering angel whose love has seen him through. Indeed, her love has not seen him through. Throughout his entire life he battled addiction. In *Cash* he dismisses the myth that true love conquers all: "The publicity in the 1960s was that June saved my life, and I sometimes still hear it said that she's the reason I'm alive today. That may be true, but knowing what I do about addiction and survival, I'm fully aware that the only human being who can save you is yourself" (ibid.: 314). Cash unflinchingly tells of his bouts of addiction and the damage drugs did to himself and his family, not to mention all of the cars he wrecked. It is not a glamorous story, and it does not follow a tidy narrative structure. There is no progress. It is not the story of a great man's rise to greatness but of a man's repetitive confrontation with addictive drugs that feel good and then don't. "My problem persists," Cash writes, "It's

an ongoing struggle" (ibid.: 248). Carter's role in his life is significant, but she did not bring salvation or even permanent sobriety: "What June did for me was post signs along the way" (ibid.: 314). Cash makes it clear that it was up to him to read those signs, and then reread them.

Rather than fulfilling the role of love object, in Cash's version Carter challenges him, refusing to accept anything from him that she does not believe is authentic. Early in the autobiography Cash reveals the complexity of the subjectivity he is representing: "there are levels of intimacy. I go by various names…June recognizes that I operate at various levels, so she doesn't always call me John. When I'm paranoid or belligerent, she'll say, 'Go away, Cash! It's time for Johnny to come out'" (ibid.: 9). Cash's recognition of his multiplicity of selves early on in the autobiography is a heads up that this book is not going to reinforce the icons he has played in the past. Indeed, despite the title's suggestion that this will be the belligerent *Cash*, the autobiography succeeds in resisting the pull of the stable image by defying narrative conventions.

Interventions: destabilizing the icon

Cash's overt acknowledgment of the various roles he played and was expected to play challenges the stable oversimplification of the icon he has become, and I think he also strove (and succeeded) to challenge it in his on stage performances. Most obviously, his late recordings with rap and rock producer Rick Rubin for American Recordings (1994–2010), throw the previous vision of his celebrity into wonderful disarray. George Lewis (1997) places Cash within the context of the cultural constructions of country music, marketing himself at the end of his career as one the "'authentic' folk rebels" in order to reach a younger market (173). While the versions of himself that Cash constructs in his final recordings are not inconsistent with previous images—he is still in black and unapologetically rebellious—this self-fashioning is nevertheless jarringly disruptive. Cash might still look like a rebel, but he also looks (and sounds) every day of his sixty plus years. His last albums are not the return of the Man in Black, but another intervention into his own myth. By including covers of songs such as Soundgarden's "Rusty Cage" (Cornell 1992), Nine Inch Nails' "Hurt" and the final track of all, "Aloha Oe" (Princess Lili'uokalani, late 1870s), Cash escapes the country canon he himself helped to define. But even before this risky remaking of himself, his behaviour on stage invited transformation. Performance, I believe, was a safe space for Cash to engage the working-though process.

I think Cash did this for himself in his performance of Shel Silverstein's "A Boy Named Sue" at San Quentin in 1969. This was Cash's first performance of the song; indeed, he had to read the lyrics as he sang them (Cash, 1997, 371). This is a powerful example of a performative reading experience. Cash was visibly producing the text as he simultaneously read and sang, and the performance is a powerful one. Easily dismissed as a novelty song (and an

irritating one at that), the final two verses are a classic description of an oedipal conflict and, what is rarer, its resolution. After a lifetime of beating up other men for making fun of his name, Sue finally meets his match in the father who named him in the first place. After acknowledging his son, the father explains that the name was his way of protecting his son in his absence. And it worked, the father concludes, as the son has come closer than any other man to besting the father in a fight. This is a powerful act of acceptance and recognition from the father, and Sue's response in the final verse is equally powerful. He accepts the father's explanation and recognition, and, in a final comment directed to the audience rather than the father, he asserts his refusal to reproduce his father's behaviour, which he has been doing up until this time through duplicating his father's life of barroom brawls. Now, Sue concludes, when he has a son he will name him anything except Sue, thus breaking the pattern of violence and aggression. Cash's exhilarated performance of this last verse suggests a powerful liberation of energy. He shares this transformational moment with the audience when the laughter that followed the first performance of the song "just about tore the roof off" of San Quentin (Cash, 1997: 371).[4]

Cash describes a parallel moment of epiphanic laughter when recalling his own father's refusal to recognize him. During a concert, Cash dedicated a song to his parents in gratitude for their encouragement: "Right then I felt my father's presence beside me protesting, '*I* didn't encourage you!' He was right, of course—his attitude had always been, 'You won't amount to a hill of beans. Forget about that guitar'—and I almost laughed out loud right there in front of everybody" (ibid.: 322). As with "A Boy Named Sue," laughter, this time suppressed, announces Cash's recovery from the trauma of his father's lack of recognition. Just prior to this, Cash recounts the moment of trauma that resulted when, aged five, his father shot his dog because they couldn't afford to feed it: "I guess I don't have to tell you how I felt. I was five, and he was my dog…I thought my world had ended that morning, that nothing was safe, that life wasn't safe" (ibid.: 320–321). In *Cash*, this is the moment of trauma. More than his brother's death, his father's deliberate, violent aggression toward him, redirected onto the dog he could not protect, is the wound that keeps Cash stuck so long in an oedipal fist fight he cannot win. When he finally realizes that, he can laugh. His father did not support him. And here he is on stage being cheered and applauded. With that moment of accepting laughter the fight is over. Cash accepts the loss of not having the past he wishes he had had, and with this grief comes the liberating release of anger in laughter.

Just as in the last verse of "A Boy Named Sue," Cash is able to see himself as like his father and also not like his father, an ambivalent identification that comes as a result of working-through oedipal trauma. Cash describes it overtly: "I don't have to bear my father's sins, and I don't bear any of his guilt. Sometimes I feel as if I'm not even related to him. Other times it's, 'Now, *there's* a guy after my own heart'" (ibid.: 322). Cash announces the

completion of the process of working-through: "I'm not haunted by him. On the other hand, he is the most interesting specter in my memories, looming around in there saying, 'Figure *me* out, son.'" (ibid.: 323). In his autobiography, Cash engages his father without conflict. He acknowledges their connection and separateness, and also the impossibility of really knowing someone else. He ends his rereading of his father with a series of questions he cannot answer: "I can never really know…And how about me?" (ibid.: 323–334). Cash rejects the simplified, acontextualized economy of loss that makes the Man in Black an Everyman at the crossroads waiting to fight any man—father, brother, stranger—who gets in his way. Instead, Cash's confrontation is an attempt to figure out his father—and himself too—rereading his past as a text he is responsible for creating.

While Cash does not describe the process of working-through that led him to this position, it does seem that the safe space he found in which to do it was on stage. Rosanne Cash said of her father in an interview "he's *more* himself on stage…he comes more focused; he becomes his essential self when he's on stage" (heard on broadcast radio program *Fresh Air*, November 25, 2005). Just as the laughter at the end of "A Boy Named Sue" and the acceptance that his father had not supported his musical ambitions signaled the working-through of oedipal trauma on stage, so too did Cash use the stage to resolve other conflicts. These interventions were often met with resistance, and they were not always done kindly, but Cash used the stage to push them through. Cash gives an example of this practice in his autobiography. He apparently disliked Marty Stuart's Martin guitar. Stuart was playing in Cash's band at the time, and one guesses there is more to this story, but in the version Cash tells, Cash tells the audience an invented story in which Stuart began to play when he was twelve because Lester Flatt gave him his guitar. Cash goes on to say that Stuart would like to do the same, at which point he takes Stuart's guitar and hands it to a boy in the audience. Stuart was furious and helpless, but Cash "held his [Stuart's] eye and started grinning, and then his face broke and he started grinning back" (Cash, 1997: 155). While one may well wonder what really prompted Cash's behavior, what interests me here is the way in which Cash uses the structure of the stage to create conflict and then continues to use it to resolve conflict. The shared grin is not as exuberant as the laughter that follows "A Boy Named Sue" or Cash's on-stage acceptance of his father's discouragement, but the resolution contains the same acceptance of the power structure: Stuart, after all, works for Cash. It is as if Cash is saying: this conflict is pointless, we both know I can win, so let's give up the symbol of that fight, which means I've won, but if we stay on this stage together then we both win. Holding Stuart's eye is Cash's sign of recognition, just as in "A Boy Named Sue," the father recognizes his son even as the father wins the fight, thus protecting the son from the guilt of killing his father. With order restored, recognition is a mutual acceptance of the complex power dynamic between them. Their shared grin is a lying down of arms, a step back from the crossroads.

Another example of Cash's use of the stage to change someone close to him is dramatized in the film *Walk the Line*[5] when Cash calls the recently divorced June Carter, who is watching from the wings, to sing with him. She tries to refuse, but Cash appeals to the audience to insist. She is stuck, and joins him against her will. Again, he uses the audience to pressure someone to do something they expressly do not want to do. When he suggests they sing a duet she had recorded with her first husband, she flatly refuses, covering the mike to protest that it would be inappropriate. Cash signals the band to begin the song and says, "There's no better way to put it behind you." He forces her to confront her past, stare down the humiliation of divorce, celebrate the success of her hit song, and enjoy the sexual energy between them. The intervention is manipulative, but by making her vulnerable he creates a space, the safe space of the stage, in which her defenses are lowered and the potential to confront and work-though loss can occur.

In this instance he pushes too far, and when he kisses her during the song she runs from the stage. He replays the scene in his on-stage marriage proposal in which he reverses roles, insisting this time that it is inappropriate for them to sing "Jackson" together unless they are married. Again, Cash uses the pressure of the audience and the safe space of the stage to change Carter's mind once again.[6] The film ends with the representation of another successful transformation, this time in the relationship between Cash and his father, Roy. No longer defensive, Cash can recognize his father without waiting for his father's approval. Cash's children are playing telephone with two tin cans tied together by a sting. The children want Roy to play, too, but he doesn't know how. Cash suggests Roy tell his grandchildren about the flood and how Roy saved the family by taking the front door off its hinges and using it as a raft. In this suggestion, Cash pays homage to his father, whose ingenuity saved the family. The tin can telephone is a powerful metaphor for the difficulties of communicating across the lines of loss. Both sides have to hold onto their ends for the phone to work. The film ends with the smiling Cash calling to his father, "Hold the line tight, Daddy."

Transformations: the middle of nowhere

Transformational narratives may use strategies like Cash's that surprise, unsettle, haunt, and put us on the spot. This does not usually feel good. It often requires hard work. Active readers have to hold tight to the tin can and listen hard or come up to the mike and face down a song we'd rather not sing again. If we can step out on the stage, however hesitantly, we might just be able to face loss and put it behind us. Such moments require us to create the text, to become active readers who produce our own texts. The expected plot is gone, foreshadowing is not going to help. We are out there in the spotlight, and we can back away into the wings of resistance or fall into the well-known unknown arms of a familiar story we have never read this way before.

Johnny Cash rejects traditional narrative conventions in *Cash*, organizing the autobiography around associations, moving from the moment of writing to a story about the past. His anecdotes are not illustrative but episodic. There is no cherry tree to fess up to chopping down. The memory of his lost dog leads to the story of forgiving his father. The associative connections are clear, but he refuses to represent a stable identity or predicable plot. In biographies and autobiographies we look for representations of life, yet they often follow the narrative conventions of fiction. *Walk the Line*, for example, concludes with the disclaimer that some events depicted in the film have been "fictionalized for dramatic purposes." As Nagourney points out, this creates a disconnect between what we imagine we are reading the biography for and the narrative strategies that structure that reading. Even as *Walk the Line* strives to resist the one-dimensional icon of the Man in Black, he returns as another stable narrative figure. In his autobiography and performances, however, Cash himself challenges these images and opens a space for ambivalent transference that invites transformation. In rejecting his iconic status he makes himself into an unstable symbol of transformation.

Conflict is audible in Cash's music, not just because he sings of it, but also because he sings in it. Words and music are frequently at odds with one another. The novelty song genre of "A Boy Named Sue" makes a joke of a powerful oedipal struggle. In Cash's cover of "The Ballad of Ira Hayes" (La Farge, 1961) the bouncy beat masks the tragic content of the lyrics. Hayes, a Native American, helps raise the flag at Iwo Jima, but dies drunk and forgotten. The chorus makes the point that calling out to Hayes now is impossible, but it is accompanied by an upbeat rhythm reminiscent of the "Raw Hide" theme song, undermining the pathos of the message. The tension between words and music disguises Cash's lifelong feelings of being an outsider and his identification with the oppressed articulated in his song, "Man in Black." This pattern is apparent as early as his first recording, "Cry, Cry, Cry." Listeners can easily avoid experiencing the emotional content of these songs because of the music's more dominating message to, as the title of another early song recommends, "Get Rhythm (When You Get the Blues)." This advice to ignore emotional responses permits easy listening, a parallel to passive reading. Listeners can feel as though they are feeling something without actually experiencing the pain of the emotional struggle Cash depicts. As with the icon of Cash as the Man in Black, the songs can be heard as a stable, non-threatening representation of loss.

While much of Cash's music might seem to be at odds with the lyrics, the beat does not erase the message. Rather than undermine the painful stories his songs tell, the music works to calm resistance and allows the words to give voice to class and racial oppression under the cover of the up-beat melody. Through the conflict between the words and music, the content is smuggled in. The listener sings along easily into a world that is too often overlooked. Caught up in the rhythm, the listener just might hear the pain. Cash is an outlaw analyst, creating a safe space in which to make an

interpretation that will likely meet with resistance but always offers transformation.

Cash challenges his own iconic stability in *Cash* and in the final albums produced by Rick Rubin beginning in 1994, in which content and music are no longer at odds. The slow, scratchy version of "Hurt" on *American IV* (2002) is an excellent example. The grim resignation of the lyrics is consistent with Cash's previous work, but gone is the rock-a-billy beat that allows us to clap along to the dire helplessness of "Folsom Prison Blues." The earlier sound's internal conflict is an appropriate analogy for Cash's own conflicted life and image. Johnny Cash died on 12 September 2003, as a result of complications from diabetes. He had been suffering from autonomic neuropathy, a neurological disorder similar to Parkinson's disease. The disease affected his voice, which, although still unmistakably Cash's, sounds weak and raspy in his last recordings. There are moments when he sounds as though he is gasping for air. The later work strips bare the façade and allows the listener to hear the weakened voice of a dying man.

I have spent the last few years writing about Virginia Woolf, and her connection to Johnny Cash is obvious to me; although, I realize that seems like a stretch. Johnny Cash does not have the cultural capital that Virginia Woolf has, but both, I would argue, made careers out of defying authority, challenging oppression, and calling for social justice. Both strove for transformation. Cash's description of his own subjectivity as multiple and unstable parallels Woolf's representation of the subject in *Orlando*: "For [Orlando] had a great variety of selves to call upon, far more than we have been able to find room for, since a biography is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves, whereas a person may well have as many thousand" (Woolf, 1956: 309). Woolf's description of the struggle to represent the instability of the subject in a conventional genre is readily applicable to Cash's work as a musician and an autobiographer. Try as I might to create this parallel, however, I have internalized a rather loud academic voice that warns that Johnny Cash is not a legitimate subject for a serious study; I should be writing about literature, and serious literature at that. I am doubly defensive, feeling I need to justify Cash as a topic both because he is not a literary text and because he is not high art.[7] This also raises my concerns about class. My own class status is wobbly. I grew up in the suburbs, but I recognize the voices I struggle with as reflecting working class values, for example, that reading is not real work and that writing is not labor. I recognized the attitude of my own family in bell hooks' comment that her parents "would insist that reading too much would drive me insane" (hooks, 1993: 106). My parents are from southwest Virginia, just a few miles from the homeplace of the Carter Family. This part of Appalachia would be predominantly working class if there was work to be had. Going to school is not work. My mother sent me off to college with a cheerful, "Don't work too hard!" Both of my grandfathers were coalminers; there is no comparable work to be found on a college campus. hooks says that her parents' "ambivalence nurtured in me like uncertainty about the value

and significance of intellectual endeavor that took years for me to unlearn" (ibid.: 106). While I hotly insist that reading is work and writing is labor, I also feel guilty when I read during the day (even if I am preparing a lecture for class) or write during the work week. A friend of mine, the poet Susan Facknitz, shares many of these struggles. She suggests that I think of reading as my way of going on strike, so that I can spend all day feeling like I'm sticking it to the man. And speaking of the man, my feelings about Johnny Cash are ambivalent, too. He is a tremendously powerful symbol of transformation, but I have never been a fan. I confess, I still don't quite understand "Jackson." All of these anxieties are no doubt common for a first generation child of immigrants into the middle class.

Susan agrees that "Jackson" is a strange song.

"How are we supposed to understand a divorced woman and a man married to someone else singing about how they're going to step out on each other?" she asked me the other day. Clearly, this story was not for us.

I said, "their over-insistence on not caring as a way of caring is just confusing. What sort of logic is: 'go ahead and mess around, I don't care, you couldn't if you wanted to, and I'll be messing around first anyway,' when the whole point of the song is the passion you can hear between them. Are they talking about Jackson, Mississippi? Where are these people?"

This was when Susan figured it out. "They're in the middle of nowhere," she said, gesturing out of the car window. We had been driving for nearly an hour and were now somewhere in the mountains between Crozet and Ivy, Virginia.

Point taken.

"Jackson" ends in reconciliation. At the end of the song they are going to go to Jackson together and never come back. They have worked it out, just as they also say they will do in "Long Legged Guitar Pickin' Man," which ends with Cash saying to Carter: "I love that big mouth of yours." Like many academics from working class, or nearly working class backgrounds, I have changed my accent, the way I dress, my tastes. And no matter how many times I am praised for this transformation (maybe because I am praised for it—you have no trace of a Southern accent, I am often told, but as a child I sounded like Opie from "The Andy Griffith Show"), I know that I do not fit in. I'm trying to work it out, but I am still in the middle of nowhere. The typical academic fear of being exposed as an impostor is heightened when one is also trying to pass as cultured. I admire Johnny Cash for not trying—or for trying differently.

Reading produces a powerful transferential response, which has the potential to admit an intervention that will profoundly affect the reader even if the reader is not aware of this process—indeed it is unlikely that the reader would be aware of this activity in the unconscious even though the effects may be marked. To engage in the question of how such a change might be produced, one must recognize the role of the unconscious in the reading process. In practice, most reader-response critics—like most readers—repress the unconscious, or more accurately, allow the unconscious to repress itself. Just as we

know the atom is mostly empty but act as though our world is solid, we may agree that there is an unconscious and yet continue to imagine ourselves as though we are fully conscious and in control. The suggestion that we are not is often experienced as a criticism rather than a description. Reader-response represses its origins in psychoanalysis; reintegration of psychoanalysis into reader-response would allow recognition of the reading process as a site for the transformation of the reader who produces the text. Johnny Cash is a model for this duel process: he performs (literally, on stage) interventions that result in readers being transformed by the texts they produce. These transformations are modelled by the personae of Cash's signature songs such as "A Boy Named Sue" and "Jackson" who end up with "a different point of view" at the end. Through Cash's performances, the trained mind steams away from Folsom Prison, held up by an outlaw analyst—untrained, out of control, and unconscious.[8]

Central to my admiration for and critique of reader-response theory is my respect for the significance literature has on readers. Too often, we are trained to repress the most powerful of these responses and to provide instead a staged discovery of the deep hidden meaning of a literary work. I see Johnny Cash as a sort of antidote to this position, and I say this not just because his work appears critically simple, full as it is of open Christian faith; sentimental odes to mothers; and good men going wrong, coming back, and going again. Cash also raises his middle finger at the establishment because of his concern for the effects of music on his listeners and himself and because of his conscious, and often uncomfortable, self-creation and recreation. Despite his own awareness of the constructed nature of his image, audiences largely perceived him as authentic, and he used this perception to elicit powerful responses. Unlike reader-response criticism, Cash trades on the subjective responses of his audience to encourage identification, transference, and transformation. I have included my own highly subjective responses in order to make room for a voice that resists the appearance of objective control. Like Cash, my instinct is to challenge authority for no good reason, which makes me uneasy with claims of critical control. Instead, I contextualize my responses personally, professionally, and sometimes literally. While we may end up in the unlocatable unconscious, we are not always in the middle of nowhere. It feels to me as though I get somewhere when I make a connection that helps me make sense of my responses, however idiosyncratic and unexpected. It is then that a reading experience begins to make sense to me, and in that moment I recognize my lack of control even as I gain meaning.

Thinking back to the discussion of reader-response criticism in Chapter 1, I see my resistance to Stanley Fish originating in my suspicion that my own readings are not firmly secured in an acceptable interpretive community and my resistance to Norman Holland stemming from a desire to gain control over my own identity rather than being pinned by it like a moth to a mounting board. Like Cash, I believe that "sooner or later you just have to go into [grief and loss]" (Cash, 1997: 36) trusting that you will come out the other

side, but not certain that you will or that you will recognize yourself when you do. Analysis and reading can both be a leap of faith where the trained mind jumps the track and lands, still smoking, in Jackson or rural Virginia, or the middle of nowhere on the other side of grief and loss.

Notes

1 Although, as Leigh Edwards (2009) has noted, "the majority of the publications on Cash have been popular biographies and collections of music journalism" (1) Cash received unprecedented critical attention in the wake of his final recordings with producer Rick Rubin and the release of the popular film "Walk the Line." Foremost among them is Leah Edwards's insightful and thoroughly researched *Johnny Cash and the Paradox of American Identity*, in which she takes him as a symbol of the "walking contradiction" (to reference Kris Kristofferson's song about him, "He's a Pilgrim") at the heart of American identity:

> Cash's corpus and image illuminate key foundational contradictions in the history of American thought, particularly through his fraught constructions of a Southern white working-class masculinity. Cash's persona bring disparate or even opposed ideologies into close, symbiotic relationship with one another. This artist's iconic image in fact depends on his ability to stage the idea of irresolvable ambivalence—to illuminate how that model of cultural ambivalence, what we might call a "both/and" idea, is an important paradigm for U.S. popular music and for American identity. Cash embodied the tensions in the American character without resolving them. (2)

Edwards's cultural critique parallels my own position that Cash's deliberate refusal to present a stable identity enacts the instability of the subject that goes beyond country music and American masculinity to point to the illusion of ego stability as a central construct of the western psyche.

2 Nagourney's theory of the enabling assumptions supporting the genre of biography are discussed more fully in Chapter 5

3 See Nancy Holland's "Sesame Street Goes Post-Modern OR What is Deconstruction, Really?" (Holland, 1990) for a whimsical analysis of this song as well as a lucid explanation of deconstruction.

4 Teresa Ortega (1998) references "A Boy Named Sue" to make an important point about Cash's construction of a hyper-masculine gender identity that has established him as a lesbian icon. See Eng (2000) on gender in melancholia, where he notes that "melancholia…has come largely to define how we think about our subjectivities (1275). Cash describes this moment in his second autobiography: "Shel's song, 'A Boy Named Sue' was a big hit for me and a great success the first time I performed it, at the prison concert that became the *Live at San Quentin* album. The lyrics were so new to me that I had to sing them off a sheet on a music stand, but they were exactly right for the moment. They lightened the mood in what was otherwise a very heavy show. In fact, the laughter just about tore the roof off" (Cash, 1997: 371).

5 *Walk the Line*'s director, James Mangold, consulted with both Cash and June Carter on the film prior to its production. Cash reviewed and approved the script, and even suggested the casting of Joaquin Phoenix to play himself. While the film is not a product of Cash's, he consented to its representation of him. See NPR Morning Edition interview of James Mangold by Steve Inskeep (November 17, 2005) for a discussion of Mangold's collaboration with Cash.

6 Cash describes this in *Man in Black*: "It was onstage in London, Ontario…before five thousand people! For some reason, I had more nerve to officially ask her onstage than I would have had privately" (Cash, 1975, 146).
7 I am indebted to Susan Ghiaciuc, who asked me to think about this problem in our reading group on women and class at James Madison University. Her question, "Do you feel like you don't have permission to write about Johnny Cash?" Led me to realize that, indeed, I felt unworthy to address a topic in which I felt I lack of credentials—not because I lack an academic background in music or film, but because I am not a fan. Daisy Breneman, also a member of that short-lived reading group, has been an invaluable partner in helping me thinking through issues of class for myself and in this essay.
8 The wonderful metaphor of the "trained mind" as one that runs on tracks comes from Rachel Bowlby's essay on Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (Bowlby, 1988).

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9 Depicting the undepictable

The reflective analysis of Alison Bechdel's *Are You My Mother*?

Girls are horny too: why would this be confusing?

Imagine my delight when the Netflix original series "Big Mouth," a cartoon that looks unflinchingly at the sexuality of adolescent boys, turns its attention to the same awakening in girls with the episode "Girls Are Horny Too." "Big Mouth" reminds me of a foul-mouthed cartoon version of "The Wonder Years" focused on the challenges of puberty. The main characters are Nick (voiced by show co-creator Nick Kroll), whose parents (voiced by Fred Armisen and Maya Rudolph) over-share details of their sex lives, his constantly masturbating friend Andrew (voiced by John Mulaney), and their friend Jessi (voiced by Jessi Klein). The series begins, appropriately, in 7th grade health class. Nick and Andrew get confused about the difference between the vagina and the uterus. Jessi comments: "'How come in all these videos puberty for boys is like the miracle of ejaculation and for girls we're just a yarn ball of aching tubes?'" Sadly, this proves to be a meta-commentary on the series.

The first episode, "Ejaculation," shows Andrew's surprisingly mature penis when he accidently drops his towel during a sleepover at Nick's. In this episode and throughout the first season, the boys have to manage unexpected erections, ejaculation, and surprising emotions, including Nick's literal penis envy. In contrast, in episode 2, "Everybody Bleeds," written by Kelly Galuska and directed by Bryan Francis, Jessi gets her first period wearing white shorts on a field trip to the Statue of Liberty. This episode is the first appearance of the Hormone Monstress, voiced by Maya Rudolph (who also voices Nick's mother). In the first episode we meet Andrew's Hormone Monster, Maurice, (also voiced by Nick Kroll), who coaches Andrew to develop his skills in masturbation. In contrast, the Hormone Monstress's advice to Jessi on how to handle the confusing physical and emotional experiences of menstruation is: get rid of her baseball mitt, yell at her mother, and throw herself on her bed and "cry so hard no sound comes out." Andrew gets to ejaculate. Jessi gets aching tubes.

"Girls Are Horny Too" (episode 5) was written by Emily Altman and directed by Bryan Francis. Here we get positive images of Jessi exploring her

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vagina, discovering her clitoris, and masturbating, encouraged by the Hormone Monstress and gently coached by her vagina (voiced by Kristen Wiig), which looks more like a Disney princess than genitalia. Sadly, however, the options offered to Jessi for women's sexual desires are represented by traditional narratives that limit (even as they arouse) women's desire: "Dirty Dancing" and the steamy romance novel "The Rock of Gibraltar," in which the heroine, Fatima, is swept off her feet by the dominating Gustavo. Fatima's father, who controls her sexuality, forbids this relationship, so Gustavo has himself magically turned into a horse so they can be together. Presumably grooming and galloping are satisfying alternatives to orgasms for women. While it is good to see a narrative in which women are sexually aroused and responsive, the women in these narratives are passive. Their secret sexuality is released in response to the men whose gaze is turned upon them. The YouTube summary of the episode makes this clear: "A steamy novel making the rounds at school inspires Jessi to explore her own sexuality—and leaves the boys totally confused about what girls want" (YouTube, 2017). What the boys don't understand is that the women are turned on not just by sex but also by all of the things around sex; in other words, they want romance. Even the episode devoted to female sexuality ends up being about how confusing this is to the guys.

I texted my frustration with this episode to a colleague who responded:

> Jason: Was thinking how the very conventionality of the "Girls Get" episode you describe only further plays into your argument. Even supposedly bold truths about sexuality get caged by traditional heteronormative/patriarchal codes.
>
> Me: Exactly! Even with Maya Rudolph voicing the Hormone Monstress and Kristen Wiig as the Talking Vagina. Chat on reddit all excited about how feminist the episode is because they actually show a vagina. Then comes Gustavo, hero of "The Rock of Gibraltar." Realize I am running the risk of being accused of not having a sense of humor.

We need alternative narratives like Alison Bechdel's *Are You My Mother?*, a graphic memoir in which a woman whose active and overt sexuality is explored in a narrative that includes reading Virginia Woolf and British object relations psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott. Bechdel creates a complex narrative of desire, laden with metacommentary provided by a self-conscious narrator. Her references to Woolf are powerfully telling, but the intertextuality goes beyond Bechdel's quotations to an incorporation of the rhetorical strategies Woolf uses in *Orlando* and *A Room of One's Own* to thwart the dominant narratives that repress women's desire. The self-conscious narrators Woolf and Bechdel employ illustrate a reflective reading process embedded into the very telling of their narratives.

Dykes to Watch Out For: the self-conscious cartoonist

The "Cartoonist's Introduction" to *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For* (2008), the collection of the comic strip Bechdel began drawing in 1983, is a mini-memoir in which Bechdel's persona, "the cartoonist," says, "I've been drawing this comic strip for my entire adult life! How did that happen? Let's try and retrace our steps, shall we?" (Bechdel, 2008: vii). With this invitation, Bechdel guides the reader through a quick review of her childhood interest in drawing, education, and early publications. She draws herself in college reading Adrienne Rich's *On Lies, Secrets and Silence* with a girl friend (ibid.: x), a shared experience that leads directly to what Judith Kegan Gardiner describes as "jump[ing] into bed to consummate the more direct language of oral sex while Rich's book lies on the floor" (1995–96).[1] Bechdel ties reading, feminism, and lesbian desire together in three frames that unite intellectual and physical passion. We see the same association between reading and sexuality in *Fun Home*, where "Alison" realizes she is a lesbian in a bookstore (Bechdel, 2007: 74). When she hits on the idea for the "Dykes to Watch Out For" comic strip she describes it as, "A catalog of lesbians! I would name the unnamed. Depict the undepicted!" (xiv).[2] Defined as she is by sexual attraction to women, a lesbian's desire is front and center. It cannot be contained or repressed, even by the steamy Gustavo's forbidden passion. When she comes upon an old rejection letter from Adrienne Rich she is so moved by Rich's generosity that she writes to thank her (xvi). Rich's response is affirming: "'I've always admired the way your work tries to explode dyke essentialism and explore our real humanity'" (xvii). Under the frame that reproduces part of this letter, Bechdel peeks out to comment, "Exploding essentialism! Exploring our humanity!…Perhaps my little experiment was not a failure after all" (xvii). The introduction here turns from memoir to a commentary on the larger function of the comic strip, which, Bechdel realizes, had an impact on the lives of her readers: "Good Lord, how many young women have told me these were the first lesbians they ever met? That my cartoon characters were—oh, I can hardly say the words—…—choke—**role models!**" (xvii, bolding original). With the realization comes self-doubt: "Once you speak the unspeakable…it becomes spoken…conventional" (xviii). Her penultimate response, before literally going "Back to the drawing board" (xviii) is to present readers with the volume we are holding in our hands by throwing a copy of *The Essential "Dykes to Watch Out For"* out of the frame for us to catch saying, "Here. You decide. Essentially the same?…or essentially different?" (xviii). The introduction ends with the charge to read critically and reflectively, breaking the wall between cartoonist and reader.

Bechdel does not break the third wall in this way in *Are You My Mother?*, but she similarly searches for someone who will "read" her.[3] She seeks analysis and approval from her therapist and her mother, just as she does from Adrienne Rich. *Are You My Mother?* tells the story of writing *Fun Home* and *Are You My Mother?* and her mother's reaction to these memoirs, just as "Cartoonist's Introduction" describes the development of the cartoon and its

impact on readers. In *Are You My Mother?* the post-modern address to the reader is replaced with metacommentary in boxes placed over the frames that insert other voices, especially psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott and Virginia Woolf, into her narrative. This is the same technique Bechdel uses in *Fun Home*, which Julia Watson eloquently describes as "introspective acts that cast back in the past in spirals of reflection" (Watson, 2008: 37). Winnicott and Woolf serve as a reflective "critical agency"[4] that supports Bechdel's own reflective reading of her life and creative process.[5] Writing about *Fun Home*, which has received a great deal of critical attention, Julia Watson describes it as "at all times an ironic and self-conscious life narrative" (Watson, 2008: 27). Watson refers to Caren Kaplan's term for works that transgress the laws of genre to claim Bechdel's work as an "out-law" memoir. "As a result," Watson continues, "*Fun Home* invites—and requires—readers to read differently, to attend to disjunctions between the cartoon panel and the verbal text, to disrupt the seeming forward motion of the cartoon sequence and adopt a reflexive and recursive reading practice" (Watson, 2008: 28). This description is also appropriate for *Are You My Mother?*, which models the process of reading Woolf and Winnicott to support the narrator's reflective reading of her own past.

As in *Fun Home*, there are so many things going on in the frames of *Are You My Mother?* that it is challenging to write about it. Many threads quilt the frames together: Alison's dreams; her reading of psychoanalysis, Rich, and Woolf; her therapy sessions; conversations with her mother; and her relationships with her lovers. Bechdel similarly complicates the narrator with her multiple personae as author, narrator, and character at various ages, leading all critics who write about these books to explain how they are going to refer to her various personae. The most common practice for critics of *Fun Home* is to refer to the author as "Bechdel" and the character as "Alison" (e.g., Anderst, Barounis, Gardiner). I will follow this practice, but *Are You My Mother?* poses an even more complex problem because of the meta-narrative that re-reads all of the scenes presented, much as "the cartoonist" does in *Dykes*. I want to call attention to this self-conscious narrator, whom I will refer to as AB.[6] I have exchanged numerous emails with queer theorist Katie Hogan about the difficulty of writing about Bechdel. Katie has been writing about *Fun Home* while I have been writing this chapter.

> Katie: I empathize with how hard it is to write about Bechdel. It has taken me so long to figure out how to say/argue what I see. I've known what I've wanted to say, but I don't know how to say it. I still worry that I am not really able to say what I want to say.
>
> Me: It is so hard to get the organization to work. I think it's because there are always three or more things overlapping in every panel. It jumbles up my argument. Maybe this chapter would work better if I did it as a comic strip! Too bad I can't draw.
>
> (private email exchange from February 3, 2018)

Quilting points: Bechdel and Woolf reproduce mothering[7]

I have been trying to write about Virginia Woolf ever since I was an undergraduate. Writing about Bechdel bears an uncanny similarity to writing about Woolf for me. Whenever I have a flash of insight and go back to their texts to look for supporting evidence I find, not just the example I am seeking, but also the insight itself stated plain as day. Bechdel's quilting point of identification with Woolf, I realize, comes from looking to Woolf as a model for how to perform a self-analysis that will allow her to understand and grieve for her own father. Looking for this moment in *Are You My Mother?* I find a frame bridging a therapy session with Alison's memory of her distant inaccessible mother, Helen. In the frame, Bechdel reproduces an entry from Woolf's 1928 diary: "Father's birthday…His life would have entirely ended mine. What would have happened? No writing, no books;–inconceivable. I used to think of him & mother daily; but writing The Lighthouse, laid them in my mind" (quoted in Bechdel, 2012: 152). That is what Bechdel was trying to do in *Fun Home*, I realize. She was trying to lay her father in her mind. Then I find the parallel insight from Bechdel herself in *Fun Home*, commenting on the propinquity between her closeted father's suicide and her coming out to her parents: "And in a way, you could say that my father's end was my beginning…or more precisely, that the end of his lie coincided with the beginning of my truth" (Bechdel, 2007: 117). Next to it is my marginal note: "link to VW quote re father's birthday that AB uses in *Are You*." Even I had figured this out already. Back to the drawing board! This happens so frequently with Woolf and Bechdel that I end up concluding that I have nothing to say about either of them except: go read the books again. Their shared strategy of interpreting their own narratives exemplifies the self-consciousness baked into their work.

Woolf's influence on Bechdel is readily apparent through frequent references to Woolf's diaries; her memoir, "A Sketch of the Past," from *Moments of Being*; and *A Room of One's Own* as well as *To the Lighthouse*. Like Woolf, Bechdel struggles to write about lesbian sexuality in the context of a hostile audience. For Woolf hostility came from a society in which homosexuality was illegal and writing about it was censored. Woolf writes about "sapphistry" in code in *Orlando* and calls for the ability to write about it overtly in *A Room of One's Own*, which includes a fantasy for a novel in which "Chloe liked Olivia" (Woolf, 1957: 87). For Bechdel censorship comes from her own mother, whose response to the prospective publication of *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For* is so devastating that Alison hangs up on her. Helen's response to Alison's good news about having a book contract exemplifies her critical voice: "You mean your lesbian cartoons?…But…what if someone sees your name…I don't want the relatives talking about you. What attitude am I supposed to take? Defend you? Laugh it off?…I'm not comfortable with it. You know I'm not" (Bechdel 2012: 227–228). Helen's disapproval turns Alison's pride in her accomplishment into a painful rejection of who she is and what she does.

Alison's mother also voices her disapproval of *Fun Home*: "I just hope it won't be all angry." In the next frame, AB thinks, "This is one of my difficulties now…my fear that mom will find this memoir about her [*Are You My Mother?*] 'angry.' Another difficulty is the fact that the story of my mother and me is unfolding even as I write it" (ibid.: 10). Even before she sees it, Helen voices her anticipation that Alison's work will be a disappointment. Her criticism makes it difficult for Alison to imagine a book that will ever win her mother's approval. Bechdel and Woolf are both writers unwinding their pasts and oppressed by their present. In *Fun Home* Bechdel is grieving for a father she does not yet understand. Writing *To the Lighthouse* surprised Woolf when it allowed her to grieve by recreating parents about whom she felt ambivalent: her mother was distant and her father was often violently angry. Just like Bechdel's parents. This is another quilting point for Bechdel with Woolf. It is another tiny stitch that holds them together.

References to Woolf appear early on in the first chapter of *Are You My Mother?* when Alison is on the phone with her mother. The metacommentary describes Alison making a transcript of the conversation, justifying it: "I would have more scruples about this, I like to think, if I didn't suspect that she was not so much talking to me as drafting her own daily journal entry out loud" (ibid.: 12). Bechdel's reference to Woolf acts as a transition to the memory of Alison's childhood diary, a portion of which mother her mother wrote from Alison's dictation. The transitional panel reads: "I often think of this passage from Virginia Woolf's diary: 'What a disgraceful lapse! Nothing added to my disquisition, & life allowed to *waste* like a tap left running. Eleven days unrecorded'" (ibid.: 13, emphasis added). AB notes that "Like my mother, I keep a log of the events of daily, external life, but unlike her, I also record a great deal of information about my internal life…Although I'm often confused about precisely where the demarcation lies" (ibid.: 17). Bechdel here links Woolf, herself, and her mother as all needing to record their lives in order not to "waste" their experiences. It is as if the days don't exist unless they are recorded. Bechdel's memoirs are a continuation of her diary's log of events; the self-conscious narrator demarcates the line between external and internal life in the text boxes of metacommentary that overlay the cartoon depictions of external events.

Bechdel records the conflict Alison and her mother have throughout the creation of the book we are reading. Helen does not think it is appropriate to write about one's inner life; she "considers memoir a suspect genre" (ibid.: 11). Recording her inner life makes the memoir suspect: the contents are outlawed by her critical mother. Woolf mediates this conflict by literally coming between Alison and her mother to express the desire to record her inner and external life. Bechdel reproduces an entry from Woolf's diary (Monday 19 February [vol. 2]) in which Woolf writes that her diary is not a "real" diary in which "I could see changes, trace moods developing; but then I should have to speak of the soul, & did I not banish the soul when I began? What happens is, as usual, that I'm going to write about the soul, & life breaks in" (ibid.: 17). The next

panel is a picture of Alison's desk with overlapping copies of Woolf's *To the Lighthouse, Moments of Being*, and volume 2 of Woolf's diary with Alison's own diary for 2002 on the right. Woolf models the reworking of the same material in diary, memoir, and novel. She gives Bechdel permission to tell the story of her inner life.

One imagines that Alison's mother would agree with Woolf's banishment of the "soul" in her diary. But Woolf does not banish it from her fiction, where, in *To the Lighthouse* she captures her parents, as Bechdel tries to do in her work. Alison is so intent on reproducing her mother in *Are You My Mother?* that in order to "capture her voice, her precise wording, her dead-pan humor" Alison transcribes her telephone conversations with her mother with such concentration that: "I'm trying so hard to get down what she's saying that I'm not really listening properly" (ibid.: 12). The recording becomes more important than the experience. This is a commentary on the book itself, of course, which attempts to both record and analyze her relationship with her mother, as well as the other women—her lovers, therapists, and Woolf—who mediate her relationship to her mother. Again, the self-conscious narrator has already said this: "My mother composed me as I now compose her" (ibid.: 14).

In a therapy session with her first therapist, Jocelyn, Alison explains her dilemma over writing *Are You My Mother?*, which cannot be written unless she gets her mother's "critical faculties" (ibid.: 11) out of her head. She tells Jocelyn that she wants D. W. Winnicott to be her mother (ibid.: 21). In the metacommentary AB writes: "My mother's editorial voice—precisian, dispassionate, elegant, adverbless—is lodged deep in my temporal lobes" (ibid.: 23). Alison's mother's voice functions as the superego, the internalized disapproval that is both conscience and reprimand. It sets a standard one can never live up to. It is silencing in its demand for perfection. It nearly incapacitates Alison, but AB, the self-conscious narrator, can analyze this voice without being enthralled to its laws. Again, Woolf mediates this in another metacommentary block over a drawing of Alison lying facedown on Jocelyn's couch: "How I envy the involuntary torrent of words and images that came to Virginia Woolf that day in Tavistock Square" (ibid.: 23). AB imagines Woolf freed from the silencing of hostile censorship. The next page is a full-page drawing of Woolf in Tavistock Square. The facing page is another full-page drawing in which AB imagines Winnicott walking past her, bringing her two "mothers" into close proximity. She can capture them, even though she fears she will not be able to reproduce her own elusive, emotionally distant mother.

Alison identifies with Woolf's longing for her mother's attention. Alison remembers bedtime: "Then perhaps mom would tell us a story. Virginia Woolf, in her unpublished memoir, *A Sketch of the Past*, recalls her memories of the nursery she shared with her brother. AB quotes: "like all children, I lay awake sometimes and longed for her to come. Then she told me to think of all the lovely things I could imagine. Rainbows and bells…" (ibid.: 135). AB connects Woolf's memory to the scene in *To the Lighthouse* in which Mrs. Ramsay

I myself wonder if I learned not to sleep at night in hope that my mother would come to comfort me. Did longing for my mother lead to my insomnia?

checks on the youngest children, Cam and James, during the dinner party where she says much the same to Cam that Woolf's mother said to her. Woolf was the youngest daughter of her mother's seven children. These associations to Woolf lead to the young Alison's moment of trauma when her mother refuses to kiss her goodnight. "You're too old to be kissed goodnight anymore" the mother says to the young Alison, who looks up at her with longing, and then, in the next panel lies still in bed. The metacommentary says: "When mom abruptly stopped kissing me goodnight, I felt almost as if she'd slapped me… But I was stoic. I betrayed no reaction" (ibid.: 137). *Are You My Mother?* exposes the pain the young Alison did not show. It reintegrates the emotions that were censored by her mother's intolerance for the inner life.

The drawings of young Alison lying alone in bed allow for a regression back to this moment of trauma, of feeling "slapped." She can return to this scene and recreate it, retrieving the repressed emotions of rejection and loss, thus moving on to work-through them. In the therapy session that follows, Alison is struggling with the way in which, according to her second therapist Carol, she has cathected, or become over-attached to, her own mind. In the panel, she is talking about her childhood diary-keeping with Carol, who sees the diary keeping as a dysfunctional symptom. Alison says "'But…my diary saved me!'" (ibid.: 151).

For Freud, a symptom is something that gets in the way of success in love or work. The symptom is trying to get our attention; it is a clue to something we have previously repressed that is no longer resting quietly in the unconscious. Repression is not a bad thing, but when something is not fully repressed, when it returns to the edge of consciousness, it is disruptive. The return of the repressed is caused by a memory or experience that calls it back up. It returns when we reach a point when we are ready to work-through what was once too divesting to feel. That disruption is a "symptom" or clue to the material that is ready to return to consciousness. Unfortunately, symptoms can distract us from the repressed material they are trying call to our attention because instead of seeing the symptom as a clue we can analyze in order to attain greater self-knowledge, it often seems like either a problem to be cured or a part of who we understand ourselves to be—frequently both at once. The symptom often feels like something that defines us.

I am an insomniac. I define myself by my symptom.

AB finds another model for keeping a diary in one of Winnicott's patients, who kept a detailed diary of her analysis until its "climax," at which point she

simply stopped. AB quotes from Winnicott: "The meaning of the diary now became clear—it was a projection of her mental apparatus, and not a picture of the true self, which, in fact, had never lived till, at the bottom of the regression, there came a new chance for the true self to start" (ibid.: 151). A symptom can feel like a part of the true self, as it did for Winnicott's diarist until she was able to re-experience the emotions she had repressed and integrate that repressed material. In this way she recreated a sense of self that did not need the symptom, just as Bechdel does when she recreates the feeling of pain the young Alison cannot express when her mother withholds affection. Winnicott calls this reintegration of repressed emotion allowed by regressing, or emotionally returning, to the moment of past trauma and feeling the pain the young child was too vulnerable to feel the "true self." This is the conscious self made complete by the reintegration of repressed emotional responses. Too overwhelming to experience as a child, the regressed adult can now feel this pain and recognize that it will not destroy the self. The withdrawal of Helen's love was too painful for the young Alison to acknowledge. She repressed it until, as an adult who could withstand this pain, she feels it—reproducing it in a panel that shows both the repression of emotion as a child and simultaneously reliving—and surviving—the feeling of being emotionally "slapped." As Tammy Clewell insightfully explains, Bechdel's "graphic-memoir making repeats an experience of emotional injury that enables the author to transform her sense of self from an object of suffering to a subject of artistic production" (Clewell 2017: 58). While my concern is not with Bechdel's creative or therapeutic progress, I agree with Clewell that the memoir leads us through the interpretative process. In this way, it guides us to become reflective readers.

In a therapy session, Alison's most recent therapist, Carol, explains that Alison's attachment to her mind and work is more like a relationship with a parent or lover, and that this attachment prevents Alison from establishing relationships outside of her head, just as Winnicott's diarist did. In the panel, Alison gets up off the couch saying, "Wait, I gotta write this down!" In the metacommentary AB comments: "The irony of the fact that I'm writing a book about all this is not lost on me" (Bechdel 2012: 152). This panel is followed by the reference to Woolf's diary: "In her 1928 diary, Virginia Woolf makes a second mention of how writing *To the Lighthouse* released her from her parents' thrall." Alison tries to find the writing of Winnicott's patient, but she doesn't find anything. Alison comments: "She's probably just off living her life somewhere" (ibid.: 156). The implication is that success results in not needing to write but to live, to have a conversation rather than to transcribe it.

Writing is a symptom for Alison, as it was for Winnicott's diarist, only because it takes the place of living in the world. Giving up the symptom does not mean giving up writing; it means having a different relationship to writing, one in which it is a part of life rather than a substitute for it. Bechdel's self-conscious narrator illustrates this different relationship to writing: not obsessively listing the events of the day or scenes of the past but instead

working-through the emotional responses she repressed as a child, feeling them, and integrating them into a "true self" that can survive emotional trauma. When Bechdel recreates her mother, like Woolf, she lays her in her mind. The scenes of childhood integrate the narrator's analysis with the memory of traumatic moments. The frames Bechdel draws of these scenes recreate the experience of rejection without censoring the young Alison's inner life.

Are You My Mother? as self-analysis

AB's memoir includes her readings in psychoanalysis as a metacommentary on her relationships with her therapists, Jocelyn and Carol, as well as her mother. Julia Watson describes *Fun Home* as a "reflexive and recursive reading practice" (Watson, 2008: 28). *Are You My Mother?* similarly models for us how to read the book—and how to read our own lives. Each chapter begins with a dream, which is a common starting point for an analytic session. The frames of the dreams are surrounded by a black background that distinguishes them from the series of associations to the dream that follow. Free association is the strategy used in psychoanalysis to uncover the unconscious material the dream allows us to access; this is called dreamwork. The associations are a series of narratives of Alison's memories. Because they are not sequential, the narratives take us back and forth in time even as the metacommentary inserts Woolf and Winnicott and the narrator's interpretation of the memories. I was often confused about when something was happening, despite the handy timeline of therapists and romantic attachments (ibid.: 22). Alison's therapists are drawn to look very much alike, as are her romantic attachments, which further complicates the reading of associations. Clearly the narrative is less about giving us a sequential understanding of the events of Alison's life and more about the interpretation of her associations. The final insight that concludes each chapter is similarly placed on a black background, thus sandwiching the dreamwork of the narrative in between the dark pages.

> Here is the dream I brought to my first session of psychoanalysis: I was walking across a bridge on Connecticut Avenue in Washington, DC. The bridge stretches high over Rock Creek Parkway. There were stone lions on either end of the bridge, but in the dream they were altered slightly so that they became Patience and Fortitude, the lions in front of the New York Public Library. As I walked across the bridge I was suddenly lifted up into the air. I woke before I could fall onto the Parkway below. The overwhelming feeling of the dream was of being picked up by an outside force that was determined to throw me over the side of the bridge so that I would be smashed to death. Dr. Horton said: "This is the dream of the analysis. We will both need patience and fortitude to see it through."

Tammy Clewell begins her essay on *Are You My Mother?* by quoting an Amazon reviewer of the book: "Enough with the Freud already!" (Pooter, quoted in Clewell, 2017: 51). There is not much Freud in *Are You My Mother?*, but there is plenty of therapy and psychoanalysis. Clewell celebrates Alison's resistance to therapy: "Bechdel's text portrays resistance as enabling the artist to embrace the messy neuroses of her everyday life not as symptoms of a psychic disturbance to be resolved but as a core component of her identity, particularly her identity as a graphic memoirist" (ibid.: 53). It is important to clarify that, while both of Alison's therapists go on to train to becoming psychoanalysts, Alison is in therapy, not psychoanalysis. The goals of therapy are more focused on relieving symptomatic distress rather than on revealing the repressed origin of the symptom. When Alison's therapist suggests Alison draw her comics more quickly rather than going through the painstaking process of drafting, she is offering a strategy for avoiding what she assumes is a painful process (Bechdel 2012: 252).[8] Alison is frustrated by the difficulty she is having writing *Are You My Mother?*, but her writing process is part of the exploration of the associations she is drawing that lead her to interpret the dreams that begin each chapter. The chapters conclude with the recovery of the repressed content the dreams were pointing to and Alison's integration of that insight. The painful, labored process of writing the book parallels the process of psychoanalysis. Alison is not getting the interpretative excavation of her associations in therapy; AB uses Alison's memories of her therapy sessions as part of the associations she interprets through the writing process.

AB's descriptions of the dreams appear in textboxes overlaid on top of the images. In the first dream she is trapped in "a dank cellar" (ibid.: 2) from which she exits and then plunges into a pool that is "deep and murky" (ibid.: 3). Her final comment in a frame that depicts her dropping deep into the pool is that she has "a sublime feeling of surrender" (ibid.: 3). Her mother's psychotherapist boyfriend Bob's analysis of the dream is that: "water is usually about creativity" (ibid.: 10). This interpretation is not identified as Jungian, but it was Jung (not Freud) who proposed this sort of formulaic symbolic matching.[9] It is the first of a series of memories AB recounts as associations to a dream about being stuck on a frozen cliff that turns into her family home (ibid.: 161–3). AB comments: "This image of my childhood as an emotional deep freeze was the opposite, I'm certain, of the psychological atmosphere my parents thought they were providing" (ibid.: 167). In her association, young Alison and her father are doing dishes. Her father says "Little boys like their mother best. That's called the Oedipus Complex." In the next frame the father continues with Jung's version of the Oedipus Complex for girls, "Girls like their father best. That's an Electra Complex." Young Alison's response is "Do they have to?" (ibid.: 167). In the following association AB remembers her mother mocking her father's musings on penis envy: "Who'd want one of those things dangling between their legs" (ibid.: 168). In the next memory young Alison is in the bath with her 2 younger brothers: "My younger brothers' penises, scrotums, and absent foreskins were interesting enough. But what I really envied were all the words" (ibid.: 169). Her

mother doesn't know the name for Alison's genitalia. AB comments: "Why would my mother—who supposedly had this same apparatus—have to get back to me about what it was called?" (ibid.: 169). The next night Helen reports back: "Vagina" (ibid.: 169).

In the next memory, Alison is in college reading Adrienne Rich, noting Rich's reference to *A Room of One's Own* (ibid.: 171), the only book of Woolf's she discovers her mother has read (ibid.: 172). It is in books that she finds the words for genitals and desire that her mother could not supply—and she reproduces them in her own books, including graphic depictions of women's bodies and expressions of sexual desire. In *Dykes, Fun Home*, and *Are You My Mother?* we see women kissing, fondling and licking each other's breasts and toes and clitorises, enjoying each other's bodies and conversations. AB, commenting on Alison's unwillingness to break the law through civil disobedience, says "It was only my lesbianism, and my determination not to hide it, that saved me from being compliant to the core" (ibid.: 188). Alison's mother censors words, but she does not censor Alison's sexual desires, which are drawn sensually and explicitly.

AB returns to the topic of penis envy in chapter 7, "The Use of an Object" (the title of a paper by Winnicott), where the panels show a discussion between Alison and her mother about her mother's open favoritism of Alison's brothers. "'But you worshiped John and Christian!' Alison says to her mother (ibid.: 264). The metacommentary in the same panel takes us to Winnicott again: "Winnicott gave a talk on feminism to the Progressive League in 1964." As the conversation continues in the next two panels, the metacommentary goes on "Some of what he says is very much of that era. 'Penis envy is a fact.'… But then Winnicott 'reminds' the audience that 'male envy of women is incalculably greater.'"

> My best friend since elementary school, Beth, had a son, Eli, and then a daughter, Emily. The first time Beth changed Emily's diaper Beth had a horrible sick feeling in her gut: Emily was horribly defective. Her genitals were mutilated. Something was lacking. Then Beth realized, Emily wasn't defective. Emily was a girl.

The splash on the next page shows Alison and Helen's feet with a box they are packing between them. There is no dialog. The six boxes of metacommentary overlaying the image start with Winnicott who "sees both men and women as frustrated by mutual envy," and then moves to five boxes on Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* that connect Mr. Ramsay's temper with Woolf's father, Leslie Stephen (ibid.: 266); the connection to Alison's father's anger depicted in *Fun Home* is implied. The next association is to what AB describes as a "pivotal session" with Jocelyn in which Jocelyn tells Alison she is "adorable" (ibid.: 267). Alison cannot take this in. "Did you hear anything I said?" Jocelyn asks,

repeating that Alison is "adorable." Alison's response is that if this were true, "I would die" (ibid.: 268). Jocelyn responds: "Because you'd rather die than feel anger at your mother for not giving you what you needed?" In the metacommentary, the self-aware narrator comments on what is happening in the session: "It's the analyst's task…to give the patient the capacity to use the analyst…and the analyst does this the same way the good-enough mother does…" (ibid.: 267). The "good enough mother" is Winnicott's phrase for the mother who provides for the infant's needs without being so over-attentive as to so smother the infant with affection and concern that it is difficult for the child to ever imagine separation.[10] At the center of the spread is a narrow panel with a black background: "Here's the vital core of Winnicott's theory: the subject must destroy the object [e.g., the mother]. And the object must survive this destruction." In other words, one must achieve emotional separation from the mother, establishing clear boundaries, and see that, no longer internalized, the mother still exists. This is surely a comment on *Are You My Mother?*, which AB knows, from her mother's feeling that *Fun Home* was a violation of privacy, constitutes a further betrayal—even as it seeks reparation. Alison fears that she will not be able to survive her anger at her mother, which screens her feeling of being unloved by her mother. She also fears that the process of working-through these emotions by writing *Are You My Mother?* will destroy her mother. To some extent, this fear is realized: writing the book allows her to separate from her mother, thus "killing" the internalized critical voice that, although painful, is a connection to her mother it seems impossible to survive without. At the end of the book, Alison recognizes that they are both still standing.

In discussing her frequent fights with her mother during her teenage years, AB's metacommentary, 7 blocks laid over 3 panels, is about countertransference, the analyst's emotional responses to the analysand. AB notes: "In Winnicott's hands it becomes more of a tool" and "The analyst can't help the patient 'unless the analyst's own hate is extremely well sorted-out and conscious" (ibid.: 175). The analyst must be aware of these feelings and not act out in the analysis as a result. "Hate" (chapter 5) ends with Alison's conversation with her mother about whether or not it is appropriate to include personal material in published writing: "Mom had told me that she felt I'd betrayed her in *Fun Home* by revealing things in the book that she'd told me in confidence" (ibid.: 200). Alison is planning *Are You My Mother?* The conversation is interspersed by comments and quotations from Winnicott's "The Child in the Family Group" (ibid.: 200) in which Winnicott gives an example of patient who, as a young girl, wished for affection and attention from her mother that she never got. "'As it was,' the woman told Winnicott, 'I never found my mother again'" (ibid.: 203). AB references this story when she returns to her therapist, Jocelyn, and is able to feel loved and attended to by her as a good-enough mother surrogate. Discussing the moment when Jocelyn told Alison she "was adorable," Alison tells Jocelyn: "That moment patched up a hole" (ibid.: 274).

On my birthday, a year and a half after my father died and a year before I began to write about Bechdel, I was deeply depressed. I was not grieving, but stuck in melancholy. My birthday was always a sore spot. He was largely absent during my childhood, traveling for work. Both of my parents agreed that my father's work was the highest priority. I remember the times he was not home for my birthday more than the times he was there. This powerful sense of absence was amplified by my mother's emotional absence. As I began to mourn my father, I first had to face the grief I felt for my empty childhood. My parents loved me; it was their responsibility. But they did not acknowledge me. I was Oedipus standing at the crossroads alone. I have since come to see that later, after he retired and I had an administrative position he could respect, we became good friends. Recently, my mother has been exuberant in thanks and praise for all of the things I have done for her. I am delighted by her gratitude. But on this particular birthday I was depressed and trying to force myself to face the emptiness of my childhood. My daughter Pippa came over for dinner. I said to her: "Nana loves me, but she doesn't see me. She doesn't know who I am. She can only acknowledge the tiny piece of me that is like her. She praises my cooking. She criticizes my housekeeping. I felt like a bad mother because you went to daycare, even though I was the only one working. Your dad was working on his dissertation until we separated. I had to work, but that meant to the extended family that I put my work ahead of my children, just as my father had. The rest of my life—writing and teaching—are invisible to Nana. It feels like there is an emptiness at the heart of me that can never be filled." Pippa put her hands together to make the shape of a heart and placed them on my chest. "That's where I come in," she said. "I fill that empty place." As we talked I realized that she was right. I love her, and I also see her for who she is. I see the parts of her that are not like me as much as I see the parts that are like me. She is her own person. I am proud of her.

When she was born I had a powerful need to reclaim my body, which felt like it had been taken over by aliens. I wanted a tattoo. I knew where I wanted it (my right bicep), but I could not decide on a design. Pippa's father had a fit and said mean things about this plan. [I later realized that this was probably because he still hoped I would convert to Judaism, which forbids tattoos.] So I shaved my head instead. But I never let go of the wish for a tattoo. So I said to Pippa, "if this were a tattoo—this way that you fill in the emptiness I carry—what would that be?" Without missing a beat, she said, "you get a lock, and I get a key." And on Valentine's Day we did.

Winnicott's talk on feminism comes up again following the graphic depiction of Winnicott's death (ibid.: 278): "We find that the trouble is not so much that everyone was inside and then born, but that at the very beginning everyone was *dependent* on a woman" (ibid.: 279 emphasis original). The metacommentary in

the panel that follows, which continues the quotation from Winnicott, concludes: "Winnicott sees this dependence as the root of misogyny—though he never uses that word. Perhaps, like Woolf with 'feminist,' he felt plain language was more persuasive" (ibid.: 279).

The end of the book also uses plain language. In a conversation with her mother, who has just read the first four chapters of *Are You My Mother?*, Helen describes it: "It's…it's a metabook." Alison responds, "Yeah! It is!" (ibid.: 285). In the metacommentary in the next panel, the narrator says: "At last, I have destroyed my mother, and she has survived my destruction." The final two pages are black with a single panel of young Alison and her mother playing a game described earlier in which Alison fantasizes that she cannot walk and her mother plays along by giving her leg braces.[11] The five boxes of metacommentary conclude: "There was a certain thing I did not get from my mother…*There is a lack, a gap, a void*…But in its place she has given me something else…Something I would argue, that is far more valuable…She has given me a way out" (ibid.: 288–89, emphasis added). Helen's realization that *Are You My Mother?* is a "metabook" is the validation Alison seeks. Her mother has read and understood her—and survived this knowledge. As in the crippled child game, her mother can now play along in Alison's adult life as writer who writes about her inner life and her identity as a lesbian feminist. As in the crippled child game, Helen is always there as she has been throughout the narrative of *Are You My Mother?*, during which Alison talks to her nearly every day and shares the draft of the book with her. Helen is the audience whose response Alison most desires and fears.

> I cannot help noticing that this is a quilting point between Bechdel and myself, as I write about her in a book I could not have written until my father died and dread having my mother read. (Happily, sadly, I know it is unlikely that either of my children will ever read this.) Unlike Bechdel, I will not share drafts with my mother, whose disapproval is palpable even now. Perhaps I will just not mention the book to her. Ever.

AB reflectively reads her experiences in therapy to create an analysis—to do for herself in writing *Are You My Mother?* what analysts do for their patients and what Woolf did for herself in writing *To the Lighthouse*. AB's reading in psychoanalysis is a course in training herself to become her own analyst (as she sees Woolf being in *To the Lighthouse*). This is the ultimate goal of analysis: at the end, the analysand no longer needs the analyst; the analysand has become the analyst. This is a goal *Are You My Mother?* accomplishes.

The self-conscious narrator is a *bricoleuse* in her use of the various psychoanalytic sources she reads: Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, Alice Miller's *Gifted Child*, D. W. Winnicott, Jacques Lacan. AB comments on

Alison's relationship with both therapists: "In fact, all along I've been pitting myself against each of them in turn. What I really want is to cure myself. To be my own analyst" (ibid.: 149). Thus AB reads psychoanalysts and writes books that she imagines will relieve her of her parents' internalized voices, as *To the Lighthouse* did for Woolf.

Mise en abyme

The penultimate chapter, "Mirror," opens with a dream in which Alison watches her mother practicing lines for a play by delivering them in front of a mirror. The dream occurs while Alison is waiting to hear her mother's response to *Fun Home*. Her associations to the dream lead to her memories of her mother on stage in local theater productions and then to a series of frames in which the young Alison watches her mother at her dressing table mirror (ibid.: 213–215). The metacommentary embedded in this sequence is a reproduction of the title page of Winnicott's paper, "Mirror-role of Mother and Family in Child Development" (ibid.: 213). The metacommentary summarizes this essay, which is a response to Jacques Lacan's essay "The Mirror Stage." AB turns to Lacan's essay during frames of Alison as a toddler pulling the mirrored hallstand on top of herself. AB comments that "both [Lacan and Winnicott's] papers outline theories of how we come to think of ourselves as selves" (ibid.: 231).

The chapter ends with AB's description of the foyer of her childhood home in which two mirrors hang on facing walls to create a *mise en abyme* in which reflections in the mirrors are reflected back to one another infinitely. We get to this image of infinite reflection through the interpretation of the dream of the mother in the mirror, which ends with three words: "drive thwart laden (ibid.: 207). AB interprets: "'Laden' seemed like a joke about the overladen content of the dream itself. But whose drive had been thwarted?…and by whom?" (ibid.: 208). The chapter's associations lead to the answers to those two questions. In the two-page end to the chapter there is one frame floating on the black background of young Alison caught in the *mise en abyme* of the two foyer mirrors simultaneously "trapped" and "opening out, in an infinite unfurling" (ibid.: 244). The metacommentary continues, "I am the one whose drive is being thwarted…and I am the one who is thwarting it" (ibid.: 245). The *mise en abyme* is a symbol of the book itself, which constantly reflects its own imagines back and forth.

The session in which Jocelyn tells Alison she is adorable (ibid.: 216–17) is remembered twice again in the final chapter (ibid.: 267, 273–274). In the first memory of the session, the next panel has Alison remembering sitting with her father watching her mother perform with while the metacommentary explains: "Jocelyn kept talking but I couldn't hear her. My head was reverberating with the thing I had apparently been longing to hear for my whole life" (ibid.: 217). The second time Alison's association leads her back to this session, Alison is able to stay present in the session even though she still does not take in what Jocelyn says. The metacommentary mirrors Alison's inability

to hear Jocelyn's affectionate compliments through textboxes about Winnicott at the top of and in between the frames of the session that equate the analyst with the "good enough mother" (ibid.: 267). AB's interpretation shows us this is what Jocelyn is doing in telling Alison she is adorable as a replacement for her mother's emotional distance and criticism. The memories and commentary bounce back and forth, taking the narrative into a deeper and deeper space, which becomes a metaphor for analysis.

Alison describes herself as having "cathected Jocelyn," (ibid.: 216). The absence of a recognition of transference is notable here, but it is addressed in the final chapter during a later, post-therapy, conversation with Jocelyn, who is now in psychoanalytic training: "mostly we talked about the intensity of my transference to her" (ibid.: 273). Transference is the process, necessary in psychoanalysis (but not theorized in therapy) through which the analysand projects repressed emotions onto the relationship with the therapist, thus making it possible to experience and work-through them. Just as the repressed speaks through dreams, symptoms, and slips of the tongue, so too does it speak through the transference. To develop a transference relationship requires that the analysand trusts the analyst enough to act out and regress and ultimately work-though the repressed emotional material. Alison feels safe enough to return to Jocelyn, which indicates a willingness to work-though the material the therapy has raised. They discuss the time Jocelyn told Alison she was adorable, and in this third reworking of the session Alison feels the empty space she recognizes as unfilled by her mother fill up. She can now say, in a frame that contains no metacommentary, that looking back, "That moment patched up the hole" (ibid.: 274).

AB's reflective reading of her therapy with Jocelyn and Carol recreates those sessions as an analysis. More than the therapeutic lessening of symptoms, AB rereads the experience to get at the underlying repression that gives rise to the symptoms, thus freeing her from the exhausting psychic work of maintaining the repressed material—her anger at her mother and the "hole" she felt because of the lack of maternal affection—that keeps emerging in dreams and gets in the way of her ability to love and work. The difficulty of writing *Are You My Mother?* is an expression of the difficulty of analysis. She says this outright: "One reason this memoir is taking me so long is that I'm trying to figure out—from both sides of the couch—just what it is that psychoanalysts do for their patients" (ibid.: 21).[12] This is also what she seeks in Woolf: how did writing *To the Lighthouse* free Woolf from the internalized voices of her parents? When Jocelyn first tells AB that she is adorable, AB cannot hear her. It is only in revisiting Jocelyn that she can also revisit that moment and work-through both the feeling of loss and the emptiness filling up.

Lisa Diedrich notes that psychoanalysis "for Winnicott revolves around the doctor's ability to withhold interpretation—to be *patient* – so that, through play, the patient might come upon an interpretation him-/herself" (Diedrich, 2014: 189). This is precisely what Bechdel herself does in the self-analysis of *Are You My Mother?*, as she uses the playfulness of comics to work-through

her dreams and past experiences in therapy. Her writing process for the book, in which she photographs herself in every pose and then draws the frames from this play-acting, creates a site of play and interpretation within each frame. Just as she plays the crippled child for her mother's attention, she plays out the narrative of the book she will give to her mother.

Outlaw narrators: representing women's desire

The narrator of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, the Biographer, first suggested to me that a more flexible relationship to authority was possible and was a way to escape the oedipal stalemate of openly fighting the father (and thus becoming him), submitting to patriarchal law (and perpetually fighting in hysterical silence), or regressing into the pre-Oedipal fantasy of maternal merger (which is psychosis). Woolf's Biographer defies the laws of biography, telling the life story of someone who lives over 300 years and changes from a man to a woman by directly addressing the reader just as Bechdel's self-conscious narrator does. Most importantly, the Biographer recognizes the self as multiple and unstable: Orlando "had a great variety of selves to call upon, far more than we have been able to find room for, since a biography is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves, whereas a person may well have as many as a thousand" (Woolf, 1956: 309). The Biographer recognizes the existence of the law and is indifferent to complying with it. The Biographer is a renegade who acts outside of the laws of biographical convention.

Like *Are You My Mother?, Orlando* can be a difficult book. It calls up our resistance. We want to believe that ego is constant; we want to believe that desire can be satisfied. It is upon these beliefs that the patriarchy (and thus much of the feminist fight against patriarchy) is sustained. *Orlando* does not attack patriarchy directly. It contains no overt plan for a takeover or the destruction of the world as we know it. Instead, *Orlando* sees patriarchy as constructed and empty of intrinsic power. The patriarchy only has power in the ways we grant it power. This is a difficult message. It does not offer the satisfaction of political action as we have typically conceived it. Outwardly, it changes nothing. At the end of an analytic session we rise up from the couch physically unchanged; at the end of *Orlando* we look up from the book physically unchanged. But in both of these moments everything has changed—"everything, in fact, [is] something else" (Woolf, 1956: 143). The self-conscious narrator Woolf creates in *Orlando* recurs in *A Room of One's Own* as Mary Beton, who speaks directly to the audience in the lecture room. Like *A Room of One's Own, Are You My Mother?*'s self-conscious narrator speaks to readers about the events we are being shown. Similarly, both books are structured as the investigation of the questions they ultimately answer: what do women need in order to write? A room of their own. Are you my mother? Yes, you are. Both texts are narratives of their own creation.

In identifying her internalization of her "mother's critical faculties" AB suggests that Helen functions within Alison's psyche as the superego—the

hyper critical voice of authority of the conscience that will never approve of who we are or what we do. Bechdel's narrative is self-conscious and self-critical, pushing back on Helen's disapproval. She uses Winnicott and Woolf to amplify this strain in the narrative.

In Freud's original formulation, the construct of the superego is equally internalized authority and a self-conscious critic of that authority.[13] The "critical agency" is the part of the superego that Freud repressed as his construction of a more stable model of the unconscious developed. Lacan rejects the more rigid late version of the superego as internalized parental and social authority that Freud ultimately equates to the conscience; instead, Lacan emphasizes the instability of the unconscious as internalizing both the law and criticism of the law. Like *Orlando*'s Biographer, the critical agency knows the law, but is not compelled to obey it. The critical agency is an outlaw. The self-conscious narrators of *A Room of One's Own* and *Are You My Mother?* expose the critical agency that can challenge the superego (for Alison this is her mother's internalized critical voice), and relieve the pressure of dominant narratives that silence women's voices and repress women's desire. Without the critical agency of self-consciousness, the dominant narrative takes over like the slap Alison feels when her mother refuses to kiss her goodnight.

Bechdel's narrative graphically—in both senses of the word—represents Alison's sexual desire for women. She makes love to various partners without restraint. Resisting the notion that women are inherently sexually repressed, passive, hysterical, or simply asexual is crucial, even central, to the work of feminism. This is a powerful buffer to her relationship with her mother and the internalization of her mother's critical voice. The refusal—or inability—to recognize women's sexuality results in infantilization and oppression. Alison's expression of desire claims a voice for herself that is not defined by her (desexualized) position as daughter. She claims a space for herself as a woman who controls her own voice, body, relationships, and desires. By identifying herself as a lesbian she announces her sexuality and defies patriarchy's co-option of her body and mind.

Jane Marcus describes the influence the relationship between Woolf and Vita Sackville-West would have had on the audience of the lectures that became *A Room of One's Own*, which Woolf gave soon after the publication of *Orlando*. According to Marcus, Sackville-West's presence at the first lecture, delivered at Cambridge University on 26 October 1928, and Woolf's references to Sir Chartres Biron (Woolf, 1957: 85) and Sir Archibald Bodkin (Woolf, 1957: 115), the government officials involved in the current obscenity trail of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (the book was banned on 16 November 1928), combined to raise lesbianism to the front of everyone's mind. This set the stage for the fantasy Woolf imagines in *A Room of One's Own* of a novel in which "'Chloe liked Olivia'" (Woolf, 1957: 86). In Marcus's contextualized reading of the lecture, Sackville-West's presence exposed the lesbian subtext and made all the women in the room into co-conspirators against patriarchal censorship: "The presence of Vita Sackville-West was not

only real but symbolic. *Orlando* had just appeared—a lesbian love letter, including photographs of Vita Sackville-West, and it was *not* on trial for obscenity" (Marcus, 1987: 166, emphasis original). Bechdel draws a parallel between Woolf's lecture and one Alison attends by Adrienne Rich (Bechdel, 2012: 186–187). On the next page we see Alison drawing her lover, Eloise, in the nude, followed by 2 frames of them having sex—interrupted by a frame about Winnicott's analysis with James Strategy (best known as the translator and editor of Freud's collected works).

Woolf's relationship with Sackville-West would have made lesbianism a topic available to Woolf in a different and more immediate way than ever before. Throughout her affair with Sackville-West, Woolf's allusions to lesbian desire became more and more overt—from the single kiss Clarissa Dalloway receives from Sally Seton (Woolf, 1981: 52) to Orlando's cross-dressed adventures. Woolf's affair with Sackville-West led to greater openness in Woolf's depiction of sexuality and sexual desire, and it seems to have influenced her thinking, as well as her writing, on the subject.[14] Before their first meeting on 14 December 1922, Woolf described Sackville-West as "a pronounced sapphist," (Woolf 1980: 2:235) but a few years later Woolf had happily become one of those "sapphists" herself.

In their writing to and for one another, Woolf and Sackville-West attempted to hold open a space for female sexual desire. What they wrote under each other's influence attempts to represent women who cherish other women, as they themselves cherished each other, in defiance of the law. Unlike the tense, sharp-featured, androgynous Alison, during sex Alison's features soften; she is full-breasted and voluptuous. No longer lying prone on the therapist's couch or sitting with her head in her hands, she is on top (and on the bottom and on her side). Her sexuality and sexual desires are the steady force in this narrative that moves from one moment of trauma to the next. Alison is horny—and there's nothing confusing about it. While Alison does have trouble sustaining relationships, she does not have trouble expressing her sexual desire.

Literature and psychoanalysis both provide access to the unconscious and therefore offer the potential to create real and lasting change. Putting Freud's initial exploration of the construction and function of the superego into conversation with texts in which Woolf and Bechdel grapple with the construction of female subjects suggests strategies for resisting external and internal patriarchal oppression. Woolf and *Are You My Mother?* form an intertextual engagement with what I see as the interconnected problems of representing identity and female sexuality.

Are You My Mother? offers a version of the narrative Woolf imagines in *A Room of One's Own*: Alison likes Amy and Eloise, Donna and Chris, and Holly.

Notes

1 There is scant criticism of *Dykes to Watch Out For*, with Gardiner's outstanding, nuanced essay (Gardiner, 2011) being the exception. Gardiner reads *Dykes to*

Watch Out For alongside *Fun Home* to argue that the two books comment on one another, the first as comedy the second as tragedy which "inflect one another in new queer mixed forms that show the ways that genre is always historically grounded (Gardiner, 2011: 189). About *Dykes to Watch Out For* she writes: "The graphic visibility of truth and of Bechdel's cartoons counters lies about lesbians: they are drawn in various shapes, but all look recognizable, unthreatening, familiar, while her decision not to shade the faces of characters of color de-emphasizes racial differences in the lesbian community. Instead Bechdel in the later years of *Dykes* has joined Rich in moving beyond the 'dyke essentialism' of Lesbian separatism and toward a more fluid queer inclusivity open not only to a multi-racial community of women-identified lesbians but also to trans, bi, and heterosexual people of various genders" (ibid.: 196).

2 Writing in *Bitch*, Audrey Bilger describes *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For* as "a whip-smart soap opera—*The L Word* meets queer theory meets Virginia Woolf crossed with Rachel Maddow…" (64, quoted in Gardiner, 2011: 190).

3 Julia Watson notes instances in *Fun Home* in which the reader's hands holding the book lie on top of Alison's hands holding photographs (Watson 2008: 39–41). In her essay on empathy in Doris Lessing's *Under My Skin* and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, Leah Anderst (2015) writes: "the frequent moments of self-reflexivity [in these two autobiographies]…draw the reader close to the experiences of the autobiographer during the instance of narrating. These moments of self-reflexivity… contribute to the works' overall sense of intimacy between the autobiographer and reader" (Anderst, 2015: 276). She further argues that "Lessing and Bechdel each school their readers by representing their own empathy for another as they voice that other's consciousness" (ibid.: 276).

4 We will return to the concept of the critical agency in more depth at the end of this chapter. In brief, the critical agency is an early aspect of Freud's notion of the superego, which he initially conceived of as both the internalization of parental authority and the questioning of that authority.

5 See Nancy K. Miller's "The Entangled Self: Genre Bondage in the Age of Memoir" (Miller, 2007) for an excellent overview of memoir and autobiography. Miller touches on *Fun Home* and provides an extensive bibliography.

6 I will also adopt the convention of using ellipses to indicate that related quotations are presented in separate text boxes.

7 The reference to Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Chodorow, 1978) is to invoke Chodorow's argument that the resolution of the Oedipus Complex for women is to form an attachment to the father without separating completely from the mother.

8 Tammy Clewell offers a different interpretation of this scene, which she sees as an act of resistance to psychoanalysis (Clewell, 2017: 56–57).

9 For Freud, it was the dreamer's associations with the dream that led to its interpretation.

10 Winnicott was a part of the Object Relations school of psychoanalysis, developed by his therapist, Melanie Klein. This school (as distinct from the continuation of Freud's work championed by his daughter, Anna Freud) worked directly with children. Freud's theories about child development were inferred from his analysis of adults.

11 Cynthia Barounis discusses this game in "Alison Bechdel and Crip-Feminist Autobiography," which argues that "Bechdel's memoirs bring together psychiatric disability, creativity, and metaphor in ways that both draw from and break with her feminist precursors' use of disability metaphor" (Barounis, 2016: 141). Barounis is particularly critical of Woolf's *A Room of One's Own.* Tammy Clewell also discusses this game noting that "the panel's composition suggests a birthing scene, in which Alison appears to have just crawled out of her mother's parted legs" (Clewell, 2017: 66).

12 Diedrich concludes: "in the course of Bechdel's graphic analysis, Winnicott and his ideas will come to function not as mother-substitute, but as a transitional object, something Bechdel can use in order to create the book about her mother" (Diedrich, 2014: 192–193).
13 See "On Narcissism" (Freud, 1966, XIV:67–102) for the origins of this concept.
14 See Sproles (2006) for a more fully developed analysis of this relationship.

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Afterword

A twisted wrench and a sunbonnet quilt

I often use an old socket wrench that my grandfather salvaged from the trash heap at a coalmine in southwest Virginia. Bent beyond use, it was tossed in with the slag, the rocks discarded after sifting out the coal. My grandfather hammered it back into alignment. It works perfectly, but there's a twist just above the grip—a trace of some misplaced blow that might have taken off a finger or thumb as well as bend the steel. The coal and slag in the miners' daily haul is equally heavy, but they would only get paid for the coal. The slag heap was testimony to their unpaid labor. Anything that couldn't be used anymore was thrown into the heap and much of it was salvaged and repaired for other use. Sometimes it seems to me that all the tools in Russell County Virginia come from the Clinchfield Coal Company's slag heap, and like everything that comes out of the mines, they are bent out of shape. A strong will and a heavy hammer can straighten out the good metal, but there will always be a twist—a traumatic trace—to testify to the damage done.

My grandfather's wrench is a daily reminder of my family's stories, stories that go back well past my memory but nevertheless tell me part of the story of who I am. Physical manifestations of these stories are scattered across the desk I am writing on now. The jack rock my Uncle James found in his driveway during a miners' strike, my father's worn pocket knife, and the heavy pewter letter opener my mother gave me nestle among open books, journals, photographs, newspaper clippings, and a ripe peach. That is how I imagine this book, too: a melange of texts: literature, people, tools, and my own past held together by insomnia and loss. Johnny Cash writes that one cannot ignore grief: "sooner or later you just have to go into it" (Cash, 1997: 36). I think that we do ignore grief, for the most part, because then we do not have to admit the loss that gives rise to it. Often one loss calls up another and the traumatic response we have repressed because it is too painful to "go into." We kill our responses, and sometimes they stay dead and buried. Sometimes they fight to get our attention, and announce themselves in symptoms like sleeplessness or dreams, but they don't always succeed in waking us up to the pain we would have to face if we open our eyes.

J. Hillis Miller begins his essay, "Narrative," by asking: "Exactly what psychological or social functions do stories serve? Just why do we need

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stories, lots of them, all the time?" (Miller, 2005: 67). One answer is that stories help us "go into" that place inside where we collect feelings of grief and loss in an attempt to avoid them. All of the stories I consider here have taught me something about narrative's ability to open up a safe space in which everyday trauma can be transformed. People often say that something they have read changed their lives. There are rare occasions when a story grips me as in a vice and pounds some bent experience into a new shape. Often without realizing it, often several days later, a past pain or confused misunderstanding suddenly seems different. At its extreme edge I would say that this transformational process is "working-though." Working-through is a term of art in psychoanalysis that indicates a complex process in which a repressed traumatic response is re-experienced and integrated. However painful the process, the result is the healing of the traumatic wound that has been festering in the unconscious.

What is it about some stories that can make us feel the twist we have carefully forgotten? What calls up the repressed trauma and creates the sudden wrench that pulls pain back up from the unconscious? How can a story heal the injury beneath a scar? These are transformational narratives. They will be different for everyone. I believe it is how we read, not what we read, that transforms us. Recognition of this process of reflective reading is one way to experience metacognition—thinking about thinking. How we think about reading, an awareness of the interpretative process is a metacognitive engagement that both informs and supports the process of deep transformation.

It takes an enormous amount of psychological energy to keep from remembering a painful experience, but once faced it is no longer the same and it is no longer threatening. All of the psychological energy used to repress that pain is freed up. Because the process of repression is largely unconscious, it is difficult to describe or to track. Often the only sign that working-through has occurred is a sudden increase in energy. It is not usually dramatic. To me, it feels like getting a good night's sleep under a sunbonnet quilt.

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