

**“Disconnecting Something From Anything”:  
Fetishized Objects, Alienated Subjects, and Literary Modernism**

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores modernist attitudes toward the commodity and the process of commodification under late capitalism. Some modernists, notably those commonly referred to as the “men of 1914,” lament a reversal of the presumed proper relationship between subject and object, in which people become passive as a result of the mechanical routines of the workplace, and objects gain perverse independence from their human creators. My dissertation suggests that there is a feminist alternative to this familiar, hegemonic modernist critique in the work of Gertrude Stein, Djuna Barnes, and Virginia Woolf. For Stein, Barnes, and Woolf, the problem with commodification is not passive subjects and animated objects, but, to the contrary, domineering subjects and a fungible object world. Stein, Barnes, and Woolf seek not to reclaim humanity’s world-creating powers, but to re-enchant the world of things and discover modes of ethical passivity that enable a more receptive, hospitable relationship to alterity.

In articulating this alternative critique, I distinguish my position from two strains of modernist scholarship, one that acknowledges only one critique of commodification—that of the “men of 1914”—and a wave of scholarship that considers itself as, in the words of Kathryn Simpson, “exploding the myth [...] of modernist writers’ and artists’ absolute disinterest, detachment and contempt for popular and consumer culture” (1). While I align myself with the latter contingent, I differentiate my position through a consideration of the ways in which certain modernists reformulate a critique of the commodity in less absolutist and naïve terms. I argue that Stein, Barnes, and Woolf advance immanent critiques that do not presume to stand outside the commodity industry but draw power from certain tensions within commodification. Specifically, their critique is animated by a paradox: by exaggerating the alienation and fetishism characteristic of commodification, they hope to combat the commodity’s reifying logic.

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**LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS****Gertrude Stein texts**

<i>AABT</i>	<i>The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas</i>
<i>EA</i>	<i>Everybody's Autobiography</i>
<i>GP</i>	<i>Geography and Plays</i>
<i>LIA</i>	<i>Lectures in America</i>
<i>MA</i>	<i>The Making of Americans: Being a History of a Family's Progress</i>
<i>Na</i>	<i>Narration: Four Lectures</i>
<i>TB</i>	<i>Tender Buttons</i>
<i>TL</i>	<i>Three Lives</i>

**Djuna Barnes texts**

<i>N</i>	<i>Nightwood</i>
<i>I</i>	<i>Interviews</i>
<i>NY</i>	<i>New York</i>

**Virginia Woolf texts**

<i>AROO</i>	<i>A Room of One's Own</i>
<i>BTA</i>	<i>Between the Acts</i>
<i>TG</i>	<i>Three Guineas</i>
<i>TTL</i>	<i>To the Lighthouse</i>
<i>TW</i>	<i>The Waves</i>

## Introduction

This dissertation investigates the response of three female modernists—Gertrude Stein, Djuna Barnes, and Virginia Woolf—to the growing predominance of the commodity in twentieth-century culture. It argues that these writers advance a critique of the commodity that departs radically from that asserted by many of their male modernist peers, in particular the writers known as the “men of 1914”—James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Wyndham Lewis (Lewis *Blasting* 9).<sup>1</sup>

Whereas the “men of 1914” depict a world in which commodification robs individuals of agency and grants perverse autonomy to objects, these female modernists suggest that commodification is the product of abstract and instrumental rationality that enshrines the individual as sovereign while denying the object world any inherent value, rendering it, in effect, mere stuff for human fabrication. For the latter writers, the individualism and instrumentality at the heart of a commodified world leads simultaneously to violence against others and nature, and to self-denial, a mistaken refusal of the pleasures of receptive and embodied experience.

Further distinguishing their position from the “men of 1914,” Stein, Barnes, and Woolf refuse nostalgia about the pre-capitalist past and naïveté about art’s ability to maintain autonomy from the realm of commodification. Surprisingly, they discover potential within aspects of commodity culture to combat the commodity form itself. Indeed, their work is animated by a paradox: by exaggerating the alienation and fetishism characteristic of the commodity, they hope to combat the commodity’s reifying logic. Ultimately, their critique is feminist insofar as it contests patriarchal oppositions between masculine form and feminine matter or masculine action and feminine passivity.

In making this argument, I distinguish myself from two strains of scholarship, one that acknowledges only one critique of commodification—that of the “men of 1914”—and a recent wave of scholarship that considers itself as, in the words of Kathryn Simpson, “exploding the myth [...] of modernist writers’ and artists’ absolute disinterest, detachment and contempt for popular and consumer culture” (1). The latter group has emphasized the complexity of modernists’ attitudes toward capitalist modernity, noting the ways in which they express ambivalence about, actively engage with, and even celebrate phenomena such as consumerism, popular mass culture, celebrity, and advertising. While I am also interested in points of contact and affinity between these modernists and commodity culture, I take for granted that the “myth” of modernists’ “absolute disinterest, detachment, and contempt” has been thoroughly demystified. Instead, I focus on the ways in which Stein, Barnes, and Woolf attempt to reformulate their critique of the commodity in less naïve and absolutist terms after modernism’s complex and inextricable entanglement with commodification has been acknowledged.

### **Alienation and Fetishism: the “Men of 1914” and their Critique of Commodity Culture**

In his 1914 essay on Thomas Hardy, D. H. Lawrence associates waged labour with the loss of self, claiming that “when necessity alone compels man, from moment to moment, to work, then man rebels and dies” (*Study of Thomas Hardy* 41). Driven to work for the sake of self-preservation, one is doomed to “struggle mechanically, unformed, unbegotten, unborn, repeating some old process of life, unable to become ourselves, unable to produce anything new” (45). By contrast, through artistic labour, the individual is “born again”: “the incomplete germ which is a young soul” is “fertilized” and gives birth to the fully “distinct” ego (44).

Lawrence's disdain for the labourer is typical of early male modernist responses to modern capitalism and industrial society. These writers tended to lament the increasing passivity and disenfranchisement of the human subject brought about by the changing conditions of modern life. While this passivity had its origins in the realm of work, where workers were disconnected from the ends of their labour and subjected to automated and dehumanizing routines of the Taylorist factory, it extends to infect all spheres of life.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the most exemplary expressions of this sentiment can be found in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), with its haunting evocation of the automaton-like crowds that "flow" over London Bridge on the way to and from work (ll. 62-63), and Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936), with its comic depiction of a worker cruelly subjected to a constantly accelerating assembly line. In Eliot's poem, the repetitive and deadening rhythms of labour have bled beyond the walls of the factory and office to affect even the worker's leisure time, their journey through the city both before and after their working hours.

These writers lament the impact of industrial capitalism not just on human subjectivity, but also on the object world. The corollary of the passive subject is the commodified thing—an object that has been rendered impersonal, cheap, and perversely animated. *The Waste Land* again provides a paradigmatic expression of this sentiment. In "The Fire Sermon" section, a female typist "lays out food in tins" amidst the squalor of her flat, "where stockings, slippers, camisoles, and stays" hang to dry in advance of a tryst with "the young man carbuncular" (ll. 223, 227, 231). Taken together, the disorderliness of the setting, with its suffocating preponderance of commercial things, and the mechanical nature of her profession (she is described as having an "automatic" hand), are meant to emphasize the soulless and sordid nature of the affair. For writers like Eliot, the modern subject is overwhelmed by the unruly disorder of a commodity

culture, which, in its “tawdry cheapness,” no longer bears the mark of its human author or satisfies genuine human needs (Pound, “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley” 550).

Early literary modernist writers often contrast the mechanical labour and anonymous products of modernity with the active and creative labour of artists and the singularity of their works of art. The modern artist is a willful and vital force who, rather than passively accept the world as given, seizes and wholly transforms his or her environment, imposing meaning and form on a chaotic existence. Unlike the mechanical workers of the Taylorist factory, who follow commands from their superiors, or modern consumers, who accept a choice between existing things, artists freely create the new, unconstrained by worldly limits. They bring forth a new reality out of what Eliot calls the “immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (“Ulysses, Order, and Myth” 177-178). Unlike commodities, the works of art they produce are unique, non-repeatable objects that bear the mark of their creators. T. E. Hulme, whose articulation of a neo-classicist aesthetics was a profound influence on Lewis’s “vorticism,” echoes Eliot and the “Men of 1914” in understanding art as a response to the disorder of modern life, claiming that the “geometrical line is something absolutely distinct from the messiness, the confusion, and the accidental details of existing things” (Hulme 87). For Hulme, the work of art registers a “condition of mind” or “artistic volition” that brings order to the world. For these writers, the world-creating artists and their original works of art provide a powerful antidote to the passive subjects and degraded yet seemingly independent—anarchic and resistant to subjective control—object world of modern capitalism.

Many of these early literary modernist sentiments draw upon an idea popularized by Karl Marx—namely, that in capitalist modernity one witnesses a reversal of the presumed proper relationship between human subjects and material objects. Increasingly, under capitalism, people

become thing-like, as the mechanical routines of the workplace render their labour automatic and unthinking (a phenomenon Marx called alienation), while objects take on the characteristics of people, gaining independence from their origin in human labour (a phenomenon Marx called fetishism). In his more technical account of this phenomenon, Marx contends that, under capitalism, “the social character of men’s labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour” and that the “social relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour” (*Capital* 1: 72). This “appears” is not merely an illusion, but the product of the organization of labour in a capitalist society. Workers labour privately, independent of each other, to create products that are then exchanged in the marketplace. Producers are therefore connected not by any plan or coordination, but only through the exchange of commodities once the production process is complete. This disconnection between the social character of labour and its productive content leads to commodity fetishism, the perception that commodities possess their value autonomously, or inherently. Since workers only connect through exchange—or, because the social relationship between producers is displaced into the marketplace, “an alienated plane,” so to speak—producers do not recognize themselves, and their labour, as authors of the commodity’s value (Cohen 120).

For this reason, Marx suggests that commodities appear to workers as “mysterious” objects, while workers are increasingly estranged from their own creative powers (*Capital* 1: 164). The consequences of this estrangement are dire, since Marx views humankind’s defining feature as its capacity for free and purposive work. Marx contends that “it is in his fashioning of the objective world that man really proves himself; through such productive activity nature

appears as his work and his reality [. . .] and he can therefore contemplate himself in a world he himself created” (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* 77). Thus, when commodity fetishism alienates the human subject from authorship of value, it alienates him or her from their essential nature. Like Marx, the “men of 1914” see the crises of modernity in terms of the subject’s estrangement from its creative powers, and an object world that increasingly appears alien and strange, no longer the product of the subject’s mastery and control, but rather an external power.

### **Female modernism, fetishism, and “world alienation”**

As Douglas Mao notes, the narrative recounted above, that of modernists’ “struggle against the mass-produced commodity on behalf of the handcrafted thing,” is “one of the oldest stories about modernism” (11). It also one that has been constructed from an exclusive focus on male modernists. My dissertation examines and contributes to a very different narrative about literary modernism and its relation to capitalist modernity. In particular, I analyze the work of female modernists Gertrude Stein, Djuna Barnes, and Virginia Woolf, all of whom find redeeming elements in estrangement and fetishism, in receptive subjects and an animated object-world. Gertrude Stein, for instance, expresses a fondness for the commonplace commodities that Eliot finds so offensive in *The Waste Land*. She figures her artistic practice not in terms of actively shaping a new world, as does Wyndham Lewis, but in terms of “caressing” the existing one (*LIA* 231).<sup>3</sup> In her most radical artistic statement, she envisions the act of writing in passive terms, as a matter of ceding autonomy to language, claiming that she “like[s] the feeling of words doing as they want to do” (*Na* 15). Similarly, Djuna Barnes celebrates forms of passivity and estrangement. She admires film stars like Dietrich and Garbo whose subversive power resides not in voice, but in silence, and not in action, but in a languorous and detached inactivity.

Finally, Virginia Woolf advocates a “Society of Outsiders” that resists by “active and passive measures” and celebrates the shopper or spendthrift, and lavish, excessive, and unproductive expenditure as an alternative to the work ethic and its future-obsessed temporalities.

Stein, Barnes, and Woolf share with their modernist peers a desire to critique commodity culture, yet hold a very different conception of what constitutes that culture and consequently envision a strikingly different form of resistance. For Stein, Barnes, and Woolf, the problem with capitalist modernity is not passive subjects and animated objects, as it was for “the men of 1914,” but, to the contrary, domineering subjects and a fungible object world. From this perspective, the subjects of capitalist modernity have grown too powerful in their embrace of a calculative and instrumental rationality, while the world of objects has become mere stuff, nothing more than fodder for human fabrication. This development is both ethically suspect, insofar as it leads subjects to treat others as means to their ends, and self-defeating, insofar as it suppresses the pleasurable, sensuous, and embodied aspects of experience. Stein, Barnes, and Woolf seek not to reclaim humanity’s world-creating powers, but to re-enchant the world of things and discover modes of ethical passivity that enable a more receptive and fulfilling relationship to others and the natural world.

When characterizing the ills of modernity, these writers lament a dominant concept of the human subject as the autonomous, disengaged, and willful individual—or man as *homo economicus*.<sup>4</sup> A construct of neoclassical economics, *homo economicus* is the self-interested subject who will, in any given situation, rationally calculate the most expedient means to a pre-determined end. In his or her ruthless pursuit of narrowly defined self-interest, *homo economicus* tends to view all people and things as either means or impediments, which he or she must strategically manipulate in order to realize their desired outcome. Stein, Barnes, and Woolf

embody and critique the logic of this autonomous, calculating subject through a variety of characters—the journalist in Stein, the male spectator in Barnes, and the professional man or banker in Woolf. What these characters share is a goal of manipulating the world without, in turn, being manipulated. In Stein’s lectures, the journalist seek to explain major events, rendering them consistent with pre-existing schemas of knowledge, and thereby depriving them of transformative power, their potential to remake the readers’ paradigms of possibility. In Barnes’s *Nightwood* (1936), Felix Volkbein uses Robin Vote as the means to a child who would embody his vision of the past, and thus forecloses the possibility that his encounter with her could *matter*—could inform his sense of self and understanding of the past. In Woolf’s *Three Guineas* (1937) and *Between the Acts* (1941), the professional man and banker treats every expenditure as an investment, a momentary loss that will repay itself (and more) in the future. He attempts to deny the possibility of losing oneself, so to speak, in these expenditures and thereby experiencing a kind of “ending” that would challenge his conception of self and institute new modalities of pleasure and temporality (*BTA* 162). These characters’ manipulation of the world occurs through recourse to exchange value—an abstract, universal value that establishes equivalence between unlike things, thereby making them exchangeable and therefore fungible. Felix Volkbein, for instance, attempts to reduce Robin to a familiar matrix of gender roles—wife, mother, child—thereby rendering her legible and commensurable with his grids of intelligibility. Thus, on one level, the threat posed by *homo economicus* is an assault on alterity, a homogenization of the singular and irreducible, effected by means of the commodity’s rule of equivalence.

In opposition to *homo economicus* and the reified world of late capitalism, whose imagined mode of living they view as highly impoverished, Stein, Barnes, and Woolf insist on the social nature of human subjectivity, positing the self as a dialogic or intersubjective being—a

being whose identity is not pre-given in advance of relations with other people and the world, but constituted *through* a sensuous immersion in the world. In articulating this alternative subject, they dismantle active-passive binaries, suggesting ways of being and interacting with the world that do not presume mastery, transformation, or invention. In this respect, the critiques of commodity culture that Stein, Barnes, and Woolf advance resemble Hannah Arendt's, who contended that "world alienation, and not self-alienation as Marx thought, has been the hallmark of the modern age" (*The Human Condition* 254). Arendt relates "world alienation" to what she calls the "surveying" mode, common both to modern science and capitalism, by which "man disentangles himself from all involvement in and concern with the close at hand and withdraws himself to a distance from everything near him," winning a degree of freedom but at the cost of "alienating man from his immediate earthly surroundings" (251). By contrast, Stein, Barnes, and Woolf are invested in rediscovering a form of dependent and immersive subjectivity that draws them into closer alignment with their "immediate earthly surroundings." They welcome a degree of "self-alienation" in order to combat "world alienation."

By embracing "self-alienation" in a quest for experiences that are open and exploratory rather than goal-oriented, Stein, Barnes, and Woolf paradoxically find resources in commodity fetishism and alienation, the reversal of subject and object that characterizes capitalist culture. Indeed, they are attracted to the moment of animism in fetishism, which projects independence and autonomy onto the object. They view this animism as a potential counterforce to the dominance of instrumental reason, and seek to exaggerate it in their art. Similarly, they find in particular modes of passivity and estrangement an antidote to the domineering and calculative mindset of *homo economicus*. Thus, Stein, Barnes, and Woolf's critique of commodification proceeds from a position internal to the commodified world. This strategy stands in stark contrast

with the hegemonic (masculinist) modernist narrative, which imagines the critique of the commodity as launched from a position external to commodity exchange, usually in a realm akin to pre-industrial artisanal labour. Stein, Barnes, and Woolf discover radical potential in characters that are drawn directly from a distinctly consumerist-capitalist universe: the collector (Stein), the film star (Barnes), and the spendthrift (Woolf). The activities associated with these characters have radical potential when performed in a particular, idiosyncratic manner. Stein is interested not just in any collector, but a collector who seeks to cut the commodity off from both its use value in everyday life and its exchange (or symbolic) value within the realm of the museum. By doing so, this collector intensifies the uselessness inherent in commodity fetishism, gesturing towards a materiality that resists conceptualization and a pleasure that contests economies of exchange. The same can be said for Barnes and Woolf, both of whom are keen to distinguish between their privileged models of the film star and spendthrift from standard conceptions. Barnes's vamps, like Garbo and Dietrich, perform the radical individualism of the movie star as indifference, declaring their autonomy from demeaning social scripts without at the same time denying the sociality of subjectivity. Woolf posits her spendthrift in opposition to the worker but also to the shopper who spends productively, treating purchase as a form of investment. In this way, Stein, Barnes, and Woolf differentiate their versions of these figures from the normative capitalist ones, while simultaneously avoiding their modernist peers' more reactionary postures with regards to commodity culture. The critical potential of these characters stems from their ability to negate other, more oppressive aspects of commodity culture: the journalist's impulse to reduce transformative events to mere information, the masculinist spectator's reifying gaze, the banker's obsession with exchange, return, and growth.

Their immanent critique, which acknowledges art's complicity with the commodity, can be understood as responding to the growing ubiquity of consumer capitalism. This ubiquity makes the notion of standing outside consumer capitalism appear increasingly naïve and implausible. In a world in which everyone, even artists, are touched by the logic of the marketplace, any critique of commodification must acknowledge its own entanglement with capitalist modernity as one of its conditions of possibility. In 1912, Pablo Picasso begins to experiment with collage and created paintings that featured pasted-in objects, including newspapers, a notorious symbol of commerce for many modernists. Even more dramatically, Marcel Duchamp's invention of the "readymade" breaches and blurs the modernist artwork-commodity opposition. Duchamp explains his motivation to invent the readymade as follows: "Let's say you use a tube of paint; you didn't make it. You bought it and used it as a readymade. Even if you mix two vermillions together, it's still a mixing of two readymades. So man can never expect to start from scratch; he must start from readymade things like even his own mother and father" (Kuh 90). His subversive suggestion is that the readymade, rather than mark a radical rupture with other forms of visual art, merely makes explicit what is already the case for all painting in the modern era. As Duchamp elaborates, "since the tubes of paint used by the artists are manufactured and readymade products we must conclude that all paintings in the world are 'readymades aided' and also works of assemblage" (Kuh 142). Prior to the industrial manufacture of paint in tubes, the artist made his or her own paints by grinding and mixing dry pigment powders with linseed oil, a complex and laborious process that was transmitted from craftsman to apprentice. With the advent of paint production in tubes, painting became available to a wider public for the first time, and in doing so excised painting from one of its traditions, enabling new experimentation, such as plein-airism (de Duve 187).<sup>5</sup> Yet the technological

advance came with this cost: the painter no longer oversees the entire process of production, but becomes dependent upon a mass-produced and readymade product. Duchamp insinuates that there is nothing in the age of advanced capitalism, not even painting, that is not already touched by industrial labour, by the process of commodification—no given, no original, no unmediated reality. As Thierry de Duve suggests, Duchamp's radical gesture in creating *Urinal* (1917), figuratively speaking, is in leaving the tubes of paint sealed, in making only the most minimal transformations (mounting, inverting, and signing) to the readymade material (190).

Like Picasso and Duchamp, Stein, Barnes, and Woolf answer the question: what happens to modernism after claims to stand outside the commodity have been exposed as illusion, after the line between commodity and artwork has been blurred, and the modernist work of art has been demonstrated to be a product and expression of capitalist modernity? More specifically, what happens to notions of artistic production after support for the idea of the autonomous, artisanal, and self-fulfilling labour of art begin to falter in the face of the ubiquity of alienation and fetishism across society? Does modernism's admission of its complicity render its narrative of rebellion and radicalism obsolete? How can modernism acknowledge its participation in a market economy, and still maintain a critical, oppositional stance towards aspects of capitalist modernity?

In examining their answers to these questions, I contend that their response to the crisis of commodification is feminist in at least two respects. First of all, they are responding critically to the gendered oppositions between activity and passivity, nature and culture, frequently invoked in formulations of work, including artistic labour. According to these traditional constructions, the masculine artist imposes form on passive, amorphous, and feminine nature, shaping this raw stuff into a meaningful whole. Feminine nature materializes the masculine idea, conveying its

meaning, but adding no content of its own, acting merely as the “receptacle” or vehicle (Goux 6). The “men of 1914” adopt these dualistic categories and imagine commodification as an emasculating force that deprives men of their ability to shape feminine matter in their own image.<sup>6</sup> The writers I analyze object not only to the subordination of women in this construction, but also the rigid and dualistic oppositions that these categories enforce. In other words, they do not yearn to liberate themselves by becoming masters and world-creators, just like their male modernist peers, for this would merely displace the masculinist violence of the will, not contest it. Instead, these writers work to destabilize these dualisms by suggesting that matter and meaning, passivity and activity, are inextricable from each other and mutually constitutive. Their work registers materiality’s resistance to the meaning-making functions of a masculine-defined discursive reason and a receptive subjectivity that finds pleasure in registering the sensuous particularity of the object world.

Secondly, these writers respond to women’s unique historical relation to commodification and consumerism. Historically, women have held the status both of commodity—that is, property owned by and traded between men—and paradigmatic consumer of commodities. As commodity, women were subjected to the violence of exchange value and denied independence. Yet, as Rachel Bowlby notes, with the emergence of consumer capitalism in the nineteenth century, “it was above all to women that the new commerce made its appeal, urging and inviting them to procure its luxurious benefits and purchase sexually attractive images for themselves” (*Just Looking* 11). Bowlby argues that women’s new role as consumer ushers in new forms both of subjection and freedom. On the one hand, women shopping for their families function as conspicuous consumers in Thorstein Veblen’s sense, purchasing goods that will display their husband’s wealth. For this reason, according to Bowlby, “[women] were to

become in a sense like prostitutes in their active, commodified self-display” (*Just Looking* 11). Yet, Bowlby also notes that women had the opportunity to assume “a role almost never theirs in actual prostitution; that of consumer” (*Just Looking* 11). As consumers, women had opportunities to escape the household, and with it their traditional domestic roles and identities, to participate in the public sphere. Through shopping, women enjoyed a pleasure and power previously not afforded them, that of the *flâneur*, or street-walker, a role that brings with it a free and wandering mobility, and a detached spectatorship. Yet, as Susan Hankins points out, women’s experience of street-walking is not the same as men’s, for “the flâneuse, unlike the flâneur, was a moving target” (19).<sup>7</sup> Understandably, given their particular historical relation to the commodity, the response of women modernists to commodity culture is less nostalgic for what precedes commodification than their male counterparts, and more receptive to what Walter Benjamin thinks of as the Utopian impulses inherent within commodity culture.<sup>8</sup>

### **The modernist critique of commodification in contemporary scholarship**

In advancing this argument, I distinguish myself from two contemporary strains of modernist scholarship. The first seeks to demystify modernist claims to art’s autonomy from market forces by showing that the relationship between modernism and modern consumer capitalism is far closer than previously acknowledged. These critics often view the modernist critique of capitalism as naïve, nostalgic, and deeply complicit with what it purports to oppose. Another group of critics questions whether this demystification is even necessary, arguing that modernists were explicitly engaged with capitalist culture from the beginning, and, in reality, far less hostile to the commodity than previously imagined.

In the 1980s, critics like Frederic Jameson and Terry Eagleton broke decisively with New Criticism of the 1930s and 1940s in viewing high modernist art and mass-culture as interrelated phenomena, mutually-constituting terms in a dialectic and thus equally complicit with the reifying logic of capitalism. As Eagleton observed, “modernism was born at a stroke with mass commodity culture” (“Capitalism, Modernism, and Postmodernism” 139). Eagleton argues that modernism’s desire for autonomy was itself fetishistic and thereby rendered impotent its critical agenda and (quasi-) Utopian aspirations:

To fend off such reduction to commodity status, the modernist work brackets off the referent or real historical world, thickens its textures and deranges its forms to forestall instant consumability, and draws its own language protectively around it to become a mysteriously autotelic object, free of all contaminating truck with the real. [...] But the most devastating irony of all is that in doing this the modernist work escapes from one form of commodification only to fall prey to another. If it avoids the humiliation of becoming an abstract, serialized, instantly exchangeable thing, it does so only by virtue of reproducing that other side of the commodity which is its fetishism. (“Capitalism, Modernism, and Postmodernism” 142)

For Eagleton, modernist opposition to the commodity is genuine but doomed to failure since the assertion of art’s autonomy—its independence from societal forces because a product of individual genius—unwittingly participates in the commodification it means to oppose.

More recently, an interest in modernism and the marketplace has brought scholarly attention to material conditions of production and publication and has demonstrated the extent to which modernist writers engaged with the commercial aspects of their work. In fact, some literary modernists were experts in the art of self-promotion, keenly aware that their survival in

literary circles was dependent upon their ability to market a niche product. Lawrence Rainey's influential study *The Institutions of Modernism* (1998) argues that modernists actively encouraged the commodification of their own works but not in order to secure a large public readership. Instead, Rainey suggests that modernist writers such as Pound, Eliot, and Joyce catered their work to an elite market of collectors and patrons and imagined the book as a collector's item and investment. It was a strategy that aimed at financial success while simultaneously shielding the work of art from the perceived degradation of a mass audience.<sup>9</sup>

Like Eagleton, Rainey finds modernism guilty of a kind of fetishism. Joyce's choice to publish *Ulysses* as a deluxe edition, both expensive and limited in number, has the effect of "[reconceiving] the very notion of audience and readership: to transform the reader into a collector, an investor, or even a speculator":

Though we tend to associate modernism with the emergence of the New Criticism and the triumph of close reading, the effect of modernism was not so much to encourage reading as to render it superfluous. What modernism required was not the individual reader but a new and uneasy amalgam of the investor, the collector, and the patron. (56)

Whereas Eagleton deems modernist opposition to the commodity as genuine but misguided, Rainey considers modernism's opposition to be duplicitous. He presents modernism's critical stance as a ruse—more advertising campaign than principled rebellion—in the service, ironically, of economic ends. Modernism's rebellion against bourgeois morals, both sexual and economic, increases the notoriety and shock value of their texts, which investors and collectors could then exploit financially. Joyce Piell Wexler, looking at the fiction of Conrad, Joyce, and Lawrence, echoes Rainey's sentiment, claiming "modernists found that opposition to bourgeois morality brought the supreme bourgeois reward: money" (xvi).

A number of text-focused analyses of modernist works build on Rainey's argument, showing how, even in their formal and thematic preoccupations, modernists betray their supposed opposition to market values. Rod Rosenquist points out that the modernist obsession with the "new" is a feature it shares with the fashion industries (110). The modernist interest in the figures of the *flâneur*, the spendthrift, and the gambler suggest that modernism was, at the very least, conversant with the economic trends of its historical moment. Even the notion of art as an autonomous sphere, and the Greenbergian idea that the individual arts interrogate the formal preconditions of their medium, suggest modernism's participation in the capitalist division of labour. Art is pressured to be autonomous at the same time that it is expelled from other spheres of life—science, philosophy, economics, government—as a stage in the progressive rationalization of society through intensified specialization (Bernstein 3).<sup>10</sup>

In various ways, this scholarship purports to reveal modernism's hidden complicity with the marketplace and commodity culture, a fact that defeats modernists' claims to artistic autonomy. These critics accept the idea that modernist works do indeed express a virulent art-commodity divide, only questioning the success or sincerity of the stance. For these commentators, the antagonist posture is either a ploy—a rebel stance intended to gain publicity—or a reactionary and exceedingly simplistic critique. Another strain of modernist criticism, however, questions this shared premise altogether, contending that not all modernists were unaware of the ways in which art was entangled with the marketplace, and that many actively interrogated the convergence of art and commodity in modern culture. From the perspective of these critics, modernist attitudes towards commodity culture is far from straightforward, but complex and ambivalent, combining attitudes of critique with those of acceptance and even celebration.

Typical of these critics, Aaron Jaffe argues that “modernism’s supposed antagonism towards mass culture and mass culture’s supposed indifference to modernism have long been features of—some would say the chief impediments to—the academic invention of modernism” (88), but that “modernism—for all its seeming distaste for consumer culture and capitalism more broadly—made selective use of popular forms and had its own popular ambitions” (Jaffe 89).<sup>11</sup> While he concedes that the narrative of antagonism cannot be abandoned altogether, Jaffe’s criticism downplays antagonism to highlight the previously unacknowledged ways in which modernism directly and self-consciously negotiates popular mass culture.

Similarly, a number of scholars, including Bowlby, Jennifer Wicke, Janet Wolff, and Alissa Karl suggest that female modernists were less straightforwardly hostile, and more ambivalent, towards the world of commodity culture than their masculinist modernist peers. As noted earlier, these critics point to the fact that, as shoppers, women escape their roles in the domestic sphere. Characteristic of this criticism, Leslie Kathleen Hankins argues that Woolf, in essays like “Street Haunting,” expresses a particular delight in walking the streets of London and freely beholding the commodities exhibited in shop windows. Hankins suggests that Woolf reads commodities dialectically, in a way analogous to Walter Benjamin, recognizing the dangers and oppressive effects of commodities, on the one hand, and an emancipatory potential, on the other. Similarly, Kathryn Simpson maintains that Woolf’s attitude towards the market and commodity culture was “highly ambivalent” (92). Woolf is “aware of the positive and potentially dangerous impact of the all-pervasive capitalist forces and commodity culture on women’s social, psychic and emotional experience,” and, at the same time, “aware of the ways that commodity culture can stimulate and mobilize a profusion of desires in the consumer, as it fuels fantasy and excites imagination” (92).

Some critics go further in advocating the positive links between modernists and the commodity culture. Wicke argues that Woolf, like her friend John Maynard Keynes, did not merely represent the marketplace but fundamentally shaped how we perceive modern markets today. In particular, Wicke argues that both Keynes and Woolf register the incredible complexity of modern markets as a challenge to dominant, realist modes of representation. For Woolf and Keynes, the market in its naturally chaotic state is unrepresentable; if there is any order, it must be created, imposed from outside by individual perception (“*Mrs. Dalloway Goes to Market*” 11). In Wicke’s account, there is a direct parallel between the logic of the marketplace and Woolf’s liberating break from literary tradition. Building on Wicke’s pioneering work, Michael Tratner, in *Deficits and Desires* (2001), examines the parallel developments in both sexological and economic discourse in the 1920s and 1930s, and how these changing discourses inform literary modernism. Tratner demonstrates that in both sexology and economics there is a reevaluation of spending—both of one’s sexual energies and one’s money—in which the central economic challenge becomes how best to stimulate consumption (5). In Tratner’s analysis, literary modernists embrace the development of finance capital and the shift toward a consumer-driven economy.

My position departs from both clusters of critics. In relation to the first group, I contend that there is not one modernist critique of commodification, but a multiplicity of critiques. Secondly, I suggest that, for the modernists I examine, the irony of their complicity with commodity fetishism and alienation is neither “devastating” to their critical and creative agendas nor unacknowledged. Finally, while I agree with Rainey’s contention that modernists were in some part driven by financial success, and, further, that their rebelliousness contributed to the construction of a marketable mystique, I do not think that, in the case of Stein, Barnes, and

Woolf, the rebellion against market society is simply a *posture*. I contend that these modernists embrace fetishism and alienation as a serious strategy, one which deploys the very features of capitalist modernity to contest the principle of exchange.

My argument shares considerable terrain with the second group of scholars. Like them, I suggest that there is a diversity of art-commodity narratives in modernism, some of which are less naïve in imagining that art could be freed entirely from the influence of the commodity and decidedly less antagonistic and more nuanced in their attitude towards commodity culture. In particular, I contend that female modernists, who have been traditionally marginalized in scholarly assessments of modernism, viewed commodity culture in a more positive light than their male contemporaries, and actively interrogated the intersections between this culture and the art world. Nevertheless, despite their less antagonistic and absolutist attitude towards commodity culture, I argue that these writers do, in fact, articulate a critique of commodification. Whereas the second group of scholars does not seek to deny this, they are at pains to emphasize the points of collusion between modernist art and commodity culture. My dissertation focuses instead on how these writers sustain a critique of commodity culture in the face of their own undeniable complicity with and even celebration of certain aspects of commodification. I also differ from the second group of critics in how I construe this alternative, immanent critique of commodification. I argue that there is a connection between the antagonistic and celebratory aspects of their critique: namely, these writers seek to turn fetishism against commodity fetishism or alienation against capitalist alienation—a point that has not been explored in modernist scholarship to my knowledge. While Eagleton and Rainey accuse modernists of falling prey to fetishism, neither consider how fetishism and alienation could be paradoxical strategies for resisting a commodity culture.

My focus on the relationship between subjects and commodity objects intersects with a recent resurgence of scholarly interest in materialism and the human-object interface. In literary theory, this trend is best represented by the rise of “thing theory,” while in philosophy, it is exemplified by the emergence of “object-oriented ontology.”<sup>12</sup> Maurizia Boscagli groups these movements together under the umbrella of the “new materialism” and argues that “each of these theories presents versions of the material as unruly: they refuse to play by the rules that define materiality as passive matter” (3). This theoretical approach has proved a productive one through which to analyze modernist literature. An important example of this scholarship, and the one most relevant to my argument, is Douglas Mao’s *Solid Objects: Modernism and the Test of Production* (1998). In this book, Mao asserts that modernism is “animated by a tension between an urgent validation of production and an admiration for an object world beyond the manipulation of consciousness” (11). On the one hand, modernists adopt a productionist ethos, which considers the work of art or handcrafted thing—in opposition to the commodity—to be a “test” of the productive capacities of the human being. At the same time, however, modernists are made anxious by the thought that the produced object is “inevitably marked by the mind of its maker,” and that all production is a form of human domination over the object world, a violation of the object world’s “radical alterity” (Mao 11). The “test” is motivated by the threat of mechanization in modern times, the emergence of the scientific management of work, and the prevalent anxiety that humanity is being deprived of its productive and expressive powers. The problem, according to Mao, is how to refuse commodification and mechanization (how to pass the “test”), while simultaneously avoiding an aesthetics of mastery. While I am also interested in the tension between a productivist ethos and a reverence for the thing as something beyond human manipulation, I would argue that this tension is further mediated and complicated by the

rise of commodity culture and the technologies of commodity production. To be fair, Mao does recognize one way in which these categories are mediated by capitalism: modernists are concerned about the potential similarity between artistic methods of transformation and the seemingly unlimited powers of capitalist technology to control and consume materials. Yet, I argue that this accounts for only one side of the story. The commodity is, at the same time, paradigmatic of the authentic thing transformed (reified) into a substitutable, self-same object, and representative of that which eclipses the authority of the human hand in production, which “wipes out any human trace” (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 28). This contradiction is one that I believe certain modernists are attempting to work through: can the fetishism of commodification—that which “wipes out any human trace”—be employed to defeat exchange value, to emphasize particularity? Can the work of art as commodity counteract the aesthetics of mastery and the authorial subject? Can consumption (or unproductive expenditure) be liberated from the telos of capitalist accumulation?<sup>13</sup>

### **Gertrude Stein’s fetishistic aesthetics**

In the first chapter, I argue that Gertrude Stein’s engagement with consumer culture, the figure of the collector, and the modern American newspaper demonstrate a pervading concern with the mechanics of fetishism—what Stein terms variously as a “separation,” a “lack of connection,” or “disconnecting something from anything” (*LIA* 51). Rather than lament fetishism as many of her modernist peers do, Stein embraces it, even envisioning her art in fetishistic terms, while nevertheless giving voice to a distinctive critique of capitalist modernity.

Stein’s *Tender Buttons* (1914) explores subject-object relations and modern material culture through the motif of collecting, a contentious subject within modernism. For Wyndham

Lewis, the collector exemplifies the weak and enfeebled passivity that he believed was endemic to modern industrial society. Lewis considers the receptivity of the collector as an impoverished mode of engaging with the world, and contrasted the collector with the modernist artist, who shapes rather than accepts the surrounding world (*The Caliph's Design* 128). In sharp contrast, Stein discovers a critical potential in collecting, albeit a very particular and idiosyncratic form of collecting. Stein's collecting is neither straightforwardly passive nor a testament to the artist's powers of world-creating, but a means of emancipating the object from the realm of human use and meaning while putting the collector in contact with the pleasures of the object's sensuous particularity. In being collected, the object is severed both from the context of everyday life, where it is an object of utility, and from the context of the museum, where it is burdened with symbolic meaning. As such, the collected thing is rendered fundamentally useless, an independent and obdurately material thing. In the case of *Tender Buttons*, I suggest that Stein's poems collect words themselves, cutting them off from conventional contexts and patterns of meaning and, in doing so, jolts the reader into an affective engagement with materiality.

The practice is fetishistic in obscuring the use-value of words, their communication of a discursive message, and in treating them as objects of fascination and attention in their own right, as things "existent in [themselves]" (*AABT* 224). This process of abstraction mirrors the fetishism of commodities: in both processes, objects are stripped of their origins in human labour and given an independent and autonomous existence. Yet, Stein's artistic fetishism carries commodity fetishism one step further. In the case of the commodity proper, the object is displaced from the realm of human labour only to be stabilized in the realm of exchange value, the context of consumption. As such, it remains distinctly *for us*, a holder of value, measurable and commensurable with other things, even if no longer recognizable as a product of our creative

powers. By contrast, Stein's words are doubly displaced, cut off both from the realm of use and the realm of exchange, becoming at once autonomous *and* intransitive. In so doing, her mode of collecting resists the instrumental ethos of modern capitalism, restoring dignity to the word in its singularity, on the one hand, and to the desiring and receptive aspects of human subjectivity (in contrast to the instrumentally rational aspects), on the other.

In the second half of the chapter, I turn to Stein's lectures of the 1930s, which contain her most extensive meditations on consumer culture, and, in particular, her critique of the modern American newspaper. In these writings, Stein posits a tension between newspapers' inherent "lack of connection," which is potentially a source of excitement and pleasure, and the tendency of journalists to render personalities and events "smoothed over" for the reader (*LIA* 51, *N* 39). By neatly packaging the events of the day in a standardized format, the newspaper makes the news and its "lack of connection" orderly, familiar, and directly commensurable with what we already know. In essence, the newspapers seek to minimize or eliminate "discovery," a term that Stein uses to describe disruptive experiences in which one's expectations are upset, one's schemas of knowledge fail, and one is forced fundamentally to reorient oneself in relation to an event or object (*Na* 38). The newspapers' neutralization of discovery is a problem because it leads to a world lacking in "excitement"—a world that is predictable and self-same (*Na* 41). At the same time, and somewhat surprisingly, Stein finds an antidote to this neutralization of discovery in the sensationalism of the Yellow Press, which seems to activate the affective potential of the newspaper in ways not achieved by the mainstream press.

I argue the lectures provide a theoretical vocabulary to conceptualize more effectively Stein's lifelong engagement with consumer culture and fetishism. Stein's art, like commodity fetishism and advertising, manifest a "lack of connection" that liberates objects, words, events

from the sphere of utility, rendering them other and giving them the power to induce experiences of “discovery” (*Na* 38). This “discovery” unsettles viewers’ fantasy of mastery, but puts them in touch with something more “exciting”, a non-conceptual and sensuous particularity that proves captivating in its own right. Thus, Stein’s poems ironically mobilize and exaggerate the “lack of connection” inherent to modern capitalism to contest a commodified world in which exchange value rules and all things are rendered fungible.

### **Djuna Barnes, the vamp, and reified subjectivity**

Whereas Gertrude Stein explores the commodification of the object world, Djuna Barnes looks at the effects of commodification on human identity. Barnes views modern alienation as a complex and contradictory mode and aims to recuperate a particular mode of alienation, one that Barnes posits, paradoxically, as the means to resist a reified society.

I explore these themes in Djuna Barnes's early journalism, particularly her treatment of the female film star and the vamp character, and in her depiction of the character Robin Vote in *Nightwood*. In her journalism, Barnes largely views female film stars as victims of objectification: in the face of oppressive show business machinery and a male-dominated public, the female performer is stripped of autonomy and rendered a static image for male viewing pleasure. Yet, despite her general pessimism about women in film, Barnes expresses enthusiasm for the film stars Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich, discovering a subversive feminist potential in these stars’ interpretation of the traditional vamp role. Both Garbo and Dietrich’s vamps manifest a languorous and mysterious glamour while expressing indifference to the various men who surround them, and thus testify to a mode of resistance that operates from within the reified subjectivity of the film star.

Although Barnes only references Garbo and Dietrich a few times in her writings, the central character of *Nightwood*, Robin Vote, vividly invokes these stars and gives Barnes the occasion to further explore issues related to female agency, active and passive subjectivity, and modern alienation. Robin is made a “target forever” by the other characters in the novel, who are simultaneously fascinated and threatened by her strange performance of subjectivity and confusing combination of gender signifiers (*N* 157). Like Stein’s journalist, they attempt to reduce her to the familiar, to their grids of intelligibility, making her legible as daughter, mother, wife. In so doing, they reify Robin, enabling her to circulate as commodity in their fantasy worlds. Yet, Robin, like Garbo and Dietrich, disrupts the reifying male gaze from this position of the commodified object, claiming independence from its projections without, crucially, embracing the atomistic individualism privileged by capitalist modernity. Instead, I argue, Robin manifests her individuality in purely negative terms, repudiating the male gaze’s projections without positing the fully-realized, self-grounded subject of Enlightenment philosophy. This negativity manifests in Robin as a present-absence, “a withdrawal in her movement, and a wish to be gone” and a “stubborn cataleptic calm,” which makes her both a fascinating and unsettling individual in the world of the novel (*N* 77, 49). Although Robin sometimes appears to be lacking volition of any kind—a sort of blank screen for the fantasies of others—this ultimately proves illusory; her aloof indifference is revealed to be a form of obstinate refusal. Indeed, Robin is figured by Barnes as a doll who both solicits the fantasies of other characters, and, by remaining aloof from these fantasies, renders them visible *as* fantasies, *as* projections—more revealing of the fantasist than of Robin. As such, Robin occupies the position of the fetishized object differently, transforming its very passivity into a source of disruptive power.

For Barnes, this distinctive inflection of reified subjectivity is preferable to the narcissistic fantasies of novel's other characters, who, in their desire to fortify their identities against the instability of desire and the uncertainty of recognition, are not unlike the "active and changing" subject put forward by Wyndham Lewis (*The Caliph's Design* 123). Barnes contests this concept of the active and willful human subject with her notion of a passive-active subject who performs modern alienation as defiant indifference and anti-social rebellion, a mode that refuses others' attempts to impose identity without simultaneously asserting full self-presence.

### **Virginia Woolf, the spendthrift, and the endlessness of capital**

In my third chapter, I examine Virginia Woolf's exploration of money and expenditure in *Three Guineas* and *Between the Acts*, a fitting endpoint for my discussion of feminist modernism and commodity fetishism given that money can be considered the commodity *par excellence*, exchange value in its purest form.

Money has traditionally served as one of modernist art's most vilified others, yet Woolf's attitude to money is unique amongst her modernist peers on at least two accounts. For one, Woolf does not criticize a culture of luxury and frivolous consumption, as does, for instance, the American economist Thorstein Veblen. On the contrary, Woolf celebrates consumption, but believes that, paradoxically, the love for money so characteristic of capitalist culture curtails its enjoyment in spending. Secondly, Woolf refuses to understand the money economy in terms of infertility and the unnatural, as does Ezra Pound, among others. To the contrary, Woolf castigates the money economy for being hyper-(re)productive—a pure and accelerated instrumentality that subordinates all present expenditures to future ones in a reproductive cycle without end. Woolf does not object to money as the root of all evil, but only to money in its role

as capital—that is, money in the process of continually becoming *more* money. As such, Woolf's consideration of money, focused as it is on processes of capital accumulation over time, raises questions about the subject's experience of temporality.

Beginning with her long essay *Three Guineas*, I situate her views on money in relation to major theorists of money, including Marx, Georg Simmel, and her Bloomsbury friend and economist John Maynard Keynes. In *Three Guineas*, Woolf personifies the love of money in the “professional man” and characterizes his plight as a ceaseless “dance round the mulberry tree” (*TG* 162). In subordinating himself to the task of reproducing more money, the “professional man” accepts work without end or reward, work that is both teleological and endless, insatiable and ascetic, instrumentally rational and mad. He is sustained by a fantasy of making all expenditure productive, thereby denying the inevitability of loss, and dreams of becoming, like money, an endlessly self-perpetuating entity. Yet, because this is impossible, the love of money is a self-defeating and self-destructive enterprise, a refusal of the ephemeral pleasures of daily life for a transcendent fulfillment that never arrives.

Woolf's final novel, *Between the Acts*, builds on her analysis of money in *Three Guineas*, and considers in greater detail how women might resist the “dance round the mulberry bush” and replace the masculinist ethic of the professional man with an emancipatory, feminist one. She explores these questions primarily through two characters—Isa Oliver and Miss La Trobe—both of whom embody different attitudes to expenditure, sexuality, and artistry, and present a potential alternative to the ethic of the professional man. Isa is a spendthrift, spending not only money but also energy on a range of frivolities—including idle sexual fantasies about a gentleman farmer, spontaneously composed romantic verse, and melodramatic play-acting. These expenditures constitute a rebellion against her husband's economies of thrift and the social

script of motherhood, which demand the sacrifice of self-fulfillment to female reproductive labour. Conversely, Miss La Trobe, the writer and director of the annual pageant, introduces experimental moments into the pageant that halt its linear progression, and, by extension, the endless forward march of money and civilization, in order to startle the audience into a critical awareness of the present moment. Yet, despite their rebellion, both Isa and Miss La Trobe fail to overcome the instrumentality of money and realize, in the words of Walter Benjamin, a present that is not a “transition” (*Illuminations* 262). Isa’s acts of spending are ultimately subsumed to her husband’s banker ethos; she reconciles with him by the end of the day, and appears to acquiesce to her role as wife, mother, and labourer in history’s ceaseless forward march. Miss La Trobe’s authoritarian personality traits, as well as her emphasis on the *work* of reconstructing nationhood and establishing continuity with the past, ultimately neutralize the more radical elements of her play and reaffirm the hegemonic cultural emphasis on return, reproduction, and accumulation. In presenting these failures, Woolf emphasizes the capacities of modern capitalism to recuperate and co-opt that which opposes its rule. Nevertheless, an alternative politics to the professional man is glimpsed at points throughout the novel, typically in moments where the characters embrace “ending,” and take pleasure in fleeting activities with no aim beyond themselves (*BTA* 162).

Woolf’s critique of the professional man and money as capital resembles Stein’s critique of commodification and Barnes’s critique of the film star. Like Stein and Barnes, Woolf eschews the modernist ideal of self-determining freedom and world-creating artistry, while discovering something redemptive in the alienation and passivity that characterize modern life. Woolf counters the process of capital accumulation through forms of excessive consumption and expenditure that aim to find pleasure in finitude, loss of self, and “ending.” In doing so, she

leverages the consumer against the stockbroker, finding resources within capitalist culture to counteract that culture's emphasis on exchange, endlessness, and futurism.

Stein, Barnes, and Woolf all seek ways of mimicking the fetishism, alienation, and separation of the commodity in order to contest the instrumental tendencies of the marketplace. Yet, in the course of articulating what these critiques share, certain important differences emerge, including contrasting conceptions of passivity and shock, the sociality of subjectivity, the nature of temporality, and the experience of literary celebrity in a commodity culture. These differences will be noted throughout the dissertation and treated most fully in the Conclusion.

## CHAPTER 1

### “Words doing as they want to do”:

#### Gertrude Stein, Collecting, and the Newspaper

In *Time and the Western Man* (1927), Wyndham Lewis denigrates Gertrude Stein’s “prose-song,” calling it “cold, black, suet pudding”: “cut it at any point, it is the same thing: the same heavy, sticky opaque mass all through, and all along. . . . It is all fat and no nerve” (59). The association of Stein’s prose with suet pudding—a rich yet unrefined dish—links her writing with the body, appetite, and, more generally, matter (“mass”). Lewis’s attitude towards eating is captured in a scene from his novel, *Tarr* (1919). The eponymous hero—generally considered the mouthpiece for Lewis’s aesthetic ideas—devours lunch “mechanically, with an unhungry itch to clear the plate” (*Tarr* 56). Tarr transforms eating into a purely utilitarian chore, devoid of gustatory enjoyment, because he believes that “man is the opposite of his appetite” (*Tarr* 12). The artist in particular must resist the allure of food and sex, must not surrender to the body and its appetites, if he or she is to succeed in the cerebral, intellectual realm of art. As Lucy Ricaud suggests, this is Lewis’s celebration of anorexia as metaphor for artistic subjectivity (213). Lewis’s scorn for Stein’s work degrades not just the writing but also the writer as a body with intemperate cravings.

In addition to an ascetic aversion to the sensuous and somatic, Lewis’s idealization of anorexia stems from a belief that the artist should be radically active in his relation to the material world, a producer of new things rather than a consumer of the already existing. Typically, in eating and in sex, Lewis perceives only a passive acceptance of the given world. According to Lewis, the artist can take one of “two attitudes towards the material world”: “[he]

can Interpret or he can Create”; there is the “Receptive attitude or the Active and changing one” (*The Caliph’s Design* 123). When talking about the “receptive attitude,” Lewis has in mind primarily the figure of the aesthete-connoisseur-collector, a figure he mercilessly attacks in much of his criticism and fiction. As Douglas Mao observes, it is the “connoisseur’s attempt to elevate exquisite selection or acquisition to the level of art” that Lewis condemns most ferociously (108). According to Lewis, the aesthete/collector/connoisseur “desire[s] to accept and enjoy: to accept what is already in the world, rather than to put something new there: to be in a state of permanent *pamoiison* and rant about everything; the odder the thing, the *queerer* that you should find yourself fainting and ecstatic about it” (*The Caliph’s Design* 128).<sup>1</sup> According to Lewis, the “receptive attitude” of the collector (essentially a “tasting-machine”) is so seductive that even artists he otherwise admires, such as Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, fall victim to it (*The Caliph’s Design* 135). Lewis criticizes Picasso and Braque’s “nature-morte concoctions” (nothing more than the “debris of their rooms”) and their collage work (which he derisively calls “Plank Art”) for these reasons:

For a specialized visual interest in the debris of your table, or the mandoline you have just bought—in copying the colours of the roofs seen from your garret-studio—is not the creative interest required for art. It is a parasitic interest. Your interest in the forms around you should be one liable to transfigure and constantly renew them [...] (*The Caliph’s Design* 119)

Given Lewis’s derisive comments about *Three Lives* and attitudes towards Picasso and Braque’s Cubism, one can only imagine his disdain for the *nature-mortes* in Stein’s *Tender Buttons*.

However dismissive Lewis might have been in his assessment of Stein’s literary merit, he nevertheless accurately characterizes certain aspects of Stein’s aesthetics—the opacity of her

language and her passion for the world of material things. Eugene Jolas, who published Stein's work in his magazine *transition*, and defended her work (as well as Joyce's) from Lewis's attacks, had a more favourable view of Stein's literary project. Nevertheless, in his autobiography, Jolas criticizes Stein in terms similar to Lewis: "The little household words so dear to Sherwood Anderson never impressed me, for my tendency was always in the other direction. I wanted an enrichment of language, new words, millions of words" (*Man from Babel* 116). Like Lewis, Jolas faults Stein for being too accepting of an ordinary, domestic diction—language in its givenness. The qualities that modernists condemned in the collector—passivity, pleasure in consumption, an uncritical acceptance of the given and ordinary—were frequently the same characteristics they condemned in Stein.

Stein did not share her early modernist male peers' contempt for the world of domestic, ordinary things (including consumer goods), nor their aversion to consumption and collecting. She frequently describes artistic creation as a mix of both activity and passivity, of transformation and receptivity. For instance, she characterizes the prose poems in *Tender Buttons* as a matter of "caressing" nouns (*LIA* 231), a statement that suggests sensuous engagement with the materials but not transformation or mastery.<sup>2</sup> In her most radical statement, she declares, "I like the feeling of words doing as they want to do" (*Na* 15). In assertions such as these, she envisions artistic creation in fetishistic terms, presupposing that artistic materials have a life of their own, and imagines the artist's work as a matter of staging or framing this independent animation.

In the first part of this chapter, I will analyze Stein's engagement with domestic objects and the motif of collecting in *Tender Buttons*. She endorses, I suggest, a concept of collecting that closely resembles Walter Benjamin's and that involves cutting objects off both from their

use-value in everyday life and their cultural-historical significance in the realm of the museum (a different kind of usefulness). By abstracting the object from the realm of human usefulness and meaning, the collector compels a new kind of relationship between the spectator and the object: one based not on calculation and exchangeability, but on sensuous engagement (*Reflections* 155). Stein's prose poems in *Tender Buttons* not only depict collecting but also perform collecting. The poet collects words, disconnecting them from conventional contexts and projecting them into new and unusual ones, thereby rendering their meaning obscure and overdetermined. In doing so, Stein foregrounds the materiality of language: not simply as the vehicle of a message, but as image, sound, and rhythm.

Interestingly, these concepts of disconnection and abstraction, so critical to Stein's version of collecting, also figure prominently in the accounts of modern American capitalism and mass culture found in her lectures of the 1930s. In these lectures, she frequently speaks of a "lack of connection" or "a separation," which she links to "series production," the "American language," and "American writing," specifically singling out advertising, the newspaper, and detective fiction (*LIA* 51). I turn to these writings in the second part of this chapter, paying particular attention to her account of the newspaper, in order to understand more fully Stein's complex relationship to the fetishistic consumer culture of late capitalism. While newspapers are capable at times of manifesting a "lack of a connection," Stein notes how frequently they work to ensure events and personalities are "smoothed over," neatly subsumed to the dominant culture's existing schemas of knowledge, creating a forced commensurability between the new and what is already known (*Na* 39). Consequently, they minimize what she calls "discovery," the encounter with an event, person, or thing that fundamentally disrupts one's expectations and reorients one's understanding of the world (*Na* 38). While this may account for the newspapers' appeal to many,

for Stein, this filtering of events impoverishes reading, depriving it of the excitement that accompanies novel and unexpected experiences.

Stein's 1930s lectures shed light on her particular critique of modernity. Late capitalism, in its instrumentalist tendencies, seeks to master events, objects, and people by reducing them to pre-existing conceptual schemas, and, in the process, sacrifices the singularity of events and objects, on the one hand, and suppresses the passionate, desiring side of subjectivity, on the other. The antidote, however, is not found in some pre-industrial form of labour, but, for Stein, is inherent in elements of modern capitalist culture like the Yellow Press, advertising, and consumer goods. These phenomena all possess a shock-like power that, when unlocked and radicalized, can jolt us into a new relationship with the world around us.

The terms provided in the late lectures allow us to grasp her artistic practices in *Tender Buttons* and her attitude towards consumer capitalism. Her practice of collecting mimics the abstraction inherent in commodification, which removes objects from their origin in human labour. Yet, Stein carries this abstraction a step further by refusing to reorient the object in the realm of exchange value. In liberating the forces of abstraction and disconnection from the dictates of exchange, she creates experiences of "discovery," in which the subject registers the material alterity and radical singularity of the object, and is touched, moved, or changed by the experience. Paradoxically, Stein employs the mechanics of fetishism to combat the reign of exchange value and instrumental reason in late capitalist societies.

### **"Caressing nouns": Stein, collecting, and *Tender Buttons***

Stein, herself a collector of modern paintings, evidently did not share her peers' aversion to the figure of collector. She also had a passion for kitsch objects. Mabel Luhan Dodge recalled

that “[Stein] didn’t care whether a thing was *bon gout* or not [. . .] she adored ridiculous miniature alabaster fountains with two tiny white doves poised on the brink that tourists bought [. . .] and she had a penchant for forget-me-not brooches, and all kinds of odds and ends that she liked much as a child likes things” (*Intimate Memories* 324). Moreover, collecting is a central motif of *Tender Buttons*. As Jayne Walker notes, in *Tender Buttons*, while “one complex of images asserts the fundamental principle of difference—breaking, shattering, division, pieces, remainders,” yet another “invokes a ‘wholeness’ that is based on the mingling of heterogeneous elements: collections, mixtures, reunions, stews” (136). The final section, “Rooms,” thematizes collecting at the formal level. Whereas the first two sections of *Tender Buttons*, which focus on objects and food and are divided into a number of short prose poems, the last section differs in being presented as one long, undivided segment. As such, the section evokes the house and rooms that contain the various objects on display. It is in this section that Stein references collecting explicitly: “There was a whole collection made. A damp cloth, an oyster, a single mirror, a manikin, a student, a silent star, a single spark, a little movement and the bed is made” (*TB* 68).

Stein was not alone amongst modernists in her fascination with the collector. In the wake of Picasso’s experiments with collage, and Duchamp’s invention of the readymade, the collector becomes a powerful metaphor for the work of the artist. In *Nadja* (1928), André Breton paints an unforgettable picture of the artist as scavenger, browsing flea markets and pawn shops in search of “objects that can be found nowhere else: old-fashioned, broken, useless, almost incomprehensible, even perverse” (52). Joseph Cornell, Kurt Schwitters, and Mina Loy all employed objects discovered at flea markets and pawn shops as material for their collage and assemblage constructions.

The collector owes at least some of its controversial status to the questions it raises about the relationship between art and commodity culture. According to Lewis, collectors consume rather than produce, or rather produce through consumption, and yet they are unique kinds of consumers at that: in their concern for the display and exhibition of items, collectors are thoroughly invested in the object's exchange value rather than its use. If, according to Marx, the commodity is already a fetish, already inscribed by a division between use and exchange, the collector doubles or re-marks this original fetishism, displacing the object from its sphere of utility in consumption in order to invest it with what Walter Benjamin calls "exhibition value" (*Selected Writings: 1927–1934* 169). Viewed from the perspective of Lewis and his strict passive-active dichotomy, the collector as artist troubles the opposition of the work of art to the commodity on the grounds that the artwork is a handmade thing and therefore the direct expression of a human subject. The work of art directly incorporates mass-produced commodity objects, and in putting those objects permanently on display, where they cannot be returned to use, the collector intensifies the fetishism—and its eclipse of use value—already at work in the original commodity.

Stein's attitudes toward commodity culture, consumerism, and the domestic sphere have been a source of critical disagreement and controversy.<sup>3</sup> Nicola Pitchford maintains that the "rhetoric of the attacks" on Stein's oeuvre "reveals her critics' resistance to the intrusion of the gendered realms of consumer culture and domestic space into 'high' art" (650). One can certainly discern this in the critiques of Lewis and Jolas. Likewise, Michael Gold, in a vitriolic 1934 attack on Stein ("Gertrude Stein: A Literary Idiot"), asserts that, for Stein, "art became a personal pleasure, a private hobby, a vice. She had no responsibility except to her own inordinate cravings" (210). Diagnosing her "idle art" as a symptom of "the decay of capitalist culture,"

Gold associates Stein with a “leisure class” devoted to the trivial and frivolous, to meaningless play rather than the serious labour of writing. In faulting Stein for surrendering to her appetite, her “cravings,” trivial vices, Gold codes Stein’s transgression as perversely infantile and anti-social in a manner that recalls Wyndham Lewis’s comments about Stein. Her writing displays a self-indulgence that testifies to a lack of masculine purpose and resolve.

In a more nuanced critique, Jonathan Monroe also finds problematic Stein’s collusion with commodity culture. For Monroe, however, the association between women and consumer culture is itself a patriarchal construct, and thus Stein’s fondness for domestic spaces and commodity objects is a failure of her feminism. According to Monroe, the “Objects” section of *Tender Buttons* exposes oppressive gender roles traditionally imposed on women, particularly those of hostess and housekeeper—roles which force women to serve both as the caretakers of objects, and objects themselves, the private property of their husbands. “Rooms,” however, with its emphasis on harmony and order, its abandonment of experimental syntax, belies the promise of radical emancipation hinted at in “Objects.” Instead, “Stein tends towards a politics . . . that would rearrange the furniture rather than condemn and violently destroy existing structures,” that would “whitewash” the “walls . . . of social and sexual oppression” rather than tear them down (Monroe 199). For Monroe, the domestic space is a prison, and to the extent that Stein demonstrates affection (however ambivalent) for these spaces and their furnishings, she remains insufficiently radical in her opposition to traditional gender roles and norms.

As can be seen, most critics agree that Stein embraces consumer culture to some extent, but disagree about how to interpret this fact. Is Stein complicit with consumer culture, uncritically acquiescent to the power structures and gender hierarchies of late capitalism? Does this embrace constitute a rebuke to modernism’s elitist privileging of high culture, which is itself

rife with misogynistic assumptions? Is her celebration of consumer culture nuanced, capable of acknowledging both liberating potential and oppressive power in commodity culture? Of course, where a critic stands on these issues will in part be determined by the parameters she or he places on the phrase “consumer culture,” which encompasses a broad range of subjects, including, among others, the phenomenology of shopping, the mechanics of commodity fetishism, high-low cultural divides, the phenomenon of spectacle in the modern metropolis, and the kinds of people associated with consumerism, to name just a few. My position, as articulated in the introduction and this chapter as a whole, is that she finds emancipatory potential within consumer culture by embracing an exaggerated form of commodity fetishism that animates objects and creates pleasurable experiences in which the singularity and alterity of objects is registered.

In one of the more extensive accounts of Stein’s relationship to commodity culture, Michael Davidson maintains that she, along with other female modernists, “both participated in consumer culture and maintained a critical perspective on it” (45). In part, this was because Stein recognized the paradox that “the presumed independence of the artwork from the artist expresses art’s dependency on a world of things” (41). Davidson observes a “refusal of commodification” in Stein’s writing that seeks to detach the work of art’s “purposiveness” from the sphere of “exchange and commerce” (38).

Davidson is right to note that Stein’s art negotiates a paradox—namely, that art remains dependent upon, complicit with, that which it means to oppose (the commodity, exchange value, technological reproduction, etc.)—one that finds its earliest and most complex articulation in writings by Benjamin and Adorno in the 1930s. Like these philosophers, Stein both acknowledges art’s dependence on and participation in commodity culture yet simultaneously refuses to relinquish the idea of art as a considerable form of protest or critique. Stein imagines

that a project critical of the commodity must proceed immanently, imploding the commodity form from within. The precise contours of this contradiction, however, become somewhat unclear if one maintains, as does Davidson, that art can be fully detached from the sphere of “exchange and commerce.” This separation would seemingly enable the distinction between art and commodity that Davidson means to call into question. I seek to build on the foundation laid by Davidson to explain more thoroughly the paradox in Stein’s works as an instance of deploying the mechanics of fetishism against the instrumentalizing tendencies of commodification proper—an animation of the object world in order to contest the reign of the sovereign subject in late capitalism. In so doing, my aim is not to sever the links, asserted by Lewis and others, between Stein and passivity, consumption, collecting and fetishism—or to insist upon the *real* labour at the heart of Stein’s project. Rather, I suggest that it is through her idiosyncratic performance of passivity, consumption, collecting, and fetishism that she subverts the logic of commodification.

Stein’s *Tender Buttons* meditates on the complex relationship between people and their possessions, and, in doing so, advances a radical conception of the significance of collecting. In order to foreground what is singular about Stein’s conception, her work should be situated in relation to other established thinkers about the subject. One of the foremost theorizers of collecting, Susan Pearce, distinguishes among three primary social and psychological motives underlying the practice: collecting as souvenir, as fetish, and as systematic assemblage. Pearce explains that, in regards to the first, the subject creates a “romantic life-history” by arranging objects (souvenirs) with highly “personal” meaning in order to tell a story (32). In fetishistic collecting, on the other hand, the “object” is dominant and is allowed to “create the self” (32).

Lastly, systematic assemblage collecting seeks to classify, order, and define collected objects, and is driven by an intellectual concern with the production of knowledge (32).

Of these three practices, the one most commonly attributed to Stein is the first—“souvenir” collecting. Catherine Paul interprets *Tender Buttons* and Stein’s extensive collection of modernist paintings as “interrelated creative acts” that explore the relationship between people and possessions and express Stein’s own theories about collecting. Paul contrasts Gertrude’s account of collecting with that of her brother, who saw himself more as a connoisseur than a collector, impersonally passing judgment on the paintings he amassed. Indeed, Leo actually disdains the idea of collecting itself, calling it a “perfectly legitimate sport for grown-up children” (qtd. in Paul 200). According to Paul, Stein “disagree[s] with Leo’s assessment” and instead “portray[s] the act of collecting as an intellectually and emotionally complex act, one that ventures far beyond child’s play into artistic creation and innovation” (200). Paul claims that collecting is more personal for Stein—less about the object per se than it is about modes of creative “looking” and “ways of responding visually to things”—the collection as a whole is an “expression of self” (203, 215). As such, Paul interprets Stein as an advocate for what Pearce terms “souvenir” collecting, where the focus is on what the assembled objects reveal about their collector, or how they symbolize aspects of the collector’s past.

A number of other critics, commenting not on collecting but on Stein’s style in *Tender Buttons* as a whole, have reached similar conclusions to Paul about the personal nature of the poems. In attempting to account for the linguistic opacity of the work, they have interpreted Stein’s poems as employing a mode of free association, metaphoric substitution, or automatic writing, giving unfettered expression to Stein’s unconscious or subconscious mind.<sup>4</sup> For instance, David Lodge argues that *Tender Buttons* “is clearly a type of metaphorical writing based on

radical substitution (or replacement) of referential nouns. But the perception of similarity on which metaphor depends is in this case private and idiosyncratic to a degree that creates almost insuperable obstacles to understanding” (153). Interestingly, writers in Stein’s own era made similar criticisms of her work. Shortly before Stein’s return to America for her lecture tour, B. F. Skinner published an article, “Has Gertrude Stein a Secret?” Having discovered a paper Stein co-authored with Leon Solomons while a psychology student at Radcliffe, one which outlines the results of Stein’s research into automatic writing, Skinner hypothesizes that *Tender Buttons* is an application of the method that Stein had studied, and denounces the work as nothing more than a product of Stein’s “second personality successfully split off from Miss Stein’s conscious self” (206). Skinner suggests it is “probable” that “meanings are not present [in *Tender Buttons*], and we need not bother to look for them,” proposing that the book is “little more than ‘what her arm wrote.’ And it is an arm that has very little to say” (207). Lodge and Skinner, although more critical in their appraisals of Stein, are similar to Paul in invoking a practice of private, subjective association to connect the seemingly unconnected nouns in the poems of *Tender Buttons*. For these critics, *Tender Buttons* is an experiment in capturing things not as they objectively are, but as they subjectively appear—the way they mix with memory and emotion in the mind of a particular observer. Thus, these poems, while ostensibly about possessions in collections, reveal far more about the collector than they do about the objects.

This approach fails, however, to take seriously Stein’s statement that her writing shifted at the time of *Tender Buttons*: “hitherto she had been interested only in the insides of people, their character and what went on inside them, it was during that summer that she first felt a desire to express the rhythm of the visible world” (*AABT* 119). Importantly, the passage does not imply that in refocusing her attention on the “visible” and external world she is returning to a

realist mode—an attempt to capture a subject-independent world of facts. Her aim is not simply to *represent* the visible world but to “*express* [emphasis added] the rhythm to the visible world.” Stein further elaborates that this does not involve abandoning the “inside” altogether, but finding new ways of “mixing the outside with the inside” (*AABT* 156).

Stein’s turn to the external world, the world of objects, entails a corresponding grammatical interest in nouns. In a 1935 lecture entitled “Poetry and Grammar,” Stein specifies that her relation to nouns will be, a matter of, among other things, “caressing” them (*LIA* 231). “Caressing” invokes tactility, and approximates the notion of “mixing the outside with the inside.” For philosophers such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Luce Irigaray, it is through touch that the human subject is most aware of itself as an embodied being—that is, as both a subject touching and an object touched.<sup>5</sup> Caressing can be contrasted with grasping, which implies recognition and appropriation, and the intent to transform and use the object. While caressing can give the caresser a sensual pleasure, it is a form of affectionate and intuitive interaction that respects the separateness or independence of that which is touched. The caress leaves the object as it is, so to speak, or effects only minimal changes. To the extent that it produces a sensational pleasure for the caressing subject, that pleasure is directly tied to the moment of contact, and the object itself, rather than to some further manipulation of that object after contact.

While Stein associates poetry in general with caressing nouns, she specifically connects her project in *Tender Buttons* with the optical realm, with “what is seen”: “I began to make portraits of things and enclosures that is rooms and places because I needed to completely face the difficulty of how to include what is seen with hearing and listening and at first if I were to include a complicated listening and talking it would be too difficult to do” (*LIA* 189). Stein stipulates that, like the painters she admired, she must “be certain that looking was not confusing

itself with remembering” or “recognizing resemblances” (*LIA* 188). In doing so, Stein distinguishes her interest in the external world from that of literary Impressionists such as Walter Pater, Henry James, Joseph Conrad, and Virginia Woolf. The latter had been interested in the world of ordinary objects to the extent that they trigger memories and associations in the consciousness of the characters who perceive them. Stein’s problem with this kind of “remembering” is that it distracts one’s attention away from the object in the present moment, assimilates the object in all its particularity to remembered versions of similar objects. The object becomes a mere prop in the drama of human consciousness. Steven Meyer suggests that Stein “objected to association, whether lexical or syntactical” because “it distracted from writing by removing one’s attention from the object on the page and so breaking one’s concentration” (240).<sup>6</sup> Stein’s insistence on “looking” without “recognizing resemblances” or identification dissociates vision from its traditional connections with reason and knowledge. Thus, Stein’s emphasis on both caressing and seeing, the tactile and the optical, need not be considered a contradiction. Rather, “looking” without “recognizing resemblances” is equivalent to caressing instead of grasping. Stein imagines a tactile vision that would be non-synthesizing, non-subsumptive, but instead receptive and accommodating to alterity. As Stein insists in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), “I feel with my eyes” (70).

What exactly does “caressing nouns” entail, however? Stein frequently explains her poetics by means of analogies with painting. In a 1946 interview, she discusses Cézanne’s influence on her writing:

Up to that time composition had consisted of a central idea, to which everything else was an accompaniment and separate but was not an end in itself, and Cézanne conceived of

the idea that in composition one thing was as important as another thing. (“Transatlantic Interview” 502)

Cézanne gives autonomy to the parts by a variety of means. As Barbara Will explains, a Cézanne painting has no central focal point; instead, vision is “dispersed” across the canvas:

For example, in one of the ten canvases of Cézanne’s last, great series, *Le Mont Sainte-Victoire*, painted between 1902 and 1906, there is no central, organizing perspective around which the painting revolves, despite the work’s seeming commitment to the very symbol of Romantic sublimity, the mountain.” (*Gertrude Stein, Modernism* 117)

Thus, each zone of the painting is as important as any other. At the same, Stein might have had in mind the way the brush strokes in Cézanne’s painting are often “patchy” and as a result visible *as* brush strokes (*Gertrude Stein, Modernism* 117). In this sense, Cézanne frees the materials of painting—pigment and brush stroke—from their subservience to the representational totality; no longer merely descriptive means, subordinate to the “central idea,” the brush strokes become ends in themselves, objects of attention in their own right.<sup>7</sup> With *Tender Buttons*, Stein attempts to do something similar with words. To the extent that language has a use value, it must be as a means of communication: the ability to abstract a message from any particular arrangement of words. Thus, the words of the poem serve as means to the communication of a “central idea.” Stein’s dissonant poems, however, foreground the word *as* word, as sound and image. If to caress implies a fetishistic respect for separateness and the autonomy of things, then caressing nouns entails that one gives words a moment of freedom from their representational and discursive functions, allowing words to be ends in themselves—signifiers rather than the signified—just as Cézanne does with the brush stroke. Drawing the reader’s attention to the surface materiality of words (the signifier as sound-image), Stein renders words momentarily

unexchangeable—that is, incapable of being translated without remainder— and, in doing so, allows them to matter intransitively. Thus, Stein demonstrates her respect for the external world, for the life of ordinary, domestic objects, not through endless description of these things, but by foregrounding the sensuous-material aspect of words themselves.

Thus, it is words that the poet in *Tender Buttons* collects. In this case, collecting involves overdetermining their communicative function, their use value, and putting them on display, a textual action akin to caressing nouns insofar as it implies abandoning an instrumental (grasping) relationship to words. As such, the collected objects do not express and reflect the collector's consciousness; they are not mere vehicles for nonlinguistic mental contents. Instead, the collector is drawn to the exteriority or otherness in the objects of his or her collection. In this sense, Stein turns away from the "insides of people" to take an interest in the "visible world." The poems are not straightforwardly representational, nor are they representations of a subject's experience of objects, but, instead, they are presentations of objects for the sake of sensuous experience. In this sense, forgoing usefulness is not just a sacrifice on the part of the subject, but involves some affective gain as well. To be clear, this forgoing of usefulness does not entail a movement beyond the subject altogether—after all, the caress brings pleasure to the one who caresses—but a shift from a conceptual/epistemological mode of engagement with objects, in which the goal is to identify and know the object, to a predominantly affective one. The means of achieving this shift is a form of Shklovsky's "defamiliarization effect," whereby words are jolted from their conventional realm of use and rendered alien. Stein's contemporary Laura Riding makes a similar claim when she states that, in Stein's poems, the words "are no older than her use of them" (188–9). My position is slightly different from Riding's, which I suggest is naïve in its positing of a new language stripped of referentiality. After all, the process of abstracting objects

from their familiar context nevertheless recalls the very context from which they are abstracted; thus, the supposed purity of a realm beyond referentiality, of words with no history, is an unlikely product. By contrast, I will suggest that Stein dislocates (and thereby collects) words by projecting them into new contexts where they are not free of all reference, but where their references are overdetermined and ultimately undecidable. The poems thus create a kind of dissonance or gap between signifier and signified that makes the reader attentive to the materiality of the word.

With its special concern for the “external” or “visible” world, Stein’s form of collecting is distinct from what Pearce terms “souvenir” collecting. Stein’s reasons for eschewing “souvenir” collecting and shifting her attention from “the insides of people” to the “visual world,” might be better understood through Jean Baudrillard’s characterization of the collector as a narcissist. For Baudrillard, the collector dislocates the object from a public world in which its meaning is socially decided to a private realm in which it carries only the meaning the collector projects onto it. In doing so, the collector establishes a relationship that differs from “ordinary human relationships, which are the site of the unique and the conflictual” (Baudrillard, “The System of Collecting” 10). The realm of human relationships is one of uncertainty and lack, since the other, insofar as he or she has his or her own interests and desires, can always disagree, always refuse to recognize oneself in the ways one desires. Removed from the intersubjective realm, the inanimate object becomes a kind of ideal mirror image for the collector: “Surrounded by the objects he possesses, the collector is pre-eminently the sultan of a secret seraglio. . . . As Rheims puts it, ‘for the collector, the object is a sort of docile dog which receives caresses and returns them in its own way; or rather, reflects them like a mirror constructed in such a way as to throw back images not of the real but of the desirable’” (“The System of Collecting” 10). Once

the object is privately owned and its meaning or value is defined only by the collector (without competition from the outside world), the collector can then purport to discover in the object what he/she projects. As such, Baudrillard considers the collector to be narcissistic, claiming “it is invariably *oneself* that one collects” (“The System of Collecting” 12). Similarly, for Stein, if seeing is simply a matter of “recognizing resemblances,” if the objects only have meaning as emblems of one’s personality or past, then collecting will be nothing but an encounter with deadening sameness, a solipsism that consolidates subjectivity against difference or otherness. As I will suggest later, for Stein, the consequences of adopting this attitude to the world and its objects is to deprive experience of genuine excitement and discovery.

Stein avoids the infantile attitude of Baudrillard’s collector—in which the collector seeks refuge from the “conflictual” realm of intersubjectivity and seeks to stabilize their sense of sense by projecting it on the objects of his or her collection—by embracing a concept of collecting that resembles Walter Benjamin’s. For Benjamin, the collector accomplishes (or attempts) “the liberation of things from the drudgery of being useful” (*Reflections* 155). In Hannah Arendt’s apt summary, for Benjamin, the collector’s “passion [is] an attitude akin to that of the revolutionary” and “the redemption of things” is intended to “complement the redemption of man” (*Illuminations* 42). According to Giorgio Agamben, Benjamin’s collector frees the object from “the drudgery of usefulness” by quoting and decontextualizing it, thereby removing it from the context “inside which it finds its value and meaning” (*The Man Without Content* 105). Indeed, for Benjamin, collecting has a predominantly destructive character insofar as it strips the object of contextual meanings without seeking to add new ones. Almost all theorists of collecting reflect upon the displacement of a collected object from its immediate context, from its ordinary place in everyday life. For some, however, this displacement is but a means to master the object.

For Baudrillard, the collector excises the object from the intersubjective realm in order to impose on it a purely personal meaning. The public museum, on the other hand, may abstract an object from its particular context in order to render that object symbolic (of a historical period perhaps). In either case, the displacement of the object coincides with a revaluation of the object on grounds other than its use. Even in this revaluation, however, the object remains unfree, a means to an end, rather than an end in itself.

In the case of Baudrillard's collector, the object has meaning and value only insofar as it reflects, transmits, expresses some aspect of its collector. For Benjamin, on the other hand, the destruction of the object's original context, its use-value, is not a preparation for assigning symbolic value to or abstractly defining the object. As Agamben notes, "the collector takes on the task of transfiguring things, suddenly depriving them both of their use value *and* (emphasis added) of the ethical-social significance with which tradition endowed them" (*The Man Without Content* 105). In so doing, Benjamin counters more dominant conceptions of collecting as a form of narrative construction. Indeed, conceiving of *The Arcades Project* as an assemblage or montage, Benjamin declares, "I have nothing to say, only show" (460). Commentary or narrative explanation would seek to define collected objects heteronomously, from without, and thus stands in direct contradiction of Benjamin's concept that objects "come into their own" through collecting, become eloquent in themselves (*The Arcades Project* 460). According to Benjamin, the elements of the collection form a "constellation" and mutually illuminate each other, producing an "idea," but an idea that does not possess propositional form. This idea is more like a flash of illumination that cannot be put into language or abstracted from the experience of the particular elements themselves and the constellation they form with each other: "For ideas are not represented in themselves, but solely and exclusively in an arrangement of concrete elements

in the concept: as the configuration of these elements” (*The Origins of German Tragic Drama* 34). This moment of illumination is a shock-like experience that overwhelms and unsettles subjectivity (Nägele 170).

Benjamin’s notion of letting objects “come into their own” through collecting resembles Stein’s articulation of a tactile aesthetic. Both writers posit a form of collecting that, rather than impose order on objects, enables objects to impress themselves upon our vision in all their particularity and difference, thus exceeding the subject’s organizing frame of reference. Stein powerfully expresses this idea in the poem, “Mounted Umbrella”:

What was the use of not leaving it there where it would hang what was the use if there was no chance of ever seeing it come there and show that it was handsome and right in the way it showed it. The lesson is to learn that it does show it, that it shows it and that nothing, that there is nothing, that there is no more to do about it and just so much more is there plenty of reason for making an exchange. (*TB* 20)

The title of this poem evokes a context of collection and display. The idea of “mounting” finds an echo in the recurrent motif of boxes and catalogues in *Tender Buttons*—mounting, boxing, cataloguing are all ways of altering an everyday object, making it part of a collection, and investing it with what Benjamin calls “exhibition value” (*Illuminations* 225). The artfully constructed rhetorical question with which the poem begins (“what was the use of not leaving it there”) expresses the paradox that there might be some usefulness in “leaving it there”—that is, in *not using* the umbrella; or conversely, there might be no use in using an umbrella (or in using an umbrella, one might miss out on its better use as an object of display). The advantage or use of “leaving it there” is that it makes possible “seeing” the umbrella “show that it was right and handsome.” The poem gives agency to the umbrella, as though it were not a passive object of

vision, but actively exhibiting itself to the viewer's gaze. Interestingly, the umbrella shows itself as "right" and "handsome"—bringing together moral and aesthetic judgements, thus diagramming paradigmatic modes of critique. Indeed, the final sentence states that "there is no more to do about it," with "it" presumably referring to the rightness of the umbrella, as if to suggest that its rightness cannot be further analyzed, dissected, since the judgement ultimately depends on "nothing," or nothing determinate and thus nothing less than the umbrella in its entirety. Seeing and judging the umbrella to be "handsome and right" is a curiously passive procedure, not a question of picking out particular features of the umbrella and subordinating them to concepts, but a result of "leaving it there." Yet, it is not entirely passive since "leaving it there" presupposes its mounting, its placement on the wall. Although indecipherable, the handsomeness of the umbrella is entirely enough "reason" for an "exchange." Stein reminds one that this interaction occurs against the background of a consumer society—the umbrella becomes part of a collection only through a purchase. The dislocation of the object from the sphere of immediate use and its transformation into displayed item is a doubling or remarking of the abstraction from use to exchange value already at play in the production of commodities.

Unlike "souvenir" collecting, in which the collected object becomes the privileged site on which the collector projects some personal meaning (by connecting the item to an important memory, for instance), collecting in Stein's poem confounds active-passive dichotomies: consisting merely in "leaving it there," it does not transform the object in the mode of Wyndham Lewis's artist and yet nevertheless still mediates the object. "Leaving it there" is a precondition for the umbrella seemingly becoming animate and "show[ing] itself." This is the exact opposite of "souvenir" collecting, where the collector's projection of private, associational meaning would preclude the possibility of "seeing" the object in this fashion, as it would be a form of

“recognizing resemblances,” of distracting oneself from the object’s singularity by means of its similarities to other, remembered objects.

### **Kant, Adorno, Stein: The “absolute commodity”**

For Stein, as well as for Benjamin, collecting animates objects. The umbrella in “Mounted Umbrella” “comes there” and “shows itself,” as though it were a self-moving entity. Stein’s animism extends to language, too. At the conclusion of her first Chicago lecture in 1935, Stein declares, “I like the feeling of words doing as they want to do” (*Na* 15). The curious statement grants words an agency (“doing”) and desire (“want”) of their own. Critics have typically interpreted statements such as these as expressing Stein’s rebellion against an aesthetics of mastery. Peter Nicholls, for instance, suggests that, for Stein, “the pleasure taken in the artistic medium is the result of a sense of felt connection with a world rather than of mastery over it” (207). Shari Benstock comments, “[Stein] did what no other writer has had quite the courage to do: to relinquish the right to make language submit to the writer’s will” (159). Stein’s renunciation of control over language, while a radical departure from some modernists’ poetics of mastery, finds company in Mallarmé’s notion that the modernist author “cedes the initiative to words” (“[cède] l’initiative aux mots”) (*Oeuvres* 366).

Yet, construed this way, the artistic act begins to sound quasi-mystical. Surely, Stein makes artistic decisions. In what sense are words “doing as they want to do”? These statements exhibit a form of fetishism: that is, they ascribe to objects a personified power they do not in fact possess—the capacity to act, think, desire—and thus deny or hide their status as products of human labour. For Marx, this illusion is inherent to the production of commodities under capitalism. In these circumstances, workers fail to recognize their own agency, their own ability

to create and control the conditions of their social existence, since they perceive the sphere of commodity exchange as something natural, autonomous, rather than historical. The result is that subjects are transformed into objects, mere means to be consumed by the system in the production of commodities, and objects into subjects.

In another fetishistic statement, Stein says of her landscape poetry, “she began at this time to describe landscape as if anything she saw was a natural phenomenon, a thing existent in itself” (*AABT* 224). Seeing everything as a “natural phenomenon” implies of course seeing non-natural things—made things—as though they were naturally occurring, autonomous phenomena. Stein’s use of terms such as “end in itself” and “existent in itself” draws upon the philosophical vocabulary of German Romanticism. It can be tempting to read these statements as committing Stein to an outdated and somewhat embarrassing philosophical position, a reminder of the ways in which Stein’s thought was as much a product of the nineteenth century as the twentieth. Interpreted differently, however, Stein’s Kantian pronouncements on art actually speak to her work’s *modernism*, and in particular, the questions of technology and commodity fetishism I have been outlining.

In *Critique of Judgment* (1790), Kant argues that in order for something to be beautiful, it must have “the form of purposiveness . . . without the presentation of a purpose” (84). According to Kant, the beautiful object strikes the perceiver as having a kind of order, a kind of patterning, that makes it appear *as if* it were designed, *as if* constructed to satisfy some purpose, even though that particular purpose is unknown or entirely non-existent. Kant’s paradigmatic case of beauty is, not surprisingly, natural beauty. A particular landscape, which one knows is not the product of any rational plan, may nevertheless appear as though it must have been designed. In reflective aesthetic judgements, one apprehends an object, recognizes its purposiveness—that is, some

minimum of form, the potential for meaning—and searches for a relevant concept under which to subsume the object, but without success. Despite the lack of a determinate result, one experiences a disinterested pleasure in the very process of cognition itself, the movement from particular to universal and back to the particular again.

Works of art present a problem for Kant's aesthetics since, as artefacts of human making, they are inevitably products and not wild nature. Whereas Kant argues that natural beauty, insofar as it appears the product of design, will look like a work of art, he suggests that works of art, in order to be judged beautiful, must look like nature. "In a product of beautiful art," Kant postulates, "we must become conscious that it is art and not nature; but yet the purposiveness in its form must be seen to be free from all constraint of chosen rules as if it were a product of mere nature" (*Critique of Judgment* 173).

Aesthetic theorists after Kant abandon natural beauty in order to turn to artistic beauty. Hegel, for instance, champions art over nature, or rather, art as the moment in which humans realize and achieve their freedom from nature. Like Hegel, Theodor Adorno reverses Kant's privileging of natural beauty over artistic beauty; unlike Hegel, however, Adorno imagines the two to be continuous. Thus, "art does not imitate nature, not even individual instances of natural beauty, but natural beauty as such" (*Aesthetic Theory* 71). The key point about "natural beauty as such" is its indefinability: "natural beauty is the trace of the nonidentical in things under the spell of universal identity" (*Aesthetic Theory* 11). Thus, Adorno retains Kant's notion of art's uselessness, its being without purpose, while abandoning the notion that art should seek to represent nature. By extension, modernist art works must appear in excess of, or irreducible to, artistic ideas or intentions; they must not appear to be an act of communication, despite the fact that art is inevitably something intended. Adorno articulates the paradox of modern art in terms

similar to that of Kant: “with human means art wants to realize the language of what is not human” (*Aesthetic Theory* 100); “how can making bring into appearance what is not the result of making” (*Aesthetic Theory* 107). Or, to rephrase the problem in Stein’s terms, how can something composed simultaneously bear witness to “words doing as they want to do”; how can something made, and thus artefactual, appear as “a natural phenomenon”; how can mounting, boxing, cataloguing, paradoxically liberate its materials? For Adorno, modernist works of art are “thoroughly organized by the subject” in such a way that they are “divested of the subject’s intentions” (*Aesthetic Theory* 67). This signals an inversion of the classical paradigm in aesthetics. In Adorno’s case, modernist artistic creation does not aim to synthesize its materials in meaningful and harmonious wholes; instead, by means of its organization, it foregrounds the parts in isolation from the whole, thus producing something dissonant and fragmentary.

Read through this Adornian framework, poems in which “words do as they want” are wild or discordant and appear nature-like in not yielding determinate, transitive meaning—a meaning or message precisely detachable or paraphrased from these words—and that exceed attempts to understand them. In these texts, words are “doing as they want” since not subsumed to a central idea; each one registers as an end in itself. On the other hand, Stein’s stipulation that her works are nevertheless ordered, consciously composed, corresponds to Kantian “purposiveness”; it is the idea that, despite not yielding any determinate results, the work insinuates meaning, holds one’s attention, produces pleasure. It is precisely for this reason that one cannot consider these works to be entirely empty of meaning or significance.

The type of fetishism that Stein practices in her writing, her animation of inanimate things, is not anthropomorphic—she allows her words an independent voice, yet not a human voice, not a voice one can translate without loss into one’s own terms. This is the difference

between Baudrillard's collector and Stein's collector. Quoting Rheims, Baudrillard suggests that the object obediently gazes back at the collector like "a docile dog," returning to the collector an ideal image of him or herself. The collector projects the image onto the object, then pretends to discover it, disavowing the image's status as mere projection. By contrast, Stein's fetishism is her means of registering the obdurate materiality of words as something that resists one's transformative powers, one's will to render them expressive of a subjectivity. Indeed, by foregrounding the word as a material thing, one draws attention to that which is not made but given, *a priori*, and which unsettles the aspiration to complete self-presence through expression.

Stein's fetishistic practice resembles commodity fetishism as described by Marx, the phenomenon in which products of labour appear curiously independent of the subjects who created them, as though they were alien, autonomous things. Yet, the paradox of Stein's fetishism is that it functions ultimately to highlight the materiality of the word and render it unexchangeable, something to be caressed but not grasped or utilized. In other words, by means of fetishism, she contests the commodity's law of equivalence, the work of exchange value to homogenize difference and make unlike things fungible. In this sense, her work exemplifies Adorno's notion that, in modernism, the "absolute artwork converges with the absolute commodity" (*Aesthetic Theory* 21). If one understands the commodity character as that which "wipes out any human trace," then the presumption that the work of art is an end in itself, and *not* the "result of making," is inevitably a form of fetishism, and therefore tied up with the order it wants to oppose. Yet, the modernist work of art is for Adorno an "absolute commodity," an object *more* rather than *less* fetishized than the commodity proper. When fetishism is intensified, the result is "a radicalization of the alienated relation between subjectivity and nature . . . a mimetic approximation and acceleration of the nonidentity between things and us" (Huhn 252).

The estrangement of the commodity from its use-value approximates the independence of things, of the object world, from the subject's conceptual operations. Ironically, by means of fetishism, Stein displaces the subject from its presumption of mastery and registers the alterity of language, its status as something that precedes and inaugurates subjectivity, and that is irreducible to a paraphrasable meaning without remainder.

Why, though, is Stein's aesthetic approach a radical use of the technology of reification and not a normal one? How is her "absolute commodity" different from the processes of commodity production proper? Adorno observes that "artworks are in fact absolute commodities in that they are social products that have rejected every semblance of existing for society, a semblance to which commodities otherwise urgently cling" (*Aesthetic Theory* 236). While the technology of fetishism dissociates the commodity from its origin in labour, from its useful properties, it cannot vanquish use value altogether, for it is use ultimately that is exchanged. Marx contends, "nothing can be a value without being an object of utility. If the thing is useless, so is the labour contained within it; the labour does not count as labour, and therefore creates no value" (*Capital* 131). In a scene from Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900), department store shoes cry out to Carrie, "Ah such little feet . . . how effectively I cover them" (94). The scene demonstrates the fetishistic illusion of commodification by presenting the shoes as subjects with a voice and agency of their own. As subjects, however, the shoes cry out for recognition and approval, attempting to reassure Carrie of their usefulness and value.

Thus, fetishism abstracts the product from its origin in labour, from the context in which it appears a reflection of the human powers to create, but in its achievement of exchange value, the process is halted, and the product becomes a place-holder for quantifiable human value. The product now appears to possess its value independently of human labour, like a natural thing, but

remains nevertheless a product *for us*, existing for the sake of satisfying human desires. Similarly, in the practice of collecting outlined by Baudrillard, the collector displaces the object from its context in the world but reimposes a personal meaning on the object once it is part of the collection; the object continues to have value only for others—in this case, the collector. By contrast, Stein’s fetishistic mode carries out a further abstraction from exchange value, erasing entirely the pretense of the collected object (in this case, words) holding value *for us*. If the commodity is a subject, but a fundamentally social one, then Stein’s singular poems are “asocial,” turning an enigmatic gaze on the consumer (S. Martin 22).

Given the fetishistic nature of Stein’s artistic practice, it is perhaps not surprising that Stein consistently allies her work with forms of capitalist culture. In her lectures, Stein presents her writing as part of a distinctly “American Writing” that includes advertising, the newspaper, and detective novels (*LIA* 51). She also links her writing style to both the “cinema and series production,” the latter term referring to the scientific management of work—essentially the attempt to boost productivity in the workplace through processes of standardization and mechanization (*LIA* 177). The significance of “series production” for Stein, as Steven Meyer points out, was that it represented a “native strain of abstraction”:

Henry Ford’s perfection of the assembly line, and with it of a distinctly American capitalism, successfully completed the abstraction of the finished product from the individual assembly worker (with the corresponding alienation of the worker from the product). (Meyer 137)

This estrangement of the product from individual assembly worker could be viewed as a regrettable process leading to the creation of objects that are impersonal, fungible, and entirely lacking in what Stein calls “vital singularity” (*MA* 47). Indeed, this seems to be the implication

of this passage from *The Making of Americans* in which Stein describes American people as the “product” of mass-production:

Yes real singularity we have not made enough of yet so that any other one can really know it. I say vital singularity is as yet an unknown product with us, we who in our habits, dress-suit cases, clothes and hats and ways of thinking, walking, making money, talking, having simple lines in decorating, in ways of reforming, all with a metallic clicking like the type-writing which is our only way of thinking, our way of educating, our way of learning, all always the same way of doing, all the way down as far as there is any way down inside to us. (*MA* 47)

Yet, as Barbara Will demonstrates, Stein goes on to trouble the conformity/singularity dichotomy established here, eventually positing the paradoxical possibility of a “mass-produced ‘vital singularity’” (*Gertrude Stein, Modernism* 152). Indeed, I suggest that the “abstraction of the finished product from the individual assembly worker” figures, for Stein, the possibility of “vital singularity” rather than its negation. It does so precisely insofar as it “wipes out any human trace,” negating the authorial subject who would seek to grasp the materials and render them expressive of its interiority rather than caress them and register their irreducible materiality. This strange independence of the product from our productive powers promises to inaugurate a different mode of relating to the object world, one in which we cease to treat materiality as mere resources awaiting our transformation, but as things “existent in themselves.”

Yet, as I have been arguing, Stein’s writing should not be interpreted as an uncritical acceptance of commodity fetishism since it operates, ironically, to contest the law of equivalence or the fantasy of exchange without remainder. Indeed, the law of equivalence is something Stein contends is operational in the very forms of “American writing” she celebrates. As I will show,

she sees the newspaper as seeking to make events “too easy,” as if one had “known it all beforehand” (*Na* 38). Thus, Stein understands commodity culture as riven by tensions and envisions her aesthetics as mobilizing one impulse in commodity culture—fetishism or what Stein calls “separation”—in order to contest another impulse in that culture—that of exchange value (*LIA* 51). In this sense, her work again recalls Adorno, who asserts that modernist “artworks resist domination by mimetically adapting to it,” or by internalizing the technological means that, in capitalist modernity, are employed for domination (*Aesthetic Theory* 404).

Having established this theoretical account detailing how Stein’s writing employs the mechanics of fetishism to contest the fungibility of the commodity, using both Stein’s own formulations and those of Adorno, I now want to explore how this process works at the level of an individual poem. Many of Stein’s poems in *Tender Buttons* feature relatively standard syntactical forms. Marianne DeKoven argues that valid syntactical structures creates the expectation of semantic sense, which the prose poems then upset:

But syntax also functions at a deeper level in this writing, as a sort of *trompe l’oeil*. All the syntactical structures of the transitional style are logical, expository, almost argumentative: the grammatical sign of exactly the kind of patriarchal-symbolic writing which Stein subverts here [...] (72)

The *trompe l’oeil* effect is vividly on display in “A RED STAMP”:

If lilies are lily white if they exhaust noise and distance and even dust if they dusty will dirt a surface that has no extreme grace if they do this and it is not necessary it is not at all necessary if they do this they need a catalogue. (*TB* 14)

The *trompe d’oeil* of syntactical sense is conveyed by the if/then structure of the poem, which creates the expectation that the various “if” phrases will all name conditions for the truth of the

statement, “[lilies] need a catalogue.” The syntax of the text, however, is belied by the lexical meaning of the various conditional phrases.

The first phrase, “if lilies are lily white,” is both tautological—that is to say, lilies could only be *lily* white—and part of common idiom, meaning pure or unadulterated. Tautology itself is pure and unadulterated, a closed loop of reference. Yet, in this case, lilies are both themselves (tautology) and, at the same time, a citation of an idiom about purity. Therefore, lilies are two things and thus not pure, but adulterated. Following that, one encounters, “if [lilies] exhaust noise and distance and even dust.” The phrase is not ungrammatical, and therefore no reference to a rebellion against conventional grammatical or syntactic form (alone) can explain the poem’s singular difficulty. Instead, the difficulty is lexical and rhetorical in nature. The phrase prompts the question: can “noise,” “distance,” and “dust” be exhausted in the same way? The dissimilarity of the nouns— “distance,” as a spatial term, is abstract, and, of the three, “dust” is the only one that possesses material substance—suggests that answer is no, that “exhaust” must be taken differently for each word. The rhetorical term syllepsis refers to a sentence in which a verb applied to two or more other words must be understood in a different sense with respect to each word. An example is “[She] went straight home, in a flood of tears, and a sedan chair” (Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers* 505). In syllepsis, the transition from one sense of the verb to another produces a semantic incongruity or dissonance, often to humorous effect, which compels the reader to pause, even reread, in order to register the phrase’s multiple meanings. The difference, however, between Stein’s phrase and conventional syllepsis is that it is not clear in the case of the former that noise, distance, and dust can be exhausted at all. Indeed, these are not the type of entities that one typically uses in conjunction with the verb exhaust.

As Marianne DeKoven notes, “unfamiliar, surprising, fresh conjunctions of words” are characteristic of Stein’s style in *Tender Buttons* as a whole. The book is full of phrases that combine words in unconventional ways. Consider the phrases, “if the speed is open” and “if the color is careless” from “A PIANO,” both of which confound reading in ways similar to “A RED STAMP” (*TB* 18). Stein’s conjunctions of words is a mode of parataxis or montage, the means by which she defamiliarizes words by taking them out of their common contexts and recombining them. This ability to abstract words from ordinary contexts and project them into new ones, however, is a normal and essential feature of language use. According to Stanley Cavell, “we learn and teach words in certain contexts, and then we are expected and expect others, to be able to project them into further contexts” (*MMS* 65). Cavell gives as an example the word ‘feed’: “we learn the use of ‘feed the kitty’, ‘feed the lion’, ‘feed the swans’, and one day one of us says ‘feed the meter’, or ‘feed the film’, or ‘feed the machine’, or ‘feed his pride’, or ‘feed wire’, and we understand, we are not troubled” (*CR* 181). Cavell’s point is simply that making projections is not a matter of “the grasping of universals nor the grasping of books of rules”—there is no outside, impartial authority, no law that can be invoked to *decide* the success of any projection, or to limit in advance the projective range of a particular word. As such, Stein’s unusual phrase in “A RED STAMP” is in no way strictly meaningless or purely nonsensical. Rather, encountering such a phrase, one is prompted to reflect upon conventional, ordinary uses of those same words, in search of continuity between those contexts and the new one. Bodies, patience, funds, and steam can all be exhausted. As one can see, these various uses of the word “exhaust” share a family of resemblances rather than some essential core meaning. Depending upon the context, to “exhaust” can mean to deplete, wear out, drain, or even let off (emit). If one takes “exhaust” in the last sense—to let off or emit—“[Lilies] exhaust noise” could

be read as Stein's way of giving lilies a kind of language, which, as a figure for their natural beauty, is beyond our understanding, and thereby nothing more than "noise" to us. Or, conversely, we might imagine that exhausting noise means reaching a state of silence by running out of things to say (thus taking "noise" as a metonym for talk), by *depleting* the realm of the sayable. Lilies might exhaust noise insofar as they possess a beauty that cannot be captured by words; the individual's futile attempts to capture the lily's beauty in words must be thought of as meaningless "noise," which eventually gives way to speechlessness in being exhausted.

Employing the same logic, one might construe the phrase "[lilies] exhaust . . . distance" to imply that lilies somehow overcome or transverse the distance separating us from them, approaching or coming near the viewer. Taken figuratively, the idea of lilies encroaching on the space of the viewer implies perhaps that lilies overwhelm the viewer with a beauty that (again) resists one's attempts at conceptualization. Yet, how does one interpret "[lilies] exhaust . . . dust"? The poem suggests that lilies themselves are dirty and perhaps even give off a dust (provided one reads "dirt" as the verb "to dirty"). If the lily is dusty and dirties surfaces, if the lily is a source of dust, then presumably the necessary sense of exhaust used here is to emit or to let off—a lily might exhaust dust like an automobile exhausts pollutants into the air. Perhaps Stein refers here to the lily's distinctive orange pollen, a kind of "dust" that the stamens expel as the flowers ripen, or even the lily's fragrance, which is sometimes described as powdery or dusty. Here, Stein would seem to be revising traditional and oppressive lily symbolism while remaining botanically accurate: historically associated with a feminine beauty that is pure and innocent, lilies now become a transgressive and contaminating force.

Nothing prevents one from producing a paraphrase of these sentences. In Stein's poem, there is no radical erasure of semantic meaning or transcendence of signification altogether.

Thus, Laura Riding's claim that Stein's words "are no older than her use of them" is an inadequate account of what happens when Stein projects words into new contexts (188–9). Nevertheless, there is something unsatisfactory about these paraphrases, perhaps because they assume too much—more than Stein provides us—or depend upon suspect inferences—such as taking "noise" as a metonym for speech. Or, perhaps, it is because they are unable to give satisfactory explanations of why Stein would use "exhaust" or "noise" in these contexts rather than other words (like deplete or speech, for example). Cavell observes the necessary limitations one faces in projecting words, "if we are to communicate, we mustn't leap too far; but how far is too far?" (*Claim of Reason* 192). Indeed, Stein's conjunctions of words press one's interpretative capacities to their limit, begging the question, "how far is too far"? Yet, because there are no given rules about what constitutes "too far" in interpretation, since the question is not clearly answerable, these interpretations of Stein's phrase cannot be dismissed outright, and thus form a part of the experience of reading these poems.

The unusual combinations of words in Stein's *Tender Buttons* poems calls for a kind of circular or recursive structure on one's reading process. First of all, as in syllepsis, one is required to decide the relevant sense of the verb for each of the nouns it modifies. Secondly, one is compelled to reflect back upon quotidian uses of the word "exhaust," in order to determine what valences of the verb "exhaust" apply to the present context. This recursive structure is akin to Kant's notion of reflective judgment, or "purposiveness . . . without the presentation of a purpose," in which the search for a concept under which to subsume an object yields no determinate result, yet nevertheless is pleasurable in itself. At the same time, this circular structure is like the tautology with which Stein begins the poem—"lilies are lily white"—which appears to be moving towards a definition, but in fact returns the reader to the starting point. The

recursive structure produces, to quote Paul Valéry's definition of poetry, "a prolonged hesitation between sound and meaning" (*"hésitation prolongée entre le son et le sens"*) (782). Commenting on Valéry's definition, Agamben argues that this "strategy" causes "the word and the representation to appear as such" and allows "language finally [to] communicate itself, without remaining unsaid in what is said" ("Difference and Repetition" 331, *The End of the Poem* 115). When reading Stein's poem, the reader must compare the ordinary uses of "exhaust"—its "representation"—with its present use. Since the ordinary uses of "exhaust" do not transfer smoothly to the present context, since there is a lack of fit or dissonance between the multiple contexts, the reader is simultaneously made aware of "exhaust" as word, as obdurate material thing, and as a representation, with a history of meanings and applications. Thus, rather than suggest that Stein's poem enables one to leap from a realm of meaning to one of pure sensuousness, as does Riding, it makes more sense to suggest the poems produce a tension between word as representation and word as object. Meaning derived from usage, habit, and etymological lineage is momentarily suspended or bracketed, but nevertheless present as the background against which the poem exhibits its semantic dissonance.

Yet, the poem also functions at the symbolic level. Connections made among lilies, dirt, and dust undermine conventional lily symbolism. Typically associated with female purity and virginity, Stein's lilies are dirty and stamped red, which, as Lisa Ruddick notes, suggests "menstruation and defloration," "waste products . . . of the human body," aspects of female sexuality typically excluded from depictions of the feminine (149). Stein is playing with the religious symbolism of the lily in similar ways as the Pre-Raphaelites, for whom the lily came to represent not purity, but "purity awaiting its destiny, its alternation into another state . . . . The mystical moment of loss of virginity" (Ruddick 172). Just as the practice of collecting evinced by

Stein resists the recontextualization of objects/words within the collection, seeking instead a kind of permanent dislocation of meaning by creating an unusual juxtaposition, the lily is disconnected from its traditional associations not in order to symbolize the opposite (impurity), or something altogether different, but the “moment of loss” itself, the transition between states, the self-extinguishing of meaning.

The lily was of similar importance to Oscar Wilde, who wore a lily on his jacket for his 1882 American lecture tour (he was hired to promote Gilbert and Sullivan’s *Patience*, an opera that parodies Wilde and Whistler), and featured it prominently in his play, *Salome* (1891). Colin Cruise argues that Wilde’s use of the “lily-as-badge,” through its association with the Annunciation, casts Wilde in the role of angelic messenger, preaching art rather than religion, or art as the “new religion” (180). The irony of Wilde as messenger for Aestheticism is that Aestheticism’s message is precisely that art serves no end external to itself, whether moral, religious, or political, and thus is message-less, so to speak. Thus, even insofar as Wilde employs the traditional associations of the lily, it is in order to announce a process in which the transcendental is secularized, emptied of its prior significance. As an essential component of Oscar Wilde’s personal style and self-presentation to the public, the “lily-as-badge” constituted a Wildean elevation of style over substance, a transformation of an object rich in religious symbolism into decoration, self-advertisement. Stein achieves something similar in “A RED STAMP,” abstracting the lily from its tradition, from the context “inside which it finds its value and meaning,” and rendering it a collectible (Agamben, *The Man Without Content* 105). Thus, Stein’s engagement with lily symbolism points to the theme of decontextualization that the poem performs at the level of the sentence through its combination of unlike words. In Stein’s poem, the lily is a figure for the disruption of symbolism.

Conversely, the “red stamp” of the poem’s title can be taken to represent a postage stamp, an association reinforced by poem’s final reference to a “catalogue.” Of course, the postage stamp is a commonly collected item. Insofar as the stamp permits the exchange of objects, including letters, it symbolizes communication or exchange. Yet, in collecting or cataloguing stamps, one takes them out of circulation, removes them from the context of mutual, communicative exchange. This perhaps can be read as a way to frame movement in itself—the sign of movement—to capture movement independently of any thing (message) to be moved, or any final destination of which movement would come to a halt. As such, the poem communicates nothing determinate; instead, it points to the very conditions of possibility (the stamp, the materiality of the signifier) of communication itself. The stamp catalogue provides another allegory for the abstraction the poem performs. Indeed, the poem gives the structure of rational, communicative language (if, if, then) in the absence of any particular communicable message. And in the absence of a communicable message, one is forced to attend to ordinary, communicative language as something sensuous and felt. More specifically, Stein makes the reader feel logical connection itself as a kind of movement, though one without purpose, telos, or transcendence.

I have demonstrated how, at the level of an individual poem, Stein ‘collects’ words by projecting them into unconventional contexts that render their semantic meaning overdetermined and undecidable. In *Tender Buttons*, words cease to be transitive vessels, quickly transcended in the movement from signifier to signified; instead, the poems create, in the terms of Valery, a prolonged “pause” between sound and meaning (782). This mode of collecting is Stein’s means of allowing words to “come into their own,” to employ Benjamin’s description of collecting, or to “let words do as they please,” to employ Stein’s own terms.

Stein's mode of collecting is exemplary of fetishism insofar as it seeks to disconnect words (even momentarily) from a realm of usefulness and work (the labour of communicating a 'message'), and instead invest them with autonomy. For Stein, this mode of collecting is both similar to the fetishism of the commodity and distinct, an exaggerated form of commodity fetishism that intensifies one element of fetishism—the abstraction of an object from its origin labour (its appearing as “a natural phenomenon, a thing existent in itself,” in Stein's words [AABT 224])—to resist another effect of commodification—the creation of an abstract value detachable from its materialization.

Having established the mechanics of fetishism in Stein's poetry, I want to now examine a little more closely Stein's contention that, by means of taking objects and putting them in a collection, she is somehow liberating them or giving them autonomy. These statements are playfully provocative—how can language truly act independently of a writer or a writer affect such radical passivity in what is essentially a creative act?—yet they serve to make an important point. Stein seeks to negate the emphasis on powerful subjects and their world-shaping activity, so characteristic of many of her modernist peers, particularly the “men of 1914,” whose positions I explored in my introduction. Stein points to the fact that one is a receiver of language before one is a user of language—that the subject who employs language is produced through that language, through discourse, and is not some pre-existing essence, as is posited by Enlightenment philosophy. Interestingly, for Stein, it is the commodity that most fully recalls one to this original passivity—this acknowledgement of the subject's constructed and fundamentally unstable nature. To make these points, Stein frequently embraces paradox, advancing the idea of a simultaneously passive and active labour, a fetishistic work that can foreground what is not made, what is unowned and opaque, in any act of production.

**“Excreation,” “talking and listening,” infancy: Deconstructing active-passive dichotomies**

On the one hand, the trope of collecting allows Stein to construe artistic labour as something involving both activity and passivity, creation and discovery. The labour is passive insofar as it involves the quoting of pre-existing objects or words. The collector does not create *ex nihilo* the things that compose his/her collection, nor are the things significantly reworked or transformed from their given state—thus, they are chosen or discovered, ready-made, and left as is. Yet collecting, or quoting, necessarily produces some (transformative) effect on its object; in this case, dislocation from its primary context and arrangement within the space of the collection in relation to other objects. Moreover, this dislocation renders the object enigmatic and opaque by abstracting it from its everyday contexts, the contexts of use and exchange, the discursive fields that render the object intelligible. Thus, the process of abstraction is itself a form of labour, involving the negation of context, syntax, expectation, and association.

Indeed, despite the emphasis placed on “words doing as they want,” Stein often insists that her poems are highly calculated and controlled. In response to Skinner’s charge that her writing was automatic, Stein commented in a letter to a friend that ““it is not so automatic as he thinks . . . . If there is anything secret it is the other way . . . I think I achieve by xtra [sic] consciousness, excess”” (qtd. in Meyer 141). I take Stein to be suggesting that the appearance in her work of formlessness, randomness, or words acting independently, is actually the effect of careful construction. Put differently, the negation of discursive meaning in Stein’s writing requires more, not less, consciousness than that of so-called normal, communicative writing. Stein’s statement should not be taken as an argument in favour of the primacy of authorial intention or as recourse to the notion of literary Impressionism. Rather, “consciousness” should

be taken to refer to the aspects of language that render it serviceable for the conveyance of communicative meaning—the semantic register that enables “consciousness” to be expressed. As such, Stein implies that her poems do not leap from the realm of semantics into a purely nonsensical and sensuous one—indeed, to assume this would be to adopt a dualistic view of language in which its semantic and sensuous functions were fully and finally dissociable. Indeed, syntax, semantics, “consciousness” are all present in these poems, but deployed differently, against themselves so to speak, in order to foreground the graphic and phonic singularity of words.

Stein’s notion of abstraction shares something with Duchamp’s notion of *surcensure* (Duchamp’s word; translated by de Duve as “overcensorship” 170). Thierry de Duve summarizes Duchamp’s method for composing poems: “having chosen the first word of the sentence, Duchamp would then proceed to choose the next, scratching every choice until he was satisfied that no meaning was produced but an abstract one” (170). The technique runs counter to André Breton’s notion of automatic writing by requiring an intensification of rational censorship in the name of freeing words from communication (even of unconscious contents) as opposed to the abolition of censorship in the name of freeing the subject (by enabling a more authentic expression). I do not mean to suggest that Stein specifically employed Duchamp’s technique, only that self-censorship provides a compelling concept for understanding what Stein achieved through her turn to the “visible world” of objects. Stein’s notion of “xtra consciousness” corresponds to Duchamp’s notion of *surcensure* and both concepts eschew the notion of an autonomous, self-grounding subject expressing its interiority thanks to the abolition of convention or the repressive law of the conscious self. Instead, by imposing consciousness, censorship, convention, they seek to estrange authorial self-expression. At root, they object to the

very theory of subjectivity and writing assumed by Breton's notion of automatic writing, the notion that the subject exists somewhere beyond language and its conventions, awaiting its full expression. Instead, it is language itself that precedes and inaugurates subjectivity—language as productive of subjectivity—that Stein foregrounds through her radical techniques.

Beyond Duchamp, the American assemblage artist Joseph Cornell is perhaps the visual artist who best evokes the spirit of *Tender Buttons*. Just as Stein's *Tender Buttons* meditates on containment and liberation, Joseph Cornell's boxes, with their closed spaces and exact arrangements, evoke both a theater and a prison, both free play and objectification. According to J. M. Bernstein, a "Cornell box" is an "artistic presentational device that itself connects art to childhood" through its evocation of "the shoebox of treasured possessions," and "connects childhood to adult obsession of collecting and cataloguing" (*Against Voluptuous Bodies* 245). Moreover, like Stein, Cornell's presentations of objects exceed mere souvenir collecting. Contrasting Cornell with the Surrealists, Dawn Ades argues that Cornell was not interested in the metaphoric "transformation of objects practiced by Ernst, who, for example, allows a bat's wing to become the blind of a railway carriage or rats climbing the side of a face become the mane of a sphinx" (17). The space enclosed by a Cornell box is neither the ordered space of taxonomy nor a theatre of the mind operating according to the principal of equivalence. The fragments incorporated into a Cornell box—images of actresses, advertisement and newspaper cut-outs, marbles, sand, pipe—are commodities and social signs, and, as such, not simply shorn of their representational meanings. Rather, as Bernstein observes:

Adjacency, contiguity, and juxtaposition generate a script or bond, an affinity among the objects that perspicuously exceeds their literal and symbolic significance. Indeed, it is the very point of a Cornell box that it possesses this form of excess, that it sets off a

communication of its objects that invites interpretation while making any fully discursive accounting impossible. (*Against Voluptuous Bodies* 219-220)

Interestingly, Stein often speaks of Cubism in ways that anticipate object or assemblage art:

in the shops in Barcelona instead of post cards they had square little frames and inside it was placed a cigar, a real one, a pipe, a bit of handkerchief etcetera, all absolutely the arrangement of a cubist picture and helped out by cut paper representing other objects.

(*AABT* 91-2)

Stein highlights the interplay between the “frame,” the “arrangement,” and the things arranged, which are not created by the artist but chosen—excised from the realm of use to be placed within the collection.

Stein’s poems in *Tender Buttons* are in no sense formless, or examples of automatic writing; yet, they work to foreground that which exceeds form, that which is readymade, and beyond the author’s control in the work of art—in Stein’s case, the ordinary word, rendered momentarily unfamiliar or the “excess” of meaning referenced by Bernstein. Importantly, Stein does not leap beyond the realm of referentiality into one of pure sensuousness. She does not, through collection, restore the object to its pre-commodified state. Nor does she, it goes without saying, literally channel the free will of words, letting them do as they please. Instead, it is by means of the tools of syntax and grammaticality that she generates an excess of meaning and renders words momentarily opaque and unexchangeable; by means of frames and arrangements, that she liberates objects from usefulness; and by means of the mechanics of fetishism itself, that she resists the commodity’s exchange value. Thus, in articulating a critique of commodification, she does not assume recourse to a realm outside of commodity culture, and, in contesting the sovereign artistic subjectivity, does not posit a pure receptivity, a radical outside to shaping and

forming. This nuance is important as it demonstrates that Stein avoids the naivety of her modernist peers, like Wyndham Lewis, who presupposes autonomy from the marketplace, and resists dualistic constructions in which meaning and sensuousness, intelligibility and materiality, whole and part, are opposed without mediation. The result is poems that are “not unordered in not resembling” (*TB* 9); that is, the structure of the poems, their order, works on behalf of wildness and dissonance rather than harmony and unity. *Tender Buttons* raises the possibility that framing, boxing, collecting, and cataloguing might function *not* as a means to possess, control, and dominate, but for the sake of the thing boxed, paradoxically freeing the object. By removing the object from its quotidian context by placing it behind glass or mounting it on the wall, one estranges oneself from that object. One can no longer grasp or clutch the object, appropriate it for the world of use and consumption. If the ordering of objects in a collection is such that it denies or negates narrative, one might be forced to acknowledge the object in its separateness, to relinquish one’s claim to know the object completely or possess it inalienably. The frame, which is created by the subject, protects the object from the subject’s projections. Yet, as Hannah Arendt notes in relation to Benjamin’s philosophy, “collecting is the redemption of things which is to complement the redemption of man” (*Illuminations* 42). In other words, the liberation of things is not just on behalf of the thing, but also yields some benefit for the collector, too. Namely, in liberating material things from conceptual dominance, one also liberates the passive, receptive subjectivity from the dominance of a discursive and instrumental rationality. In *Tender Buttons*, this pleasure is conceived of as a “violent kind of delightfulness”—violent because it means relinquishing one’s desire for epistemological mastery, and delightful because the desire was a self-defeating project from the start (10). Stein’s later writings, to which I will turn shortly,

conceive of the pleasure of the newspaper in terms of “excitement” and “discovery” as well as the “violence” of being “bombard[ed] with questions” (*HWW* 93).

Stein dismantles the opposition between activity and passivity that structures so many (male) modernist diatribes about the work of art and its opposition to the commodity. The idea of caressing nouns and letting “words [do] as they want” incorporates an element of passivity into an otherwise active endeavour, the writing of a poem. Intertwining passivity and activity is also present in Stein’s definition of genius in her lectures as a matter of “talking and listening”:

One may really indeed say that that is the essence of genius, of being most intensely alive, that is being one who is at the same time talking and listening, doing both things, not as if there were one thing, not as if they were two things, but doing them, well if you like, like the motor going inside the car moving, they are part of the same thing. (*LIA* 170)

Stein does not imagine talking and listening as a process involving two distinct tasks—first listening, then talking—and thus is not a form of realism, wherein one receives a set of sensory impressions then actively, accurately synthesizes and orders them through the labour of writing. Rather, Stein’s notion of genius posits the artist as split, doubled, engaged always in two tasks “at the same time,” which is to say always simultaneously a consumer and producer.

This intertwining of activity and passivity is also evidenced in Stein’s use of excretion as a correlative for artistic creation in *Tender Buttons*. Many of the poems feature scatological references, including “ORANGE IN,” in which Stein coins the neologism, “excreate” (*TB* 38).<sup>8</sup> Lisa Ruddick argues that thinking about creation as excretion is meant to convey “the sense of omnipotence that follows from digestive change, as if one imagined one could magically change everything into excrement” (237). I read the figure of excretion differently. Excrement is what

remains at the end of the digestive process, the material stuff the body expels after it has extracted all that can be used. The analogy equates the poem with that which cannot be digested, absorbed, and repurposed in any act of consumption, and what therefore must be cast out, abjected. Thus, “excreat[ion]” is not a metaphor for the artist’s capacity for unlimited transformation, but rather for what remains beyond the artist’s control—in this case, that which is lost in any act of translation or repurposing, that which inheres in the material intransigence of language.

By conflating the work of art with excrement, the product with the byproduct, productive labour with unproductive labour, Stein upsets the assumptions that underlie modernist conceptions of the work of art as productive of the self, and furthermore, as a fortification of the subject against “the ‘drift’ of desire” (Nicholls 193).<sup>9</sup> Excrement is precisely that which must be rejected, expelled, if the boundaries between inside and outside, self and world, are to be maintained. Stein’s poems prevent one, however, from disavowing this process of abjection. Instead, the remainder becomes the object, and Stein casts the process of evacuation as valuable in itself. In a passage from *The Making of Americans*, Stein locates a perverse pleasure in shitting: “It should come out of me without any straining in me to be pressing. . . . Always each thing must come out completely from me leaving me inside me just then gently empty, so pleasantly and weakly empty” (MA 586). The speaker derives pleasure from a literal emptying of the body and a figurative voiding of the self through a production that, as excremental, fails to reflect back an image of the author’s identity. Whereas expression posits a correlation between what emerges, what is externalized, and the subject’s interiority, excreation imagines a product that is processed yet without being fully incorporated into the subject.

Lisa Ruddick suggests that in Stein's "A BROWN"—"A brown which is not liquid not more so is relaxed and yet there is a change, a news is pressing"—"a news is pressing" can be read as "(anus) is pressing," a literal description of the excremental process (25). At the same time, the choice of "a news" rather than "anus" suggests the modernist privileging of the new (as in Pound's maxim, "make it new"). Thus, the agent of the "pressing" is ambivalent—it is alternatively the subject (via the "anus") or the work itself (the new, or the "brown"). In the latter case, the fact that it is the brown which is "pressing" gives to the act of creation an aspect of involuntariness and passivity, as though creation arises always in response to something urgent, a pressing matter, which precedes the individual will. In the former case, artistic creation is active and transformative, producing "a change" in the materials, even when this change involves not only the application of force, but also a relaxation ("and so is relaxed"), which is more passive, a simple release of the object. The creative process is imagined in terms of a "pressing" that is not expressive, a pressing which replaces shaping, forming, as a mode of artistic production. This excretion, I am suggesting, is akin to the process of fetishistic abstraction, which similarly imagines artistic work in terms of dislocation and movement rather than active shaping or masterful transformation.

I have attempted to show that Stein imagines a radical form of collecting akin to Benjamin's ideas about collecting and art. Radical or not, however, Stein's use of collecting as a trope, her obsession with ordinary commodity objects, as well as her predilection for entirely simple words (often repeated), puts her out of sync with many of her modernist peers. At the beginning of this chapter, I suggested that other modernists' disagreements with Stein turned on a perception that Stein passively accepted the common world and language, unwilling to

transform the given and invent the new—a failure of both imagination and will. Returning to that context, I want to elaborate further what exactly is at stake in such differences.

In *The Caliph's Design* (1919), Wyndham Lewis recounts a parable about a caliph who dreams up elaborate and fantastic new designs for the city streets beneath his castle window, and entrusts two engineers to make the impractical plans a reality (*The Caliph's Design* 19). The parable inscribes a division of labour: the sovereign intellect, unrestrained by material considerations, invents and designs freely, while a team of labourers translates these designs into concrete, physical forms. Indeed, for Lewis, it is essential that the artist realize absolute autonomy from the material world: “theoretically, even, a creative painter or designer should be able to exist quite satisfactorily without paper, stone or paints, or without lifting a finger to translate into forms and colours his specialized creative impulse” (*The Caliph's Design* 37). Similarly, Eugene Jolas’s entire aesthetic project is premised on the creation of a new language, as opposed to the lesser feat of dislocating an already existing language: he suggests that writers can limit themselves to the “mere *phantasmatic* rearrangement of [the] material” which is the invention of a new syntax, the creation of a “montage in words,” or one can construct “a new metaphoric language that might approach the mood of illumination” (*Critical Writings* 284). Indeed, Jolas’s favourite metaphor for the labour of the artist is that of alchemy. The authentic artist must first “disintegrate the primal matter of words imposed on him by textbooks and dictionaries” (*Critical Writings* 111). This strange notion of dissolving language into a “primal matter” corresponds to the first phase of alchemical transmutation by which existing common metals are reduced to *prima materia*, the shapeless material substrate out of which all things are fashioned. In its reduction to *prima materia*, materials are deprived of form, solidity, and rendered infinitely malleable, utterly receptive to the transformations of the alchemist. They are

reduced to *raw* material, where *rawness* suggests an un-worked or un-processed quality. The disintegration of language to primal word matter is the means of producing *a tabula rasa*, clearing away all that is impure and degraded, in order to prepare the ground for the authentically new to emerge (*Critical Writings* 163).

Both Lewis and Jolas subscribe to a dualism consisting of the active mind of the artist and the world of passive, inanimate materials, a dichotomy which pictures writing as a process in which words, materials, function merely as vehicles for something *independent*, presumably non-linguistic mental contents. The emphasis for these writers is on creating forms adequate to the richness and complexity of the (sub)(un)conscious mind, where that mind is presumed to preexist language, the expressive medium. For this reason, the subject and his/her “specialized creative impulse” is entirely unconstrained and unconditioned by the currently existing state of language.

As I have already demonstrated, Stein’s account of artistic creation tends to emphasize passivity and dependence rather than sovereignty and independence, choosing and consuming rather than what Lewis characterizes as active and authentic creation. If the artist in Lewis and Jolas’s account achieves a sophisticated mastery over language, Stein’s is always immersed in a language that is beyond one’s control, possessed of its own animation. Indeed, one might suggest that Stein’s poems simulate an experience of linguistic infancy in contrast to the mature and sovereign independence of Lewis’s artist as caliph. Fittingly, the most common insult leveled at Stein’s work is that her writing is childish. Michael Gold describes Stein’s writing as “deliberate infantilism” and Stein herself a “literary idiot” (209, 205). B. F. Skinner describes Gertrude Stein’s secondary personality, the one responsible for *Tender Buttons*, as “flimsy” and “as easily influenced as a child; a heard word may force itself into whatever sentence may be under construction at the moment, or it may break the sentence up altogether and irremediably” (66).

The notion that Stein's writing is childlike, however, need not be presented as a criticism.

Barbara Will insists that, "of all modernist writers, Stein indeed seems closest to the linguistic sensibility of children, most attuned in her use of language to the efforts of a subject learning to navigate the terms of adulthood" ("And Then One Day" 340). Stein even claimed of her poetry that it was "children's poetry" ("A Transatlantic Interview" 508).

Stein's poems remind the reader of one's dependence on others, and one's shared exposure to language, a state most fully experienced in infancy, but which one never fully transcends. For Jean Laplanche, the infant is initially passively and helplessly exposed to an adult world of enigmatic signifiers—words and gestures that are laden with a meaning that is sensed but not comprehended, and which therefore overwhelm the infant (127). According to Laplanche, the interiorization of these enigmatic messages constitutes and inaugurates the subject. Thus, prior to language being employed as the means of articulation or communication, it is first encountered in the other in the form of an address, a provocation, that must be attended to but not mastered (Laplanche 157-8). Similarly, according to Judith Butler, the subject cannot give a full and coherent account of herself because "the very terms by which we give an account, by which we make ourselves intelligible to ourselves and to others, are not of our making" (*Giving an Account of Oneself* 21). The infant does not choose or invent its own language. It is the language of others, the infant's elders, before it is the infant's own. This "primary vulnerability" to language and to others is the condition of possibility for there being a subject at all, and consequently, of the ability to narrate one's life or enact agency. It is only against the background of an already existing public language, a language one did not choose nor make, that the idea of the autonomous subject becomes legible at all (*Precarious Life* 31).

I am suggesting that Stein's aesthetics of collection and abstraction draw one's attention to an exposure to language that is the very condition of possibility for artistic expression. The infant's inauguration into subjectivity depends upon a capacity to recognize the other's words and gestures as messages, which are potentially meaningful, even if specific meanings are beyond comprehension. Learning language through the repetition of an overheard word will be the infant's passive-active imitation of sounds and gestures, rather than an active grasping of meaning. Since Stein's poems produce intransitive meanings, a purposiveness without purpose, they simulate this primary exposure to language, and unsettle, disrupt, any sense of an independent self outside of and in control of language. The experience of original passivity in which one is initiated into life with language should not be considered a constraint or obstacle to personal expression. Exposure to a language and a form of life that is foreign, not of one's own choosing, conditions the emergence of the very subject that seeks to give expression to him or herself. As such, Stein's idea of collecting, while not narcissistic, is infantile. The criticism directed at Stein misses the point by ironically noting it: Stein's poetry is frivolous and playful in the mode of children and collectors rather than disciplined and masterful in the mode of her masculinist modernist peers.

Lewis's artist is, of course, entirely unbelievable and thus it would be misleading to say that Stein refuses this mode, as though it were a readily available option. In many ways, Lewis takes the ideal of autonomous, self-grounding subjectivity—the one enshrined in the economic and philosophical discourses of modernity—and exposes its absurdity by developing the concept to its extreme yet logical conclusion. If the artist is to act and express himself autonomously, then he must do so without the mediation of artistic materials or generic conventions; he cannot be constrained in any way by what already exists. To ensure such influence does not occur, the

artist's visionary act must transpire apart from, even in ignorance of, the world in its givenness. Thus, the caliph can redesign the city only because he is entirely cut off from it. Lewis's parable of artistic subjectivity posits a division between the part of the psyche that envisions the work (the caliph) and the part that materializes that vision (the engineers). Importantly, communication between these parts must be unidirectional, proceeding from the caliph to engineer, lest the caliph's pure imagination be besmirched by the engineers' practical, embodied experience. Thus, it is possible to read Lewis's work as revealing the tensions and inconsistencies inherent to the concept of the fully autonomous subject. Faced with these absurdities, Lewis attempts to consolidate this extreme vision of a sovereign artistic subject by attacking outsiders—the collector, the homosexual, the woman—those types who come to exemplify for him the characteristics he abhors—receptivity, appetite, embodiment.

Stein's articulation of a naïve and childlike artistic subject can also be viewed as a reaction—in this case, an alternative—to the same ideal of the fully autonomous subject of modernity. Stein views the ideal as an impossibility—and thus not a modality available to her—but one that claims a certain hegemonic status in the discourses of modernity. Thus, while the achievement of full autonomy may be a fantasy, the experience of living under the sway of this concept is a familiar reality. In the context of Hegel's master-bondsman dialectic, Judith Butler speaks of the master's pretense to a disembodied subjectivity as “a way of living or existing the body in the mode of denial” (“Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*” 44).

Likewise, Lewis's articulation of the artist as a disengaged, fully autonomous individual can be interpreted as a way of living intersubjectivity in a mode of denial. The artist's sovereignty is manifested in attempts to *deny* connectedness, mutuality, and receptivity—in part, by castigating various outsiders, ironically disclosing relationality and affective engagement (hatred of specific,

embodied others) in the very act of disavowing those qualities. As we will see, the confluence of fantasy and scapegoating glimpsed in Lewis's work anticipates Stein's journalist, Barnes's masculinist spectator, and Woolf's stockbroker. I argue that Stein, Barnes, and Woolf view these characters as anxiously denying finitude, death, and uncertainty through acts of fantasizing, which, in addition to positing impossible goals, constitute impoverished modes of living. Stein argues that the journalist, in seeking omniscience, fails to comprehend the pleasure in experiences that startle, surprise, and confuse. Barnes shows that the voyeuristic spectator is doomed to continually discover his or her embodiment and the alterity of others as a discomfiting shock, an unpleasant unraveling of the self, while missing out on other less reifying ways of relating to otherness. Woolf contends that the stockbroker's obsession with endless accumulation requires that they live a form of ascetic self-denial, forever in a calculative and future-oriented mode that forecloses sensuous pleasure in the fleeting present of consumption. In each case, these writers expose what subscribing to the assumptions and desires of *homo economicus*—modernity's fully autonomous and reifying subjectivity—actually entails, namely an anxious denial that proves epistemologically inaccurate, ethically suspect, and unfulfilling.

As I have been arguing throughout this chapter, Stein links this fantasy of the sovereign, masterful subject to modern commodity culture. Turning now to her lectures, and specifically her exploration of the newspaper, I suggest that Stein understands modern commodity culture as maintaining the fantasy of the sovereign subject by minimizing and disavowing that which she calls "discovery"—experiences analogous to those of vulnerability and exposure, which I have explored here. Importantly, however, the modern commodity culture that neutralizes or disavows discovery also contains within it the latent possibility for discovery. As such, Stein's critique is an immanent one, aiming to liberate one element of the commodity culture from another, and

does not involve recourse to a position outside the sphere of commodification. Specifically, Stein believes there is potential to exaggerate and radicalize the “separation” in commodification in order to recall the subject to an experience of discovery.

### **Stein, the newspaper, and the “separation” in “American writing”**

Stein argues that the newspaper, along with advertising, road signs, and literary work, are all manifestations of what she refers to variously as a “separation” or a “lack of connection” in modern “American writing”: “There is inside it as separation, a separation from what is chosen to what is that from which it has been chosen . . . a separation a quite separation between what is chosen and from what there is the choosing” (*LIA* 51). And again, “the disembodied way of disconnecting something from anything and anything from something was is the American one.” (*LIA* 53)

Stein explains the necessity for disconnection in “American writing” by the fact that the American language was “made so late in the day that is at a time when everybody began to read and to write all the time and to read what was written all the time” so that “it was impossible that the language would be made as languages used to be made” (*Na* 7). Instead of forging an entirely new language, specially tailored to tell their own story, American writers were forced to appropriate English words by disconnecting them from their function and meaning in what she calls “daily life” (*Na* 6):

These words that were made by those who finally made them to tell the story of the soothing of living every minute of the day a daily living these words by the pressure of being used by those who never any day live a daily living have not come to have a

different meaning not at all but they have come to have a different movement in them and this is all so very very exciting and interesting and unexpectedly a real thing. (*Na* 7)

Stein presents American writers as consumers and collectors rather than producers of language, or at least imagines a form of production that operates through consumption, through “choosing” and moving rather than creating or inventing. English words uprooted from their context are not simply repurposed within the American life, for as Stein frequently insists, there is no “daily life” in America. British words do not “come to have a different meaning” in their American life, but “a different movement” (*Na* 8). Just as “RED STAMP” depicts the process of abstraction itself—not the lily, but the lily at the moment of its loss of meaning—words that carry their “separation” “inside” of themselves are not stripped entirely of their history, but preserve their past through its negation. Words estranged from their context tell the American story because the American story itself is one of dislocation, estrangement, and excitement, rather than one of settled patterns and routines. Thus, American words perform and embody estrangement rather than merely represent estrangement.

When Stein talks about modern “American writing”, she is not referring only to high-brow literature. In her lectures, Stein frequently includes newspapers, advertising, road signs, and detective fiction as part of “the American writing” she trumpets as being exciting and full of “movement” (*Na* 8). Including various forms of modern print culture, particularly the newspaper and advertising, is interesting on account of modernism’s very complex relationship with print culture. Newspapers and advertising have an important place in the development of the so-called “object art” that I referenced earlier as exhibiting certain shared concerns with Stein’s art. Picasso’s earliest collage paintings included bits of torn newspaper headlines and banners; the Dadaist Kurt Schwitters frequently included scraps from newspapers or advertisements in his

collages. Christine Poggi has theorized that the presence of newspaper in Picasso's paintings needs to be read as a subversive gesture that takes into account the newspaper's status as exemplary commodity, as authentic art's other. Writing about Picasso, Poggi claims that "in place of the unique, expressive marking of the artist's hand, still of primary significance in Symbolist and Fauvist works, we find for the most part fragments of previously established codes of representation: news" (184). The newspaper, however, is not only one of Picasso's privileged objects for incorporation in collages, it may also provide a model for collage work insofar as it prominently features parataxis in its visual layout and organization. Indeed, the newspaper can be imagined, both visually and conceptually, as a collection of isolated fragments. As such, it is not surprising the Stein cites the newspaper as an instance of "separation" or "lack of connection" in "American writing." David Banash claims that "collage has deep roots in the rise of mass media and commercial culture that both precede and make possible the avant-garde innovations of modernists and postmodernists" (n.p.).

Modernism's complex relationship to modern print culture is powerfully captured in a passage from Walter Benjamin's *One Way Street*:

Printing, having found in the book a refuge in which to lead an autonomous existence, is pitilessly dragged out onto the street by advertisements and subjected to the brutal heteronomies of economic chaos. This is the hard schooling of its new form. If centuries ago it began gradually to lie down, passing from the upright inscription to the manuscript resting on sloping desks before finally taking to bed in the printed book, it now begins just as slowly to rise again from the ground. The newspaper is read more in the vertical than in the horizontal plane, while film and advertisement force the printed word entirely into the dictatorial perpendicular. And before a child of our time finds his way clear to

opening a book, his eyes have been exposed to such a blizzard of changing, colourful, conflicting letters that the chances of his penetrating the archaic stillness of the book are slight. Locust swarms of print, which already eclipse the sun of what is taken for intellect for city dwellers, will grow thicker with each succeeding year. (62)

Benjamin vividly characterizes the transformations brought about by new printing technologies in the nineteenth century, namely the steam-powered rotary printing press, which enabled printing on an industrial scale, as a transition from horizontal to vertical print. The transition is violent, according to Benjamin: print, which has been lying down for centuries, even “taken to bed” in the form of the book, is roughly woken from its repose, shuffled out into the public sphere, where it stands at attention in the “dictatorial perpendicular”. In this vertical position, print is deprived of autonomy, forced to serve the dictates of capital. By imagining this transition as print’s enslavement to economic forces, Benjamin echoes the complaints of many modernist artists responding, at the beginning of the twentieth century, to an emerging commercial print culture. Indeed, modernists frequently construe the emergence of print culture as the degradation of language in the service of utilitarian and commercial interests. For Mallarmé, for example, the flat and open pages of the newspaper make a prostitute of the written word, while, in contrast, the “cut folds” of the book emblemize mystery, purity, and virginity (Poggi 144).

As the passage progresses, however, Benjamin hints at how the transition from horizontal to vertical print could be figured differently: the dignified repose of the book is recast as “archaic stillness,” suggesting lifelessness rather than autonomy, and is contrasted with the energy and movement print acquires in its verticality, becoming “a blizzard of changing, colourful, conflicting letters.” Although print may be forced into the vertical plane to serve commercial ends, once there, it appears as inscrutable to the “city dweller” as a “swarm of locusts,” thereby

“eclips[ing] the sun . . . of intellect.” Thus, vertical print seems to exceed the ends for which it is purposed, and once set into motion in that vertical plane, it becomes increasingly difficult to control. In the passage’s conclusion, Benjamin expresses optimism that vertical print might open a horizon of possibilities not entirely “bound up with the claims to power of a chaotic way of running science and the economy”; or the forces of bureaucratic rationalization, on the one hand, and commodification, on the other. Benjamin finds potential for poets to explore “ever deeper . . . the graphic sphere of [print’s] new eccentric figurativeness” (*One Way Street* 67). This is the moment when “quantity becomes quality” and vertical print emerges as a new “hieroglyphics” (*One Way Street* 67). In this respect, Benjamin voices the other side of modernists’ complex response to print culture. For Filippo Marinetti, the “great newspaper” stands alongside other important innovations of modernity in conveying a powerful sense of movement, energy, and freedom (*Futurism: An Anthology* 143). Marinetti’s endorsement of the newspaper is evident in his decision to publish the “Futurist Manifesto” on the front page of *Le Figaro*. Print culture, in drawing attention to the graphic dimension of the printed word, spurs Marinetti and other avant-gardists to experiment with typography in their art. If for some modernists the newspaper and advertising poster serve as authentic art’s degraded other, for those such as Marinetti, it is a source of profound inspiration for the excitement and novelty of the work of art. As I will show, Stein, like Benjamin, views print culture and the newspaper as complex phenomena, holding both negative and positive potential, as tools of rationalization, on the one hand, and vehicles of excitement and affect, on the other.

Modernist scholarship has examined both sides of modernism’s ambivalent relationship to emerging print culture. In *Advertising Fictions* (1988), Jennifer Wicke argues that literary critics need to revise their assumptions about the relationship of advertising to fiction—rather

than being diametrically opposed, the two are mutually constitutive. Jerome McGann, in *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism* (1993), argues that the decorative book design of private presses at the end of the nineteenth-century draws attention to the ways in which the visible and material features of the printed page create meaning, thus setting the stage for modernism's obsessive self-reflexivity. In *The Visible Word* (1994), Joanna Drucker explores avant-garde experiments with typography, and argues that such experimentation draws inspiration from new forms of commercial design in the early twentieth century. Patrick Collier, in *Modernism on Fleet Street* (2006), looks at the different ways in which the press was figured as a threat to authentic literature in modernist discourse, while simultaneously noting the opportunities provided by journalism to modernist writers.

Curiously absent from most of these discussions of modernism and print culture is the work of Gertrude Stein. I say curious because Gertrude Stein's passion for new print media is well-documented. In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein recounts bringing American newspapers to Picasso's house so that he could read the "Katzenjammer Kids" comic supplement (23). In *Everybody's Autobiography* (1937), Stein recalls being "delighted" by shaving cream advertisements she observed on a road-side billboard: "one little piece on a board and then further on two more words and then further on two more words a whole lively poem" (225-226).

McGann's *Black Riders* is an exception to this critical neglect. He argues that although Stein did not experiment extensively with typography or page layout, her aesthetic project is "inconceivable without the late-Victorian Renaissance of Printing" (21). The fundamental innovation of William Morris's Kelmscott Press and John Lane and Elkin Matthews's Bodley Head was in calling attention to the textural surface of the literary work and highlighting its constructedness, its contribution to meaning, something that Stein did at the linguistic level by

self-reflexively meditating on, for instance, the rules of grammar. Yet, McGann's insistence on the importance of Kelmscott and Bodley Head ignores the interest Stein herself expresses in the new forms of print culture she saw emerge at the beginning of the twentieth century. Stein, to my knowledge, has little to say about nineteenth-century book printing, yet her work abounds with references to newspapers, advertising, and road signs. I argue that it is *this* context—the emergence of commercial print media—which most pervasively informs Stein's aesthetic practice. Moreover, while McGann plays lip-service to the particularity of Stein's work, he nevertheless chooses to focus on the feature of her aesthetic that most closely links Stein with her contemporaries—reflexivity and constructivism. This critical move enables McGann to posit a link between nineteenth century innovations in book printing and modernism *as a whole*. My aim in this chapter is different: by considering what is unique in Stein's attitude to the newspaper, I demonstrate what is unique about Stein's aesthetic in relation to her modernist peers.

Stein's example is worth investigating because her attitude towards new print culture is uncommonly complex and nuanced: like Benjamin, she neither invokes a rigid modernist opposition between the work of art and the newspaper as commodity, nor uncritically celebrates the newspaper and advertising. Importantly, she does not share the reactionary vitriol that many of her modernist contemporaries expressed with regards to the newspaper. As Patrick Collier suggests, the issue for many modernists and other cultural commentators in the early twentieth century was the idea that the newspaper systematically destroyed the reading habits necessary for comprehending and enjoying literature: "the format and content of the new newspaper, with its multiple visual claims on the readers' attention and its presentation of many brief, decontextualized items, undermined the habitual reader's ability to concentrate" (14). This

perceived tension between literature and the newspaper was exacerbated by the changes introduced by Britain's "New Journalists" of the late nineteenth century, who instituted simpler diction, shorter sentences, and a more "concrete" and "graphic" language (Collier 30). The transformations were meant to appeal to a wider and less educated readership. While some discerned democratic potential in this new writing, many feared that journalism was becoming "incapable of linguistic complexity or precision" (Collier 31).

In America, the equivalent of the "New Journalism" was the "Yellow Press." The term was coined in the late 1890s to refer to a new, sensationalist style of news reporting, best exemplified in Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*, and William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal*. The journals introduced multi-column headlines, attention-grabbing layouts, and had a predilection for certain subjects, most notably crime reporting. According to David Spencer, "readers of the Yellow Press were bombarded on a daily basis with graphic and ghastly tales of murder, incest, poverty, infidelity, corporate fraud, and any number of imagined or real evils" (5). Typically, the phrase "yellow journalism" was employed pejoratively to describe journalistic practices that distorted, fabricated, and exaggerated the truth for the sake of selling newspapers. For many, the yellow press "seemed to stand in perfect conflict with those who advocated the collection of facts and the diminution of storytelling" (Spencer 16). Indeed, the emergence of yellow press signaled a close "partnership" between the newspaper and "the department store" (Spencer 13).

Modernists writing about the newspaper tended to emphasize the ways in which the journalism had degraded language. Eugene Jolas had this to say about his own experience as a journalist:

But it was probably newspaper work, more than anything else, that had made me so conscious of the “malady of language.” I should like to ask any sensitive police reporter, any political or city hall reporter, any correspondent, any feature writer what he really thinks of the iterant, trite words he is compelled to use day in, day out. Does he not finally come to feel repugnance at having to continue to use the same overworked, hollowed-out phraseology? (*Man from Babel* 108)

Jolas grounds the necessity of literary modernism in a crisis of language of which the newspaper is paradigmatic:

There no longer exists any language for our deepest emotions about love and death. The “lyrical” language today is filled with banausic clichés and metaphoric banalities. To the epigones the thematic material is everything. Their language is poisoned by the *déchets* of the utilitarian mind. It suffers from the vacuity of the “little housekeeping words,” and from the logic of the conceptualist system. (*Critical Writings* 282)

The “hollowed-out phraseology” of the newspaper has contaminated even poetic languages, Jolas insists, and as a result, the contemporary artist has no language at his or her disposal for self-expression, thereby making it necessary to produce a new language.

There was also pervasive anxiety about the influence of printing technologies on the process of writing. Some worried that machines would intervene in and distort the organic relationship between the human subject and expressive language. Heidegger, for instance, writing in 1942, claims the invention of the typewriter as the culmination of a process, beginning with the printing press, that progressively displaces “language from the essential realm of the hand” (*Parmenides* 81). The dire consequence of this displacement is nothing less than the “destruction of the word” (*Parmenides* 81). For Heidegger, the possession of hands and language

is what distinguishes the human from the animal: “For the hand is, together with the word, the essential distinction of man. Only a being which, like man, ‘has’ the word, can and must ‘have’ ‘the hand’” (*Parmenides* 81). The hand and the word both represent the human capacity for purposive activity, for actively shaping the world in which they find themselves. With the emergence of type, the “writing stroke” is erased and replaced by standardized, mechanically-formed letters that are “set” and “pressed” (*Parmenides* 85). As consequence, there is a loss of individuality and authority: “the typewriter makes everyone look the same” (*Parmenides* 81).

Heidegger shares with Jolas an anxiety about the fate of the human in the age of machines. Both express concern that new print technologies, and the new forms of print culture they enable, strip language of its expressive capabilities, estranging “man” from writing. Since these writers believe that “man’s” essence is to be found in forms of productive work, “man’s” estrangement from writing is akin to “man’s” estrangement from himself. The newspaper or advertising poster, in both form and content—the geometrically-shaped, bold-faced letters and cliché-ridden language—is unrecognizable as the product and expression of a singular human subject.

Alienation and expression figure prominently in Gertrude Stein’s own account of the newspaper, and more generally, what Stein calls the “new American writing.” “American writing” is characterized by a “lack of connection,” yet, for Stein, this estrangement is positive (*LIA* 53). It gives “excitement,” “movement,” and “liveliness” to language (*LIA* 53, *Na* 41, 13) and, as I will demonstrate, it is necessary to produce “discovery,” the experience of things, events, objects, personalities, that run counter to one’s expectations, destroying fantasies of omnipotence but nevertheless proving delightful (*Na* 38).

Stein grapples with print culture most directly in her series of lectures beginning in 1934, as well as in other non-fictional writings of the period, including essays written for newspapers and autobiographical writings. The lectures followed the surprising popular success of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1934), which made Stein a celebrity and household name in America and generated a lot of publicity—both positive and negative—in mainstream magazines and newspapers even prior to her arrival in America. In January of 1934, B. F. Skinner published the article, “Has Gertrude Stein a Secret?” in *The Atlantic*, criticizing her writing. Conversely, in September 1934, *Vanity Fair* published an article written by Stein in which she reflects on her recently acquired celebrity status. The article is prefaced by an editorial note drawing attention the fact that *Vanity Fair* was one of the first publications to recognize her literary merit (Leick 162). The lectures themselves were reported in newspapers across the country, often employing playfully parodic headlines. During the tour, Stein consented to numerous interviews and formed several close relationships with journalists such as Joseph Aslop, Jr. of the *Herald Tribune* (Leick 165).<sup>10</sup>

Thus, it is not surprising that Stein begins to think critically about the newspaper as a medium and the forms of reading and writing it inaugurates. In lectures given at the University of Chicago in 1935, Stein reflects upon the newspaper at length, including crime journalism. In *Everybody's Autobiography*, Stein recounts with fascination the way that passengers on an electric streetcar hold the newspaper while reading and which articles capture their attention:

I was interested in the passengers there and in the way they read the newspaper. They kind of read the newspaper but it was not really very interesting but when they got to the part about the quintuplets and how the doctor took care of them then they folded their

paper so that they only had that spot and then they settled down to solidly reading.<sup>11</sup>

(223)

The passage recalls Benjamin's reflections on vertical print and highlights commuting as a factor in the transition to new forms of print culture. The writing of this period is filled with accounts of memorable encounters with print culture. In *Everybody's Autobiography*, Stein describes the jolt of seeing her name in lights:

If anything is natural enough it is not surprising and then we went out again on an avenue and the elevated railroad looked just like it had ever so long ago and then we saw an electric sign moving around a building and it said Gertrude Stein has come and that was upsetting. Anybody saying how do you do to you and knowing your name may be upsetting but on the whole it is natural enough but to suddenly see your name is always upsetting. Of course it has happened to me pretty often and I like it to happen just as often but always it does give me a little shock of recognition and non-recognition. (*EA* 175)

The passage can be read as demonstrating Stein's ambivalence about her new celebrity status. In submitting herself to the publicity machine of modern America (Stein was in America to promote the première of *Three Saints in Four Acts*), Stein experiences an unsettling dissociation of public from private self. Yet, while she suggests that seeing one's name in a marquee is both unnatural and "always upsetting," this does not entail the wholesale condemnation of the experience or the commodity culture of which it is a part. Hearing one's name spoken by a stranger can also be upsetting (though not always); moreover, Stein insists that she "like[d]" to see her name in print "just as often" as she did. In her writings about newspapers, as I will

explain, Stein demonstrates that experiences that upset and destabilize subjectivity can at the same time be beneficial ones, creating a sense of excitement and interest.

Stein's account of the newspaper is characterized by a paradox: the newspaper is both a vehicle of the new and at the same time a defense mechanism that protects against the shock of the new, thereby preventing us from experiencing the new *as new*. Stein states combatively,

I said newspapers make things too easy and I said that once to a reporter and he said you have no idea I am sure how terribly hard we work. Yes I said but after you have done all that hard work you have to write it up as it would be if you had known it all beforehand and that is what really makes it too easy. There is no discovery there is mostly no discovery in a newspaper or in history, they find out things they never knew before but there is no discovery and finally if all this goes on long enough it is all too easy. (*Na* 37-38)

Stein objects to the newspaper's reduction of experience, of events, of personalities, to what one already knows, to pre-existing and ossified categories of knowledge. This is, for Stein, a neutralization of "discovery," a means of putting limits upon what can and cannot be experienced. The reporter "makes it too easy" for readers by carefully packaging what is discovered in terms of what is old, of what was known "beforehand." By reducing events to "what was known beforehand," the newspaper protects against the possibility of what Derrida calls "the event"—an occurrence which is incomprehensible because unexplainable by what one thought possible (Derrida 441).<sup>12</sup> As something unprecedented, something one never saw coming, the event brings with it the frame of reference by which, retroactively, it can be made legible. The event is exemplary in the philosophical sense: it is a phenomenon that does not conform to pre-existing rules or principles, but instead is rule-giving, instantiating a new

paradigm.<sup>13</sup> In light of the event, one will see and do things differently, one will change one's fundamental orientation towards the world. Stein subversively underscores the reductive effect of newspapers in her response to the reporter's claim that journalists work "tremendously hard": she concedes the point, but insists that her claim is rather that "newspapers *make* things too easy". It is not the labour of writing for a newspaper that is easy, but the end product that is simplistic—all that hard work by the journalist renders the news something easily assimilable to existing paradigms, and thus something that the reader can master.

Interestingly, Stein's primary example of this reductive tendency is crime reporting:

And so in the newspapers you like to know the answer in crime stories in reading crime and in written crime stories knowing the answer spoils it. After all in the written thing the answer is a let down from the interest and that is so every time that is what spoils most crime stories unless another mystery crops up during the crime and that mystery remains.

(*Na* 40)

Crime is a subject that fascinated Stein. In an article written for *The New York Herald Tribune*, entitled "American Crime," Stein describes the interesting crime as one in which "you do not know the answer at all" or one in which "there is a mystery behind the answer" and the memorable criminal as one who lacks a motive (*HWIW* 103). The newspaper's reduction of crime to objective facts—to the answer—fails to do justice to the importance of crime as a source of surprise and mystery, as something that defamiliarizes habitual assumptions (about, for instance, human psychology in the case of a criminal without a motive). What Stein values in crime writing of all kinds is not dénouement, but its capacity to generate the desire for dénouement: in other words, Stein craves crime writing that arouses fascination, suspense, and excitement, without bringing those affects to an end. Stein's own attempt at detective fiction,

*Blood on the Dining Room Floor* (1933), attempts to narrate a murder mystery in which the dénouement is entirely absent.

Does Stein actually believe that newspaper reporting should resemble detective fiction in seeking to excite rather than inform the reader? What Alan R. Knight calls the bold and “vatic pronouncements” and “unsupported declarations” of Stein’s lectures sometimes seem intentionally outrageous (157). The provocative presentation of Stein’s argument, however, disguises a subtler reflection on modern media. To present events as so much data—information to be computed and assimilated—is to divorce events from the life of affect and sensation. Events stripped of sensation are events incapable of arousing interest and exciting the reader. In depriving events of their ability to arouse interest and excite the reader, the newspaper severs information from the conditions in which it could acquire significance and meaning in the life of the reader. The excessive rationalism of the newspaper—the desire to minimize excitement—is in fact self-defeating: information separated from affect is knowledge for its own sake, is knowledge without any connection to life contexts, is knowledge without meaning. By contrast, the sensationalism of crime reporting is at least capable of jolting the reader from their habitual modes of thinking and relating to the world; even if such journalism represents a celebration of shock-value for its own sake, it draws attention to the possibility of an event-like occurrence taking place, prefiguring its disruptive nature.

One part of neutralizing “discovery” is conveying a sense of temporal immediacy, as though the reporting and the event reported were occurring simultaneously, as though there was no “interval” between its occurrence and its appearance the newspaper (*Na* 35). She observes a tendency in newspapers to “write that happening as if it was happening on the day the newspapers are read”:

That is what they mean by hot off the press, but yet after all there is an interval generally six hours or so but always an interval, and that interval they try to bridge by head lines, and do they succeed, not very well I guess not very well because it is not possible [.] (*Na* 35)

The existence of an “interval” means that the newspaper’s news could already be out of date by the time of its reading because something else has transpired, a fact that causes anxiety, since the newspaper aspires to omniscience.

The effect of minimizing “discovery” and producing the appearance of temporal immediacy is to minimize excitement and reassure readers of their capacity to conceptually master a potentially confusing and overwhelming world. “It is very curious,” Stein remarks, in a newspaper that sometimes really sometimes a personality breaks through an event, it takes a tremendously strong personality to break through the events in a newspaper and when they do well it is soon over it is soon smoothed over and even history wishes to change it into something that any one could recover from. (*Na* 39)

Stein’s phrasing in this passage is telling. If the contemporary newspaper works to transform all stories into “something that any one could recover from,” Stein, by implication, desires stories from which one no one can recover. The experience from which one cannot recover, analogous to Stein’s notion of “discovery,” is one that exceeds one’s ability for explanation (at least, based upon what one “already know[s]”) and thus fundamentally alters the way one understands the world. One cannot recover because recovery implies return, return to an orientation or subject position that existed prior to the discovery, when the point of discovery is precisely that such a return is made impossible by the horizon-changing character of the event. As Stein suggests, the newspaper never wants to give the impression that something is “changing,” a paradoxical fact

since the newspaper deals necessarily with the new, but one illustrative of the journalists desire to facilitate a fantasy of omniscience, stability, and mastery (*Na* 43).

By presenting events as data that can be easily accommodated and endlessly accumulated, the newspaper imagines a subject that is stable, neutral, and unaffected in her encounter with the news. Stein's own way of accounting for this phenomenon is through a description of the interaction between the "inside"—by which I take her to mean subjective interiority—and the "outside". According to Stein, the "inside" is "reality" and the "outside" is "the newspapers," and in the normal state of affairs, "never is the outside inside and never is the inside outside" (*Na* 40). Only in rare cases does the "outside break through to be inside" (*Na* 40). The outside world only enters the subject after being filtered through existing conceptual schema, a process that deprives the outside of its very externality, its difference, its particularity. If the inside is reality, and the outside is kept outside, then newspapers function by preventing the outside world from becoming part of one's reality, part of one's lived experience. The price to pay for reducing the world to mere facts, mere information, consists in cutting oneself off from that reality, and robbing the world of its ability to influence and change the self. The language of "break[ing] through," to which Stein returns several times, suggests an intrusion of the outside world for which the subject is not prepared. The breaking "inside" of the "outside" is the event of "discovery": rather than change the outside to accommodate what the subject already knows, the subject must change to accommodate what is particular, non-subsumable, and entirely surprising in the outside.

When Stein explores the positive aspects of newspapers, she frequently focuses on the medium's formal features. In "American Newspapers," a piece written for the New York Herald Tribune in 1935, Stein compares the contemporary "metropolitan newspaper" unfavourably to

the “yellow press.” Whereas the “metropolitan newspaper” seeks to be “soothing,” the “yellow press,” by means of “headlines by scare lines, by short lines and long lines, by making all the noise and sound they could with their words and lines,” managed to be “terribly exciting” (*HWIW* 92, 90). For Stein, these formal features better convey the movement, excitement, and novelty of the medium. Indeed, she considers these features, where they still existed in the “metropolitan newspaper,” to be “hangovers” from the days of the yellow press, and attributes to them an “emotion of . . . violence” as well as a “sweet(ness)” which now mostly lie dormant within “the machinery” of the modern newspaper (*How Writing is Written* 92, 93). Interestingly, Stein’s critique of the newspaper is in some sense the precise opposite of the critique of newspaper’s sensationalism—the familiar claim that newspapers employ exaggeration and scare tactics to bypass the rational defenses of the reader and arouse an impassioned response. The modern mass-circulation newspaper is not too sensationalist, for Stein, but not sensationalist enough—it fails to live up to its promise of sensationalism.

Stein’s critique of the newspaper, as I have interpreted it, is that the newspaper misrepresents our relationship to the world as being primarily epistemological. This occurs despite the fact that newspapers are exemplary vehicles of powerful and exciting affects: the radical parataxis of the newspapers testifies to this with its complex grid layouts, bold headlines, and advertisements, all competing for the readers’ attention. As such, Stein thinks that the newspaper fails to realize the promise for discovery inherent in its technology. In this respect, Stein avoids the nostalgia of many of her contemporaries for the sanctity and purity of the book. The shocks of the newspaper, the way it “bombards” the reader, are not seen as aspects of its degraded commercial nature, but as moments capable of generating new relations to the world around us.

Walter Benjamin, reflecting on the difference between advertising and criticism in *One Way Street*, echoes Stein's thinking on the newspaper:

Criticism is a question of correct distance. Advertising eliminates the free leeway of consideration, bringing things dangerously close, right in our face, the way a car, in the cinema, hugely increasing in size on the screen, comes quivering towards us. . . . What is it, ultimately, that makes advertising so superior to criticism? Not what the red electric text up on the moving screen says—the pool of fire that mirrors it on the asphalt. (97–8)

The destruction of “correct distance” in advertising is analogous to the way a “tremendously strong personality” “breaks through” the façade of the newspaper; it is the stimulus that exceeds the subject's conceptual grasp and thereby defeats neutral distance and “the free leeway of consideration,” managing to excite the subject's interest and elicit an affective response. For Benjamin, advertising has a double identity: it is both a disseminator of information and manufacturer of sensations, “pools of fire,” and it is in the latter function that Benjamin, like Stein, locates the promise of the new print media. For Stein, the newspaper is similarly divided between a documentary impulse, which seeks to render news information, and a sensationalism, which she associates with the yellow press and advertising. Stein endorses the newspaper to the extent that it is exciting but views it as inevitably interested in neutralizing or managing the very excitement it makes possible in the name of making everything “smoothed over” and “too easy.”

As a manifestation of “separation” and fetishism, the modern-day newspaper resembles the public museum. Both separate objects and events from their organic context, in order to invest them with a discursive-symbolic value, or what Agamben calls “the ethical-social significance” (*The Man Without Content* 105). The newspaper cuts events from larger contexts, collects them as fragments, while simultaneously seeking to cover over or suture such cutting by

rendering news “information.” Thus, the “lack of connection” that Stein views as the newspaper’s positive potential is not fully realized; the potentially exciting is presented as utterly familiar, as something that is connected and continuous with the subject’s conceptual apparatus. The newspaper does this by filtering everything through a pre-existing schema—say, a set of questions about what, where, when, why—which has a leveling effect, making all things structurally equivalent and exchangeable, and thereby depriving events of their ability to change the reader. In the words of Walter Benjamin, the newspaper is “shot through with explanation.” Whereas in her prose poems, Stein seeks to feature “separation” in words that “carry it inside themselves as separation,” in the modern newspaper, the moment of “separation” is hidden, foreclosed, in order to enable the illusion of epistemological mastery.

In the terms that Adorno provides, newspapers are commodities that cling to use-value even as they foreground exchange value. Insofar as the newspaper presents itself as a collection of discrete fragments, it manifests the abstraction inherent in the commodity form. At the same time, however, the newspaper presents itself as being useful, something which renders the world more manageable (of course, Stein wants to insist that this is actually a loss not a gain). These are not two separate functions, but one and the same: the abstraction of events from context enables them to be repackaged as something altogether “too easy,” something “shot through with explanation.”

In the yellow press and in advertising, however, Stein glimpses an instance of fetishism carried (dangerously yet excitedly) past the point of usefulness. In these phenomena, the “separation” (abstraction, parataxis, fetishism) of the newspaper is experienced rather than neutralized. The “noise” of “headlines” “bombard” and overwhelm the reader. Indeed, newspapers “making all the noise and sound they could with their words and lines” is perhaps an

example of words “doing as they want to do,” of words liberated from a communicative or expressive function. Stein’s analysis of newspaper coincides, here, with Benjamin and Heidegger’s. According to Benjamin, the transition from the horizontal to the vertical plane is a result of language’s commodification, yet this shift simultaneously energizes and animates language in new ways, drawing attention to the “graphic sphere of [print’s] new eccentric figurativeness”; Heidegger, on the other hand, laments the alienation of the hand from writing in modern print, imagining that it represents the death of an expressive language. As such, all three writers reflect upon the fetish character of modern print culture: language is defamiliarized, rendered foreign and object-like rather than a tool for self-expression. In opposition to Heidegger, Benjamin and Stein view this as a positive consequence of new print media. Stein finds these experiences of alienation both pleasurable and important, insofar as they remind us of our dependence on or exposure to language.

It remains unclear whether Stein thinks the “metropolitan newspaper” could, or should, be reformed and, if so, exactly what it would look like. For instance, would reforming the newspaper involve emulating the yellow press or would Stein advocate that the newspaper be replaced altogether by poetry? Similarly, it is not clear whether Stein has any appreciation for the idea of the newspaper as an instrument of the public sphere—that is, as a means to disseminate information, promote the free and open discussion of ideas, form consensus, and exert an influence on public affairs. What her writings on the newspaper do demonstrate, however, is that Stein sees newspapers, advertising, detective fiction, and her own writing as existing on a continuum, all manifesting modern writing’s “separation” or fetishism to different degrees. Furthermore, Stein’s thinking on the newspaper provides the critical terms to theorize her earlier writing. In *Tender Buttons*, the subject’s experience of the collected object is a form of

“discovery”: abstracted from the contexts that determine its use and meaning, the object can be registered as something singular, thereby defeating modern commodity culture’s attempt to subsume people, objects, and events to what one already knows. As such, the object “breaks through” the rational defences of the subject to become the “outside-inside,” an object of experience rather than of knowledge.

In this chapter, I have shown that Stein positions herself in opposition to two rival ideologies—that of the modernist world-creators (Lewis and Jolas), on the one hand, and of journalists (or the newspaper), on the other. In some respects, these two positions appear as exact opposites with Stein occupying a middle ground. The artist as world-creator rejects our life and language in its given (degraded) form and resolves to forge something radically new. In contrast, the journalist seems entirely willing to reproduce the currently existing world, as demonstrated by their desire to reduce events to “what we already know.” The two positions, however, share an anxiety about passivity, loss of control, and determination by outside forces. The newspaper protects against this anxiety by setting up a conceptual schema through which it filters all events, effectively removing the possibility of stories that surprise, unsettle, and change the subject. The world-creator combats this anxiety by positing the self as creative origin of all things in the world, thereby eradicating all traces of an alterity that might act upon the subject or mediate its self-expression. Both imagine the subject as master: either the subject is omniscient, possessing a perfect knowledge of all that exists, or the subject has fabricated their own world through an act of visionary willpower. By contrast, Stein wants to reserve a place for “discovery,” for the possibility that objects, events, language, might run counter to one’s expectations, exceeding and unsettling the predominant frame of reference, and yet nevertheless be experienced as pleasurable—as the condition of possibility for self-expression, rather than an indication of its

impossibility. Interestingly, Stein views modern commodity culture—in particular, newspapers and advertising—as responsible both for suppressing and, when radicalized, creating these experiences. As such, she is unique amongst her modernist peers in refusing a predominantly pessimistic account of commodity culture and its fetishistic tendencies.

In the next chapter, I examine the work of Djuna Barnes and shift from the concept of fetishism of objects to fetishism in its application to human subjectivity. As I have shown, Stein too is interested in questions of estranged subjectivity as evidenced by the metaphors she uses for artistic creation (caressing, collecting, talking and listening, excreation), all of which construe the act as being both passive and active, and her elaboration of the experience of “discovery,” which she believes contemporary commodity culture suppresses. Barnes’s exploration differs from Stein’s, however, in being more acutely concerned with the threats of a masculine reifying gaze on female subjectivity in the age of commodification. Consequently, she envisions a form of passive and indifferent female subjectivity that is capable of challenging patriarchal culture’s hostile and objectifying gaze without, in turn, appropriating these objectifying tendencies for itself.

## CHAPTER 2

### **“I Want to be Alone”: Djuna Barnes, the Film Star as Commodity, and the Anti-Social Subject**

In a 1930 interview with Alla Nazimova, a popular stage and film actress of the 1910s and 1920s, Djuna Barnes laments the actress’s transition from stage to screen roles. In the hands of unimaginative and profit-driven Hollywood executives, Nazimova was repeatedly cast in the demeaning and clichéd role of “vampire,” if only because “the great public preferred vampires” (*I* 356). Nazimova, reflecting on the limitations of working within the Hollywood system, acknowledges to Barnes, “I wanted to do thoughtful things, things subtle and only hinted at. [. . .] One fails when one is asked to give less than one has, though the public may think it is success” (*I* 358). At the conclusion of the session, the actress recalls the distressing moment that marked her initiation into the world of American celebrity:

“Oh,” she said—and I swear she put her hands together like a child—“that night when I first saw my name in lights. I went up to my hotel room, way up under the roof, and I opened the window and leaned on my arms; and I was afraid, terribly afraid.” (*I* 359)

The passage is reminiscent of Stein’s recollection in *Everybody’s Autobiography* of first seeing her name in lights upon her return to America in the 1930s. Both artists emphasize the unpleasantness of the shock, while also admitting, or betraying, some degree of excitement at the spectacle. Stein calls the experience “upsetting,” and yet adds, “it happened to me pretty often and I like it to happen just as often” (*EA* 175). Nazimova’s gesture of clasping her “hands together like a child,” the affected melodrama of the passage as a whole, imply a certain satisfaction, at the very least, in the telling of her traumatic tale.

As part of my first chapter, I looked at modernists’ responses to the mass-produced

newspaper, and suggested that, for many, the newspaper signalled the degradation of language when put in the service of the capitalist economy. In this chapter, I will examine modernist attitudes to the twentieth-century phenomena of the celebrity or film star. As another component of early twentieth-century mass culture, the “star” provokes a complementary set of anxieties: if, for a certain masculinist strain of modernism, the newspaper portends a crisis for language, then the star threatens the commodification of human identity itself. The preceding passages by Stein and by Barnes figure this crisis in terms of estrangement and the expropriation of identity: the experience of being transformed into a celebrity is like seeing oneself from a distance, rendered object-like, fixed in the public gaze and made a screen for its fantasies. Throughout Barnes’s journalistic work, these same motifs recur: predatory show-business producers and executives and an objectifying masculine spectator conspire to rob the performer, particularly the female one, of individuality and autonomy.

Barnes, however, is not strictly pessimistic about the possibilities of female celebrity. This narrative of objectification and loss of control is but one of several stories Barnes tells about star culture in her journalism. In the first section of this chapter, I examine several articles Barnes wrote about film that espouse a more optimistic concept of celebrity—works that have been largely neglected by Barnes specialists. In particular, I focus on articles that mention two of the most popular female stars of the 1920s and 1930s, Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich. Written in the early 1930s, in the same period as the interview with Alla Nazimova, these pieces testify to the depth of Barnes’s intellectual engagement with the figure of the cinema vamp. Yet, whereas Barnes is largely critical of Nazimova’s roles, she appears more enamoured with Garbo and Dietrich’s. Although several critics have noted and analyzed Barnes’s fascination with the cinema vamp, no one, surprisingly, has considered Barnes’s writing on Dietrich and Garbo, nor

how their revival and transformation of the vamp role in the late 1920s and early 1930s might inform Barnes's attitude to the vamp figure and the film star. I argue that the importance of Garbo and Dietrich's vamps consists not only in terms of their deviant articulation of gender/sexuality/desire, but also in their detachment and cool indifference, their anti-social character, and the fact that they are, in the words of James Naremore, "star[s] who acted stardom" since they often played glamorous stage performers, objects of fascination and obsession (132).

Indeed, while early Hollywood film culture has been read in terms of an objectifying male gaze, one that systematically deprives the female star of a subject-position, it has also been subject to a very different critique. The pioneering work of Richard Dyer argues that the Hollywood star presents an image of free and autonomous subjectivity, and as such, functions to consolidate the individualist ethos of capitalist modernity. Thus, the star as commodity presents an image of the individual as someone who is radically independent, self-grounding, and knowable in isolation from its social context. Dyer's typology of stars includes the independent woman as one of its central categories.

I suggest that Barnes's analysis of female stardom accounts for both objectification and an image of radical self-sufficiency but, despite this, ultimately finds something worth recuperating in the star. Indeed, for Barnes, the very opposition between a woman as mere body and object, on the one hand, and an "independent woman" on the other—especially where such independence is construed as atomistic, asocial, and given—is constitutive of a crisis of subjectivity in modernity. For Barnes, the star is both a symptom and also, potentially, a mode of agency for addressing this crisis. Barnes discovers in specific stars a model of subjectivity capable of subverting the bourgeois antinomy between heteronomy and autonomy, between

independent subjectivity and dependent objecthood.

This crisis of the modern individual—for which the star is both symptom and antidote—is one Barnes takes up in her fiction. I turn from Barnes's journalism to consider her 1936 novel, *Nightwood*, arguing that Robin Vote invokes Garbo's vamps, and that the novel interrogates the same specular economy that Barnes critiques in her journalism. The novel's characters are fascinated and threatened by Robin's confusing combination of gender signifiers and unusual performance of subjectivity. Like the spectator and showbiz bosses in Barnes's journalism, they reify Robin, reducing her to reductive and misogynist types. In doing so, they attempt to homogenize her difference, making her legible and commensurable with their schemas of intelligibility—like a commodity, she is rendered equivalent through reduction to exchange value. Essentially, these characters envision their relation with Robin as epistemological: they want to know her as they would an object in a collection (specifically, a non-Steinian one, such as the type of collection articulated by Baudrillard) with all the distance, disengagement, and mastery implied by that perspective. This reification of Robin is depicted by Barnes as a defense mechanism, one which seeks to consolidate their fantasies of a sovereign, voyeuristic subject position immune to the uncertainty and dynamism of intersubjective relations. As the projected upon screen in these fantasies, Robin makes the achievement of these identities appear a possibility, provided they can come to possess Robin inalienably. Yet, Robin, like Garbo and Dietrich, affects a mode of resistance from within this reified position. Her impassive, indifferent, unconscious persona makes conspicuous the others' reductions and impositions, denaturalizing their constitution of her as a commodity object and their assumption of her commensurability with their schemas of valuation. As such, she gestures to the ways in which the other characters' illusions of sovereignty are manufactured through violence and figures a

surplus or excess that haunts their assumptions of equivalence.

Through the character of Robin, Barnes surprisingly locates a subversive power in estrangement, passivity, and withdrawal. Whereas other modernists construe these qualities as the products of capitalist modernity—the degrading impact of mechanistic labour practices and the expansion of the consumer sphere on human subjectivity—Barnes interprets them as potential weapons in a fight against the reifying logic of late capitalism. In an age of expanding commodification, when women are frequently rendered sexualized spectacles for masculine consumption, Barnes finds power in a mode of aloof glamour—perhaps best exemplified by Dietrich and Garbo—that elicits the gaze at the same time that it turns indifferently away. Robin’s passive-active night-time subjectivity models a non-reifying, erotic relation to otherness—one that refuses to posit self and other as fixed identities and possessions, but embraces a fluid, affective, and sensuous intersubjectivity.

### **Barnes’s journalism and the celebrity as commodity**

Given her preference for the sensationalism of yellow journalism, Gertrude Stein might have appreciated the newspaper work of Djuna Barnes. Barnes’s journalism consists of interviews, mostly with celebrities in the entertainment industry, and often featuring dialogue obviously fabricated by Barnes herself; travel journalism, in which she visits attractions across New York City, such as Coney Island and Greenwich Village; and a form of “stunt” journalism, in which she records her personal experiences of being force-fed or rescued by firemen from the top floor of an apartment building. When looking at Barnes’s journalism as a whole, a set of recurring concerns or themes emerge: whatever the particular assignment, Barnes is nearly always attentive to (a) new forms of mass culture and technologies; (b) America’s culture of

celebrity and the phenomena of fame in general; and (c) the images of femininity that are produced at the intersection of technology and celebrity culture.

Focusing primarily on interviews Barnes conducted with Arthur Voegtlin, the influential stage manager at New York's Hippodrome circus from 1905 until 1918, and Alla Nazimova, Laura Winkiel maintains that Barnes's journalism contains a critique of modern spectacle.<sup>1</sup> According to Winkiel, Barnes objects to the "transformation of public culture from local heterogeneous sites of entertainment to the capitalized, homogenized culture industry" (8). In "Interviewing Arthur Voegtlin is Something Like Having a Nightmare," Barnes draws attention to the ways in which the Hippodrome circus differs from the nineteenth-century circus. Voegtlin himself calls the Hippodrome a "drill," emphasizing the mechanization of modern entertainment (I 81-82). Whereas in the nineteenth-century circus, an emphasis was placed on the interaction between the performers and audience, spontaneous and improvised, in the modern Hippodrome, everything is orchestrated from above, and the performers stick closely to their scripted routines—not unlike "anonymous" workers on a factory line (Winkiel 13). As such, Barnes characterizes the commodified spectacle of the Hippodrome in terms of a radical division of labour: the performers, no longer artisans, exert little control over the details of performance, but execute the commands of the "authoritarian" Voegtlin (Winkiel 9). The audience, in turn, passively consumes a "prepackaged" product that, in being manufactured to appeal to a mass audience, is cleansed of any material that might be deemed too provocative (Winkiel 13).

In other interviews, Barnes depicts these transformations in mass culture as having negative effects specifically for female performers and celebrities. As Diane Warren contends, Barnes's interviews "turn their gaze toward the spectator" and interrogate the role of the male gaze in producing images of femininity (25). For instance, in her interview with D. W. Griffith,

the American film director, she questions him on the public's desire for particular female types in films. Griffith demonstrates an acute understanding of the ways in which the male gaze operates but is largely apathetic and uncritical, accepting the demands the gaze imposes upon his work. "It is rather difficult," Griffith states, "to tell what the requirements of the season are. The season's taste changes with the leaves on the trees—at one moment it is the baby doll with a head full of curls; the next it is the vampire with the calculating look" (*I* 306-7). Griffith underlines the reductiveness inherent in the public appetite for female stereotypes yet naturalizes these appetites, depicting them like the changing seasons, something inevitable and beyond one's control. At one point, Griffith does raise the possibility of a new type of female role, a "woman who is still beautiful but wise, sophisticated yet tuned by experience," adding, "personally, I respect a person with her years upon her because each year holds its separate dignity, and such things are truth, and truth should be of value to the man in the street, and it is—a little" (*I* 307). Later in the interview, however, Griffith is more skeptical: "A man may love a fading mistress, provided that she fade before his eyes; he gets accustomed to it, but would he love this woman if he saw her for the first time at the age of, let us say, fifty[?]" (*I* 308). Warren adeptly notes:

Although the new type of heroine may initially appear to be a less formulaic and hence more interesting type of woman, with whom the female spectator might be able to empathise, [...] the primary perspective remains male in Griffith's mind. For all her experience, age and dignity, the woman remains a sexual object, and the male observer/voyeur remains invisible, and hence his own physical form is beyond comment.

(42)

Despite grasping problems with these reductive and misogynist clichés, Griffith cannot imagine refusing the demands of a masculine-defined gaze—satisfying the public appetite for "baby

doll[s]” and “vampire[s]” remains, for Griffith, an incontrovertible imperative.

In an interview with Gaby Deslys—a French dancer, singer, and actress who achieved popular success in America in the 1910s—Barnes describes the male audiences that attend her show and “crowd [...] to the front, unsandwiched by the slender shoulders of their womankind” (*I* 46). Barnes claims that, as an actress, Deslys’s “reputation” has been “taken from her to make a column on” (*I* 38). Like Nazimova, Deslys’s image and identity have been expropriated, part of the cost of being a performer in the public spotlight. Barnes reports Gaby saying,

“I have had such patience with your men, the young who do not understand, and your old who do not want to. [...] Nobody reading this will believe it but I want them to understand that Gaby had hopes of becoming something far different from the woman the public believes her [to be].” (*I* 41-42)

Again, Barnes emphasizes dashed hopes, wasted talent, and the limitations of a Hollywood system in which women are made to conform to simplistic and often misogynistic stereotypes.

Barnes’s lament about the transition from local, heterogenous culture to commercialized spectacle has two interrelated components: one that focuses on the impersonality, lack of spontaneity, and sanitized nature of the spectacle; the other citing the imposition of reductive roles on female actresses meant to satisfy masculine fantasies. That said, spectacle, mass culture (specifically cinema), and technology do not always figure negatively in Barnes’s journalism. First of all, mass culture appears to be both unavoidable and paradigmatic of the world she inhabits. In a 1914 work of stunt journalism in which she relates her experience of being saved by a fireman from the top floor of an apartment building, Barnes draws upon the clichés of film. Describing their descent, she observes, “[o]ur hearts beat as closely as those of escaping lovers in a melodrama” and “I was a ‘movie’ flashing transient pictures upon a receptive sky” (*NY* 188,

189). Similarly, the figure of the cinema vamp recurs throughout Barnes's early stories, periodical prose, and drawings. As a result of a drawing entitled "Vampire Baby," she was named one of America's "vampire specialists" by *Vanity Fair* (Levine 274). The sheer recurrence of the figure testifies to her fascination with vamps.

The "cinema vamp" is a twentieth-century manifestation of the nineteenth-century *femme fatale* or dangerous woman. While the term has its origin in the notion of a female vampire, one who "drains man of his vital fluids" (Kuhn and Radstone 409), Erik Butler notes that, "the term 'vamp' came to designate any strong-willed, sexual female characters, even where there was no hint of the supernatural" (180).<sup>2</sup> Like the nineteenth-century *femme-fatale*, the vampire gains significance from its opposition to the "virgin": "whereas the virgin is virtuous and pure, the vamp is immoral and tainted" (Kuhn and Radstone 409). The first American vamp was Theda Bara, who made her debut in *A Fool There Was* (1915), a film based on the Rudyard Kipling poem, "The Vampire" (1897).<sup>3</sup> Nancy Levine aptly summarizes the "classic vamp movie" as one in which "the fatal woman sets a trap for her victim; her diabolical plans are upset by an outside force (a well-timed letter, for example); the vamp dies, illustrating the moral that 'crime does not pay'" (273). Levine contends that the vamp "reveals the tremendous ambivalence Americans felt about the loosening of social restrictions affecting women in the teens" (273). Plots of vamp films enabled audiences to enjoy covertly the vamp's social deviance and sexual freedom, while at the same time publicly condemning such behaviour. The cinema vamp, with her insatiable and destructive appetites, thus serves an ideological function in these plots, demonizing female sexuality.

If Barnes was acutely aware of the ways in which the vamp could function as a misogynist cliché (demonstrated by the Nazimova interview), then what accounts for her

simultaneous fascination with the figure? Levine contends that while “Barnes may have found risible the melodrama and fake chic that Theda Bara and her imitators brought to the role, [...] she had all the respect in the world for that universal human hunger the myth of the vamp was meant to satisfy” (280). According to Levine, Barnes is more interested in what the vamp represents—the power and force of desire—than she is in the actual vamps she finds in the films of her day (such as Theda Bara) and the logic of their plots that sought to control and contain the threat of female sexuality. While Levine is correct in suspecting Barnes was attracted to the sexual freedom of the vamp, there is more to say about her interest. Barnes was actually quite enamoured with certain vamps or rather certain actresses known for their vamp roles—namely, Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich. Barnes wrote about both Garbo and Dietrich on separate occasions during the early 1930s in her column, “Playgoers Almanac.” As such, any account of Barnes’s attitude towards the cinema vamp needs to consider how it might have been affected by Garbo and Dietrich’s revival and transformation of the type—which had been largely absent from cinema since the teens—in the late 1920s and early 1930s. I argue that Barnes discovers in Garbo and Dietrich an indifference, languor, and aloof detachment that functions, curiously, as a rebuke of the male gaze and illustrates a mode of subjectivity not premised on the fantasy of radical sovereignty.

“Playgoer’s Almanac,” which lasted from 1930 through to 1931, was a two-page spread in *Theatre Guild Magazine* featuring Barnes’s own illustrations and hand-drawn text. The column covered theatre news, reviewed plays and movies, and related the occasional humorous anecdote or piece of gossip.<sup>4</sup> The world of Hollywood cinema featured prominently in her column. Sometimes she poked fun at the extravagant lifestyles of movie stars or the impersonal and bureaucratic workings of the Hollywood system. A passage from a 1930 column on Greta

Garbo mimics the Hollywood gossip column:

& then of course, there is the one ENIGMA—who lives like an enigma, in a hotel room—Greta Garbo. Everyone wants to know her, and NO one does. Her ambition is the great European stage; perhaps she remembers Sarah Bernhardt. Her castle is already built and stands on a lake in Sweden; her mind is elsewhere. Once she invited someone to dine chez elle. He was a young man from whom she buys her tweeds. He hailed a cab. “We walk,” she said. They walked about five miles. Dinner was served, a Swedish dish with sour cream. It was eaten. “Will you have a drink,” He would; it was whiskey. Hours later when he came to, he saw Greta sitting apart drinking hers as straight as the CROW flies. He staggered to his feet. She smiled—“You go in a cab now,” she said & put him in a cab, and as SHE shut the door on a night now well into the morning she added, “I think I walk now.” Yet the boy remembers that evening with love. (“Ye Gossips Tayle” 459)

The passage emphasizes both Garbo’s power and her estrangement. Garbo’s “mind is elsewhere”: perhaps, envisioning her castle in Sweden, the home to which she will presumably return after her time in Hollywood is over. Barnes implies that Garbo considers her stay in Hollywood to be temporary, a mere stepping-stone to “the great European stage,” a more serious art. Moreover, Garbo is stubbornly unwilling to settle in America, choosing to live in a hotel, a symbol of transient living, implying that her estrangement in America is at least partially self-willed. Garbo is also portrayed as fiercely independent. She upsets gender expectations about feminine passivity by orchestrating her date with the haberdasher from start to finish, choosing the restaurant, insisting on walking, and later, escorting the young man to the taxi. Whereas Barnes frequently describes the masculine spectator’s relation to the female performer as one of control and domination, in this case it is the movie star who dictates the encounter with her

adoring fan, so unmanning him in the process that he loses consciousness. Finally, Barnes presents Garbo as possessing traditionally masculine traits—there is a ruggedness implied by her preference for walking and her ability to drink whisky “straight as the CROW flies.”<sup>5</sup>

Barnes writes in a similar vein about Marlene Dietrich. In a brief review of *The Blue Angel* (1930), Barnes focuses on Dietrich’s legs: “Marlene Dietrich has the Legs of an animal, long and sensible to Environment & the need for Caution” (“The Moon and I go Roving” 34). On first impression, Barnes appears to perpetuate the fetishistic mechanics of Von Sternberg’s film, which typically presents Dietrich’s body in fragments. Moreover, the comparison of the actress’s legs to an animal’s is typical of how vamps were represented: Levine notes that the vamp had “sinister affinities” with, among other things, “larger members of the cat family” (272). Yet the features of the animal that Barnes highlights—a sort of intuitive understanding of the environment and its dangers (“the need for caution”)—seem distinctly un-vamp-like, since the comparison between the vamp and the animal is normally used to highlight the vamp’s aggressive and predatory nature. By contrast, Barnes suggests that Dietrich’s body expresses an awareness of the violence of which she is the target. Barnes casts Dietrich as the potential victim of an aggressive gaze rather than an exhibitionist or sex-hungry *femme fatale*. When read in conjunction with the Garbo article, the passage suggests not so much sexual objectification as it does an appreciation of a mode of embodiment that unsettles the male gaze.

Barnes mentions Dietrich again in a review of *Morocco* (1930) in which Josef von Sternberg’s directing is praised:

It IS Predicted that in the immediate future dialogue will serve merely as an accelerator to action in the moving pictures, a technique employed in the Josef von Sternberg production “Morocco,” starring Marlene Dietrich. The film has been Criticized for this

Very Fact, [...] which I found particularly Pleasant, but then I like my human experience served up with a little silence and Restraint. Silence makes experience go further and, when it does die, gives it that dignity common to a Thing one has touched but not RAVISHED. (“Who says this be not Drama?” 35)

Barnes suggests that, in the early days of sound cinema, von Sternberg employs dialogue in conjunction with silence in order to render the film’s quiet moments more resonant. The observation anticipates Robert Bresson’s comment that “the sound track invented silence” (38). Barnes’s compares this quiet “dignity” to that of a “thing touched but not Ravished.” The curious phrase can be taken to imply that the film resists quick and easy consumption: its embrace of silence repels an interpretive gaze, refusing to be subsumed to, and thereby ravished by, a totalizing reading. The choice of the verb ravish has distinctly sexual connotations and thus figures the process of consuming a film as akin to sexual violence. Given that Dietrich was famous for her moments of silence, Barnes might be commenting on the power of the enigmatic performer as well as that of the film itself (its directing). Silence, then, as a property of both the film and its leading star, would constitute a refusal of an aggressive and objectifying gaze.

Barnes’s infatuation with Garbo and Dietrich’s vamps could be related to a number of factors. Film scholars generally concur that Garbo and Dietrich made the vamp a more sympathetic and appealing figure. Gaylyn Studlar, for example, contends that “the Garbo films moved toward revealing the psychology of the modern woman whose beauty made her the object of male lust” (216). While Garbo’s vamps captured something of the “destructive female sexuality” that typified the early vamps, they were “frequently treated in a way in the 1920s that suggested that the heroine’s unconventional search for sexual fulfillment outside of marriage deserved sympathy” (216). Betsy Erkkila observes that Garbo managed to “transcend the

exigencies of the vamp plot”: “even when Garbo dies in these early films [...] her death seems not so much a punishment as a judgment of the world’s inadequacy” (598).

As Nancy Levine notes, Garbo and Dietrich were also known for making the vamp “respectable with their reticent glamour” (273). This “glamour” is often linked to a special quality of aloof indifference and cool detachment that both actresses made famous. Whereas the early vamps were always nefariously indifferent to the consequences of their actions—that is, without concern for the fate of men they entrapped—Garbo and Dietrich’s glamorous vamps tended to display a more general and all-encompassing indifference, not just to the fate of their men but to the men themselves. This is evident in the common observation that Garbo seems to look through or beyond her leading men. Similarly, while the early vamps were frequently rendered “other” to bourgeois society on account of their promiscuity and refusal of marriage, Garbo and Dietrich transform this outsider status into a more robust anti-sociality manifest in the aforementioned indifference, a predilection for silence, and even, in the case of Garbo, a certain blank inexpressiveness, as though without the need to communicate. Barnes touches on this aloof and indifferent glamour in her descriptions of Garbo and Dietrich with the emphasis on Garbo’s self-willed estrangement in America or Dietrich’s silence and animal-like strangeness. In both cases, Barnes attributes a power to their enigma.

Not everyone agrees that Garbo and Dietrich are subversive, feminist forces. As Judith Mayne wryly notes, “Dietrich has served not only as an example but also as a paradigm for virtually every feminist argument that has been made about the classical cinema” (1258). Most famously, Dietrich served as Laura Mulvey’s primary example of fetishism in classical Hollywood cinema. The fetishistic gaze is the spectator’s response to anxiety about sexual difference. By transforming the female performer into a beautiful image, the spectator can

disavow sexual difference by focusing on the star's formal perfection. Mulvey suggests that Dietrich is Sternberg's "perfect product, whose body, stylized and fragmented by close-ups, is the content of the film," merely another component of his impressionistic *mise en scene* (22). According to Mulvey, the fetishistic gaze denies the possibility of a female subjectivity in film.

Mulvey's analysis of Dietrich has been challenged by several film scholars, including Gaylyn Studlar who also discerns elements of fetishism in Dietrich's image, yet argues that Dietrich is not entirely controlled by the male gaze, rendered fully and finally submissive, but returns the gaze, and thus holds significant power in the relationship. The pleasure that Dietrich offers to the spectator is, for Studlar, masochistic rather than sadistic. Judith Mayne argues that Dietrich subversively foregrounds femininity as performance through ironic, detached enactments of exaggerated femininity. Others have criticized the absence of a female spectator in Mulvey's theory and considered how Dietrich and Garbo might appear to a feminine gaze. Gertrud Koch argues that "the success and popularity of Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo among women may have something to do with their glamorous bisexuality" and suggests that they often "present an image of autonomy and power which many women yoked into a marriage must have dreamed about" (8). Similarly, Andrea Weiss claims that Dietrich and Garbo's "androgynous qualities" held a special appeal for lesbian spectators. Indeed, Hollywood was aware of this draw and even exploited it, marketing Dietrich as "the woman all women want to see," while simultaneously treating this sexuality as a "threat that must be contained" through its narratives (Weiss 297).

Writing on Garbo and Dietrich, Barnes focuses on many of the same qualities referenced in these positive assessments. She characterizes Garbo in terms of androgyny. She exhibits masculine traits when insisting on walking to the restaurant, then drinking her whisky "as straight

as the CROW flies.” The fact that the haberdasher remembers the “evening with love” despite passing out drunk and having to be half-carried to his car links Garbo with a kind of masochistic pleasure. Barnes is, however, very cognizant of the “dangers” of a rapacious male gaze—indeed, she seems to discover in Garbo and Dietrich a model of resistance to the societal forces that reduce women to mere object status. Interestingly, this model of resistance appears connected to their enigmatic aspect—she places power in silence (for Dietrich) and mystery (for Garbo). If the realm of celebrity is one in which the objectification of women, their reduction to commodity status, is writ large, then Garbo and Dietrich’s example of resistance stems from a position inside that system—a resistance to commodification from the position of the star as commodity.

Barnes recognizes that what makes Garbo and Dietrich such singular and fascinating examples of female film stars is the way they operate in a liminal space between objectification and agency, never fully escaping the commodity industry’s reifying machinations, and yet seeming, simultaneously, to affect a form of independence. They inhabit the gap between the female star as objectified body in Mulvey’s account of female stardom and another influential concept of the star, the star as radical image of the autonomous individual, as influentially articulated by Ricard Dyer. As several commentators have noted, Dyer builds his analysis of stars on a mostly unacknowledged Marxist theoretical framework in which stars are understood to be fetishized products. According to Dyer, stars should be thought of as “star texts,” since they are constructed not only through films (although they remain “privileged” texts), but also “pin-ups, public appearances, studio hand-outs and so on, as well as interviews, biographies and coverage in the press of the star’s doings and ‘private’ life” (*Heavenly Bodies* 2-3). The discourse surrounding stardom, however, works to deny the constructed nature of the celebrity by promoting the illusion of the star as a natural and coherent entity, a “real” person. Thus, the

star as commodity owes its fetish character to the way in which it hides its origin in a collective labour and a myriad of texts.

Dyer argues that the star as commodity serves a particular ideological end, namely to “articulate what it is to be a human being in contemporary society” (*Heavenly Bodies* 87). The “particular notion of the human” that stars promote is that of the independent and self-legislating agent—the bourgeois individual of Enlightenment discourse. According to Dyer, the concept of the bourgeois individual specifies, minimally, that personhood resides inside the individual, in opposition to an external, social world. In other words, the individual is imagined to be fully-formed (given) and autonomous prior to its relation with others and with the social, which is construed as external, something encountered subsequent to the establishment of selfhood. As such, in addition to being a commodity (a “star-text,” whose origin in labour is hidden), the star is at the same time an ideological expression of the logic of commodification (a celebration of the atomistic concept of individuality). Importantly, twentieth-century star culture seeks to consolidate this notion of the individual at a historical moment in which actual independence is threatened by the economic realities of capitalism. Stars, therefore, “reinforce” and “compensate” for threatened values and thereby protect the reigning order from the dissent that might occur should this loss of autonomy be widely recognized (Dyer, *Stars* 81).

Dyer devotes a portion of *Stars* to constructing a typology of stars. Among these, there are subversive types, including “the rebel” and “the independent woman” (*Stars* 52, 57). One might think that the prevalence of rebel figures in Hollywood film would provide difficulties for a theory such as Dyer’s, which attempts to show that Hollywood films work to reinforce the status quo. Yet, insofar as the rebel manifests individuality and uniqueness, often in a heightened or exaggerated manner, he or she reinforces the relevant model of subjectivity for star culture.

Although they depict rebellion, the films do not challenge the concept of the radically independent yet asocial subject. Individuality is, for these characters, given and fully realized, a mode of agency against or a space of freedom outside of an unfree society. Thus, the narratives function redemptively, providing assurance that the individual will triumph over any potential threat: either the individual will employ his or her autonomy in order to change society or they will retreat from society into the sanctuary of the private self.

Garbo and Dietrich are significant precisely because they fit so uneasily into available categories. For many, they emblemize a kind of independence, yet for some, they are the ultimate fetishes. Garbo and Dietrich, by occupying a contested, central ground, expose the very tensions and contradictions surrounding the figure of the female star. I argue this is part of what makes Garbo and Dietrich fascinating subjects for Djuna Barnes. This tension between the subject as a radically autonomous individual and objectified spectacle, and the possibility of resisting this dichotomous structure, animates Barnes's other work, particularly her 1936 novel *Nightwood*, which I will turn to in the following section.

### **Dressing Robin in the “garments of the known”: Reification, recognition, and ethical conflict in *Nightwood***

Barnes's journalism raises questions about the possibility of female subjectivity in a modern consumer culture and the coercive violence of the male gaze, its demands for types and its constitution of the woman performer as a consumable object. Yet, it also points to the possibility of resistance to this gaze—interestingly, a resistance exemplified by characters internal to the commodified realm of modern film and, in particular, a role (the vamp) that is exemplary of this realm's reductiveness and misogyny. Barnes's brief consideration of the

cinema vamp and Garbo and Dietrich's transformation of that role suggest a disruptive potential in their aloof mysteriousness, silence, and uniquely embodied performances.

These themes of reification and the possibility of female resistance within an oppressive commodity culture are further explored in Barnes's novel *Nightwood*, which features a character, Robin Vote, who directly evokes the cinema vamp and, in particular, Garbo and Dietrich's vamps. Nancy Levine contends that, like the "classic cinema vamp," Robin "possesses the ability, usually described as masculine, to divorce her sexual behavior from her capacity to think and feel. Like Theda Bara in *Cleopatra* or Nazimova in *Salome*, Robin is coldly promiscuous" (278). Moreover, like the vamp, Robin "comes most alive at night, and, like the legendary blood-sucking vampire, the ancestor of the cinema vamp, she fears the morning light" (278). Like Garbo and Dietrich, Robin unsettles gender norms. She is described as a "tall girl with the body of a boy," wears men's trousers, and is referred to by Doctor Matthew O'Connor as a member of the "third sex" (N 157). As Jane Marcus and Laura Winkiel note, the scene in which Robin lays unconscious on a hotel room sofa surrounded by plants evokes images of Marlene Dietrich. Marcus claims that, "extraordinarily cinematic, the scene reverses the reader's picture of Marlene Dietrich in 1930s vamp films such as *The Blue Angel* or *Blonde Venus* [...] We remember Dietrich 'tranvested' from the waist up in top hat and tails, pointing the contrast to very feminine legs" ("Laughing at Leviticus" 236). Winkiel contends,

the scene seems to conflate two images of Marlene Dietrich in *Blonde Venus* (1932): the first is the screen in which Lola Lola abandons her flight from the law and her husband and gives up her child. She surrenders in a hotel room filled with plants and unseen, chirping birds. The second image is the famous Paris cabaret scene in which Lola Lola sings in a white tuxedo. (22)

More generally, like a female film star, Robin is nearly always the object of someone's gaze, starting with her very first appearance in the novel, in which she lies unconscious on a couch like "a picture forever arranged" (N 41). Matthew O'Connor comments on the frequently aggressive nature of this gaze when he says that Robin has been made a "target forever" (N 157). Lastly, Robin, like Garbo, performs a kind of languorous, aloof, and indifferent subjectivity. Whereas Garbo was sometimes accused of sleep-walking through her roles, and criticized for expressing nothing more than overwhelming exhaustion, Robin, is the "born *somnambule*" and is often either unconscious or aloofly absent in the presence of others (J. Brown 116, N 38).<sup>6</sup>

Barnes herself was aware of the similarities between Robin and Garbo. According to Barnes's biographer, Phillip Herring, Paramount Pictures contemplated turning Barnes's novel *Nightwood* into a film in 1961, and a reluctant Barnes told the studio that she would only give them the rights should they convince Garbo to play Robin (Herring 299). The discussions never got very far and the film was never made, but it is not difficult to understand why Barnes would have wanted Garbo to play Robin. For both Robin and Garbo, their curious passivity is informed by stubbornness and rebellion; it is not pure submissiveness but a form of active passivity, a resistance to the ways that others impose and project on them.

Like the male-defined spectator in Barnes's journalism, the various characters in *Nightwood* submit Robin to a reifying gaze that imposes reductive and misogynist roles onto her. Simultaneously fascinated and disturbed by her subversion of gender signifiers and Garboesque somnambulism, they read her in accordance with "a formula" and dress Robin "in the garments of the known," reducing her to mother, daughter, wife (N 145). Confronted by her incoherent performance of gender and subjectivity, they attempt to incorporate Robin into their schemas of knowing, what Judith Butler calls "the heterosexual matrix" and defines as:

the norm [that] governs intelligibility, allows for certain kinds of practices and action to become recognizable as such, imposing a grid of legibility on the social and defining the parameters of what will and will not appear within the domain of the social. (Butler 42)

In attempting to render Robin's incoherence legible, their gazes subsume Robin to exchange value, to a universal equivalent ("the heterosexual matrix") that would make Robin comprehensible and therefore exchangeable within their private economies.

In this sense, Felix and Nora are like Stein's journalist, who seeks to present the news as though we had "known it all beforehand," so as to render it "something that any one could recover from" (*Na* 38, 39). Similarly, *Nightwood* diagnoses the reifying gaze as an attempt (ultimately, a failed one) to fortify the subject against a threatening difference and preserve a fantasy of the subject as a sovereign, unitary, and all-knowing individual. As the screen for their fantasies, she figures the promise that they might realize their "destin[ies]" and achieve wholeness in a future that would redeem the past. If Stein's journalist wants to shield the reader against the shock of "discovery," Felix and Nora seek to deny the self-displacing experience of an intersubjective relation with Robin. In challenging their schema of legibility, Robin imperils that which gives meaning to their sense of world and self and thus portends the possibility of change, uncertainty, and contingency. In this sense, she raises the ethical conundrum posed by Butler:

How might we encounter the difference that calls our grids of intelligibility into question without trying to foreclose the challenge that the difference delivers? What might it mean to learn to live in the anxiety of that challenge, to feel the surety of one's epistemological and ontological anchor go, but to be willing, in the name of the human, to allow the

human to become something other than what it is traditionally assumed to be? (*Undoing Gender* 35)

For Butler, this self-questioning in the face of difference is an essential moment in her reinterpretation of Hegelian recognition, a process that, by virtue of its reciprocity, requires both parties to go “outside” of themselves and become other than what they are (*Precarious Life* 24). Barnes’s characters fail Butler’s challenge, defensively clinging to the “surety” of their “grids of intelligibility” and their preexisting assumptions about what it means to be human. They shut down the process of recognition, refusing to enter Robin’s night-time world or “solicit a becoming, [. . .] instigate a transformation, [. . .] petition the future always in relation to the Other” (*Precarious Life* 44).

In suggesting that the other characters misrecognize Robin, I do not mean to imply that Robin has a true identity outside of their projections, and that, if only they could set aside their prejudices, fantasies, and desires, they could accurately grasp this identity. This is because the interpretation of the Hegelian concept of recognition I invoke here is Butler’s and thus consists of a reciprocal and open-ended process of becoming, which, crucially, does not conclude at a final, fixed identity. In arguing that they misrecognize Robin, I mean to suggest that they mistake their relationship to Robin as a question of knowledge—of disengaged observation from a stable subject position—rather than a process of mutual transformation through involved and embodied caring. It is not that the characters have projected the wrong identity on her, but that they have imagined her subjectivity as an object-like, reified thing.

That said, Barnes’s novel is not simplistically moralizing in its condemnation of these ethical failures. Indeed, the ethical dilemma is made more complex by the fact that Robin’s various lovers are themselves outcasts in society on account of gender, sexuality, and religion.

As such, Barnes depicts the drive for unlimited autonomy as a response to inequality and disenfranchisement. In response to injury and oppression, these characters understandably seek a form of freedom, a freedom of self-determination, yet this degenerates quickly into more grandiose visions of absolute autonomy, of overcoming dependence and vulnerability altogether. Thus, in terms of defining or representing an ethical life, Barnes's novel testifies both to the necessity of and the dangers inherent in certain notions of personhood.

In diagnosing the characters' mistreatment of Robin, *Nightwood* reflects on the oppressive effects of the commodified society she dissects in her journalism. She depicts this oppression not in terms of a weakened ego in the face of a mechanized and consumerist world, as do "the men of 1914," but in terms of an anxious and misguided desire for exchange value, for the law of equivalence, and the sense of control and mastery that such equivalence promises. The result of this demand for equivalence is the homogenization of difference, the reduction of Robin to the simplistic and misogynistic "types" identified by D.W. Griffith. Yet, Barnes also points to the possibility of resistance to this coercive violence through the character of Robin, who, like Garbo and Dietrich in Barnes's journalism, affects a surprising power from this position of commodified spectacle, denaturalizing the circuits of exchange that this world assumes. Interestingly, Robin does not outright dismiss the characters' reifying gaze; instead, she is passive, frequently assuming (at least temporarily) the parts given her—of wife, mother, daughter—becoming the commodity that circulates in their visions. Her affectless performance of these roles, however, makes evident the fact that the exchange value they read on her is one that they themselves have fabricated. While she does not resist circulation or exchange per se—indeed she is a wanderer, forever circulating through the night world of the novel—she resists the fiction of perfect equivalence, translation without remainder, always managing to invoke a

destabilizing surplus that haunts their notion of equal exchange. Not only does she denaturalize other characters' assumptions about equivalence, but in doing so, posits an alternative mode of subjectivity, one not premised on the fantasy of sovereignty—that is on acting without being acted upon, of being law-giving while subject to no laws. Instead, she affects a kind of open and embodied relation to the world around her and embraces the multiplicity and fluidity of the night.

Felix Volkbein first encounters Robin while dining at the Hôtel Récamier with Doctor Matthew O'Connor. Matthew is summoned to a room where a young woman lies unconscious, “on a bed, surrounded by a confusion of potted plants, exotic palms and cut flowers, faintly over-sung by the notes of unseen birds” (*N* 37). She is “half flung off the support of the cushions,” “heavy and dishevelled,” “her legs . . . spread as in a dance,” her hands “on either side of her face” (*N* 38). The narrator describes the scene variously as a “painting by the douanier Rousseau,” a “set” which is the “property of an unseen dompteur, half lord, half promoter,” and a “picture forever arranged” (*N* 38).<sup>7</sup> Thus, Robin is introduced to the text as aesthetic images—she is simultaneously a painting, a stage, and a picture. This iteration of similar but marginally different metaphors hints at Robin's essential enigma, so that, even as the object of their definitions, she seems to slip from their grasp. Nevertheless, the mention of a male authority figure, Rousseau, or the “unseen dompteur”—the French word meaning tamer—implies that the wildness on display has been domesticated and ordered for a viewing public—indeed, the reference to the *dompteur* invokes one of the novel's central metaphors, that of the circus, with Robin posing as caged beast. The scene prefigures Robin and Nora's initial meeting at the circus, where the “dusty eyes” of animals “turn on [Robin] as they walk past her seat in the ring,” as well as the novel's final scene, in which Robin goes down on all fours and barks at Nora's dog (*N* 59-60, 178-180). Throughout the novel, Robin is linked to a feminine wildness, often one that

is trapped, contained, and made the object of a male, objectifying gaze.

Constituted as feminine spectacle, Robin is thus exposed and vulnerable to the male gaze; indeed, Felix, stepping behind a palm tree in the room, gazes from a position of voyeuristic mastery, seeing but unseen, as the Doctor seeks to revive Robin. Yet, neither the spectacle nor Felix's viewing position are as stable as they initially appear. For one, the reader is told that Robin "seemed to lie in a jungle trapped in a drawing room (in the apprehension of which the walls have made their escape)" (N 38). The personified, almost surrealist notion that the walls have fled suggests that the wildness on display is not entirely tamed, and still poses a threat to the organizing (and masculinized) frame. Similarly, the narrator states "that the woman who presents herself to the spectator as a 'picture' forever arranged is for the contemplative mind, the chiefest danger" (N 39). That Robin might "present herself" in this pose of abandonment suggests that she is not as entirely passive as she originally appears. Indeed, the "danger" here is that Robin's appearance of having been tamed, ordered, by an unseen author might lure the spectators into a false sense of security, rendering them particularly susceptible to a returned gaze. As Jean Gallagher insightfully notes, in this scene as in others, the novel offers and then challenges "a detached viewing position—reminiscent of the voyeur at the keyhole, the photographer at the camera's viewfinder, or the spectator of classical cinema" (280).

This initial encounter with Robin has a profound impact on Felix. Afterwards, Felix talks to the Doctor about marriage and his desire for a "son who would feel as he felt about the 'great past,'" adding in reference to Robin, "with an American anything can be done" (N 42). Felix has come to read Robin, in her passivity and availability, as a kind of unformed possibility, a blank screen, on which to project his own private fantasies. Later, when Felix asks Robin to marry him, he is "taken aback to find himself accepted, as if Robin's life held no volition for refusal" (N 46).

At this moment, it is as though his “destiny. . . seemed to stand before him without effort” (*N* 46). From these passages, it is clear that Felix immediately identifies Robin as a means to an end—and not just any end but one freighted with deeply personal symbolism, a “son who would feel as he felt about the ‘great past’” and Felix’s “destiny.”

Felix’s worship of the past is rooted in his family history. His Jewish father, Guido, “lived as all Jews do, who, cut off from their people by accident or choice, find that they must inhabit a world whose constituents, being alien, force the mind to succumb to an imaginary populace” (*N* 5). Guido, marginalized in a Christian society, desires assimilation. The “saddest and most futile gesture” of this desire is the fabrication of a false lineage, the “pretence to a barony” (*N* 5). Claiming to be “an Austrian of an old, almost extinct line,” Guido nevertheless feels himself an imposter and inferior to his Christian wife, Hedvig (*N* 5). This sense of inferiority finds expression in exaggerated acts of homage to the aristocratic history he falsely claims as his own. Indeed, the novel links his reverence for the past to his crisis of identity: “he had been *tormented* into speaking highly of royalty” (*N* 6, my italics). The more forcefully he venerates the past, the more passionately he “bows down” before it, the closer he might come to winning admission into the heritage from which he has been excluded.

Felix inherits from his father this devotion to an aristocratic history, and believes that “the great past might mend a little if he bowed low enough, if he succumbed and gave homage” (*N* 12). Like his father, Felix’s devotion to the past is no idle and passive affair, but an attempt to heal a wound: for Guido, this wound stems from the violence of anti-Semitism and his exclusion as ‘Jew’ from the protection and recognition afforded Christians in the society he inhabits, whereas for Felix, history itself is wounded and in need of healing. Felix’s desire for a “son who would feel as he felt about the ‘great past’” is thus motivated by his perception that the

aristocratic past is imperilled, in risk of dying out under conditions of modernity; having a son is one means of salvaging the past, reproducing this history for the future. Felix yearns for the order and hierarchy of bygone eras. His mourning for an aristocratic history—one of great men—is representative of a personal fantasy to become king-like, that is sovereign or law-giving but subject to no law. Robin as *tabula rasa* or blank screen represents the possibility that Felix might author his own future without mediation or resistance, and thus achieve sovereignty.

In this respect, Felix differs from his father. The latter's devotion to the past, as presented in the novel, is rooted in a particular historical violence, Christian persecution of the Jewish race. The reader is told that:

With a rope about its neck, Guido's race should run in the Corso for the amusement of the Christian populace, while ladies of noble birth, sitting upon spines too refined for rest [...] applauded with that cold yet hysterical abandon of a people that is at once unjust and happy, the very Pope himself shaken down from his hold on heaven with the laughter of a man who forgoes his angels that he may recapture the beast. (N 2)

Guido lives with the memory of this violence, and his desire to assimilate is explained by it. With Felix, however, the worship of the past becomes less about overcoming a particularly historical persecution than escaping vulnerability altogether.

Barnes's depiction of Guido and Felix is unmistakably anti-Semitic. Indeed, Felix's propensity to fantasize about sovereign selfhood is construed as a result of his Jewishness: having been dispossessed, he is burdened with an appetite for compensation, which in turn leads to him imposing grandiose fantasies on others. In presenting Felix and Guido as recognizable racial types, Barnes seeks to explain their behaviour—their anxious denial of human vulnerability, propensity to envision a monumental concept of selfhood, and aggressive

indoctrination of those (Robin) who threaten their worldview. This behaviour is, of course, not limited to Felix and Guido; Nora also exemplifies this type of fantasizing and subtly coercive sociality. In this sense, Jewishness becomes a privileged heuristic for comprehending the particular mode of subjectivity that Barnes seeks to critique in the novel. Touching upon this dynamic, Lara Trubowitz suggests that the novel universalizes Jewishness. While the novel's depiction of Guido and Felix highlights a historically-based persecution, it also naturalizes Jewishness by the "likening of Jewishness to decay and to death, both natural and inevitable processes" (316). She argues that "by naturalizing Guido's Jewishness, Barnes universalizes it; universalizing it, she detaches it from Guido, negating the specificity of the historical events that had initially constituted Guido's identity" (317). Once Jewishness is detached from Jewish people, it becomes, Trubowitz argues, both a principal of form—a narratological technique premised on digression and decay—and a set of traits by which to describe non-Jewish characters. As such, Jewishness is both everywhere and nowhere in *Nightwood*. The universalizing mechanism that Trubowitz identifies can be clearly seen in my analysis of Guido and Felix. Guido's desire to escape persecution becomes, in Felix, detached from its historical origins and universalized as the desire for monumental selfhood (Felix). On the one hand, this transition produces the anti-Semitic depiction of Jewish people as a population whose dispossession leads them to adopt grandiose concepts of selfhood. At the same time, however, Jewishness becomes the paradigm for the fragile modern ego that seeks to deny its vulnerability by means of fantasy—a maneuver that, as Trubowitz points out, should be read as an erasure of Jewishness. As a result, the depiction of Felix and Guido raises the question of whether Barnes falls prey to the very reifying dynamics she seeks to critique when applied to Robin.

Felix's fantasies are initially enabled by Robin, who makes the wholeness and

sovereignty he desires appear available. Indeed, Felix tells the Doctor that Robin gave him a “feeling that I would not only be able to achieve immortality, but be free to choose my own kind” (*N* 120). Yet, even at this early stage of their relationship, Robin’s acquiescence has a strangely startling quality: indeed, Felix finds himself “taken aback” when she accepts his marriage proposal without deliberation. This experience of surprise and temporary paralysis in the face of Robin’s uncanny passivity will become a reoccurring theme of Felix’s and Nora’s relationship to Robin.

Nora, like Felix, incorporates Robin into private fantasies, using her as a means of overcoming the vulnerability and dependence of subjectivity. While all subjectivity is necessarily embodied, both Nora and Felix, in their aspiration to the detached spectator model of subjectivity, seek to forget or deny the reality of the body, which, as Butler claims, always implies “implies mortality, vulnerability” and exposes us to others (*UG* 21). Nora Flood, whose name invokes the biblical deluge, is, like Noah, a collector—her house is the “museum” documenting her “encounter” with Robin (*N* 61). Fittingly, Nora ultimately aspires to collect, possess, and thereby save Robin—whose frequent figuration as an animal lends some credence to the biblical intertext—from the fluid waters of the night by dragging her into the safe and ordered space of the house/museum. Nora recounts to Matthew a drunken scene on the streets of Paris in which Robin flings francs to beggars, telling one, in reference to Nora, “they don’t want you to have your happiness. They don’t want you to drink. [. . .] They are all good—they want to save us” (*N* 153). Nora’s apparent concern for Robin’s safety is self-serving, and, at least in Robin’s account, has little to do with her own wellbeing.

Nora’s desire to save Robin stems from a paranoid image of Robin threatened. As Robin’s wanderings increase in frequency, Nora is haunted by the vision of “Robin alone,

crossing streets, in danger” and is struck by an “appalling apprehension”: “Her mind became so transfixed that, by the agency of her fear, Robin seemed enormous and polarized, all catastrophes ran toward her, the magnetized predicament” (*N* 62). This obsessive and exaggerated worry for Robin’s safety is pathological, less the inevitable concern for a lover’s well-being than a protest against the very fact of Robin’s mortality. Since exposure to danger (injury, death) is a condition of life, of embodiment, Nora’s impulse to remove Robin from harm’s way is paradoxically death-dealing, the space of the house/museum imposing a lifeless fixity on its objects, a means of preserving by embalming: “Nora knew now that there was no way but death. In death, Robin would belong to her” (*N* 63). Yet possession of Robin is not enough for Nora; she craves a more fundamental dissolution of the boundaries between self and other:

Nora would wake from sleep, going back through the tide of dreams into which her anxiety had thrown her, taking the body of Robin down with her into it, as the ground things take the corpse, with minute persistence, down into the earth, leaving a pattern of it on the grass, as if they stitched as they descended. (*N* 62)

Nora imagines a union with Robin so complete that it would “moult” together their bodies, “as figures in the waxworks are moulted down to their story” (*N* 130). The thought of Robin’s difference or separateness, which here seems intricately connected to the basic fact of Robin’s mortality, is unbearable to Nora, producing fantasies of aggressive incorporation. Unwilling to cede Robin’s alterity and face the challenge it portends, lest she herself be swept into the realm of the night, Nora seeks to render Robin self-same by consuming her.

That Nora assumes a motherly role and correspondingly imposes the role of child on Robin is made clear at several junctions in the novel. At Nora’s house, there is a statue of “a tall granite woman bending forward with lifted head; one hand was held over the pelvic round as if

to warn a child who goes incautiously” (*N* 55). Matthew says of Nora: “There goes mother of mischief, running about, trying to get the world home” (*N* 66). Later he tells Nora, “you who should have had a thousand children and Robin, who should have been all of them” (*N* 101). Nora also gives Robin a doll, which, among other things, symbolizes the ways in which she projects childhood innocence and vulnerability on to Robin. When Robin hurls the doll on the floor and smashes it, she rebels against her treatment by Nora as a prop in her fantasy. As Carolyn Allen suggests, “the maternal protection that becomes the impetus for rescue finally functions as control—as power to determine Robin’s movements and to define her morally” (Allen 188). Whereas a mothering role could indicate a genuine ethics of care, in this context, Nora’s concern for Robin is infantilizing, and constitutes a refusal to cede Robin’s difference and independence.

Further complicating their relationship, Nora associates Robin with her grandmother. In a dream, she finds herself at the top of a house, in “her grandmother’s room—an expansive, decaying splendour” (*N* 67):

[Nora] look[s] down into the body of the house, as if from a scaffold, where now Robin had entered the dream, lying among a company below. [. . .] From round about her in anguish Nora heard her own voice saying, “Come up, this is Grandmother’s room,” yet knowing it was impossible because the room was taboo. (*N* 68)

The grandmother of the dream is linked to a very particular event in Nora’s childhood:

With this figure of her grandmother who was not entirely her recalled grandmother went one of her childhood, when she had run into her at the corner of the house—the grandmother who, for some unknown reason, was dressed as a man, wearing a billycock and a corked moustache, ridiculous and plump in tight trousers and a red waistcoat, her

arms spread saying with a leer of love, “My little sweetheart!”—her grandmother “drawn upon” as a prehistoric ruin is drawn upon, symbolizing her life out of her life, and which now appeared to Nora as something being done to Robin, Robin disfigured and eternalized by the hieroglyphics of sleep and pain. (*N* 69)

Nora later comments to Matthew that “Robin is incest, too” (*N* 156). As Garry Sherbert suggests, “Nora’s dream is rife with ambivalent emotion” (135). The incest could refer to Nora’s love for her grandmother. The child’s desire for a parental figure can itself be considered traumatic, insofar as it marks the dissolution of the mother-child bond, a space of wholeness and satisfaction prior to individuation. In coming to desire—a relationship based on lack—the child confronts the mother figure as other, as different from the self. In this scene, the traumatic moment is that in which her grandmother is rendered unfamiliar, enigmatic, queer, as possessing a life and desires that go beyond Nora.

Nora’s attachment to Robin seems at one and the same time an instance of incest (taboo desire) and a desire to escape desire by returning to some original state of undifferentiated wholeness. Since Robin is linked to Nora’s grandmother, Nora’s love for Robin replays that traumatic moment in which she first encounters otherness, a difference she cannot comprehend, and thus entails a dissolution of wholeness. Yet, given that Nora also casts Robin as her child, her desire for Robin is at the same time a desire to erase this experience of difference and return to a moment of union prior to that in which her grandmother appeared othered, transfigured by mysterious affect. The desire for an erasure of boundaries between self and other is paradoxically a desire for the overcoming of desire, since desire presupposes the love object as separate. Nora’s tortured love of Robin gives expression to incestuous fantasy in the very process of seeking to foreclose what that fantasy portends—the reality of separation and vulnerability.

Nora, like Felix, refuses to recognize Robin's difference, her irreducibility, and instead projects upon her, making her a character in a complex psycho-drama. Nora's grandmother is "drawn upon," invoked, in Nora's perception of Robin, and this drawing upon "disfigure[s] and eternalize[s]" Robin. It disfigures Robin since it remakes her in the image of someone else, Nora's grandmother; it eternalizes Robin by abstracting her from her material existence in the here and now and translating her into a private symbol or archetype. That this disfiguring is the result of subconscious processes and suffering ("the hieroglyphics of sleep and pain") might make Nora a more sympathetic character, yet it renders the disfiguration no less problematic.

As can be seen from this analysis, Felix and Nora's relationships with Robin share a similar structure. Both project onto Robin, using her as a screen for private fantasies that fulfill a protective function, shielding these characters against painful acknowledgements of their vulnerability, dependence, and finitude. In projecting onto Robin, both imagine themselves as detached and neutral observers rather than active participants in an intersubjective relationship. They desire to see Robin without in turn being seen by Robin, without exposing themselves to her gaze. Felix perceives Robin as a blank page on which he can write his story without interference or mediation. Nora wants to consume Robin so that she does not have to face the reality of her difference. In short, they both aspire to a kind of voyeuristic subjectivity—a view from nowhere—that enables them to observe Robin from a position of neutrality and safety, denying the extent to which their reification of Robin is a *response* to Robin, is an affective relation to her difference.

This voyeurism is captured in the novel's descriptions of the two characters. Felix is linked with vision by means of his monocle, which is invoked frequently in descriptions of him:

Attired like some haphazard in the mind of a tailor, again in the ambit of his father's

futile attempt to encompass the rhythm of his wife's stride, Felix, with tightly held monocle, walked beside Robin, talking to her, drawing her attention to this and that, wrecking himself and his peace of mind in an effort to acquaint her with the destiny for which he had chosen her—that she might bear sons who would recognize and honour the past” (N 48-49).

Felix “tightly” grasping his monocle implies his anxious desire to define his subjectivity in terms of his possession of the gaze. That the symbol of his investment in the gaze is a monocle suggests his allegiance to an Enlightenment concept of vision that is monocular in its perspective. As Jonathan Crary has argued, Enlightenment notions of vision modelled themselves on the *camera obscura*—an early optical device—and postulated a neutral observer and strict subject-object duality. According to this model, the eye passively receives a single image, which corresponds with perfect verisimilitude to the reality of the world and its objects (Crary 48). This model was gradually displaced in the nineteenth and twentieth century as scientists learned more about the physiological basis of sight, particularly its binocular nature (Crary 118). In the new model, the neutral observer who merely receives an image is replaced by an embodied viewer who actively synthesizes two disparate images of the world (one from each eye) to *produce* vision. Felix's allegiance to the older model symbolizes his atomistic and disengaged approach to relations with others—his desire to reduce Robin to an epistemological object that he can objectively know from a supposedly neutral, distanced position.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, as Marius Hentea argues, Felix's monocle can be read as “a futile attempt to reclaim a presumed aristocratic past” (222). While the monocle was seen as a “distinctive aspect” of the aristocratic style (as well as the style of dandies, military men, and avant-gardists), Hentea argues that it was simultaneously “an object whose primary purpose was to manufacture

identity,” as “superfluous fashion items, pure signs” (220, 214).<sup>9</sup> As such, the monocle can be read both as announcing Felix’s claim to aristocracy—and the mode of subjectivity that goes with it, namely a self-grounding autonomy and omnipotent gaze—and undermining it, given that it is an instance of affectation and artifice, more indicative of the desire for an aristocratic identity than its possession.

Nora’s perspective is similarly described in terms of distance and detachment: the reader is told that “the world and its history were to Nora like a ship in a bottle; she herself was outside and unidentified, endlessly embroiled in a preoccupation without a problem” (*N* 59). This idea of standing outside “the world and its history” is the fantasy of possessing a view from nowhere, a gaze that grants her access to the world as it actually is. In harbouring this fantasy, she seeks to disavow the ways in which she is immersed, engaged, and entangled with “the world and its history.” Robin, by contrast, is notable precisely for her immersion in the world, subject to the flows and forces of history, which are figured by the fluidity of the night. Nora principally fears being drawn into the corporeal realm of desire or the conflictual realm of history, and, as a result, losing her pretense to a fixed and stable identity. Like *homo economicus* or Lewis’s detached and aloof artist, Nora believes she can engage with the world from a position of stability and surety outside the world; she seeks to conduct her transactions and exchange her goods without herself becoming enmeshed in and transformed by such exchanges. Of course, this disengaged spectatorship is an illusion and her claim to a detached and neutral perspective consequently leads to her becoming “embroiled” against her best wishes.

The fantasy of voyeurism soothes anxieties about one’s embodiment and one’s exposure to the other’s gaze. Judith Butler links these concerns to questions of the body:

The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and flesh expose us to the

gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well. Although we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own. The body has its invariably public dimension. Constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine. Given over from the start to the world of others, it bears their imprint, is formed within the crucible of social life; only later, and with some uncertainty, do I lay claim to my body as my own, if, in fact, I ever do.

*(Precarious Life 26)*

Like Butler, Barnes insists that since one has and is a body, one is locatable in the world, and, as such, cannot achieve the disembodied, all-seeing spectatorship that Nora aspires to. Her characters do not simply see the world but are seen in return; in addition to being agents with desires and projects, they are objects in others' desires and projects. Moreover, this status as object is primary: they are "given over from the start to the world of others"—that is, they are initially dependent and attached to others prior to acquiring an understanding of themselves as agents. Felix and Nora's subjectivities emerge from situations in which they have "unwilled physical proximity with others." As such, their autonomy, selfhood, desires and projects are not dissociable from the reality of others and the social.

Robin's partners fear exposing themselves to her gaze, since this would mean opening themselves to uncertainty and change, to the possibility that they would emerge from the unpredictable process of recognition transformed. While they desire a relationship with Robin, it is a relationship within which they imagine themselves setting the terms, and thus one lacking reciprocity and openness. According to Butler, this is equal to the suppression of their corporeal existence, their status as "skin and flesh" from which their status as subject and agent is

dialectically intertwined. Moreover, their attempts to suppress the interdependent nature of their subjectivity merely underscores that interdependency by imbuing it with nervous apprehension—a consequence that is exacerbated by Robin’s haunting presence within the world of the novel.

As I previously noted, Felix is enticed by Robin’s apparent passivity—the fact that she seems without “the volition for refusal” and thus represents a kind of unformed possibility or *tabula rasa*, so to speak. Interestingly, however, it is the same quality of passivity that ultimately proves destabilizing to his fantasy of sovereign selfhood. Indeed, throughout the novel, Barnes presents the paradoxical notion that Robin is both passive and active—utterly without volition and yet somehow capable of resistance. This paradox is evident in the novel’s first descriptions of Robin:

The perfume that her body exhaled was of the quality of that earth-flesh, fungi, which smells of captured dampness and yet is so dry, overcast with the odour of oil amber, which is an inner malady of the sea, making her seem as if she had invaded a sleep incautious and entire. Her flesh was the texture of plant life, and beneath it one sensed a frame, broad, porous and sleep-worn, as if sleep were a decay fishing beneath her visible surface. About her head there was an effulgence as of phosphorous glowing about the circumference of a body of water—as if her life lay through her in ungainly luminous deteriorations—the troubling structure of the born somnambule, who lives in two worlds—meet of child and desperado. (*N* 38)

In the first simile, it is “as if [Robin] had invaded a sleep incautious and entire,” whereas in the second simile, it is “as if sleep were a decay fishing beneath her visible surface.” In this richly figurative passage, Robin is both active, “invad[ing]” sleep, and acted upon, “fish[ed]” by sleep. Curiously, sleep which by its nature involves a loss of conscious control is represented as

something consciously chosen, “invaded.” In the final sentence, Robin is construed as inhabiting “two worlds—meet of child and desperado”. Whereas “child” imputes to Robin an innocence and naïveté, “desperado” suggests desperation, recklessness, and rebellion—a heedlessness for the law.

Robin’s mode of rebellion consists of acts of withdrawal and indifference that are neither strictly active nor passive, but troubles this very distinction. She neither submissively accepts Felix, Nora, and Jenny’s projections nor actively asserts herself in opposition to these projections, but disengages and withdraws, allowing them to take place while maintaining her non-identity. In doing so, she denaturalizes her constitution as commodity, as exchangeable identity. Crucially, these acts of reification depend on disavowing the labour of objectification, denying the fact that these identities are imposed on Robin. Yet, Robin’s strange passivity, her willingness to be remade into these roles and then her blank, inexpressive, indifferent performance of them, points to the fact that she has been *made* to conform. Her dispossession troubles their presumptions about her complete commensurability with their systems of value, figuring the surplus or excess that is the byproduct of her creation as commodity object. Nora and Felix are compelled to acknowledge their labour in making Robin, and, consequently, their fantasy of autonomous subjectivity begins to crumble. Instead of aloof, sovereign agents, they recognize the extent to which they have been affectively engaged with Robin, acting in response to anxieties about difference and finitude that she has inspired.

Following their marriage, Felix lectures Robin on the “great past,” takes her to museums, and gives her tours of Vienna’s historical monuments. Yet, the very passivity that made Robin appear the perfect accomplice because seemingly submissive and “without the volition for refusal” reveals itself, in time, to be something obstinate and recalcitrant, a “stubborn cataleptic

calm” (N 49). This “stubborn cataleptic calm” is “her only power,” a phrase that once again raises the possibility of an unexpected and paradoxical correlation between agency and unconsciousness. During one such lesson, Felix, “labour[ing] under the weight of his own remorseless recreation of the great generals and statesmen and emperors,” looks up to find “Robin sitting with her legs thrust out her out, her head thrown back against the embossed cushion of the chair, sleeping” (N 48). Even a querulous gaze would recognize Felix’s power, but Robin forgoes direct confrontation. Instead, she is absent, elsewhere. Felix feels “that her attention, somehow in spite of him, had already been taken by something not yet in history” as if “she seemed to be listening to the echo of some foray in the blood” (N 48).<sup>10</sup>

Robin’s disruptive presence here recalls Garboesque resistance via indifference, not an active and confrontational refusal, but a curiously passive rebuff, one that disrupts the male gaze’s reduction of the other to exchangeable commodity by calling attention to it. Robin sleeping while Felix lectures is reminiscent of Garbo’s sleepy and averted gaze. In the publicity still for the movie *Flesh and the Devil* (1927), for instance, Garbo reclines supine, while John Gilbert, in a military uniform, bends to kiss her (see fig. 1). Garbo’s absent-presence is conveyed by her languorous gaze—eyes half-closed—directed neither at Gilbert, nor at the camera, but beyond the frame of the picture. There is an aspect of rebuke in the gaze: indeed, while Garbo entertains Gilbert’s desiring look, she does not return his affection, turning her eyes away and not recognizing and thereby flattering the male ego. It is a rebellion of sorts—yet not by means of self-assertion but aloof detachment. This particular gaze and others like it have elicited volumes of commentary. According to Judith Brown, Garbo’s face “registers cool indifference, perhaps bored pleasure, to its viewer and to Gilbert” (113). For Bela Balazs, Garbo’s “brooding glance comes from afar . . . and looks into the endless distance,” as though she “is an exile in a

distant land and does not know how she ever came to be where she is” (286). Balazs reads something more than indifference in Garbo’s gaze: “Greta Garbo is sad. Not only in certain situations, for certain reasons. Greta Garbo’s beauty is beauty of suffering; she suffers life and all the surrounding world” (286-87). Stanley Cavell, recalling Garbo’s “most famous postures in conjunction with a man” observes that “she looks away or beyond or through him, as if in an absence (a distance from him, from the present), hence as if to declare that this man, while the occasion of her passion, is surely not its cause” (106). Cavell further imagines Garbo “as remembering something, but [...] remembering it from the future, within a private theater, not dissociating herself from the present moment, but knowing it forever, in its transience, as finite, [...] as from the perspective of her death” (185). While these critics all reference her detachment, they construe such detachment differently: for Brown, Garbo is detached from the man and the viewer; for Balazs, Garbo is detached from the present moment; for Cavell, more complexly, Garbo is detached from herself, as though she were simultaneously a participant and an observer in the scene—as though she were watching herself in a movie theater from the future.



Figure 1: Greta Garbo and John Gilbert in a publicity image for *Flesh and the Devil*. Directed by Clarence Brown, performances by Greta Garbo and John Gilbert. MGM, 1926.

Like Garbo, Robin's absent-presence, the detachment with which she performs her many roles—mother, daughter, lover—frustrates her lovers' desire to know and possess her. What drives Jenny into a state of frenzy is Robin "paying no attention to her," while whispering to a young girl at a party (N 78). In Nora's case, it is the songs that Robin sings, which tell Nora of "a life that she herself had no part in" (N 62). Robin insists upon her non-identity, her standing beyond the reach of any identity or concept the other characters might project upon her. The detached dispossession of Robin dislocates the male viewing subject and ruptures the expectation of free and equal exchange between two willing subjects. When Robin falls asleep while Felix lectures, she deprives him of affirmation. At that moment, Felix experiences a loss of confidence in his own authority; when showing Vienna to Robin, "it seemed to him that he too was a sightseer. He tried to explain to her what Vienna had been before the war; what it must have been before he was born; yet his memory was confused and hazy, and he found himself repeating

what he had read, for it was what he knew best” (*N* 47). Robin’s aloof indifference estranges Felix from his own construction of the past. Whereas in the first scene, Felix’s relation to Robin is characterized by voyeurism, in this one he is displaced and made self-conscious, the object of his own gaze. At first seeking to subject Robin to his interpretative gaze, Felix ends up observing himself, interrogating his own desires, visions, and knowledge.

At this moment, he is recalled to the work inherent in his “remorseless recreation” of the past and his imposition on Robin. Indeed, it is crucial to Felix’s fantasy that his reduction of Robin to a self-serving, exchangeable type must be perceived as a natural and self-evident fact (*N* 46). Felix here recalls Stein’s journalist, who “works tremendously hard” to make everything seem “too easy,” consistent with what we already know. Robin’s present absence, like Stein’s questioning of the journalist, exposes Felix’s projections *as* projections, *as* impositions, thereby demystifying his attempts to render Robin exchangeable.

Importantly, Barnes’s presentation of Robin’s rebellion does not presume her radical autonomy or freedom—as does the “rebel” figure in classical Hollywood film—but depicts her asocial withdrawal as having social content. Robin’s rebellion has a purely negative character. For instance, when Robin and Nora meet at the circus, Robin tells Nora, “Let’s get out of here [...] I don’t want to be here” (*N* 60), to which the narrator adds, “but it was all she said; she did not explain where she wished to be” (*N* 60). To the extent that Robin expresses any conscious desire at all, it is a desire for escape. Yet she posits no destination, no positive vision of another space—she refuses to stake out a promissory identity, one to be redeemed at some future moment, but instead embraces the contingency of subjectivity. Robin is at one point described conversing with others at a party with a “malign smile” on her face, “a withdrawal in her movement and wish to be gone” (*N* 77). Her “wish to be gone” is a mode of asociality that is

itself social, her means of interacting with people, and a direct response to (and means of engaging with) the lack of mutuality afforded her in the social as currently constituted. Similarly, Garbo's character in *Grand Hotel* (1932), the Russian dancer, famously exclaims, "I want to be alone," a sentiment that became synonymous with Garbo herself. The wish to be alone is never fulfilled, however; it is what Garbo's gaze conveys, the way she gestures towards an outside, an elsewhere, something beyond the frame, from a position entirely within the frame. As a result, Garbo became linked with the desire for escape, solitude, autonomy, as much as the realization of those things. Our lasting image of Garbo is of the star in black sunglasses, waging war against the city's paparazzi and autograph seekers—forever on the run from an oppressive sociality. Both Garbo and Robin continue to occupy—or rather haunt—the worlds and roles they desire to escape. As such, Barnes's presentation of Robin's refusal does not presume a subject position outside of the society she critiques. Barnes realizes that to grant Robin a full and radical agency in rebellion would do two things: presume that Robin possesses the very subjectivity (independence) that is at stake and imperilled by the lack of mutuality offered her in recognition, and make Robin no different than Felix, Nora, and Jenny, whose response to vulnerability takes the form of anxious denial, aggressive assertion, and fantasies of omnipotence.

Robin's "wish to be gone" has the appearance of an escapist fantasy. The wish might be mistaken for the ideology conveyed by Dyer's film star: no matter how oppressive the society, the "rebel" can count on her or his own radiant singularity as a sanctuary, some place of freedom beyond the reach of the subsumptive mechanisms of society. Yet, I have been arguing that the "wish to be gone" is presented in the novel as self-critical: not the achievement of radical autonomy, but an immanent gesturing towards some alternative state of affairs. Robin is as dependent on the social for her identity as the other characters. Thus, in a society that seeks to

suppress her difference and impose roles upon her, Robin's only option is to demonstrate her non-identity with what is projected on her. In a sense, Robin's agency consists of exposing or drawing attention to the position—or rather, the non-position—to which she has been relegated by the other characters: screen, reproductive means, commodity object, mirror image, doll. Robin's form of resistance operates from within the confines imposed on her. Her absent-presence is both chosen and imposed, a means of resisting the claims of coercive community, and emblematic of what that community has done to her. Unlike Felix and Nora, who seek to anxiously to deny the reality of their exposure to and dependence on others, Robin does not refuse corporeal vulnerability.

Importantly, Robin's body is described at length in the novel. In Felix's chapter, Barnes focuses on her hands. When Felix and Matthew first discover Robin, her "hands, long and beautiful, lay on either side of her face" (*N* 38). Later, Felix returns one evening to discover Robin sleeping in a chair, "one arm fallen" and the "memoirs of the Marquis de Sade," "lying on the floor beneath her hand" (*N* 51). The passage associates Robin's hands with the erotic (Marquis de Sade), on the one hand, and with mindlessness or unconsciousness (Robin asleep), on the other. Felix later observes that,

when she touched a thing, her hands seemed to take the place of the eye. He thought: "She has the touch of the blind who, because they see more with their fingers, forget more in their minds." Her fingers would go forward, hesitate, tremble, as if they had found a face in the dark. When her hand finally came to rest, the palm closed; it was as if she had stopped a crying mouth. Her hand lay still and she would turn away. At such moments Felix experienced an unaccountable apprehension. The sensuality in her hands frightened him. (*N* 45-46)

Given that Felix is associated with his monocle, and Nora, similarly, in terms of disengaged spectatorship, the description of Robin's hands sharply differentiates Robin and her nighttime proclivities from the novel's other characters. While the previous descriptions of her hands imply a sensuality, the trembling hands suggest an engaged and affective orientation towards others—one not geared towards identity and knowledge but perhaps something more akin to care. Indeed, Felix compares her touch to “stopp[ing] a crying mouth,” a corporeal response to another's pain. Through Robin, Barnes suggests that there are non-reifying attitudes to otherness, attitudes that do not seek to quantify and assign fixed identities, as does the disengaged, objectifying male gaze, but a sensuous ethics of touch, one that puts no demands on the other to make themselves legible and coherent. This passage recalls Stein's embrace of tactility evident in her contention that, in *Tender Buttons*, she was “caressing” nouns (*LIA* 231). Both seek an alternative to a masculinist mode of action premised on grasping and using, one that fails to heed the irreducible alterity of things and people.

Once again, a model for Robin can be found in Garbo. In the publicity still for *The Flesh and the Devil*, there is a detachment but also an openness in Garbo's pose—lying horizontally, her arm thrust behind her head, face illuminated—sprawling, languorous, heavy, exposed. Similarly, while her enigmatic gaze betrays absence and detachment, it cannot be characterized as coy or reticent or secretive. Rather, there is something unguarded about the gaze. As such, her gaze, while certainly erotic, is not the erotic address that Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit discover in Caravaggio's paintings. Bersani and Dutoit analyze the enigmatic yet seductive gestures of young men in Caravaggio's early paintings, who, according to Bersani and Dutoit, “solic[i]t interest in order to block it with a secret” (“Caravaggio's Secrets” 106). Bersani argues that this mode of address is problematic insofar as it establishes a relationship to the other premised on

lack—a secret from which the other is blocked—and aggression. This seductive address does not instigate a process of mutual recognition, since it presumes the pre-existence of some thing, a secret, behind the face, which merely needs to be uncovered. It invites the perspective of the disengaged spectator, whose relation to the other is cast as an epistemological quest. True recognition, as Butler argues, instigates a process of becoming and thus requires an acknowledgement of otherness within and without. In other words, in the seductive address, the spectator can persist in the illusory belief that his or her own sense of self is not at stake, not risked, by this encounter with the other. What characterizes Garbo's pose is not seduction, not the feigning of a secret, but the complete absence of address—an empty, expressionless stare. Her detachment does not imply a denial of embodiment, as though she were withdrawing into a purely mental realm. Rather, the detachment is itself expressed in highly corporeal terms.

Interestingly, Robin's effect is often experienced physically. While the novel is in many ways characterized by an excess of talk, discussion, reflection, it is at the same time a novel of melodramatic, physical gestures. "La Somnambule" ends with a confrontation between Felix and Robin:

One night, coming home about three, he found her in the darkness, standing, back against the window, in the pod of the curtain, her chin so thrust forward that the muscles in her neck stood out. As he came toward her she said in a fury, "I didn't want him!" Raising her hand she struck him across the face. He stepped away; he dropped his monocle and caught at it swinging; he took his breath backward. He waited a whole second, trying to appear casual. "You didn't want him," he said. He bent down pretending to disentangle his ribbon. "It seems I could not accomplish that." (*N* 53)

In "Night Watch," the reader is told that "sometimes, going about the house, in passing each

other, they would fall into an agonized embrace, looking into each other's face, so strained together that the space that divided them seemed to be thrusting them apart" (N 63). Later in the chapter, Nora sees Robin with another woman from her bedroom window: "unable to turn her eyes away, incapable of speech, experiencing a sensation of evil, complete and dismembering, Nora fell to her knees, so that her eyes were not withdrawn by her volition but dropped from their orbit by the falling of her body" (N 70). "The Squatter" ends with Jenny and Robin fighting each other, "scratching and tearing in hysteria, striking, clutching and crying":

Slowly the blood began to run down Robin's cheeks, and as Jenny struck repeatedly Robin began to go forward as if brought to the movement by the very blows themselves, as if she had no will, sinking down in the small carriage, her knees on the floor, her head forward as her arm moved upward in a gesture of defence; and as she sank, Jenny also, as if compelled to conclude the movement of the first blow, almost as something seen in retarded action, leaned forward and over, so that when the whole of the gesture was completed, Robin's hands were covered by Jenny's slight and bending breast, caught in between the bosom and the knees. (N 83)

As these examples demonstrate, Barnes is interested in one particular gesture above all: the fall, the stagger, the stumble—all forms of "going down." In each case, the violence is brought about by Robin's action or inaction—her rejection of motherhood, her betrayal of Nora, her indifference to Jenny. These are instances in which Robin's absence undermines her lovers' fantasies of voyeuristic sovereignty. Suddenly they manifest their own underlying desire or aggression towards Robin, a corporeal life that they can only experience as a "sensation of evil" and "dismember[ing]," an unravelling of the supposed coherence of subjectivity. Indeed, the gesture of the fall figures the loss of human dignity, where human dignity names the

independence of reason from animal nature. In two of the scenes, the stumble or fall involves a loss of sight—Felix’s swinging monocle and Nora’s eyes “dropped from their orbit by the falling of her body”—signifying the collapse of the I/eye of subjectivity. Robin’s absent-presence often causes the other characters to trip over the fact of embodiment, which they have attempted to suppress. Nora and Felix, despite their protestations, live the life of the body, albeit differently: with their fantasies of sovereign and voyeuristic subjectivity, they can experience corporeal existence only as a violent and terrifying fall.

These characters’ failures to acknowledge their own corporeal vulnerability with respect to Robin recall Hegel’s master-slave dialectic. In Butler’s interpretation of that dialectic, the master is seen renouncing his or her own body and essentially commanding the slave to “be my body for me” (*Psychic Life of Power* 35). The master desires recognition *as* master; yet to be a body is to be exposed and dependent on others and, by definition, not a master and not sovereign. Thus, the master renounces his own body by means of projection. There is a further condition, however, that the master needs satisfied:

In a sense, the lord postures as a disembodied desire for self-reflection, one who not only requires the subordination of the bondsman in the status of an instrumental body, but who requires in effect that the bondsman be the lord’s body, *but be it in such a way that the lord forgets or disavows his own activity in producing the bondsman [...]* (*Psychic Life of Power* 35, italics mine)

Butler summarizes: “In effect, the imperative to the bondsman consists in the following formulation: you be my body for me, but do not let me know that the body you are is my body” (*Psychic Life of Power* 35). The reason for this imperative is clear if one remembers that, for Hegel, the slave’s recognition of the master ultimately proves lacking and insufficient, since the

slave in his or her subordination is not an independent self-consciousness, and not capable of conferring the recognition wanted. Rather, his or her recognition has the same status as a confession coerced by means of torture, since it has not been freely offered, but has been extracted from the bondsman under the threat of death (Bernstein, “From Self-Consciousness to Community” 22). Thus, the recognition received by the master is not that of an equal, but the master’s own self-recognition projected on to another. This is the ironic and unintended consequence of the master’s actions: he has destroyed the very conditions necessary for recognition to take place.

Butler wants to demonstrate that the master’s disavowal of embodiment is nevertheless a particular mode of embodiment, since ultimately the master cannot escape the fact of corporeal existence. Stated more eloquently,

Disembodiment becomes a way of living or existing the body in the mode of denial. And the denial of the body, as in Hegel’s dialectic of master and slave, reveals itself as nothing other than the embodiment of denial” (“Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir’s *Second Sex*” 44).

In *Nightwood*, Robin is made to play the role of bondsman, yet she does not allow the other characters to “forget[] or disavow[] [their] own activity in producing the bondsman.” This dynamic of projection and disavowal is analogous to the commodity fetish, where the object appears independent of the labour that produced it. Yet, whereas the traditional Marxist analysis of the commodity fetish seeks to reclaim and celebrate the subject’s estranged labour, Butler and Barnes pursue a different tact. For them, the disavowed labour is symbolic of the violence, coercion, and exclusion that precedes the object’s constitution as commodity; instead, what they seek to reclaim is not the labour (which is expressive of the fact of commodification) but the

dynamism and contingency of intersubjective relations. As such, Barnes shows how Robin forces these characters to confront their coercive constitution of Robin as commodity object.

The novel's central metaphor for the misrecognition and reification that characterizes these characters' relation to Robin is the doll that Nora gives Robin. It represents both what the other characters do to Robin—deny her recognition and thereby turn her into a thing (reify her)—and the self-defeating consequences of their projections. On the one hand, Nora's gift of the doll symbolizes her desire to infantilize Robin. As I have demonstrated, the apparent concern Nora has for Robin's well-being is exposed as a desire for control and a denial of mortality. When Robin "hurl[s] the doll to the floor and puts her foot on it, crushing her heel into it," she is rebelling against Nora's refusal to cede her independence (*N* 157). The doll, however, takes on a whole set of new associations in Matthew O'Connor's musings. Matthew claims that one's childhood attachment to dolls and one's love of the invert ("immature," "third sex") are connected:

Have not girls done as much for the doll?—the doll—yes, target of things past and to come? The last doll, given to age, is the girl who should have been a boy, and the boy who should have been a girl! The love of that last doll was foreshadowed in that love of the first. The doll and the immature have something right about them, the doll because it resembles but does not contain life, and the third sex because it contains life but resembles the doll. (*N* 157)

For Matthew, the doll and the invert are alike in that both occupy an indeterminate space between life and death, human and doll, with this difference: the doll looks alive, but is inanimate, whereas the invert looks inanimate, but is alive. What causes Matthew to see the invert as lifeless, as doll-like? It is important to recall that, for Matthew, the sodomite "has

committed the unpardonable error of not being able to exist,” a reference to the fact that Robin, as a member of the third sex, combines gender codes in ways that render her unintelligible, or intelligible only as contradiction, impossibility, exception (*N* 100). In other words, the failure to exist is a failure to embody the normative ideal of the gendered human. The other characters respond to Robin’s difference either by coercively incorporating her into their “heterosexual matrix”—making her into wife, mother, or daughter—or labelling her an “invert,” “sodomite”—the categories themselves functioning as a means of objectification. Since these are identities imposed upon her from the outside, Robin is made doll-like, existing for the sake of others, and thus dead.<sup>11</sup>

Importantly, however, Robin does not strictly reject what is projected on her—after all, she marries Felix, bears him a son, and lives with Nora—yet neither does she accept or commit to these roles. Robin performs them, but with a detachment that suggests her non-identity with them, her being in excess of the categories her lovers employ to identify her. If Robin merely complied, her doll-like state—her being deprived of voice and agency—could easily be disavowed. If Robin were entirely passive, “without the volition for refusal,” her masters would not be forced to confront the ways in which they have projected their own corporeal vulnerability on Robin. Conversely, if Robin could project her own identity, she would be autonomous, free, and there would be no problem, since the others would seemingly have no power over her. Since Robin refuses to do the former and is incapable of the latter, she is like the doll, both dead (because she passively allows the projections to take place) and alive (since she implies her non-identity with them). She is doll-like, but animated by an excess, a difference, that draws attention to the fact that these roles are *impositions*, that there is more to her than is captured by these identities.

The destabilizing effect of the doll is hinted at when Nora tells Matthew, “we give death to a child when we give it a doll—it’s the effigy and the shroud; when a woman gives it to a woman, it is the life they cannot have, it is their child, sacred and profane” (*N* 151). The sentiment expressed in this passage may appear, as Merrill Cole suggests, a “homophobic” parody, “with dolls standing in for the children lesbian couples cannot have” (391). If the image of the child, however, functions elsewhere in the book as a symbol for an idealized future—namely a future in which vulnerability and dependence are overcome—then there is no reason to assume that in this particular instance Barnes intends anything different. Read from this perspective, Nora is implying that the doll is both a powerful figure for a utopian future, and, in its reality as inanimate thing, merely a substitute or stand-in for that future. It is both “effigy” or likeness of that promise, and, because only an effigy, also a “shroud,” declaring the absence of what is promised. Robin is, for the other characters, a promissory note symbolizing the possibility of recouping the losses of the past and achieving a wholeness and sovereignty not currently available to them. Yet, because only an effigy of that future, indeed an effigy that does not let the viewer forget that she has been produced as effigy, she is simultaneously a painful reminder of “the life they cannot have,” a voiding of the promissory note (*N* 151).

As this passage and others demonstrate, Robin’s disruptive, otherworldly power is connected to the way in which she represents the threat of a non-reproductive sexuality. This is evident in “La Somnambule” in which Felix’s vision of a sovereign future hinges on Robin giving him a son who feels as he does about the great past. When Robin gives birth to their child, he is described as a “quivering palsy of nerves” and is later referred to by the Doctor as “the shadow of [Felix’s] anxiety” (*N* 127). Thus, the boy is not a realization of the destiny Felix envisioned, but a realization of the anxiety, the sense of loss, that was the origin of that vision,

the very disquiet and apprehension he sought to allay by having a child. As such, the son does not represent a forward movement towards Felix's *telos*, but a regression back to Felix's lack. The son, a "quivering palsy of nerves" is the embodiment of anxiety, and anxiety serves as the affective representation of his disavowed embodiment (*N* 52). As such, *Nightwood* points to the self-defeating nature of Felix's vision: he wants to create an unmediated, direct transcription of his ideal image, and yet such an ideal transcription would be one without body, without substance, and something like a "quivering palsy of nerves," a boy suited only for the church. One might assume that Nora and Jenny, as lesbian lovers, would also embody or figure the threat of the non-reproductive. Yet, Nora's desire to save Robin by removing her from the flux of experience into the ordered space of the museum mirrors Felix's fantasies about salvaging an aristocratic past for the future—both see Robin as the (reproductive) means to a future in which a lost or damaged past is restored.

Interestingly, the doll is first mentioned in the novel in a description of the trapeze artist Frau Mann's outfit: "The stuff of the tights was no longer a covering, it was herself; the span of the tightly stitched crotch was so much her own flesh that she was as unsexed as a doll. The needle that had made one the property of the child made the other the property of no man" (*N* 16). If Robin is similarly doll-like, she is also "the property of no man." The passage describes the paradoxical nature of Robin's resistance in the novel. Robin is turned into a doll by the other characters, made a commodity by being reduced to exchange value, precisely in order that they may grasp and possess her; yet, at the same time, in being turned into a doll/commodity she escapes their control and confounds their fantasies. In her radical dispossession, Robin goes beyond the realm of exchange and ownership altogether, becoming unpossessable. In this sense, she is like Adorno's "absolute commodity" or Stein's collected object, which, as manifestations

of exaggerated fetishism, leap beyond the realm of both use and exchange value, shedding entirely the appearance of being *for us*. As doll, Robin is stitched without genitalia, and thus is “unsexed,” and remains impenetrable and impregnable, incapable of bearing the son Felix desires or becoming the daughter Nora yearns for. Nora and Felix have projected their fantasies onto Robin and, in doing so, transformed into an image of what they desire—a child—yet, by means of her unsettling absent-presence, she refuses to let them forget their own role in constructing this image. As such, she calls attention to her status as doll, rather than real child, and foregrounds the work of the “needle.” Dispossessed by their self-serving projections, she becomes the image of an absolute dispossession—the property of no one, not even herself—incapable either of being naturalized within their fantasy worlds or clinging to some identity prior to the others’ impositions.

The sexless doll is a fetish of the human body, an abstraction from the biological sexed body. Yet, Barnes locates a surprising power in this fetishized body. The unsexed body of the doll, or the sexually over-determined body of the invert, undermines a model of self-other relations that is penetrative and reproductive, where knowledge of the other is acquired by means of active conquest and is driven by a desire to consolidate one’s sovereignty.

### **Wandering the night: Robin, non-reifying relations to others, and containment**

I have argued Robin’s estranged and aloof subjectivity does more than denaturalize the other characters’ imposition of fixed and highly reductive identities on her; it also serves to figure alternative, less coercive modes of sociality. This point is contentious, however, as the single, most common source of disagreement in *Nightwood* scholarship concerns the interpretation of Robin, with some scholars reading Robin as self-destructive, narcissistic, and

unethical, and others comprehending her as a subversive force, one capable of resisting those who would make her a “target forever.”

Among the latter contingent, Jane Marcus observes that “the name ‘Vote’ signifies the suffragettes, often martyrs and victims of police brutality” and thus casts Robin in the role of revolutionary feminist, part of the novel’s “feminist-anarchist call for freedom from fascism” (“Laughing at Leviticus” 221). For Shari Benstock, Robin “serves as a ‘sign’ of female difference repressed by Western culture” and adds that, “in such a culture the control that Robin Vote exercises over her various lovers is not the sign of cruelty, bestiality, and depravity, but rather a recognition of control over her own sexuality” (257, 260). Conversely, Mia Spiro reads Robin as embodying Hannah Arendt’s notion of the “banality of evil” (128). Robin’s paralysis, her inability to act, ultimately proves as much an ethical failure as the others’ coercive sociality. According to Dianne Chisholm, Barnes “flaunts a queer skepticism concerning sexual liberation and its bohemian milieu”: “Robin is lost to the night. In her we see not the residue of the Sadean libertine but the failure of the Sadean revolution. That she makes her way back to the decaying chapel suggests her ‘excommunication’ is not yet complete” (“Obscene Modernism” 176). Anne Martin argues that “Barnes depicts [...] the negative aspects of boundary crossings” in addition to the liberatory aspects: “In texts such as *Ryder*, *Nightwood*, and *The Antiphon*, where authority is invoked in the unpredictable and often disturbing ways, systems predicated on the rejection of mainstream values are often abusive themselves” (119). Finally, Laura Winkiel contends that Robin’s subjectivity is emblematic of the alienation and estrangement of the commodity: “Barnes uses Robin to express her fear of mass culture’s empty promise of happiness and isolating effects that rob subjects of memories, emotions, and ties” (27).

For my part, I understand Robin as manifesting a possibility of resistance to oppressive forms

of power, while simultaneously demonstrating the limitations and costs of such agency. On the one hand, like the critics who understand Robin negatively, I want to suggest that *Nightwood* in no way treats Robin's mode of being, so to speak, as an ahistorical ideal, something desirable in and of itself. In her relations with the novel's central characters, Robin manifests a kind of non-identity that unsettles their narcissistic fantasies. Producing the shock-like effect of non-identity, however, does not in itself create reciprocity, or lead to a situation of mutual recognition. While figuring radical alterity might confer to Robin some limited power, it does not save her entirely from the violence to which it responds. Thus, Barnes imagines Robin's subjectivity as both the result of and a response to a historically-rooted oppression. Robin's subjectivity displays the scars of what she rebels against. The calamitous aspect of Robin's story is that she is given few options but to figure of the dissonance that calls the system of identity into question. Similarly, Robin's detached and aloof existence is not admirable in itself, but only in relation to the hidden narcissism of the rest of her society. Only once that societal narcissism is recognized does Robin's indifference appear subversive, a means of contesting reified sociality by means of its own tools.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the novel's enigmatic final scene. Robin's encounter with Nora's dog in the abandoned chapel behind Nora's house has generated a variety of conflicting interpretations. For Jane Marcus, the lesson of the ending, like many of Matthew's teachings, is that Nora "must bend, bow down, experience the body and get out of herself in ritual or carnival, let herself go, deal with the animal in herself" ("Laughing at Leviticus" 234). Dianne Chisholm, on the other hand, takes the scene as evidence that "Robin is lost to the night," and that her "'ex-communication' is not yet complete" (194) The scene's ambivalence makes deciding between these alternate readings difficult. On the one hand, Robin's return to the chapel

and to Nora suggests an inability to escape entirely the people and community that mistreated her. The creation of a “make-shift altar” gestures not to revolutionary resistance but slavishness. On the other hand, the scene is one in which Robin is most defiant of Nora’s puritanical sensibilities, most inhuman. Thus, Robin is “the possessed,” both because animated by unconscious desires *and* the property of others. Indeed, I believe that this ambivalence is irresolvable and speaks to the fact that while Robin contests the dualisms of day and night, independence and dependence, she does so while annexed to this splintered world.

Matthew O’Connor’s ruminations about the night illuminate both sides of this antimony—the potential of the night to figure an alternative form of subjectivity and community and simultaneously the way in which this night world is contained by its very opposition to the day. In his response to Nora’s desperate plea to be told “everything . . . about the night,” Matthew first of all challenges the idea (implied by Nora’s question) of there being only one night, suggesting instead that the night takes different forms: “‘Have you thought of the night, now, in other times, in foreign countries—in Paris? . . . [T]he nights of one period are not the nights of another. Neither are the nights of one city the nights of another’” (*N* 88). To think about the night in the singular is to reify the night, treat it as thing-like—that is, isolatable from its immersion in history and culture. Not only are there different nights, but there are also different ways of relating to the night. Matthew draws a distinction between the way Americans and the French experience the night: “The night and the day are two travels, and the French—gut-greedy and fist-tight though they often are—alone leave testimony of the two in the dawn; we tear up one for the sake of the other; not so the French” (*N* 89). The American, according to Matthew, “separates the two for fear of indignities, so that the mystery is cut in every cord” (*N* 91). Part of a “too eagerly washing people,” the American wants to forget the night-time experience, exclude

it from his or her sense of self, and thus accords the night no authority or significance. The night, however, is unavoidable, and necessarily constitutive of subjectivity, and thus attempts at forgetting inevitably fail.

Matthew further distinguishes between those who go out into the night and those who go to sleep. In terms of the last opposition, both the sleeper and the walker are “changed,” at least momentarily, by the experience of the night. Yet, whereas those who go to sleep can forget the night, can return to their daily routines, those who go out (“the young, the drug addict, the profligate, the drunken and that most miserable, the lover who watches all night long in fear and anguish”) can “never again live the life of the day”; or rather, in living the life of the day, “give off [...] a protective emanation, something dark and muted” (N 101). Similarly, Maurice Blanchot distinguishes between sleep and the dream: whereas sleep is simply preparation for the labour of the day, the dream is a kind of wakefulness or restlessness in sleep (*The Infinite Conversation* 210). Thus, sleep functions to contain and control, even while giving expression to, the night, precisely in order to keep it from affecting the business of the day. The dream, on the other hand, what Blanchot calls the “other night,” is a restlessness or waking in sleep, and, as such, is not only a resistance to sleep, but a contesting of the very dualisms of day and night, wakefulness and sleep, labour and rest (*The Infinite Conversation* 210). In *Nightwood*, it is the “profligate,” the one who goes out to visit cafes at night, who embodies the restlessness of Blanchot’s dream, who refuses to “separate[e] the two for fear of indignities.” While Felix, Nora, and Jenny willingly sacrifice the night for the sake of the day (“tear one up for the sake of the other”), Robin is like those who “give off a protective emanation, something dark and muted” in day-time existence. That is to say, rather than forget the night, she attempts to include the night in her identity.

The night world makes possible another form of sociality—one that is foreign to the society that Felix and Nora inhabit and project. This alternative community is not founded on rigid identity categories—the reduction of others to exchange value—but rather embraces a fluidity of identity and a continual becoming. It is a world of cafés and bars, and thus not escape from money, exchange, or circulation, but a realm where these exchanges occur without the fiction of perfect equivalence. Yet, at the same time, the inescapable dualisms of night and day work to police the social order. For Matthew and Robin, going out is at least partially connected to their status in society as “inverts” or members of the third sex. As individuals who have “committed the unpardonable error of not being able to exist,” whose articulations of gender, sexuality, and desire makes them inadmissible to the dominant schemas of identification, they are compelled to live double lives. Only under the cover of darkness are they allowed to pursue their criminal desires. While the night then offers some possibility of community among similarly marginalized individuals, it comes at a cost: exclusion from the day-time spheres of power. The heterosexual matrix, exemplified by Felix and Nora, gives space to Robin and Matthew’s night-time desires but, in doing so, attempts to annex them, ensuring that they cannot challenge the dominant schemas of knowing. The flip-side of Felix and Nora’s attempts to homogenize Robin’s difference by translating her into staid identity categories is to relegate her to the realm of pure night, treating her difference as so absolute that it need not be accounted for—a gesture that, like incorporation, works to preserve the status quo.

In a revealing passage from Barnes’s journalism, she discovers this same dynamic operating in Hollywood cinema:

Out in Hollywood, the managers of picture houses leave the lights off several moments at the close of a sad or harrowing film [so] that the audience—film stars and beauties of all

kinds, and sorts—may repair the ravages of emotion (if any) without being observed of the vulgar public. I have been puzzled all my life as to why I never wanted to be an actress, and now I know. When I cry, low lights or high, it's one and the same. Cry I will and let who will be handsome. (“Wanton Playgoer” 21)

Barnes implies that stars want to avoid being seen in the throes of powerful emotion. Ironically, the very same stars who inspire such strong emotions by means of melodramatic performances on screen cannot be seen to experience these emotions off screen, where, apparently, they are expected to exhibit composure and control. Thus, Barnes critiques Hollywood from a different angle than in her earlier journalism: rather than focus on the aggressive and objectifying public gaze, she considers individualistic stars who seek to perpetuate a false appearance of self-possession. Barnes, for her part, balks at these codes of propriety, claiming that when she cries, “it’s one and the same,” regardless of where she is or who is watching.

Interestingly, the darkened movie theatre signifies both the necessary condition for producing emotion capable of “ravag[ing]” the spectator, and also the means to disguise, cover over, and disavow this emotional excess. Insofar as the darkened theatre is essential for watching movies, it is linked to the violent and overpowering emotions that film inspire. Moreover, since affect, emotion, desire, and intuition are often figured (at least, post-Enlightenment) as forms of irrational darkness in contrast to the light of reason, the darkness of the theatre also directly figures “ravag[ing]” emotion. At the same time, however, the obscurity of the theatre in this passage signifies the lack of visibility (priority, importance) granted affect as reason’s denigrated other. The darkness allows the stars to hide the “harrowing” effects of the film on their person; in doing so, it works to police and reinforce the boundaries between life and art, reason and unreason. At the close of a movie, Barnes’s Hollywood stars disengage and distance themselves

from the world of the film, forget its capacity to excite, decompose, and unsettle. The sphere of affect is thereby deemed trivial and insignificant: the stars experience emotion privately, but cannot bring this into the light of a public sphere, cannot acknowledge the passions that overwhelm him or her. Similarly, the metaphor of the night in *Nightwood* works overtime, figuring animal embodiment and vulnerability, and at the same time, the invisibility and voicelessness accorded those qualities in a highly rationalized world.

This chapter began with an exploration of Barnes's journalism, one principal interest of which is in the phenomenon of modern stardom, particularly female stardom, and the culture industry. Barnes associates female stardom with fetishism and objectification: in being made a spectacle, the female performer is deprived of control over her craft and made subservient to masculine fantasies. Yet, Barnes is not wholly pessimistic about stardom and the opportunities it affords women. She seems fascinated by the vamp figure even though, in an article about Alla Nazimova, she decries the limitations the role imposes upon a talented actress. Nancy Levine suggests that Barnes found feminist potential in the way vamp characters manage to eschew the sexual mores of bourgeois society and claim a kind of sexual autonomy that was uncommon yet attractive for women of that time (even though the narrative logic of those films worked to punish the women for that independence). In several of her early writings, Barnes references two actresses known for their vamp roles, Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo, and it is clear she finds a certain power in their reinvention of the vamp role in the 1930s. This power stems not only from their subversion of gender norms, as Levine argues, but also seemingly from their cultivation of enigma and predilection for silence. Barnes's positive account of these actresses and the vamp role in general suggests that she sees a possibility for resistance from within the objectified subjectivity of the female star.

In *Nightwood*, Barnes explores feminist resistance further, principally through the character of Robin Vote, who invokes the vamps of Garbo and Dietrich. Robin troubles gender norms and exhibits a strange absent-presence that recalls Barnes's descriptions of the two Hollywood stars. Barnes contrasts Robin with her various lovers in the novel, Felix, Nora, and Jenny, all of whom objectify Robin (not unlike the masculine audiences Barnes associates with the culture industry), transforming her into an object of knowledge, something they can know and possess. In presenting these two very different models of subjectivity, the novel interrogates the reification of subjectivity in the modern world, positing at least two forms of the estranged individual: the atomistic subject, who relates to the world as a detached and autonomous observer, like *homo economicus*, and the subject as commodity object, exemplified by the female film star in Barnes's journalism, and by Robin in *Nightwood*. Interestingly, Barnes does not present a non-estranged model of subjectivity to counter these two forms of alienation but suggests how the latter mode of subjectivity—the subject as object—might be occupied, performed, or inflected in ways that render it a subversive force, one that undermines the very dichotomy between active and passive subject.

The novel diagnoses various characters' attempts to reify Robin, making her an object with a fixed, determinate identity, as a defensive function, one that allows them to disavow their vulnerability and sustain a fantasy of sovereign selfhood. Their self-serving readings seek to overwrite and eliminate Robin's alterity, making her a "target forever," but Robin—somnambulist, languorous, and indifferent—undercuts these attempts in a curious way. Her aloof passivity in the face of these projections, far from a form of capitulation as it initially appears, make these projections visible as projections. As such, Robin's disruptive effect

functions akin to the collected object in Stein's work: she compels an experience of shock in the other that unsettles their illusions of autonomy.

Robin is unique in the modernist canon as a character whose passivity and estrangement, far from being presented as the deleterious effect of mechanized labour or the expanding consumer sphere, constitutes a mode of power. For Barnes, the passive subject protests its objectification, while simultaneously embracing the sociality, dependence, and vulnerability of subjectivity. While Robin, in her passivity and detachment, exemplifies a kind of self-estrangement, the novel suggests her subjectivity forms a potent antidote to the more worrisome estrangement demonstrated by the supposedly autonomous subject of modernity—an instrumental and analytical detachment from others, embodied life, and the sensuous world.

No critic has yet to read *Nightwood* in terms of an ethics of reification and recognition. The dominant theoretical models for the interpretation of *Nightwood* have been psychoanalytic and new-historical.<sup>12</sup> While the psychoanalytic model successfully captures some of the complexity of the interpersonal relationships in the novel, these readings sometimes neglect the ways in which the novel responds to a particular historical milieu. Indeed, the novel depicts a situation in which the grids of recognition have become formalized and scripted, rigid and unchanging as a result of a commodity culture that reduces the world to exchange value. As a result, while there is the appearance of recognition, the reciprocity and the process of becoming in Hegelian recognition is denied. Where there is no reciprocity, there is no possibility of opening up the social to new iterations of personal and collective identity. Indeed, in *Nightwood*, it is Felix and Nora who seem most interested in establishing relations with others, while Robin appears defiantly anti-social. As I have been arguing, however, this appearance is deceptive, for Felix and Nora all refuse to acknowledge the ways in which their own subjectivity is tied up with

Robin's.

In conclusion, it is interesting to note the parallels between the lives of Garbo and Barnes. Both retired from the public spotlight at the peak of their creative powers. Garbo did not return to the screen after the critical failure of *Two-Faced Woman* in 1941, despite being offered numerous roles throughout the 1940s and 1950s. Barnes continued to write after *Nightwood* was published in 1937, but interruptedly, only publishing a play and a few poems in her lifetime. Both led reclusive existences in Manhattan until their deaths, Barnes in 1984 and Garbo in 1990. Interestingly, and probably for these sorts of reasons, Barnes has been called the “Garbo of letters” (Herring xvii). Late in life, Barnes reflected on the fact that although *Nightwood* achieved cult status, few remembered the name of its author, telling a friend, “I am the most famous unknown of the century” (Letter to Natalie Clifford Barney, 31 May 1963). The title “most famous unknown” might well be applied to Garbo. Indeed, Barnes may have been interested in Garbo because of the relationship she established between those two terms—fame and unknownness. Garbo's enigma is not exactly the result of resisting fame, but a constitutive element in her fame. Garbo is known as enigma and famous for being unknown. While it can be tempting to read Barnes's lack of productivity as disappointing or tragic, there is at the same time something un-Barnesian about this thought. While there is a note of regret in Barnes observing that she is “the most famous unknown,” there is, at the same time, a sense of defiant pride. This is not surprising considering how she depicts “Garbo” in *Theatre Guild Magazine*, as though being unknown were in itself an achievement. Perhaps, instead of regret, one should take Barnes's withdrawal, her refusal, as an opportunity to interrogate the value assigned to productivity, to the prolific, or the demand to turn one's life into a Work.

The active-passive indifference of Garbo and Robin—and perhaps even Barnes herself—

finds an echo in Virginia Woolf's notion of a "Society of Outsiders," a society that would resist patriarchy by means of "active and passive measures" (*TG* 117). Woolf's articulation of feminist resistance in *Three Guineas* and *Between the Acts* will be the focus of the following chapter, and while there are similarities between Barnes and Woolf's positions, there are also striking differences, especially in their conception of what such resistance acts against. Whereas Barnes focuses on the objectification of female subjectivity in a commodity culture, Woolf is interested in women's exclusion from the professions, as well as the destructive rationality that governs those professions—a rationality that prizes unending sacrifice in the name of accumulation and progress, and which is modeled on the temporal circuits of money acting as capital. Whereas Barnes's consideration of the commodification of identity raised questions about the relation of subjects to society, Woolf's exploration of money, the commodity *par excellence*, will raise questions about temporality and the relation of subjects to the present and future.

### CHAPTER 3

#### Woolf on Wall Street: *Between the Acts*, Money, and the Endlessness of Capital

While paying a waiter for dinner, the narrator of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) pauses to marvel at the magical abilities of her purse: "[It] is a fact that takes my breath away—the power of my purse to breed ten-shilling notes automatically. I open it and there they are" (33). Of course, the narrator of *A Room of One's Own* is being ironic. She has inherited a fortune from her aunt, Mary Breton, which pays her five hundred pounds a year for the duration of her life. The purse doesn't actually breed money on its own, though it may appear this way to the narrator, who need not work at a job in order to replenish its supply.

Woolf herself inherited twenty-five hundred pounds from her aunt, Caroline Emelia Stephen, in 1909. Together with other inheritances and with the interest that money accrued, Woolf received roughly four hundred pounds a year (Marcus, "The Niece of a Nun" 7). The automatic breeding of the purse might be taken to refer both to the inheritance and to the phenomenon of interest-bearing capital, the fact that money in a bank will increase over time. Woolf's argument in *A Room of One's Own* is that, for female writers, five hundred pounds a year purchases the independence, peace of mind, and security they need to focus on their art.

Woolf's anecdote about the purse's fertility recalls several colourful passages from Karl Marx's *Capital* (1867). Marx claims that interest-bearing capital is an instance of "self-expanding value, money generating money" (*Capital* 3: 392). Elsewhere, he suggests capital "has acquired the occult quality of being able to add value to itself. It brings forth living offspring, or, at the least, lays golden eggs" (*Capital* 1: 255). Finally, capital

presents itself as an independent substance, endowed with a motion of its own, passing through a life-process of its own [ . . . ] It differentiates itself as original value from itself as surplus-value; as the father differentiates himself from himself qua the son, yet both are one and of one age [...] (*Capital 1*: 256)

Marx, like Woolf, is describing appearances. When the money we put in a bank earns interest and increases, it may seem that it has multiplied independently of anything we or anyone else has done. In reality, however, a lot of activity has gone on behind our backs. The bank loans out our money to other people looking to make big purchases, and these individuals work to repay the loan plus accumulated interest. Some of the interest the bank receives from that loan will be passed back to the lender, some to shareholders. Nothing guarantees this return, however. Under certain economic circumstances, the money put into a bank may not realize interest, may even decrease. Marx's point is that these complexities are not visible to the individual since what one perceives directly is only the spontaneous multiplication of one's money. This is why Marx refers to interest-bearing capital as "the automatic fetish" (*Capital 3*: 392).

Importantly, both Woolf and Marx employ metaphors of asexual reproduction to describe money's powers of self-multiplication. Marx makes an analogy between capital's self-reproduction and God giving birth directly to Jesus, while Woolf's purse "breed[s]" "automatically." In fact, the motif of asexual reproduction pervades *A Room of One's Own*, used not only to describe money but also female artistic production. Elizabeth Abel notes that *A Room of One's Own* employs the metaphor of parthenogenesis in order to "write men out of the figures of birth pervading *Room*" (89). Thus, Woolf subversively plays with the conventional metaphor of literary creation as a kind of birth, transforming it by making it unnatural and non-biological. Since, according to Woolf's argument, women need financial independence in order to write,

works of art must be conceived without masculine mediation, and thus through a form of parthenogenesis. The purse is both the source of the narrator's independence and also a model of (re)productivity that the narrator wants to emulate.

Like the appearance of money breeding money in Marx, Woolf's magical purse conceals its origins, although not completely. A few sentences after paying the server, Woolf's speaker informs the reader that the aunt whose fortune she inherited "died by a fall from her horse when she was riding out to take the night air in Bombay" (*AROO* 33). The reference to Mumbai situates Mary Breton's fortune within the context of British imperialism. As Susan Stanford Friedman points out, "living on interest from a legacy harks back to the imperial and class structures upon which the upper-middle classes in Britain traditionally relied to fund a leisured way of life" (31). Friedman goes on to suggest that Woolf's purse "reveals the implication of an emergent upper-middle-class female subject in the structure of the British Empire and international banking system" (31).

Marx and Woolf both express ambivalence about money. They are fascinated by its circulations and somewhat monstrous autonomy yet disturbed by some of its social implications and effects. While Marx objects to the capitalist system in which money plays a key role, he nevertheless reserves some of his most poetic language for describing the "solipsistic speculative dance of Capital" (Žižek, *Less Than Nothing* 244). While Woolf's narrator gasps with pleasure at the appearance of money in her wallet, as though privy to a clever parlour trick, Woolf, like Marx, has reservations about the power of money within a capitalist society. Immediately after ruminating on her purse and the effects of a fixed income on her psychological state, the narrator observes that,

They too, the patriarchs, the professors, had endless difficulties, terrible drawbacks to

contend with. Their education had been in some ways as faulty as my own. It had bred in them defects as great. True, they had money and power, but only at the cost of harbouring in their breasts an eagle, a vulture, for ever tearing the liver out and plucking at the lungs—the instinct for possession, the rage for acquisition which drives them to desire other people’s fields and goods perpetually; to make frontiers and flags; battleships and poison gas; to offer up their own lives and their children’s lives. (*AROO* 35)

The more money these men possess, the more they feel a sense of lack and want; excessive wealth kindles in them a “rage for acquisition” that knows no limits, driving them to commit violent acts and endure great sacrifices (they “offer their own lives and their children’s lives”) in the name of perpetual accumulation. The passage invokes the story of Prometheus (“harbouring in their breasts an eagle, a vulture, for ever tearing the liver out and plucking at the lungs”), a myth that is frequently interpreted as a warning about hubris and the unintended consequences of ambition (Peters 145). The allusion reinforces the irony in Woolf’s argument: money, traditionally envisioned as a means to the good life (both for the individual and society as a whole), becomes instead the source of “endless difficulties.” The passage escalates from the classical image of Prometheus to gas warfare, asserting a connection between this “rage for acquisition” and warfare, an association that, as I will show, Woolf explores further in *Three Guineas* and *Between the Acts*.

Money plays an ambivalent role in the materialist-feminist politics espoused in such works as *A Room of One’s Own* and *Three Guineas*. In particular, Woolf objects to the unequal distribution of money between genders—the fact that women’s colleges were vastly underfunded when compared with men’s, the lack of control women exercised over family finances, the exclusion of women from the professions, and the unequal pay women received for doing the

same work as men. Yet the focus of this chapter is not Woolf's attitude towards redistribution but her attitude towards money in general—money as one of the most significant phenomena of modernity, an instrument with profound symbolic, psychological, and material influence. As I will demonstrate, Woolf raises questions about how money is used—whether spent, invested, hoarded, etc.—and about the various figures which come to embody those attitudes towards money—namely, misers and spendthrifts. She also raises economic questions about the relationship among production, consumption, and credit in advanced capitalist economies.

The overarching argument of the chapter is that Woolf is not critical of money in the abstract—for instance, she avoids the shibboleth that money is the root of all evil—nor of a culture defined by reckless spending and the passive consumption of commodities. This sets her apart from her modernist peers, many of whom associate money with spending, wastefulness, and the non-(re)productive. Instead, Woolf objects to money's function as capital. As capital, money is constantly in the process of becoming more money as part of an endless cycle of accumulation through self-multiplication. Thus, for Woolf, the problem with money and the money economy is not an association with wastefulness or the unproductive, but an association with an accelerated (re)productivity. In its endless self-perpetuation, money makes all other things, including human subjects, the means to its own mission of expansion for the sake of expansion.

I elucidate Woolf's view of money through explorations of *Three Guineas* and, more extensively, *Between the Acts*, and place it in the context of her Bloomsbury peer, economist John Maynard Keynes. In Woolf's view, money as capital engenders certain psychological neuroses in human subjects, making them ascetic, solipsistic, and socially destructive. Her analysis bears a striking similarity to Keynes's account of the "purposive man" (*Collected*

*Writings* IX:330). For both writers, the passion for accumulating money is founded on a fantasy of immortality and unbounded freedom. Money, which is in Keynes terms “a link between present and future” (*Collected Writings* VII:293), promises its owner the same endlessness and infinite productivity which characterizes its circulation as capital. Moreover, as the most liquid of assets, money serves psychologically as a safeguard against the threat of contingency: the fetish for money comforts its owner with the promise that it can be traded for anything. The consequences of such fantasies are dire. In Woolf’s view (and Keynes’s) the drive to save money or spend it in order to net a return or profit impoverishes the present moment, making it forever a time of restraint, calculation, and labour. Pleasure in consumption is perpetually deferred, projected onto a utopian future that never arrives.

Woolf’s analysis in *Between the Acts* anticipates Jacques Derrida’s economic thought, namely his contention that the economic “implies the idea of exchange, of circulation, of return” (*Given Time* 6). The professional men and stockbrokers in Woolf’s work imagine that every expenditure in the present can be recouped, made productive, net a return, at a future moment of time. Thus, each expenditure is but a temporary loss because simultaneously an investment in the future. The fantasy envisions time as both linear and circular, involving ever-accumulating quantities of money but also a continual return to the point of departure. Like Stein’s journalist, who wants to deny the limits of our knowledge, or Barnes’s Felix and Nora, who want to forget their mortality and interdependence, the professional man’s fantasy is founded on a disavowal of loss. They cling to the belief that money and energies can accumulate endlessly, without limit. The consequences of such a fantasy are deleterious to both self and other: it demands that the self adopt a calculative mindset that dissociates from sensuous enjoyment in consumption and simultaneously forces sacrifice on others, insisting that they, too, subordinate themselves to the

creation of a redemptive future. For Woolf, the alternative to this concept of money and the economic is a version of what Derrida calls “the renunciation of a calculable remuneration” and Bataille calls “non-productive expenditure”—an embrace of wasteful spending and consumption that breaks open the circle, so to speak, and finds pleasure in the fleeting and finite (*The Gift of Death* 107, *Visions of Excess* 118). Importantly, Woolf finds her model for this resistance not in a realm outside of the economy but in the spendthrift or consumer, a character central to commodity culture. Thus, like Stein and Barnes, Woolf can be seen as leveraging one component of capitalist culture—the consumer—against another—the banker or stockbroker.

In *Between the Acts*, Woolf shows how money circuits—the process in which money is spent or invested in order to yield more money—and the professional man’s self-destructive obsession with accumulation infects not just the business realm but also the domestic space. Woolf equates fantasies about money and time with a fixation on human reproduction for its own sake, an atavistic narrative characterized by strife, subordination, and denial. In particular, it involves the subordination of women and their needs to the labour of biological and social reproduction. The plot shares with money circuits the idea that the future is a place of fulfillment and completion, the realization of a telos, and that the present is but a means to that end. Rejecting this mode, the novel seeks, in Isa’s words, “a new plot,” one that escapes the future-obsessed endlessness of capital accumulation and the reproductive plot (*BTA* 194). The novel figures this escape in terms of a present that is not an interval, not a transition “between acts”; a spending that is not (re)productive; and a mode of being that finds fleeting pleasure in sensuousness, consumption, and “ending” (*BTA* 162).

While no character receives an entirely sympathetic portrayal from Woolf, Isa Oliver and Miss La Trobe, the novel’s two artist figures, come closest to founding a new “plot.” Isa rebels

against the mandated script of motherhood and sacrifice through autoerotic fantasy and spontaneously composed poetry, examples of non-productive expenditure, yet she curtails these activities by the end of the day and appears to reconcile with her husband, the stockbroker, and his economics of thrift and futurity. In short, she does not oppose the old plot, but ultimately sustains it in order that “another life might be born” (197). Miss La Trobe, meanwhile, employs experimental artistic techniques in her pageant, which force her audience to become aware of different temporal modes, thereby upsetting the smooth progression of what Benjamin calls “homogenous, empty time” (*Selected Writings: 1938-1940* 261). Yet, in her desire for the great historical task of cultural continuity and her own authoritarian posturing, La Trobe undermines the subversive potential of her experimental techniques. In the end, Woolf’s novel provides glimpses of an alternative to the endless and devouring force of money circuits in instances of spending that do not aim at gain or return or an idealized future, but only fleeting, ephemeral pleasure. At the same time, the novel illustrates capitalism’s capacity to coopt and defuse that which opposes its rule.

### **Modernism and the “god of commodities”**

The goal of this dissertation is to interrogate the kinds of narratives that modernists produced about the work of art and the commodity. In each chapter, I have focused on how one literary modernist depicts art’s relationship to a particular commodity: in the first, it was the newspaper; in the second, Hollywood film and the film star; and in this chapter, money—a suitable place to end, given that money is, according to Marx, “the god of commodities” (*A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* 125). These particular commodities, some of modernist art’s most notorious others, help throw into relief modernists’ attitudes towards

capitalism, commodity-fetishism, and technology.

Woolf was not the only modernist concerned with money. Gertrude Stein wrote several columns in the *Saturday Evening Post* about money in the 1930s:

Everybody now just has to make up their mind. Is money money or isn't money money. Everybody who earns it and spends it every day in order to live knows that money is money, anybody who votes it to be gathered in as taxes knows money is not money. That is what makes everybody go crazy. (*How Writing is Written* 116)

Stein's texts constitute a thinly-disguised attack on Roosevelt's New Deal economic policies and, in particular, government deficit-spending. Those who believe that money is not money are variously kings and presidents—those who spend large amounts of money without restraint. Stein herself sides with those who believe that money *is* money and expresses disapproval of those who spend more than they have and thus go into debt. She invokes an economy of scarcity, in which a finite supply of money, constantly at risk of being depleted, must be spent wisely. The fiscally conservative nature of her critique sits at odds with other aspects of Stein's avant-garde practice and politics, particularly her own passion for consumer culture and the moment of consumption in any productive act.

Among literary modernists, no one was more interested in money and the finance economy than Ezra Pound. In the late 1910s, Pound became a devotee of Major Douglas's economic theories that laid the foundation of the Social Credit movement in Britain. Douglas held that, in a capitalist society, purchasing power would always lag behind productive capacity, and thus state intervention was required to redistribute resources and bolster consumption. Along with Douglas, Pound believed that in an unregulated capitalist society money circulates in ways that primarily benefit a small contingent of money managers and bankers, professions which act as

parasites on innovative and useful industry. Leon Surette has argued that Pound's economic beliefs deeply inform his poetry. *The Cantos*, specifically, are animated by an opposition between *amor* and *usura* (Surette 78-80). Whereas *amor* is nature's (re)productive sexual powers, its inherent fertility, *usura* is associated with a non-procreative, unnatural, and "dysfunctional sexuality" (Surette 56). Marsh succinctly summarizes Pound's position: "Money, however, and especially moneymaking, like Western metaphysics, is explicitly, unabashedly, contrary to the pre-economy of nature because it is homosexual, that is, it works through "the economy of the same," it reproduces without recourse to the Other" (113).

For instance, in Canto LI, Pound postulates,

Usury brings age into youth; it lies between the bride and the bridegroom

Usury is against Nature's increase. (*Cantos* 250)

Pound's economic thought also exposes his virulent anti-Semitism, as the usurious 'Jew' is a recurring figure in Pound's work, and thus, his economic views typify and are, in turn, justified by anti-Semitism and homophobia. Like Pound, Woolf also explores economics through an economics of sex. Woolf, however, pursues a different tact than Pound in critiquing the financial economy. As I will demonstrate, she does not claim that this economy is sterile and non-reproductive, but, on the contrary, *too* reproductive, embodying a pure and accelerated instrumentality. For Pound, the usurer's riches do not derive from the production of real, material things, and so represent only the illusion of wealth. The usurer parasitically siphons off value from the productive members of society. Woolf, by contrast, is not bothered by the distinction between the real and fictitious production of wealth; she objects instead to the productive imperative itself, the idea that every expenditure of energy or money must be recouped at a future moment in time, must lead to returns, growth, and profit (an imperative not questioned by

Pound). The money economy is reproduction without end, the ceaseless drive to produce a promissory value—a value to be realized at an unspecified and continually deferred moment in the future. For Woolf, this economy is not associated with the homosexual but the heterosexual; not with a parasitic and non-productive activity, but with a (re)productive labour. Ultimately, it is a labour driven by the impossible fantasy of a future in which contingency and lack are overcome and the subject or nation is rendered whole and self-present. This is not only an impossible ideal but also an unfulfilling way of living that renders the present moment merely a transitory stage in a historical unfolding. It demands the continual sacrifice of the pleasures inherent in leisure and consumption, the spending and giving of resources without restraint or calculation. Woolf critiques the money economy for this reason, in sharp contrast to Pound's lament about productivity, and celebrates these acts of non-productive expenditure that Pound denigrates and associates with the usurer, the homosexual, and the Jew.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Three Guineas*, endlessness, and professional men**

Money is a recurring subject in Woolf's work. Alex Zwerdling notes that she “wrote about class and money with exceptional frankness at a time when these subjects were increasingly felt to be indecent” (*Virginia Woolf and the Real World* 88). Woolf's abiding interest in money is perhaps nowhere more evident than in *Three Guineas*, a work that, as Elena Gualtieri puts it, “announced straight from its title its intention to engage with the bare truth of pounds and shillings” (188). Written in the 1930s, the work is Woolf's most direct exploration of money's psychological influence and function in a patriarchal society.

The long essay was the product of a “documentary project” Woolf pursued throughout the 30s, which saw her amass a collection of newspaper clippings detailing “war, the rise of fascism,

and the treatment of women in the labor force, education, and the church” (Marcus “Introduction” xlv). Woolf draws on these clippings and the facts and figures they contain to support her claims about women’s material inequality. Jane Marcus argues that the “pound sign is the most important signifier in the book,” joking that it “appears so often in the text that the typesetters must have thought it was a new letter in the alphabet” (“Introduction” xliii).<sup>2</sup>

The book’s most extensive commentary on money occurs in its second section where the speaker responds to a letter inviting her to support an organization that helps women to enter the professions. In her answer, the speaker acknowledges the importance of the cause but contends that mere entry into the professions is not sufficient to emancipate women. Because the professions are governed by an irrational and self-destructive spirit that is inherently masculinist and patriarchal, entry would only prove damaging to women. Interestingly, Woolf’s feminist critique of the professions is not simply that the system serves the interests of men. Rather, professional men appear both beneficiaries *and* victims of the system and its presiding spirit. Their control over the professions guarantees their social standing, their power, but ultimately impoverishes their lives—as it would impoverish the lives of women, too.

Woolf charges the professional man with committing himself to endless and unfulfilling work at the cost of realizing other possibilities—leisure, play, consumption, art. In characterizing the mindset of the professional man, she references the children’s rhyme, “Round the Mulberry Tree”:

We can almost hear [the professional men], if we listen, singing the same old song, “Here we go round the mulberry tree, the mulberry tree, the mulberry tree,” and if we add, “of property, of property, of property,” we shall fill in the rhyme without doing violence to the facts. (*TG* 72)

By means of this song, Woolf connects the professions with a circular, unending, and insatiable pursuit of wealth, and suggests this activity is infantile. While purportedly self-interested, the pursuit does not benefit the professional man, but turns him into an ascetic whose endless desire for more money causes him to turn away from the sensuous world:

They make us of the opinion that if people are highly successful in their professions they lose their senses. Sight goes. They have no time to look at pictures. Sound goes. They have no time to listen to music. Speech goes. They have no time for conversation. (*TG* 87-88)

Ultimately, the obsession with accumulation is self-defeating. If the impulse is endless, it makes enjoyment impossible: working to make money leaves “no time” for the use of money in the consumption of objects. The professional men “lose their senses” doubly, becoming both estranged from the pleasures of sensuous experience, and senseless or mad in their pursuit of ever more profit.

Building on her account of the professions, the narrator describes a “procession” of educated men:

There they go, our brothers who have been educated at public schools and universities, mounting those steps, passing in and out of those doors, ascending those pulpits, preaching, teaching, administering justice, practising medicine, transacting business, making money. It is a solemn sight always—a procession, like a caravanserai crossing a desert. (*TG* 73-74)

While the reference to the “mulberry tree” implies an endless circular movement, the “procession” implies a forward march. Taken together, the images suggest that the movement of professional men is both linear, since a progression through stages of ever more money, a

growing fortune, *and* circular, since the goal remains perpetually the same, to earn a return on one's investment and then reinvest, and thus no final end is ever reached. In short, it is at once purposive, involving the subordination of means to ends, *and* endless, and hence a thoroughly teleological pursuit, despite the impossibility of realizing its proposed end.

Given the nature of the professions, the daughters of educated men confront a quandary. Shaped by patriarchal forces, the professions are simultaneously a source of power and a cause of dispossession. If women accept professional culture, they trade one injury for another—a captive existence for a colourless, emaciated, and mad one:

Before us lies the public world, the professional system, with its possessiveness, its jealousy, its pugnacity, its greed. The one shuts us up like slaves in a harem; the other forces us to circle, like caterpillars head to tail, round and round the mulberry tree, the sacred tree, of property. (*TG* 90)

For Woolf's speaker, women must not merely enter the professions, but, in entering them, transform them, challenging their dominant rationality. They must rebel by "active and passive measures," in order to "break the ring, the vicious circle, the dance round the mulberry tree" (*TG* 117). The language of "break[ing] the ring" recalls Derrida's notion that the economic "implies the idea of exchange, of circulation, of return" and anticipates Isa's dalliances with modes of spending that do not aim at return.

What exactly does Woolf have in mind in terms of "active and passive measures"? The question is difficult to answer because Woolf is more concerned with critiquing the professions than articulating how women could oppose them. Nevertheless, at one point, Woolf's speaker reflects on the unique position of working women to influence power:

If the working women of the country were to say: “If you go to war, we will refuse to make munitions or to help in the production of goods,” the difficulty of war-making would be seriously increased. But if all daughters of educated men were to put down tools tomorrow, nothing essential either to the life or to the war-making of the community would be embarrassed. (*TG* 16)

Woolf imagines resistance as a matter of agitating to gain access to men’s work and then refusing to do it—in particular, when such work is in the service of war. Resistance would require taking a position inside the professions and then jamming the machine, so to speak— and thus a mix of both active (gaining entry) and passive (refusing work) means. Woolf envisions this resistance being enacted by a “Society of Outsiders,” which would contest the masculine ideals that define the professions and lead to war. She delineates this society—which, as Jane Marcus points out, is more accurately described as an “antisociety”—primarily in negative terms: women must liberate themselves from the “unreal” loyalties of tradition, the family, the church, the state, and the empire. Free from the influence of “unreal loyalties,” women could presumably steer the professions clear of history’s great “procession” and the endless, disastrous “dance round the mulberry tree” (*TG* 72). Rachael Hollander argues that, in *Three Guineas*, Woolf posits “indifference” or a “disengaged engagement” as a mode of female agency, one that “calls into question the unity and autonomy of the subject” (92, 82). According to Hollander, Woolf revives Thomas Locke’s notion of “indifferency” while “anticipating Levinas’s recovery of the value of disinterest” (89, 87). This “disengaged engagement” is “necessitated by the false choice between remaining dependent or assimilating to the very male culture they must resist” (92). Through indifference, women can escape restrictive traditional roles and enter the professions without, at the same time, being interpellated into the destructive culture of the

“professional man” with its emphasis on autonomy, restraint, and futurity. Woolf’s elaboration of resistance by “active and passive measures” and a “Society of Outsiders” echoes Barnes’s depiction of Robin as a kind of absent-presence whose indifference to those around her constitutes a powerful form of rebellion. This shared idea of passive subversion forcefully eschews the male modernist articulation of a strong, willful, artistic subjectivity as a counterforce to the alienating tendencies of modernity. As my discussion of *Between the Acts* will demonstrate, Woolf returns to this question of resistance, and, with Isa Oliver, creates a character who, at times, embodies this concept of an outsider liberated from societally imposed “loyalties.”

Woolf’s ideas about money and time, and her critique of the professions echo those of her Bloomsbury contemporary, the economist, John Maynard Keynes. A comparison of the two proves illuminating and demonstrates the extent to which, in *Between the Acts*, Woolf is responding to historical questions about the function of money and the nature of the late-capitalist economy. In “Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren” (1930) written in the midst of the Depression, Keynes predicts that, despite the economic downturn, the world’s economies would rebound and grow sevenfold in a century, creating sufficient wealth that it would be possible to solve “the economic problem,” end “the struggle for subsistence,” and usher in an age of abundance and leisure (IX:326). By 2028, Keynes forecasts, a 15-hour work week would be possible (IX:329). Yet Keynes believes that the coming age of abundance would also pose its own challenges. In particular, humankind, “deprived of its traditional purpose,” would struggle to free itself from the ingrained psychological attitudes of the puritan work ethic and “enjoy abundance” (IX:328). He prophesies:

For the first time since his creation man will be faced with his real, his permanent problem—how to use his freedom from pressing economic cares, how to occupy the leisure, which science and compound interest will have won. (IX:328)

The newly-won leisure time is as likely to be experienced as burden as emancipation, and would cause “nervous breakdowns” (IX:327). Principally, it would raise difficult questions about how one “uses” or *spends* one’s free time, questions that cannot be answered by means of purely technical considerations, such as how to maximize profit and minimize expenditure. Instead, one will be forced to choose between activities that are qualitatively distinct and thus incommensurable with each other, requiring a different kind of deliberation, one not amenable to the kind of quantitative calculations that predominate in economic thinking.

Those who will struggle most acutely with this “challenge” of leisure are those whom Keynes calls “purposive [men].” Purposive men are similar to Woolf’s professional men, and it is in Keynes’ diagnosis of this persona that his analysis and Woolf’s most closely align. Keynes argues,

The “purposive” man is always trying to secure a spurious and delusive immortality for his acts by pushing his interest in them forward into time. He does not love his cat, but his cat’s kittens; nor, in truth, the kittens, but only the kittens’ kittens, and so on forward forever to the end of catdom. For him jam is not jam unless it is a case of jam tomorrow and never jam today. Thus by pushing his jam always forward into the future, he strives to secure for his act of boiling it an immortality. (IX:330)

Like Woolf’s professional banker, Keynes shows that the purposive man’s thinking is characterized by a logic of endlessness or infinite regress. The moment of fulfillment—in which one reaps the reward of one’s savings—is continually deferred. Since one can only occupy the

present and since one does not know the date of one's death, the future always awaits. Thus, the imperative to conserve and accumulate persists *ad infinitum*. Such actions lead to an absurd conclusion that "jam is not jam unless it is a case of jam tomorrow and never jam today."

Keynes's essay can be seen as building on Woolf's analysis by diagnosing the fantasy underlying the purposive or professional man's attitudes. According to Keynes, the purposive man's actions are characterized by an infantile fantasy to "secure a spurious and delusive immortality" (IX:330). Money is the means to this end, which is fitting, since elsewhere Keynes claims that "the importance of money essentially flows from it being a link between the present and the future" (XII:293). In saving for the future, the purposive man hopes to ensure his own endless continuity into the future, hopes to become, in a sense, like money, an endlessly self-sustaining entity.

Keynes believes this fantasy, in addition to being obviously impossible, has negative consequences for the purposive man in the present. Like Woolf's professional man, Keynes's purposive man denies himself pleasure in the drive to save and accumulate. In discussing money, Keynes invokes the story of King Midas (IX:248) whose touch renders everything golden. Like King Midas, the miser or purposive man accumulates money out of the illusory idea that money might stave off death. Yet, the purposive man's actions, like King Midas's, are ironically self-defeating and bring about his own demise. By pushing consumption perpetually into the future in the hopes of transcending finitude, contingency, mortality, the purposive man deprives himself of enjoyment in the moment and, thus, condemns himself to a kind of living death.

If Keynes believes that the purposive man's fantasy to accumulate endlessly is infantile and delusive, it is nevertheless clear from his discussion that he believes it a powerful delusion, one closely connected to money's function in a capitalist society, and thus not easily shed. The

fantasy derives, in part, from money's status as the universal equivalent. The latter is the specific commodity—most typically gold—that is chosen to act as the measure of the value of all other commodities. The universal equivalent could, theoretically, be any commodity—copper, silver, gold, alcohol, barley, and salt have all served as the equivalent at one point or another in human history. The key point is that any given commodity can be exchanged for quantities of the universal equivalent, and thus the universal equivalent makes it possible for people to exchange objects that are qualitatively distinct by creating a quantitative equivalence. In the words of Aristotle, whom Marx quotes approvingly,

[M]oney acts as a measure which, by making things commensurable, renders it possible to make them equal. Without exchange there could be no association, without equality there could be no exchange, without commensurability there could be no equality.

(Aristotle 185)

Elaborating on Marx's theory of the "universal equivalent," Jean-Joseph Goux suggests that there are parallels between the universal equivalent, the phallus in psychoanalysis, and the phonic signifier in semiotics:

The institution of FATHER, PHALLUS, and LANGUAGE, of the major "signs" that regulate the values market, in fact stems from a genesis whose necessity and whose limits are doubtless most pronounced, theoretically, in the origin of MONEY. (13)

Goux further argues that the theory of money as the "universal equivalent" entails that money is: (a) an arbitrarily privileged object among others; (b) the sole measure of value, and thus an agent of homogenization. As we will see, Woolf's stockbrokers and professional men likewise seek equivalence: money must be spent to ensure continual return and endless growth. What they find threatening is a dissymmetry or disequilibrium in exchange—the possibility that more is given

than received, that debts go unpaid, that promissory notes are rendered void.

Since money is the universal equivalent, and thus exchangeable for any good, it comes to symbolize the *power* to purchase more than the concrete benefits of any particular purchase.

Georg Simmel states the idea this way:

The German language indicates [this property of money] by the use of the word *Vermogen*, which means “to be able to do something,” for a great fortune. These possibilities, only a small number of which can be realized, are nevertheless put to account psychologically. They convey the impression of an indeterminate power which is not confined to the achievement of a particular result.[...] The pure potentiality of money as a means is distilled in a general conception of power and significance which becomes effective as real power and significance for the owner of money. (234)

Purposive men and misers make a fetish of abstract purchasing *power*, of pure potentiality. They are driven to accumulate not by what their fortune might purchase but by the simple fact of its liquidity or unlimited translatability. They savour the choice that wealth confers on its owners. Again, this is delusory—money is only relatively liquid, not absolutely, and in certain cases can lose its liquid nature—yet, these theorists agree that money begets an irresistible fantasy, one in which the incommensurable and different are quickly subsumed to a universal measure, and possession of that measure brings an unchecked power and freedom.

Woolf diagnoses the obsession with money similarly. Her depiction of Louis, a banker, in *The Waves* (1931) connects the financial professions with a fantasy of power, omniscience, and immortality. In pursuing a career in finance, Louis follows in the footsteps of his father who was a banker in Brisbane, Australia. Louis conceives of the work of banking as heroic labour to bring structure and stability to the world: “My shoulder is to the wheel; I roll the dark before me,

spreading commerce where there was chaos in the far parts of the world” (*TW* 128). Louis spies disorder all around him—in London’s passing crowds, its stop-and-go traffic—which it is his task to “reduce [...] to order” (*TW* 70). This task of creating order is analogous, in Louis’s eyes, to the translation of poems:

To translate that poem so that it is easily read is to be my endeavour. I, the companion of Plato, of Virgil, will knock at the grained oak door. I oppose to what is passing this ramrod of beaten steel. I will not submit to this aimless passing of billycock hats and Homburg hats and all the plumed and variegated head-dresses of women. (Susan, whom I respect, would wear a plain straw hat on a summer’s day.) And the grinding and the steam that runs in unequal drops down the window pane; and the stopping and the starting with a jerk of motor-omnibuses; and the hesitations at counters; and the words that trail drearily without human meaning; I will reduce you to order. (*TW* 70-71)

His labour consists in creating equivalence, levelling differences, making the particular exchangeable, and giving purpose and direction to all that is “aimless” and “unequal,” all that “hesitates” and “trails.” The banker aims to recuperate that which expends itself without purpose, that which is wasteful. As I will show later, Woolf attributes this aversion to waste and aimlessness to Giles Oliver, too, who rages at Dodge, the homosexual who is (according to Giles) always “dallying and dallying” and others in the novel who sit idly and drink tea while the rest of Europe prepares for war (*BTA* 55). In this case, Louis assumes for himself the authority of money as the universal equivalent, as the measurer of all value, and his determination for order is represented by a fantasy of translation without remainder, in which everything that exists can be accounted for within a universal language. Yet, as Woolf makes clear, this act of translation involves “reduc[ing],” these things. He can only create equivalence by excluding and eliding.

Thus, the financier's equivalence is never exhaustive, total, perfect, but succeeds only by hiding the remainder, the surplus, that which is wasted in any act of translation. Louis is, in this sense, similar to Felix and Nora, who seek to "dress the unknowable in the garments of the known," thereby translating Robin to heteronormative society's universal equivalent, and Stein's journalist, who seeks to present the news as though one "had known it all beforehand" (*N* 145, *Na* 38).

Woolf's banker, like Keynes's purposive man, is absorbed by his means-ends activity. With "the weight of the world" on his shoulders, Louis has "not a moment to spare," no time to "retreat from the sun, to sit, with a lover, in the cool of the evening" (*TW* 128). Every moment counts and must be spent prudently in the pursuit of his lofty goals:

This is life; Mr. Prentice at four; Mr. Eyres at four-thirty. I like to hear the soft rush of the lift and the thud with which it stops on my landing and the heavy male tread of responsible feet down the corridors. So by dint of our united exertions we send ships to the remotest parts of the globe; replete with lavatories and gymnasiums. (*TW* 129)

The banker's time is measured and quantified, his day carved up into discrete and rigidly bounded compartments. Meetings behind closed doors in London office buildings decide the fate of people all over the world. The British financier is an overseer: he deals in the realm of numbers and abstractions, but abstractions that have real consequences for life in the empire. As Lucenti notes, "Louis carves out a hollow for himself through the practice of rigorous accounting. He becomes the colonizer of difference, a reductive force which dilutes everything to a common denominator of similitude" (77). Once an outsider, Louis of London now ruthlessly excludes that which is different, particular, and other:

As the eye that surveys and tallies all values, Louis seems to restore himself, to grant

himself the credit which society refuses him. He has, in fact, effectively transformed himself into an agent of the same system which made him “an alien, external.” Yet this transformation comes only at the price of being “perpetually torn and distressed,” the enforcer, in effect, of his own permanent exclusion. (Lucenti 79)

Louis’s desire to “reduce” the world to “order,” to erase difference, incurs costs both to the world and his own self, as he is forced to suppress his own history and cultural identity.

As I have demonstrated, Woolf and Keynes advance similar critiques of money. Yet, to reiterate a critical point, neither condemn money as the root of all evil, as *inherently* bad, nor do they critique money’s role in consumption, or in a society of luxury and excess. Indeed, for them, the problem with money is not that it breeds hedonism or greed, but to the contrary, that it turns men into ascetic and self-denying misers. The miser or purposive man imagines that his ever-increasing wealth will secure him a future beyond the reach of time, contingency, and dependency. Yet, the cost of this fantasy is the sacrifice of the present, which becomes merely a transitory stage—filled with means-ends, calculative activity—in the march towards this illusory future. As such, I argue that Woolf and Keynes (at least, in certain essays) object not to money itself, but to money’s role *as* capital in a capitalist society. The distinction is a Marxist one. Marx describes the exchange circuit that characterizes the barter economy as C—M—C, where C stands for a commodity and M stands for money (*Capital* 1: 247). In this circuit, an individual sells a commodity in order to procure the money to purchase another commodity. Money functions as the medium of exchange and is thus a neutral force. This circuit captures the perspective of the average consumer, for whom the purpose of money is buying useful and desirable things. Marx, however, suggests that the money circuit looks completely different from the perspective of the capitalist or entrepreneur. He describes a second exchange circuit in terms

of  $M—C—M'$ , where  $M'$  stands for the money paid to produce a commodity plus the surplus money made through its sale (*Capital 1*: 248). In this circuit, the capitalist or entrepreneur starts by investing money in the production of a commodity, then sells that commodity for *more* than its cost to produce it. The goal of exchange is not to obtain a useful commodity, as it is in  $C—M—C$  circuits, but to increase one's total store of money (*Capital 1*: 248). Money is no longer neutral, the means of exchange, but the origin and goal of the whole process. After the circuit, the entrepreneur reinvests  $M'$  in another  $M—C—M'$  circuit. Herein lies the distinction between money and capital: capital is money that is always in the process of being turned into more money.

Marx's notion of monetary circuits had a significant impact on Keynes, who read little Marx directly, but learned of Marx's theory of  $M-C-M'$  circuits from the American economist Harlan McKracken (Foster n. p.). Following Marx, Keynes faults classical economists for modelling their theories of money on its function in a barter economy. Distinguishing between a "cooperative economy" (or barter economy) and an "entrepreneur economy," Keynes argues,

The firm is dealing throughout in terms of sums of money. It has no object in the world except to end up with more money than it started with. That is the essential characteristic of the entrepreneur economy. (*Collected Writings XXIX*: 89)

For Keynes, the discovery of this circuit points to the possibility of financial crises and implies an important critique of classical economic orthodoxy. Say's law states that supply creates its own demand.<sup>3</sup> By paying workers to produce goods, capitalists create the means by which those goods can be bought in turn. Keynes, however, uses  $M-C-M'$  to contest Say's conclusion that there cannot be shortfalls of demand or mass unemployment. Keynes points out that the entrepreneur's sole object is the increase of  $M'$ , that he or she needs to get back *more* money

through the sale of goods than he or she pays (to workers) for the production of those same goods. If this is true, it follows that the workers (considered as an aggregate) do not collectively possess the means to buy back the goods they produce, and thus production and demand do not exist in a state of equilibrium. Keynes presents a more sophisticated account of Major Douglas's main argument. As Keynes notes, "[an entrepreneur] will increase his output if by so doing he expects to increase his money profit" (*Collected Writings* XXIX: 81-2). Keynes concludes,

Marx was approaching the intermediate truth when he added that the continuous excess of M' would be inevitably interrupted by a series of crises, gradually increasing in intensity, or entrepreneur bankruptcy and underemployment, during which, presumably, M [as opposed to M'] must be in excess. My own argument, if it is accepted, should at least serve to effect a reconciliation between the followers of Marx and those of Major Douglas, leaving the classical economists still high and dry in the belief that M and M' are always equal! (*Collected Writings* XXIX 81f)

Both Marx and Keynes emphasize that money is not simply a neutral medium of exchange; instead, it is a determining factor in production. Indeed, Keynes's theory has sometimes been called a monetary theory of production.

Marx believed that the inherent tendency of capitalism was to move toward an M—M' circuit, in which no commodity needs to be produced in order for the capitalist to make money (*Capital* 1: 256). This is the case with interest-bearing capital (in which profit is made simply by advancing money) and speculation (in which investors seek to profit from the fluctuations in the market price of commodities, rather than those commodities' underlying value). Their analysis has been born out in the twentieth century. Paul Sweezy notes that, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, credit functioned by,

on the one hand providing the short-term credit needed to keep the wheels of industry and trade turning, and on the other hand catering to the long-term requirements of governments (especially for raising armies and waging wars), utilities whether private or public (canals, railroads, waterworks, etc.), and large insurance companies. (Sweezy n.p.)

To quote Keynes, speculators usually operate as “as bubbles on a steady stream of enterprise”; twentieth-century history, however, has witnessed “enterprise [become] the bubble on a whirlpool of speculation” (*General Theory* 159). One of Marx’s key concepts in this respect is that of “fictitious capital,” which he differentiates from “real capital.” Real capital is money invested in the means of production and workers, while fictitious capital is “accumulated claims, of legal titles, to future production” (*Capital* 3: 468). Elaborating on Marx, Benjamin Kunkel defines fictitious capital as “money values backed by tomorrow’s as yet unproduced goods and services, to be exchanged against those already produced today: this is credit or bank money, an anticipation of future value without which the creation of present value stalls” (Kunkel n.p.). Fictitious capital can take the form of shares in a joint-stock company, government bonds, or securities. It is “money that is thrown into circulation as capital without any material basis in commodities or productive activity” (Harvey 95). This financialization of the economy in the twentieth century forms an important part of the historical context for Woolf’s late modernist writings. Indeed, the phenomenon of credit money can be seen as the logical conclusion of the professional man’s obsession with futurity—it is “an anticipation of future value,” a promissory note.

Having illuminated and situated Woolf’s views of money through conceptual resources provided by theorists of money and modernity—namely, Marx, Simmel, and Woolf’s Bloomsbury contemporary, J. M. Keynes—I now turn to Woolf’s *Between the Acts*, a novel that

extends and develops the analysis of economic themes in *Three Guineas*. In *Between the Acts*, Woolf shows that the logic of professional men impacts not just the professions and the economic realm, but also the domestic sphere. She connects the obsessive futurism of professional men with the patriarchal ideologies that impose motherhood on women under the pretense of preserving and reproducing the nation. Through the character of Isa Oliver, Woolf interrogates what Margaret Sanger famously called “enforced motherhood” and shows how reproductive labour is connected to the endlessness of money circuits (1). If “professional men” are going to continue their march towards more and more money, then it falls to women like Isa to reproduce the next generation of bankers and stockbrokers. Indeed, Isa’s twentieth-century motherhood should be seen instead against the background of nationalist, eugenic notions of mothers as, in the words of Laura Doyle, “race-mothers” (7). Doyle explains that eugenic discourse in the twentieth century often treated the mother as “instrumental to achieving a high ‘national intelligence’ and adequate ‘national strength’ in a competitive and imperialistic political world” (7). This ideology exemplifies what Lee Edelman calls “reproductive futurism,” the all-pervasive cultural logic that posits a utopian “future” as the universal horizon of the political, defining itself in opposition to the queer, as that which is non-(re)productive and future-negating (Edelman 3). Within this logic, the end of all possible political projects is the creation of a better future for one’s children. In *Between the Acts*, the dance “round the mulberry tree” becomes a reproductive plot, which comes to define (albeit unequally) the fate of men and women, the public and domestic realms. The reproductive plot is also manifest in Miss La Trobe’s pageant, which envisions its mission as salvaging the cultural past from the ravages of war. In Woolf’s telling, this future-oriented temporality appears both oppressive and irrational: oppressive because it demands sacrifice and subordination—more from some (women) than

others—and irrational because these sacrifices seem to serve no other purpose than to perpetuate further sacrifices, to sustain the “unreal loyalties” and ensure the continuity of the patriarchal professions.

At the same time, in *Between the Acts*, Woolf explores the question of resistance much more explicitly than in *Three Guineas*. Several of the novel's characters seek alternatives to the endlessness and toil inherent in capital circuits. They seek an end that is not a means, a purchase that is not an investment, a present that is not merely a “between,” a transition between history's acts. While the novel presents numerous instances of resistance, the extent to which these constitute successful alternatives to the instrumentality of money circuits remains one of the novel's most fraught questions, as Isa's embrace of non-productive expenditure is compromised by her reconciliation with Giles at the day's end, and the experimental moment of “present time” included in Miss La Trobe's play is subsumed to a narrative of futurity.

### **The stockbroker and spendthrift: Economies of thrift and non-productive expenditure in**

#### ***Between the Acts***

The king was in his counting house,  
 Counting out his money;  
 The queen was in the parlour,  
 Eating bread and honey. (*BTA* 103)

This verse—the second of the English nursery rhyme “Sing a Song of Sixpence”—is repeated several times throughout *Between the Acts*. Miss La Trobe plays the music to the song (but not the lyrics) over the gramophone at numerous points in her pageant. While the music plays, the text transcribes Isa Oliver's thoughts as she listens to the song. What is it about this song (and

this verse) that Woolf finds so compelling?

One might contend that if Woolf's novel is about any social or historical event, it is not money but the approach of the Second World War. While that is true, Woolf was well aware that the war and the rise of fascism in Germany were connected to and partially outcomes of economic forces. Keynes famously predicted in *The Economic Consequences of Peace* (1920) that the terms of repayment (the "war debt") imposed upon Germany by the Allies in the 1919 Treaty of Versailles would have devastating effects on Germany's economy. He ends his book with the premonition, "who can say how much is endurable, or in what direction men will seek at last to escape from their misfortunes?" (251). Keynes was prescient: German reparations lead to hyperinflation in 1921 and 1924, and the massive deflation of 1931, events which are often credited as causes of the Nazis' rise to power. Woolf read Keynes's important work, calling it "a book that influences the world without being in the least a work of art: a work of morality, I suppose" (*Diary II*: 33). Moreover, Keynes's contention that the Allies' determination to recoup the losses of the war, to achieve full remuneration, was a destructive act with disastrous consequences is particularly relevant to *Between the Acts*. Woolf, too, is interested in highlighting how patriarchal modes of wealth accumulation are themselves a form of violence and therefore complicit with war. Even though Giles views his stockbroker ethos, with its focus on savings and preparation for the future, as a necessary response to imminent war, the novel suggests that, ironically, it is this mindset that creates the conditions for war. Indeed, this connection between money and war forms part of the backdrop against which the novel is set. It is acknowledged explicitly when Bartholomew Oliver reads in the newspaper, "Mr. Daladier [...] has been successful in pegging down the Franc" (*BTA* 12). Édouard Daladier was the prime minister of France at the start of the war and the headline refers to his decision to devalue the

franc in 1938. As Alice Wood notes, the decision was justified to the French public as a necessary response to European conflict (124).

The “Song of Sixpence” not only speaks to this context but also touches upon a gender dynamic that Woolf actively interrogates throughout her *oeuvre*. In the rhyme, the King counts his money while the Queen eats—reaffirming an age-old division between masculine production and feminine consumption, one that had not lost relevance at the time of Woolf’s writing. As I have shown, part of Woolf’s feminist project in *A Room of One’s Own* and *Three Guineas* is the transfer of money to women, since, for Woolf, financial autonomy is a condition of female independence in general. Yet, there is a corollary benefit of this financial redistribution. Prying away from the clutches of miserly men—men whose disproportionate share of the wealth means that their money lies idle and thus socially useless—puts money back into circulation, and stimulates the entire system. Thus, the task of winning autonomy for women is inseparable from a Keynesian goal of liberating money from the “counting-house,” and getting it into the hands of those who will spend it in consumption.

Ultimately, I argue that economics play a far larger role in *Between the Acts* than just providing historical detail. Rather, as I hope to show, economic discourse pervades the novel’s treatment of desire and temporality. The King and Queen in this verse represent two fundamental attitudes towards money—that of saving and that of expenditure—and of two fundamental character types—the professional or purposive man and the spendthrift. A host of different characters perform these roles throughout the novel, but my analysis will focus first on Giles and Isa Oliver, and then on Miss La Trobe. Giles and Isa Oliver are cast in the role of King and Queen, miser or purposive man and spendthrift. Giles is, after all, a stockbroker, a man tasked with making money multiply and accumulate for clients. Conversely, Isa is frequently associated

with spending throughout the novel. At one point, during a break in La Trobe's pageant, annoyed that Isa has not spoken to him all day, Giles "[takes] up the pose of one who bears the burden of the world's woe, making money for her to spend" (*BTA* 100). Giles's self-pitying demeanour exposes a truth about how he conceives his relationship to his wife: he works, she consumes; he saves, she squanders.

On the day of the pageant, Giles returns home from London to find visitors—Mrs. Manresa and William Dodge—having tea with his wife Isa, his father Bart (the retired colonial administrator), and his aunt Lucy Swithin. Leaving behind the sphere of manly production, Giles returns to a scene of domestic consumption and bourgeois leisure. His irritable response to this party both elucidates his character and draws attention to the conventional gendered opposition between masculine labour and feminine consumption.

Meeting Dodge for the first time, the homophobic Giles immediately identifies him as a "half breed" and "a toady; a lickspittle; not a downright plain man of his senses; but a teaser and twitcher; a fingerer of sensations; picking and choosing; dallying and dallying; not a man to have straightforward love for a woman [...] but simply a—" (*BTA* 55). Giles figures Dodge's homosexuality in terms of servility, dependence, sensuousness, and aimlessness. As a "fingerer of sensations" (but not a "plain man of his senses"), forever "picking and choosing," he is, like Isa, a consumer—passively receiving the world as it exists, readymade, rather than actively forging the new or generating returns. As someone who "dall[ies] and dall[ies]," Dodge is idle and unproductive. In Giles's construction of Dodge's homosexuality, economic and sexual discourses converge, as they do for Pound: as a stockbroker, someone tasked with saving, he perceives a generalized wastefulness—a non-(re)productive spending of time and energy.

Dodge, the unspeakable homosexual, the dilly-dallying lickspittle, typifies the *milieu* (just as, for Pound, the homosexual typifies the finance economy): much of what Giles feels about Dodge applies equally to the rest of the party. He expresses contempt for Lucy, who is “foolish” and “free” (*BTA* 43). She is always “expressing her amazement, her amusement, at men who spent their lives, buying and selling—ploughs? Glass beads was it? Or stocks and shares?” (*BTA* 43). What she fails to comprehend, according to Giles, is that his work is driven by necessity, not preference:

Given his choice, he would have chosen to farm. But he was not given his choice. So one thing led to another; and the conglomeration of things pressed you flat; held you fast; like a fish in water. (*BTA* 43)

Interestingly, unlike Louis, another of Woolf’s stockbrokers, Giles does not conceive of his work as his *raison d’être* or a labour of love. Instead, he presents his work as a sacrifice, one demanded of him by circumstances beyond his control. The fact Lucy and the rest of the party cannot understand the concept of necessity enrages Giles. He expresses incredulity that they can sit idly and look at the landscape,

over coffee and cream when the whole of Europe—over there—was bristling like . . . He had no command of metaphor. Only the ineffective word “hedgehog” illustrated his vision of Europe, bristling with guns, poised with planes. (*BTA* 49)

He is equally unenthusiastic at the prospect of sitting through the pageant, another form of idle, decadent expenditure, comparing his plight as an audience member to that of Prometheus: “manacled to a rock he was, and forced passively to behold indescribable horror” (*BTA* 55). By the same measure, however, Giles cannot identify what they should do in the face of these powerful historical currents, a failure that is echoed in his inability to find a satisfactory

metaphor for their situation. Ironically, despite his valorization of quick, decisive action, he appears himself impotent and ineffectual. Figuration, a labour that aims at equivalence in meaning, the substitution of one term for another, is homologous with Giles's work as a stockbroker, which requires him to produce equivalence through time, to ensure that money spent earns a future return. Yet, in this passage, he finds himself implicated in loss and annoyed at his similarity to the "old fogies."

Perhaps, the scene most revealing of Giles's character is the one in which he encounters a snake lying coiled in the grass during the intermission of Miss La Trobe's pageant:

Dead? No, choked with a toad in its mouth. The snake unable to swallow; the toad was unable to die. A spasm made the ribs contract; blood oozed. It was birth the wrong way round—a monstrous inversion. (*BTA* 89)

Reacting viscerally, Giles "stamp[s]" on it, splattering blood on his tennis shoes. Afterwards, he feels satisfied, since "action relieved him" (*BTA* 89). The need for "action" is the only motive Woolf provides for Giles' reaction. Does he kill the snake and toad out of compassion, a feeling that both are needlessly suffering? Or is his stomp simply an expression of his repulsion at seeing a "monstrous inversion"? Giles craves purposeful action, despite the fact that, in the case of his coffee-drinking family and friends, he cannot say what they should do instead, or in the case of the snake, he cannot provide a rationale for his action. Giles makes a fetish of practicality and necessity: doing anything, no matter what, proves consolatory, not because it is effective, but because it allows him to suppress the vexing intractability of the problems he confronts.

The scene also indicates Giles's attitudes about consumption. Christina Alt argues that Giles's decision to squash the snake is unnecessarily violent, and premised on a misinterpretation of natural processes:

A snake, by virtue of the flexible connections between its jaws and skull, can consume prey several times the size of its own head: it works its mouth slowly around its prey and gradually, by means of muscle contractions (which Giles notes as ‘a spasm [that] made the ribs contract’), draws the often still-living prey down its throat. The laborious process is misinterpreted as choking, but it is entirely natural. Only Giles’s interference constitutes unnatural violence. His misreading of nature provokes him to violence against it[.] (165-166)

Alt is right to draw attention to and cast suspicion on Giles’s actions in this scene. After all, the passage is focalized from Giles’s perspective: what is depicted is necessarily filtered through his consciousness, and thus is symptomatic of his psychology. That said, Alt’s argument that Giles misinterprets the snake as choking oversteps the textual evidence. Since snakes do occasionally choke on or regurgitate creatures that are too large to be digested, Giles’s “inference” is at least plausible (Diep n. p.). At most, one might claim that the scene is indeterminate, that it is not clear whether the snake is dying or merely digesting. The important question, however, is not whether the snake is alive or dead, but what exactly Giles sees when he looks at the snake in the grass and why the tableau moves him to violence.

What does it mean that Giles figures the snake’s predicament as “birth the wrong way round”? Superficially, the snake’s devouring of the toad is the reverse of birth insofar as it is an act of ingestion and incorporation rather than of (re)production—a taking in rather than a bringing forth. Yet, birth is more than just a bringing forth—more specifically, it is the production of something living, something that grows and develops beyond its moment of emergence. For an act of consumption to be the reverse *specifically* of birth, it will need to distinguish itself from other acts of consumption. Many acts of consumption satisfy biological

needs and thereby sustain and reproduce life. Woolf's metaphor indicates an act of consumption that moves in the other direction, towards death rather than life, a consumption that does not procure any benefits beyond its immediate moment of consumption. The metaphor perfectly captures the scene described: the snake's meal risks death. For Giles, who is committed to conservation and calculated investment, the sight of the snake and the toad can only be perceived as "monstrous": it is an act of ingestion that exists on the boundaries of self-sustenance and self-destruction, obscene and excessive.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps for Giles, the bloated snake, rendered torpid by over-indulgence recalls the "old fogies" that sit passively drinking tea with cream while the world braces for war, acquiescent in the face of annihilation. The scene reinforces Giles's antipathy to certain kinds of excessive and uncalculated expenditure, which Mrs. Manresa, Dodge, the "old fogies," and also his wife, Isa, all exhibit.

As a financier, Giles is repulsed by wasteful expenditure, consumption without concern for the future. He sees himself and his worldview as a corrective, and yet, as his failure to find a fully satisfactory metaphor suggests, he finds himself complicit in loss. Giles represents a particular mode of thinking about economics: obsessed with endless growth, seeking to transform every expenditure into gain, forever subsuming the present to the future, and then, when confronted with the inevitability of waste and loss, lashing out in violence. The violence that results when Giles cannot close the economic circle, prefigures the violence of the approaching war. In this regard, he resembles Wyndham Lewis, who, in his articulation of the disengaged artist—one unbesmirched by the contingencies of the existing world—resorts to reproaching outsiders who embody (in his mind) the traits he abhors. Likewise, Felix and Nora, while less overtly violent, need Robin to consolidate their fantasy of wholeness and sovereignty. The other functions either to disguise or cover over those qualities (finitude, loss) that the subject

wants to disavow (Robin) or is made into the sole origin of these qualities (Dodge), the identifiable and eliminable cause of the self's troubles. Giles's obsessive fuming about Dodge and the "old fogies" allows him to displace his own connection to wastefulness by projecting it on others.

Woolf locates a more promising economic modality in the character of the spendthrift or consumer. The spendthrift undermines the fantasy of perfect equivalence in exchange, the hope that every expenditure can be recouped and made productive of future value, and instead accepts and even finds pleasure in waste, loss, or "ending". Dodge and the "old fogies" provide one example of the spendthrift attitude in the novel, but it is Isa who best exemplifies the spendthrift. Her spending, both economic and erotic, represents a rebellion against the narratives of reproductive futurism.

Isa Oliver spends much of her day reflecting on her relationship with Giles, whom she thinks of merely as her "husband the stockbroker," or as "the father of my children," but rarely as Giles (*BTA* 5, 13). In the first instance, she refers to him by his formal function within the economy and public sphere, while in the second, by his function within the family and private sphere. Isa cannot see Giles, or refuses to see him, outside of the context of their marriage and his job. Thus, when Isa thinks about her husband and their relationship, she is simultaneously meditating on what he represents—namely, the work ethic, the ethos of the professional man, and the family.

Throughout the novel, Isa figures her relationship with Giles and her domestic life in terms of entrapment and oppression. She feels "entangled, by her husband the stockbroker" (*BTA* 5). In another scene, she is described as "pegged down on a chair arm, like a captive balloon, by a myriad of hair-thin ties into domesticity" (*BTA* 17). Even more explicitly, the reader is

informed that Isa “loath[es] the domestic, the possessive; the maternal” (*BTA* 17). Isa frequently expresses herself through spontaneously composed poems, and many of these texts play on these same themes of rootedness and burden, on the one hand, and a yearning for ascent, transcendence, and emancipation, on the other. In one of these compositions she exclaims,

Fly then, follow [...] the dappled herds in the cedar grove, who, sporting, play, the red with the roe, the stag with the doe. Fly, away. I grieving stay. Alone I linger, I pluck the bitter herb by the ruined wall, the churchyard wall, and press its sour, its sweet, its sour, long grey leaf, so, twixt thumb and finger. (*BTA* 101)<sup>5</sup>

The contrast between the speaker’s rootedness beside the church wall and the flight of the birds expresses the captivity Isa experiences in marriage and her desire to escape. Isa also uses verse to characterize her role as mother and wife as a self-destructive labour in subservience to history and tradition. In another poem, Isa protests being “burdened with what they drew from the earth; memories; possessions” (*BTA* 139). Later, she imagines herself as the “last little donkey in the long caravans crossing the desert” (*BTA* 139). She is commanded by the “past”: “Kneel down [...] Fill your pannier from our tree. Rise up, donkey. Go your way till your heels blister and your hoofs crack” (*BTA* 139). The burden of motherhood is associated with a personified “past” that issues commands to Isa. Woolf gives Isa’s struggle with “motherhood” a temporal dimension: she becomes a link between her society’s past and its future. Her role is to transport and thus preserve her nation’s most cherished goods. Mothers were often viewed in the twentieth century as having an important socio-economic role in the life of the nation. As reproducers of the labour force, they were key to the economic vitality of a nation, and as child-rearers and educators, they were responsible for the preservation of a nation’s culture and identity. Isa’s unpaid domestic work, which will produce the next generation of “professional men” and ensure that the “dance

round the mulberry tree” will continue *ad infinitum*, is itself a kind of endless dance or “procession,” one that aims perpetually at the production of the future. The “maternal” makes Isa a vessel for patriarchy’s traditions, breaking her body, demanding her sacrifice, in order to carry a load for others. It turns her into nothing more than an instrument and forces her to sacrifice her own needs and desires for the sake of the future health of the nation. Woolf provided another memorable picture of the work and sacrifice of motherhood in *To the Lighthouse* (1927). In that novel, it is clear that the mother sacrifices more than the husband. Mrs. Ramsay’s domestic labour is subordinate to the intellectual labour of Mr. Ramsay, who writes books of academic philosophy in an attempt to get from “Q” to “R”. Even though he fails in his aspiration, he pursues a project that is primarily for himself rather than for others. Mrs. Ramsay, on the other hand, exhausts herself in order to allow others to pursue their own individual projects. Her work to inculcate her children into patriarchy’s gender norms is critiqued by the narrative insofar as her two eldest children die gendered deaths: Prue passes away in childbirth and Andrew is killed in the trenches during WWI. Ultimately, I suggest that this toiling labour in service of preserving “the past” constitutes the “old plot” to which Isa refers in the final chapter of *Between the Acts*.

Yet Isa is not permanently melancholy and she does experience intense moments of release or relief from these oppressions. Typically, these are figured in terms of spending, flight, energy, spontaneity, and lyrical poetic impulse. In these scenes, Isa contrasts her love for Giles with her desire for the gentleman farmer, Haines, with whom she had an exciting exchange the night before. Her feelings for Haines articulate an alternative to Giles and what he represents as “stockbroker,” and “the father of her children.”

In one of the novel’s most important scenes, which I will quote in full, Isa contrasts her husband with the gentleman farmer. She does so while sitting in front of the mirror, combing her

hair. Reflecting on the previous evening and the spark of passion that was kindled when the farmer addressed her directly, Isa makes a series of associations—from a “wire, tingling, tangling, vibrating” and a recollection of an airplane’s propeller to several fragmentary images connected with flight and nature.<sup>6</sup> Isa composes a poem in her mind, but ultimately decides not to write it down. Finally, she orders fish for the day’s luncheon over the phone:

Mrs. Giles Oliver drew the comb through the thick tangle of hair which, after giving the matter her best attention, she had never had shingled or bobbed; and lifted the heavily embossed silver brush that had been a wedding present and had its uses in impressing chambermaids in hotels. She lifted it and stood in front of the three-folded mirror, so that she could see three separate versions of her rather heavy, yet handsome, face; and also, outside the glass, a slip of terrace, lawn and tree tops.

Inside the glass, in her eyes, she saw what she had felt overnight for the ravaged, the silent, the romantic gentleman farmer. “In love,” was in her eyes. But outside, on the washstand, on the dressing-table, among the silver boxes and tooth-brushes, was the other love; love for her husband, the stockbroker—“The father of my children,” she added, slipping into the *cliché* conveniently provided by fiction. Inner love was in the eyes; outer love on the dressing-table. But what feeling was it that stirred in her now when above the looking-glass, out of doors, she saw coming across the lawn the perambulator; two nurses; and her little boy George, lagging behind?

She tapped on the window with her embossed hairbrush. They were too far off to hear. The drone of the trees was in their ears; the chirp of birds; other incidents of garden life, inaudible, invisible to her in the bedroom, absorbed them. Isolated on a green island, hedged about with snowdrops, laid with a counterpane of puckered silk, the

innocent island floated under her window. Only George lagged behind.

She returned to her eyes in the looking-glass. "In love," she must be; since the presence of his body in the room last night could so affect her; since the words he said, handing her a teacup, handing her a tennis racquet, could so attach themselves to a certain spot in her; and thus lie between them like a wire, tingling, tangling, vibrating—she groped, in the depths of the looking-glass, for a word to fit the infinitely quick vibrations of the aeroplane propeller that she had seen once at dawn at Croydon. Faster, faster, faster, it whizzed, whirred, buzzed, till all the flails became one flail and up soared the plane away and away. . . .

"Where we know not, where we go not, neither know nor care," she hummed.

"Flying, rushing through the ambient, incandescent, summer silent . . ."

The rhyme was "air." She put down her brush. She took up the telephone.

"Three, four, eight, Pyecombe," she said.

"Mrs. Oliver speaking. . . . What fish have you this morning? Cod? Halibut? Sole? Plaice?"

"There to lose what binds us here," she murmured. "Soles. Filleted. In time for lunch please," she said aloud. "With a feather, a blue feather . . . flying mounting through the air . . . there to lose what binds us here . . ." The words weren't worth writing in the book bound like an account book in case Giles suspected. "Abortive," was the word that expressed her. She never came out of a shop, for example, with the clothes she admired; nor did her figure, seen against the dark roll of trousering in a shop window, please her.

(*BTA* 12-14)

The sterile formality of Giles and Isa's relationship is reinforced when Isa labels her relationship

to Giles “outer love,” insinuating that her feelings for her husband are a matter of outside forces, social convention only, and thus not reflective of “inner” passion. The fact that she thinks of the phrase, “father of my children,” as a “*cliché* provided by fiction” reinforces the impression that her love for him is something borrowed, if not deceitful. “Outer love” is love as duty, a relationship drained of passion and desire, consisting solely in legal ties and shared obligations—to the nation, to the future.

Isa contrasts her “love” for her husband with her love for Haines, which she terms “inner love.” Isa’s “inner love” is not only “felt” but seen—it is what she perceives in her eyes as they are reflected by the mirror. As she ruminates on her “inner love” for the gentleman farmer, she gazes at herself and combs her hair. The act of combing her hair—stroking herself—while looking at her reflection in the mirror and thinking about the gentleman farmer, codes the scene as autoerotic. Indeed, as she gazes and strokes, she experiences a heightening excitement, which is reflected in the quickening rhythm of the passage as a whole, culminating with the “vibrations of the aeroplane” propeller as it lifts off the ground.

The autoeroticism of the scene makes sense given that her love for Giles is associated with purposiveness, parenthood, and reproductive sex. As a consequence, Isa seeks respite in a realm where sex is non-procreative, not a means to an end, but a pleasure in itself. That is to say, the sex that she associates with the “gentleman farmer” is not sex as a form of work, reproduction, and teleology, but sex as luxury and wasteful expenditure. Against this background, her fantasies about the gentleman farmer acquire their proper significance. They are attempts to think of an alternative to a life of sacrifice, work, and service to the future.

Isa’s masturbatory fantasies fly in the face of discourses of reproductive futurism as well as what I have referred to before as Giles’s economies of thrift and the protestant work ethic. In

eighteenth and nineteenth-century medical discourse, masturbation and other non-procreative sexual activities were demonized as wasteful expenditures of vital, sexual energies as well as a solipsistic and anti-social behaviour. The sexologist Max Nordau claimed that sexual perversions like masturbation “run directly contrary to the purpose of the instinct, i.e., the preservation of the species” (411). Nonetheless, Nordau believed that sexual perversion was becoming more prevalent in the modern world, leading to a general state of physical and moral decline he famously termed degeneration. The “minor stages” of degeneration included a condition called neurasthenia, the symptoms of which include exhaustion, nervousness, a blasé attitude, and “an inability to work” (Shiach 167). The nervous and exhausted state of the neurasthenic is the result of overspending the body’s limited reserve of energy. Since nineteenth-century science treated reproduction as the purpose and sole end of sex, any use of sexual energy that was not directed towards that goal was deemed unhealthy. In describing sex in terms of expenditures and returns, sexological discourse often employed economic metaphors, and in its emphasis on the conservation of sexual energies, sexology echoed the dominant economic philosophy of the period. The anxiety surrounding masturbation stemmed not just from its conceptualization as waste, but also from its solitary nature, and thus its imagined potential to dissolve social ties and fragment society. Thomas Laqueur connects anxieties about masturbation, and specifically the female masturbator, to new forms of privacy that were the result of a growing consumer culture and an expanding market. In particular, he considers the threat posed by new practices of private reading, pointing to a motif in eighteenth-century painting of women masturbating while reading a novel, or asleep with a book dropped nearby, implying masturbation had taken place. He contends that “the cultural energy of certain sorts of reading and books—creatures of the marketplace themselves, crucial in the creation of desire and in its ethical management,

predicated on solitude, fantasy, the free play of imagination, the capacity to dwell within the self—was the cultural energy of solitary sex” (303). Indeed, in Laqueur’s view, masturbation provoked panic because it “pointed to an abyss of solipsism, anomie, and socially meaningless freedom” and thus was “an expression of anxiety about a new political economic order writ on the body” (280). As such, masturbation represents both the threat of wasteful expenditure and an anti-social subjectivity. Isa’s masturbatory fantasies, as nonproductive expenditures, flout her husband’s work ethic and economies of thrift; as investments in private pleasure and fantasy, they defy the societal expectation that, as mother, her life be devoted to the care of others and the betterment of the nation.

The motif of liberation through flight is repeated throughout many of Isa’s spontaneously composed poems. She begins one with the phrases “flying, rushing through the ambient, incandescent, summer silent . . .” and another, “flying, mounting through the air . . . there to lose what binds us here” (*BTA* 14). Flying signifies emancipation from all that “binds” one to the land and to the past: those ties of marriage, domesticity, and tradition that Isa rebels against throughout the novel. Yet, Isa is concerned not just with the airplane’s capacity for flight, but with its propeller, and its “infinitely quick vibrations.” Together with the “wire, tingling, tangling, vibrating,” these images invoke emergent scientific theories about energy, wave-particle theory, and the discovery of electrical systems in the late nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> In *Vibratory Modernisms*, Anthony Enns and Shelley Trower argue:

Vibrations were central to some of the major developments in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century science. The idea that the universe was suffused by an invisible “ether” supported the idea that all phenomena, including sound, light, and even matter itself, consisted of vibrations of varying frequencies. (1)

In Isa's fantasy, the vibrating wire more specifically implies an electrical current. The imagery functions as a metaphor for how Haines, the farmer, affects Isa. His words, like electrical wiring, connect him to Isa, allowing her to receive his electrical current and be lit up, made like a wire, "a tingling, tangling, vibrating" mass. As Tim Armstrong argues, "the invention of electric systems" in the late 1800s "implied a bodily economy" (*Modernism, Technology, and the Body* 17). The invention stimulated "widespread interest in the theory of nerve impulses" and led to the use of terms such as "animal electricity" and "nerveo-electric fluid" to describe human energies (14). Enns and Trower note that in this period the metaphor of the "human motor" came into prominence (4). As Armstrong explains, "the body was resolved in the new biophysics, into a system of impulses and flows, circuits and blockages" (*Modernism, Technology, and the Body* 19). Conceiving of desire in terms of electricity "speeds up the pace of desire and allows it to flow more promiscuously through social networks—leaping past barriers and across distances" (Armstrong, *Modernism, Technology, and the Body* 19). In the newly emerging electrical world, the body's own finite store of energy is constantly being engaged by the outside world and put into circulation. Isa is, by means of her receptivity to others, plugged in, constantly spending her own sexual current while simultaneously absorbing electricity from her surroundings.

The passage's eroticism is explicitly associated with an economics of spending—energy, desire, money. It ends with Isa ordering fish for lunch, and then reflecting on her shopping habits (in particular, her failures to purchase the clothes she admires). Interestingly, Woolf's novel does not directly challenge the gendered division of economic behaviours but contests the devaluation of feminine spending and consumption. It positions Isa, initially at least, as the liberated spendthrift, and this spending as rebellion against the economies of thrift that define the professions and the patriarchal economy.

Isa imagines an opposition between her love for her husband and her love for the farmer, Haines; or between love as a social bond and obligation (to the nation, to the future) and love as passionate, sensuous fulfillment. However, Isa's rebellion is ultimately contained and defused. At day's end, she retreats from the radical implications of her ethic of expenditure and reconciles with Giles and his oppressive economies of thrift and future-oriented narratives. Moreover, there are hints throughout the novel's description of Isa's "inner love" that it reverts to a form of narcissism that posits self-growth, not loss, as her true aim. Thus, the novel suggests several ways in which Isa fails to realize an alternative narrative to the ethic of the professional man.

Isa's desire for Haines appears to eschew the demands of what one might call the Victorian/Edwardian sexual work ethic—namely the demand that one's sexual energies be judiciously spent so as to yield returns (children). In rejecting this doctrine, Isa celebrates the pleasures of the spendthrift, a pleasure free from calculative concerns about future wealth and power, and thus a pleasure taken in loss and wastefulness. Through this act, she supposedly rejects both her husband, the stockbroker, and his economics, as well as the ongoing doctrines of motherhood, which demand the self-sacrifice of mothers to their families for the sake of the nation and its continued prosperity. Yet, I would argue that, in another sense, her fantasies might not be as useless, unproductive, or aimless as they initially appear.

For one, the farmer is never really the true object of her desire. Even in her fantasy, the farmer is more a trigger than a focal point. His face is the first in a series of fragmented images that include the electric wire, the propeller, the blue feather, and the summer sky. In the building up of her excitement, she quickly forgets and moves beyond him. The true object of Isa's fantasy is herself. Indeed, the entire passage takes place in front of the mirror, with Isa gazing at herself while she combs her hair. The passage ends with a reflection on her shopping habits and a self-

judgment—that she is “abortive.” Not being able to buy what one wants is equivalent to not being able to realize the *return*, the *fruit*, of one’s investments. To be abortive as a spender is buy things that lead to nothing, that contain no lasting value beyond their moment of consumption. If “abortive” is a derogatory term, then her spending must have an aim after all, presumably the recuperation of some value external to the act of purchase and the object purchased. Thus, her fantasies do not fully free themselves from the calculative, future-oriented mindset. Her spending of desire does not betoken an immersion in the object (as it does in Stein’s accounts of discovery), but stays rooted in a narcissism that begins and ends in the self.

There is a clever irony in all of this. Isa, in the critical scene, juxtaposes the father of her children to the gentleman farmer: the man to whom she is formally (legally) bound and the man she desires. Yet it is the farmer, a symbol for *real* labour—for closeness to nature and the natural—who is the fiction. He is the fiction not because she can *only* fantasize about him (knowing him from a distance), but because in these fantasies “he is represented as manifest stereotype” (*Feminist Destinations* 189), and is as much a “cliché borrowed from romantic fiction” as “the father of [her] children” (*BTA* 13). She interprets his face as “ravaged” and “mysterious,” romantically casting him in the role of suffering, enigmatic hero. Indeed, Isa only has several, brief interactions with the farmer, at social gatherings and parties, and knows very little about him. Her perception of the farmer is mediated by the context of their first meeting, a game of tennis—light entertainment for the leisured class, a game atypical for someone who actually tends the fields and livestock. As a “gentleman farmer” specifically, Haines does not depend on farming for his income but engages in it only as a hobby made possible by some other source of wealth. Her perception of him is an instance of projection and fantasy. As such, these imaginative encounters do not entertain the possibility of the farmer’s difference but process the

farmer through a set of tired, inherited social and cultural categories.

Moreover, the passage as a whole suggests not the loss or expenditure of energies but the build-up and accumulation of energies. The electric wire vibrates indefinitely with the electrical charge. Similarly, the plane's propeller spins and vibrates furiously in the midst of take-off, of transcendence, but there is no indication of where the plane is going or what the plane leaves behind. In these fantasies, the focus is not on the farmer, but on the current—represented by vibrations and movement—that circle around the image of the farmer. These energies appear to be both the means and the end of her meditation. Thus, one might say Isa spends on the farmer (the image, the cliché) in order to increase her spending power, in order to stoke her sum total of desire. He is a catalyst in the circuit: she gets off on feeling like a wire, coursing with electrical current—not from the discharge of that energy.

The novel's imagery testifies to the fact that Isa wants nothing more than to move with the current: float, like a swan, on the current of a river (*BTA* 5); soar, like a bird, propelled by the wind (*BTA* 14); or pulsate, like a wire, coursing with electricity (*BTA* 14). She wants to move and be moved, free of any and all constraints. In short, Isa wants to become current-cy. After all, in the age of late capitalism, it is money, exchangeable with everything, crossing borders with greater ease than people, that approximates absolute freedom of movement. Indeed, in certain respects, she entertains a fantasy not that dissimilar from the purposive man—for a kind of radical freedom from all limits and restraints, an ability to shed the bonds of the material world and become wholly liquid.

Even though they pit her husband against the gentleman farmer, Isa's autoerotic reveries of wasteful expenditure do not prove as threatening to Giles and his stockbroker ethos as they initially appear. For one, Isa hides her poems in her husband's accounting books, a detail

suggesting that her imaginative expenditure does not directly challenge his economic mode and which foreshadows her reconciliation with him at the day's end (*BTA* 14).<sup>8</sup> Upon the conclusion of the pageant, Isa reflects on how "love and hate" for her husband "tore her asunder," and ruefully wishes for "a new plot" (*BTA* 194). As the night comes to an end, however, the narrative suggests the continuation of an old "plot." First, prior to retiring to bed, Isa attends to the family's bills. In an interesting reversal of roles, Isa becomes the king in the counting house from the children's nursery rhyme, the manager of the family's accounts. The radical potential of her spending, its challenge to economies of thrift and exchange, is now defused as she dutifully pays off her debts, squaring accounts and reestablishing economic equilibrium. Secondly, Isa and Giles, who are "left alone for the first time that day," appear to resolve their differences:

Alone, enmity was bared; also love. Before they slept, they must fight; after they had fought, they would embrace. From that embrace another life might be born. But first they must fight, as the dog fox fights with the vixen, in the heart of darkness, in the fields of night. (*BTA* 197)

Whatever doubts Isa has had about her love for her husband, whatever dislike she has for the maternal and the domestic sacrifice imposed upon her, she ultimately resumes the role designated to her in the reproductive plot: mother to a future generation, donkey in the desert, vessel for transmitting tradition. If earlier in the novel this was emphasized by the impersonal title—"the father of my children"—that Isa gave to Giles, in this final scene it is emphasized by the tone of the passage, with its suggestion of an inevitable and archetypal drama. Woolf leaves the reader with the unsettling vision of a world in which giving birth to "another life" remains an incontrovertible imperative. More disturbing, this imperative seems to require "fighting" as its necessary means. The "fighting" refers to Isa's disagreements with Giles as well as her rebellions

against the reproductive plot—her yearning for the gentleman farmer and her spending. Yet, these rebellions have done nothing to weaken the hold of the imperative. On the contrary, they seem necessary to the vicious circle.

To be clear, Isa's capitulation consists not simply in the fact that she refuses to leave Giles for the gentleman farmer; after all, to demand faithfulness to the object of her free-spending fantasy would contradict the very point of her resistance, its embrace of a non-serious play and loss. Instead, her betrayal lies in the fact that, in staying with Giles and taking up his labour—paying the bills, bringing forth “another life”—she ends up actively endorsing the reproductive plot, the investment in the child as a figure of a redemptive, unifying future.

Isa and Giles' “fighting” anticipates the calamity of the war that looms on the horizon in the novel. Alex Zwerdling argues that Isa and Giles' dysfunctional marriage is “a paradigm for war itself,” and Jane Marcus argues that Woolf “shows us how fully she saw the source of the violence of war in the violence of human sexuality” (*Virginia Woolf and the Real World* 220, *Art and Anger* 151). The fact that violence of war finds its “paradigm” or “origin” in marriage carries with it a devious irony. Indeed, the coming war in *Between the Acts* is presented not as an interruption of progress and civilization, but as a consequence of progress and civilization—a necessary phase in its movement. Indeed, Woolf suggests in this final passage that so long as one remains indebted to this kind of imperative—call it reproductive futurism, or the dance round the mulberry tree—one must tolerate war (between countries, between genders, and within the self). Yet, Woolf is not claiming that war is unavoidable and thus a harsh reality to be endured.<sup>9</sup> Rather, the novel suggests that war only appears inevitable *if* one endorses the ethos of the professional man, of endless accumulation and deferred consumption—the very ethos the novel ruthlessly critiques.<sup>10</sup>

Isa's fantasies are protests against a world that demands her sacrifice to the future, making her nothing more than a reproductive means, valuable only for what she delivers. Isa's reveries, however, imagine a liberation they do not deliver. Why do these fantasies of rebellion fail? Alex Zwerdling and Stephen Barber read Isa's fantasies and poetry as a form of escapism, capable of diverting her attention, but ultimately incapable of fundamentally transforming her situation. Zwerdling reasons that Isa's poetry "must be seen simply as an escape from the tensions and abrasions of the real world in which she finds herself. Its aim is ascent, imaginative departure" (*Virginia Woolf and the Real World* 315). Barber claims that "the novel reads Isa's rejections as merely reactionary since such differences ultimately appear ineffective as they are reabsorbed into a dominant worlding sequence" (431). I contend that her ethic of expenditure is more than "merely reactionary," constituting, for Woolf, a promising alternative to Giles economies of thrift and savings. Yet, Isa's reconciliation with Giles shows how easily such resistance can be neutralized and reabsorbed by the system it opposes. Indeed, the novel summons to mind the thought of Foucault, who asserts that, in late capitalism, "useless expenditure" is subordinated to the "circuits of the economy," and, through regulation, made a productive force (114).<sup>11</sup> Elaborating on the same point, Warren Susman observes that the 1920s and 1930s saw dramatic challenges to the work ethic. Citizens were "encouraged increasingly (ways were found to help [them]) not to hoard his savings (a part of the evil of Puritanism) but to spend and spend" (111). Susman goes on to note, however, that "leisure was rapidly becoming almost as important as labor" for capitalism (111). A newly expanded advertising industry would exploit this "pleasure ethic," "stimulating those desires in an effort to use them in creating a market for a whole new set of products" (112). Leisure and free time, once spheres outside the marketplace, became highly profitable resources for capitalists. Fredric Jameson notes that those

in the German Idealist tradition (notably Friedrich Schiller) believed that play provided an “alternative experience” to that of the market and capitalist labour. In the contemporary era, however, when “leisure is as commodified as work, free time and vacations as organized and planified as a day in the office,” play loses its special status and now becomes a realm of manipulation and control (*Postmodernism* 147). Foucault, Jameson, Susman, and Woolf appear concur that late capitalism extends its power over spheres outside of the workplace and submits them to the mechanisms of rational calculation. Indeed, as many scholars have observed, the ethic or set of values that characterize entrepreneurial capitalism—risk, play, creativity, spontaneity—bear a resemblance to values promoted by the avant-gardes (as inherently anti-capitalist).<sup>12</sup> Late capitalism wants to appropriate these values, and by managing, regulating, and controlling them, render them productive. The end goal remains growth, accumulation, expansion, and profit. In the case of *Between the Acts*, Woolf observes that a consumerist moment, in itself, does not represent a radical alternative to the economy of exchange but can easily become ensnared in its calculative and instrumental logic. Indeed, the novel’s depiction of Miss La Trobe echoes the point, showing how her act of gift-giving is neutralized by her simultaneous embrace of a narrative of reproductive futurism.

### **Modes of artistic (re)production: Miss La Trobe, Lily Briscoe, and narratives of promissory futurism**

Miss La Trobe’s relationship to the reproductive plot is perhaps the most complex of any character in the novel. On the one hand, she resembles Giles: preoccupied with work rather than leisure or consumption, she views her art in terms of purpose and necessity. It is a project to salvage and preserve her country’s cultural “possessions” for the sake of the future. Yet, at the

same time, her play incorporates experimental elements that challenge the normative obsession with futurity, directing her audience's attention to the moments between acts. Miss La Trobe plays an important role in Woolf's exploration of the logic of money and futurity. She helps demonstrate what the future-obsessed ideologies of capital (and professional men) share with ideologies of progress, and hints at what form resistance might take.

Some critics have suggested that La Trobe is Woolf's privileged artist figure. Phyllis Rose, for instance, suggests an association between Miss La Trobe and Woolf herself. She interprets the novel "as Woolf's *Tempest*, a *Tempest* written in the time of war, her assessment of her own art and her farewell to it" (231-232). I concur with Alex Zwerdling, however, who claims that "there is no character in [*Between the Acts*] whose vision emerges as authoritative" ("*Between the Acts* and the Coming of War" 236).

The pageant that La Trobe stages mixes progressive and conservative elements. While few critics interpret the play as being straightforwardly patriotic, they vary in the extent to which they find in it parody or subversion. Sam Wiseman understands the play as "a qualified attempt to commemorate Englishness" (127). Julia Briggs argues that the play offers the audience "an image of an England affectionately observed yet at the same time parodied, simultaneously mocking and reproducing England's narratives of itself as a seafaring nation under Queen Elizabeth I" (202). Alice Wood finds more parody than affection in Miss La Trobe's play, calling it "anti-nationalistic" (126). She contends that it "explores England's cultural and social history with little concern for political events, military victories or defeats" (Wood 126). At one point, mid-way through the pageant, an anonymous voice in the audience asks, "'why leave out the Army, as my husband was saying, if it's history?'" (*BTA* 178). In omitting army history, a domain of English history dominated by men, and closely identified with predominant

conceptions of masculinity, the pageant could be said to offer a feminist rewriting of national history and national identity. Indeed, at least one female audience member, Lucy Swithin, finds the play empowering. She tells Miss La Trobe that though she has only played a “small part” in the life of her nation, “you made me feel I could have played Cleopatra” (*BTA* 137). Miss La Trobe interprets Lucy as saying “you’ve stirred in me my unacted part” (*BTA* 137). By telling a revised and selective version of national history, one that focuses less on the army and its imperial project, and more on the contributions of women, Miss La Trobe manages not only to counter a hegemonic national narrative, but also to make visible possibilities for female participation in England’s history.

In addition to this feminist rewriting of national history, the pageant features several experimental moments that function to undermine the future-obsessed mentality of the professional man and his march “round the mulberry tree” (*TG* 72). As Mickalites notes, Miss LaTrobe’s spectacle “alternately shocks its audience with its cheapness and enigmatic parody and leaves them writhing uncomfortably during the periods between the acts,” thereby failing in its mission to spur the audience into “a communal sense of historical participation” (161). Yet, one uncharacteristically risky—and modernist—scene in the play proves a success. Miss LaTrobe’s script calls for “ten mins. of present time”—that is, a pause during which there is no action on the stage or music of any kind. The audience sits restlessly through the interval:

All their nerves were on edge. They sat exposed. The machine ticked. There was no music. The horns of cars on the high road were heard. And the swish of trees. They were neither one thing nor the other; neither Victorians nor themselves. They were suspended, without being, in limbo. Tick, tick, tick went the machine. (*BTA* 159)

As it is at other points throughout the play, the audience is made aware of the passing of time by

the “tick” of the gramophone. Later on in the evening, after the play is over, while Isa attends to bills, the clock in Pointz Hall “tick[s]” audibly (*BTA* 195). The ticking of the gramophone and clock find a thematic echo in the counting of money featured in the lyrics “Song of Sixpence,” which, not coincidentally, the gramophone plays between acts. What distinguishes this moment of “present time” from others, however, is that this ticking is brought into the foreground, made the sole object of the audience’s attention. Being deprived of action, the audience sits “exposed” to the uneventful passing of time. Interestingly, this experience of being in “limbo” does not defeat clock-time, but calls it to people’s attention. The moment makes the audience members conscious of the passing of the time and the ways in which their lives are ordered by a linear sequence of fleeting moments, each oriented towards the future, each meaningless in itself. This self-reflexive awareness of the temporal regime is missing in their everyday lives and only achieved by being deprived of action. The result is a kind of anxious boredom. In Walter Benjamin’s description of Paul Klee’s “angel of history,” the angel is “propel[led] [...] into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward” (*Illuminations* 257). Similarly, while the pageant’s experimental non-scene is unable to interrupt or bring to a halt clock-time, it does momentarily turn its audience’s back from the future and focus its attention on what is neglected in the linear, forward-looking march of clock-time.

The experience of being in “limbo” while forced to hear the tick of the clock gives way to a moment of awe and reverence. Midway through the allotted interval, Miss La Trobe senses the audience’s attention flagging and thinks to herself that “her little game had gone wrong” (*BTA* 161). She wishes she had had “a back-cloth to hang between the trees—to shut out cows, swallows, present time” (*BTA* 161). Suddenly and surprisingly, since “no one had seen the cloud coming,” it begins to rain. The sudden shower connects the audience in an experience of beauty,

leading Miss La Trobe to proclaim, “‘that’s done it’” (*BTA* 162). “Nature,” by being unpredictable (“no one had seen the cloud coming”), and by deviating from the script (the hope is that the weather will be fine) “once more had taken her part” (*BTA* 162). Miss La Trobe’s inclusion of “present time” stands out as a strikingly experimental ploy in the midst of an otherwise conservative pageant. Interestingly, her inclusion runs counter to her desire for control, uncharacteristically opening her work to chance and spontaneity. In this moment of relinquished control, she herself assumes the stance of consumer or spectator—“she felt everything [the audience] felt”—passively receiving nature’s addition to the play (*BTA* 161).

The uncomfortable experience of “present time” and the ensuing downpour articulate an alternative to what Woolf refers to in *Three Guineas* as the dance “round the mulberry tree” (*TG* 72). In conceptualizing how the moment disrupts this dance, which Woolf links to the professional man and the pursuit of money, it is useful to compare Woolf’s thinking with Walter Benjamin’s. According to Benjamin, the modern, Western world conceives of time as a void container, indifferent to the events that fill it; the time of modernity is nothing more than “homogenous, empty time” (*Selected Writings: 1938-1940* 261). Because it is homogenous, a uniform entity without qualitative differences, it is capable of being exhaustively quantified and measured. This notion of the homogeneity of time excludes the possibility of time *as* event in contrast to time as the event’s container, of temporality as something possessing particular experiential qualities—qualities that characterize memory, boredom, and anticipation, for example. As Lukács notes, time in modernity “sheds its qualitative, variable, flowing nature; it freezes into an exactly delimited, quantifiable continuum filled with quantifiable ‘things’ [...]: in short, it becomes space” (90). Yet, by creating a situation in which time *is* the event, rather than simply the medium in which the event takes place, Miss La Trobe shows how temporality can be

*experienced*, can be phenomenologically rich. In this moment, the time-keeping of the clock becomes something sensuous; the audible and maddening tick of the gramophone breeds unease and apprehension. If time can be experienced as a mood, as something felt, then it ceases to be an empty and indifferent container. This Bergsonian experience potentially opens the door to other modes of inhabiting and *spending* time. Time as an empty container, the time of capital and progress, is merely one mode of experiencing time (and a mode that denies its experiential basis).

Benjamin links the dominant Western concept of time with the ideology of progress, where progress is conceived as “something boundless, in keeping with the infinite perfectibility of mankind” (*Illuminations* 260). By making progress an “endless task,” one condemns oneself to living in the now of waiting and work; so long as there is always something yet to be achieved, one’s present must be subsumed to the future. Indeed, as Benjamin notes, social democrats can only envision the present as a “transition” from one stage to another (*Illuminations* 262). As a result, the present moment is rendered insignificant in itself, only gaining meaning from its place in a continuum and its relation to an end that never arrives. This concept of time robs the present moment of any possibilities for fulfillment: it is a designated “anteroom, so to speak, in which one could wait for the emergence of the revolutionary situation”. The technocratic proponents of progress systematically negate the present and concern themselves only with the future, and “the speed, or lack of it, with which people and epochs advance along the path of progress” (*Selected Writings: 1913-1926* 37).

Benjamin’s shows how dominant notions of time and progress are a product of capitalist modernity. This concept of time is modelled on the repetitive and endless movement of capital, and its structure of infinite deferral (of “pleasure” in Agamben’s thought, of “now-time” in

Benjamin's). Cesare Casarino claims of M-C-M circuits:

The temporality governing such circulation is a homogenous succession of quantified instants in which each and every instant realizes itself only in the next instant, thereby negating itself in and as the present instant: money realizes itself by accruing to money; but money accrues to money only in the next transaction, only in the next instant of realization—and so on ad infinitum. (236-7)

Importantly, this temporal logic is endless, but not aimless. Each moment is oriented towards a definite future, and so is teleological.

Thus, a Benjaminian question animates *Between the Acts*: how can one conceive of a present that is not a “transition”? Expressed in a different register: how can one conceive of an expenditure that is not simultaneously an investment? The challenge for Woolf's characters lies in making the between more than just a transitory link between past and future, more than just a fleeting moment, which gives way to the great (or not so great) “acts” of history. Instead, the novel asks how this “between” might be made a permanent interruption, one that would instantiate new forms of temporality, new forms of leisure.

Benjamin figures progress as a train, and emancipation as the interruption of its movement:

Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train—namely, the human race—to activate the emergency brake. (*Selected Writings: 1938-1940* 402)

He posits revolutionary “now-time” (“*Jetztzeit*”), or the “Messianic cessation of happening,” as the alternative to the train of history (*Illuminations* 263).<sup>13</sup> Messianic time would be a temporality of culmination and fulfillment rather than waiting and working. Agamben contends that there is a model for Messianic time available in the everyday experience of “pleasure,”

crediting Aristotle with the discovery:

Aristotle had realized that pleasure was a heterogeneous thing in relation to the experience of quantified, continuous time. “The form of pleasure”—he writes in the *Nicomachean Ethics*—“is perfect at any moment,” adding that pleasure, unlike movement, does not occur in a space of time, but is “within each now something whole and complete.” (*Infancy and History* 104)

In *Between the Acts*, Miss La Trobe’s moment of “present time” manages to unsettle the community’s obsession with futurity, at least momentarily. If anyone in the novel appreciates the moment and understands its significance, it is Isa. Most often, Isa responds with indifference to (and occasionally, outright distaste for) Miss La Trobe’s play. For instance, during the first interval, she tells William, “I wish the play didn’t run in my head” (*BTA* 102). Yet, she is overcome with emotion during the interval of “present time” and the sudden downpour, exclaiming to herself first “O that our human pain could here have ending!” and then, “O that my life could here have ending” (*BTA* 162). Isa’s sentiment might be taken as a reiteration of her death-wish acted out earlier in the novel. Yet perhaps Isa means “ending” in the sense that Agamben does, when he observes, “the sole possibility we have to truly grasp the present is to conceive of it as end” (18). In other words, to “have ending” might not mean death, but an escape from the *endlessness* of money and progress. Indeed, the gerund “ending,” implies something ongoing, a mode of being, of occupying the present, rather an instant in time. Isa’s recognition of the repetitive plot of “love” and “hate,” her yearning for “ending” and “a new plot,” stand out as expressions of protest and resistance in the novel.

Yet, despite the promise of the play’s more radical moments, Miss La Trobe ultimately fails to articulate an alternative to the reproductive plot—and not just because her audience fails

to understand her meaning, but because she herself is complicit with the future-oriented time of capital and progress. At the conclusion of her play, La Trobe thinks to herself in a moment of exultation, “she could say to the world, You have taken my gift!” (*BTA* 188). As a gift, her play would challenge the circuits of exchange that characterize economic behaviour. Yet, moments later, Miss La Trobe undermines her own thought:

Her gift meant nothing. If they had understood her meaning; if they had known their parts; if the pearls had been real and the funds illimitable—it would have been a better gift. (*BTA* 188)

Miss La Trobe spells out exactly what kind of return (from her audience, her actors, her resources) she expects, and in doing so, subverts the very logic of the gift, the idea of giving without expectation of return.<sup>14</sup> By demanding that her play be performed and interpreted exactly as imagined, La Trobe keeps the pageant firmly within the sphere of work and exchange.

While the experience of present time directs the audience’s attention to the moments between acts, the pageant as a whole is very much focused on the future and the work of progress. La Trobe uses the metaphor of a wall in disrepair to figure the current state of English civilization:

That was a ladder. And that (a cloth roughly painted) was a wall. And that a man with a hod on his back. Mr. Page the reporter, licking his pencil, noted: “With the very limited means at her disposal, Miss La Trobe conveyed to the audience Civilization (the wall) in ruins; rebuilt (witness man with hod) by human effort; witness also woman handing bricks. Any fool could grasp that.” (*BTA* 163)

The symbolism is heavy-handed: the wall represents “civilization, to be built by [...] orts, scraps and fragment like ourselves” (*BTA* 169). In the aftermath of the first World War, and on the cusp of another, Miss La Trobe wants to wake her audience to an urgent task, the preservation of

tradition, of civilization, from the gathering forces of destruction. This anxiety about the future, expressed symbolically in the play, imposes a labour on the audience. They become like Isa, “the donkey” in the desert, “burdened” with the “possessions” and “memories” of the past. While it may seem sensible to protect civilization against the chaos of war, *Between the Acts* and *Three Guineas* invite skepticism about this assertion. The works force one to ask whether civilization might not be a cause of war rather than the thing threatened by war.

La Trobe’s obsession with the historical purpose of her art causes her to view both the audience and actors as the means to her vision. As a result, even though her pageant is meant to resist the destructive forces of war, it ironically reproduces some of its hierarchies and violence. La Trobe is often described through military metaphors. She has “the look of a commander pacing his deck” (*BTA* 57). The villagers call her “bossy” and resent her controlling ways. According to Isa, “She makes everyone do something” (*BTA* 54). When events exceed her control—when actors forget lines, or when the audience responds inappropriately—La Trobe fumes. Her attitude to the audience is described in violent terms: she wants to “douche them” and to “expose them” (*BTA* 161). At one point, she feels that “every moment the audience slipped the noose” (*BTA* 110). Given that Woolf argues in *Three Guineas* that fascism has its origins in common, everyday behaviours and attitudes, the military metaphors used to describe Miss La Trobe are cannot be dismissed as insignificant. Desperate to spur her audience to action, wanting to alert them to the precariousness of their historical moment, she imagines their reception of her play as nothing more than the mechanical translation of a message. Angry at their inattention or inappropriate interpretations, she imagines “a play without an audience—the play!” (*BTA* 161). In doing away with the audience, she attempts to eliminate the problem of reception altogether: she would rather have no audience than be misread. As Patricia Klindienst Joplin notes, in these

moments La Trobe seeks to “dictate rather than to communicate meaning” (90).

Ann Ronchetti claims that because her art is drama, La Trobe is required to demonstrate “a level of engagement in the common life of her culture and with actors and audience unparalleled by any other art form represented in Woolf’s fiction” (123). Yet, while La Trobe clearly possesses impressive knowledge of national culture, she frequently expresses disdain for the “common life” of her actors. Ronchetti euphemistically glosses over the elitism of La Trobe’s character, claiming that “she also has a shrewd understanding of human nature and uses it to manage her actors” (64). Yet, La Trobe’s pretensions are made clear throughout the novel, as when she joins her actors at a local pub after the performance of her play:

She turned the handle of the public house door. The acrid smell of stale beer saluted her; and voices talking. They stopped. They had been talking about Bossy as they called her—it didn't matter. She took her chair and looked through the smoke at a crude glass painting of a cow in a stable; also at a cock and a hen. She raised her glass to her lips. And drank. And listened. Words of one syllable sank down into the mud. She drowsed; she nodded. The mud became fertile. Words rose above the intolerably laden dumb oxen plodding through the mud. Words without meaning—wonderful words. (*BTA* 190-1)

The working-class “mud” is a source of artistic ideas and inspiration, but only once the words are disconnected from the context of their working-class speakers—the “intolerably laden dumb oxen plodding through the mud.” Only La Trobe, in a trance-like state of listening and watching, having obtained a critical detachment, can make the “mud” “fertile,” can make the words rise up and become music-like, “words without meaning.”

On account of her elitist and authoritarian tendencies, several critics have interpreted La Trobe as a dictator figure. The point is controversial, however. Patricia Klindienst Joplin

contends that the “proximity of artist to dictator” is revealed when Miss La Trobe “succumbs to the temptation to treat meaning as ‘hers’” (“Authority of Illusion” 89, 90). Catherine Wiley, on the other hand, suggests that to understand Miss La Trobe as dictator misses the complexity of her character. Instead, Wiley insists that La Trobe is “all of these things: would-be dictator, would-be savior” (“Making History” 15). I concur with Wiley: Miss La Trobe possesses authoritarian traits, but her complex and contradictory character is not defined by them. Nevertheless, the presence of these characteristics reveals something important about her project and its complicity with what it purports to oppose.

This complicity between artistic projects, the idea of progress, and violence is an idea Woolf had previously explored in *To the Lighthouse*. In the 1927 novel, Lily Briscoe, like Miss La Trobe, creates art in the midst of a traumatic historical event—WWI and the death of Mrs. Ramsay—and imagines her project in terms of making connections with the imperilled past, and thus preserving it for the future. Lily returns to the Ramsay’s country house in the novel’s third section, following the devastation of the war, only to find a world in fragments. The problem of her painting is “how to connect this mass on the right hand with that on the left” (*TTL* 46). Without Mrs. Ramsay, the social cohesion that she enabled (by bringing people together around the dinner table, for instance) falls apart. Lily’s own painting, as well as the surviving Ramsays’ personal missions (Mr. Ramsay, Cam, and James travel to the lighthouse), work to recreate a sense of connectedness, even if only privately. Through it, Lily seeks to restore a psychic unity by filling the void left by Mrs. Ramsay’s death. Whether the types of unities achieved by Lily are the same as those by Mrs. Ramsay, or whether she seeks to produce connections differently (say, unities without coercion, or subordination, or one-sided sacrifice), remains a valid question, but, nevertheless, the aim of her art remains that of reconnection and communion.

In *To the Lighthouse*, the relationship between artistic labour, progress, and social class is the subject of one of Mr. Ramsay's more lengthy reflections. He wonders, "If Shakespeare had never existed [...] would the world have differed much from what it is today? Does the progress of civilization depend upon great men?" (*TTL* 37). He decides that the work of great men has probably done little for the "lot of the average human being," but then questions whether the "lot of the average human being" is the best criterion for measuring progress. He wonders whether "the greatest good requires the existence of a slave class", whether the toil of the masses is a kind of necessary sacrifice for the production of cultural treasures (*TTL* 37). He finds this thought "distasteful", but stops short of dismissing it entirely. Indeed, however "distasteful" Mr. Ramsay's question haunts the novel (*TTL* 37). The problem of class and work returns in the novel's second and third sections. In "Time Passes," Mrs. McNab, the Ramsay's cleaning woman, returns to the country house to begin work on its restoration. One of only two human presences in the section (Mrs. Bast, another cleaning woman, is working on the house too), she is introduced into the narrative as an elemental energy: "But there was a force working; something not highly conscious; something that leered, something that lurched" (*TTL* 114). Mrs. Ramsay's cleaning woman represents the vital yet mostly unconscious energies of the working class. About these class dynamics, Mary Lou Emery contends:

Lily makes her triumphant line "there, in the centre," the space analogous to the center of the novel where Mrs. McNab has worked. Thus her "work" of art makes over and supplants the work performed by Mrs. McNab. Much more than Lily's painting, Mrs. McNab, her coworker, and their labors have become invisible, while Lily's "attempt" remains forever, and Lily is the "one" who decides it is so. The servant's central place in the novel has been reoccupied, and her gaze, as well as her voice, has been robbed of

meaning. (231)

While Mrs. McNab's work is experienced as a burden ("one long sorrow and trouble, how it was getting up and going to bed again, and bringing things out and putting them away again") and robbed of meaning, it is simultaneously necessary to the epiphanies and resolutions that conclude the novel (*TTL* 107). She begins the work of reconnection that Lily that the other characters complete. By drawing attention to Mrs. McNab's plight, Woolf interrogates the costs of progress and historical continuity.

*To the Lighthouse* is one of several Woolf texts that raises questions about how one responds to the trauma of war. In particular, Woolf casts suspicion on the desire to reestablish continuity with the past, and resume the projects (individual and collective) that war interrupted. Indeed, there are aspects of tradition that should not be salvaged for the post-war world, particularly related to gender norms. While mourning Mrs. Ramsay, Lily refuses to emulate her self-sacrificing ways, denying Mr. Ramsay the sympathy he demands, and seeking an independence quite foreign to anything Mrs. Ramsay knew. While Lily defiantly chooses a life of self-expression and autonomy—unmarried and childless—the instrumental, self-sacrificing, and maternal work of Mrs. Ramsay gets displaced onto Mrs. McNabb. Woolf suggests that the very concept of a Project or a Work risks a certain instrumental violence.

In *Three Guineas* and *Between the Acts*, Woolf is even more explicit in suggesting that war is not simply an interruption of progress, of future-oriented movement, but a moment *of* progress. Drawing on both texts, Matthew Weber argues that, for Woolf, "action-taking progressivism perpetuates just those structures—education, capitalism, militarism—that Woolf methodically claims to be homologous and often complicit with fascism and the imminent world war" (20). Miss La Trobe exemplifies this point, imagining her art as a form of activism in

support of cultural progress. As Woolf and Benjamin argue, the proponents of a certain kind of progress impose upon themselves (and others) conditions that run counter to the ideals of progress, conditions that resemble the very circumstances progress seeks to redress (work, forced sacrifice). In order to stave off the destructive elements of war, La Trobe commands the lower-class villagers like a general, stifling their voices and reproducing the hierarchies and subordination crucial to military action. In the case of Miss La Trobe and Lily Briscoe, this violence is projected onto others, but it could also be self-inflicted, as in the case of Woolf's "professional man," who denies himself the pleasures of the senses in his desire for abstract power. While progress aims at the alleviation of suffering in the long run, it may intensify these conditions in the short-term. If the ends of progress are fantastic and unrealizable, or if progress gets defined as an infinite process, this short-term sacrifice turns into a life sentence, and the process becomes self-defeating. The very means of achieving progress—work, instrumental reason—become obstacles to enjoying its fruits. Weber suggests that, "rather than trying to produce intervention active or passive, Woolf seems to want instead to induce contemplation of a less legibly productive sort" (20). I would add to Weber's contention that not just contemplation, but also acts of non-productive expenditure and consumption, play a role in Woolf's refusal of the telos of progressivism.

La Trobe's failure to articulate an alternative to the reproductive plot of capital is foregrounded by the ways in which her plans for another play prefigure the novel's ending. Earlier in the day, while La Trobe is preparing for the pageant, she draws inspiration from her surroundings for her next work:

Miss La Trobe stopped her pacing and surveyed the scene. "It has the makings ...' she murmured. For another play always lay behind the play she had just written. Shading her

eyes, she looked. The butterflies circling; the light changing; the children leaping; the mothers laughing [...] (*BTA* 58)

What inspires Miss La Trobe, not surprisingly, is an idyllic and clichéd scene of mothers and children frolicking in the fields, an image that evokes the ideology of reproductive futurism that Isa has rebelled against throughout the day. At the end of her pageant, La Trobe imagines the scene of this new play while surveying the grounds of Pointz Hall:

“I should group them,” she murmured, “here.” It would be midnight; there would be two figures, half concealed by a rock. The curtain would rise. What would the first words be? The words escaped her. (*BTA* 189)

Finally, as La Trobe drinks at the pub that night, she again imagines the scene of her new play:

There was the high ground at midnight; there the rock; and two scarcely perceptible figures. Suddenly the tree was pelted with starlings. She set down her glass. She heard the first words. (*BTA* 191)

In these passages, she recovers the possibility of creating a new production and directly foreshadows the novel’s final scene. As the inhabitants of Pointz Hall prepare for bed, Lucy reads from her book, “Outline of History”: “prehistoric man [...] half-human, half-ape, roused himself from his semi-crouching position and raised great stones” (*BTA* 197). Following this, the narrator tells us,

The house had lost its shelter. It was night before roads were made, or houses. It was the night that dwellers in caves had watched from some high place among the rocks.

The curtain rose. They spoke. (*BTA* 197)

The juxtaposition of prehistoric man and the married couple casts Isa and Giles as anonymous stand-ins for humanity. Together with the narrator's predictions about what necessarily "will" or "must" happen, the passage robs Isa and Giles of any agency, suggesting that this drama is not chosen, but imposed—that they merely assume roles in a script that pre-exists them and over which they exercise no control. If, as I have argued, the final scene signals the triumph of reproductive futurism and the endlessness of capital reproduction (or, conversely, the failure of a new plot to materialize), then La Trobe's authorship or anticipation of this final scene reinforces her complicity with the economic and temporal regime the novel critiques.

As the opening scene of La Trobe's next play, the final tableau marks a thematic shift from cultural to biological reproduction, from the history of England to the history of the species. Yet, both plots share a reproductive and instrumentalist logic, envisioning the future as a place of wholeness and completion, and the present as a moment of work and striving. Indeed, by contrasting these contexts, Woolf hints at a wicked irony, one Keynes would have appreciated. Though the advance of civilization has created sufficient wealth to free us from the daily struggle to meet basic needs, we continue to live lives defined by necessity—by what Keynes called "the struggle for subsistence." In *Between the Acts*, Woolf shows how a certain concept of progress, modelled on the endlessness of capital accumulation, is inherently violent, demanding continual strife and sacrifice from its adherents. In Woolf's dark vision, the notion of defending the cultural "possessions" against the destruction of war appears a fundamentally absurd task, since these works are already, as Walter Benjamin also saw, the products of war and of "barbarism" (IX: 326).

I have tried in this chapter to articulate Woolf's critique of finance capitalism. In order to put her critique in perspective, I want to consider briefly what Woolf's critique is not. Woolf

resists eschewing the world of finance, money, and desire for the “real” world of production and necessity. In doing so, she avoids the naïve and reactionary attitudes to finance capital that characterize Ezra Pound’s endorsement of the Social Credit movement. Pound defines usury as “a charge for the use of purchasing power, levied without regard to production; often without regard to the possibilities of production” (*Cantos* 230). As Preda notes, Pound’s hatred of usury derives from his notion that “the world was divided into producers and usurers. The producers create something new, using natural or industrial resources. The usurer uses money to acquire more money through speculation, pyramiding, and monopoly” (90). I have argued above that this is not Woolf’s critique of finance capital. Woolf’s portrayal of Giles Oliver and Miss La Trobe show an unwillingness to resort to a simple celebration of productive labour in opposition to the parasitic operations of financiers. (Pound’s recourse to world-creating labour keeps society rooted in a productivist paradigm.) Rather, she focuses her critique on the highly abstract and speculative nature of money, its function as a tool creating equivalence and homogeneity, and its inherent instrumentality.

Similarly, in a recent context, Slavoj Žižek argues that one should “reject” the “opposition between financial-speculative profiteering capital to the ‘substantial’ economy of capitalists engaged in productive activity” (53). This critique forgets that the so-called ‘real’ productive economy is always-already caught up in M-C-M circuits, and thus does not escape the monetary system, but remains merely one half of a double movement:

For in capitalism, the production process is only a detour in the speculative process of money engendering more money. The logic of ‘profiteering’ is ultimately also what sustains the incessant drive to revolutionize and expand production. (53)

Capitalism orients production towards the ends of money-making rather than the satisfaction of

human needs—thus the speculative economy is only an intensification of trends already present in the substantive economy. From Žižek’s perspective, monetary reformists mistakenly target money, rather than the division of labour, structures of domination and exploitation, as the root of the problem. Referring to the work of Kojin Karatani, Žižek argues that it is as consumer, not worker, that the average individual possesses agency with respect to capitalism (53). This is because, in order to transform commodities into money, capitalists must court, *as* consumers, the same people they exploit as workers.

Woolf shares this stance, placing hope in acts of gift-giving and useless expenditure, rather than acts of heroic labour. She envisions a consumption that is not productive, not an investment, not the means to more money, but an end in itself. In this, she is like Stein, who opposed the commodity not by rescuing its usefulness, but by exaggerating its uselessness. Woolf contests the finance economy through reckless consumption, a spending of energy and funds without any hope or expectation of recuperation. For this reason, the spendthrift remains the figure of radical potential within *Between the Acts*. If the promise of the spendthrift is not fulfilled, this is not because the spendthrift has ceased to be a subversive figure, but because Isa mistakenly looks for the spendthrift in an instrumental and narcissistic project of self-development and expansion, and Miss La Trobe betrays her gift by demanding a return.

## CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, I have argued that the works of Gertrude Stein, Djuna Barnes, and Virginia Woolf offer an alternative to the hegemonic modernist critique of a commodified society. Eschewing the standard modernist account that commodification degrades human subjects by reducing them to passivity, these authors instead lament that commodification valorizes a calculating and domineering subject who treats the surrounding world as nothing more than resources to be used in projects of self-realization. Conversely, and paradoxically, these writers locate possibilities within alienation and fetishism to combat commodification, reenchanting the world of things while establishing ethical relations with others. My study elucidates this paradox, while contrasting Stein, Barnes, and Woolf's version of the modernist critique of the commodity with that of their modernist peers—in particular, a masculinist strain that opposes world-creating artistic work to the enfeebling effects of commodification.

While the principal focus of my dissertation has been close evaluations of Stein's, Barnes's, and Woolf's engagements with and analogous emulations of specific commodity modalities, in this conclusion, I will explore some of the differences between their accounts, including their divergent conceptions of passivity and shock, the sociality of subjectivity, and temporality in the critique of commodification, as well as their varying relationships to the phenomenon of literary celebrity. First, however, I will briefly retrace the contours of the overarching argument.

### **Critiques of Commodification**

The hegemonic modernist critique of commodification focuses on the alienating and dehumanizing conditions of industrial labour and the homogenous and impersonal commodities

that are its product. This critique is found most prominently in the writings of those whom Wyndham Lewis calls “the men of 1914,” among whom he includes himself, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and James Joyce. A very different critique is found in the writers analyzed in this dissertation. They object to the increasing domination of an abstract and instrumental rationality over modern life. Whereas the first account attempts to recover agency for (what they perceive to be) the weakened subject of modernity, the second seeks to preserve the independence of the non-human world from (what they perceive to be) the rapacious and domineering subject of modernity.<sup>1</sup>

The first critique draws on what is, essentially, a Marxist distinction between alienated and self-fulfilling (or self-actualizing) labour. Marx believes that the capacity to design and produce objects distinguishes humanity from other species and thus constitutes our “species being.” Under capitalism, however, the worker produces objects but does not consciously design them. Instead, he or she mechanically repeats tasks that have been dictated from above and thus exerts little to no influence over what is made, what it is used for, or the conditions under which they labour. The anonymous and mass-produced product they create bears no trace of the worker’s hand, his or her unique signature, and thus it “confronts him as something hostile and alien” (*The Philosophic and Economic Manuscripts of 1844 72*).

Modernists frequently contrast the alienated factory worker with the artist (albeit a particular version of the artist) on the grounds that the artist’s labour is free and self-actualizing. In this scenario, artists—unlike the factory workers—assume a radically active relation to the world. They seize and wholly transform materials, realizing in physical form their artistic vision. Adopting Marxist terms, one might say the work of art testifies to the artists’ “species being,” their ability to invent freely and then will these inventions into existence. Since they are not

constrained by the empirically given or the societally mandated, these artists are exemplars of a radical creative freedom. Furthermore, the work they create is the authentic expression of its author, an instance of materiality mastered and subsumed to the law of form, in stark contrast with the mass-produced commodity, which is imagined as an alien and anonymous object, one without character or personality. For many modernists, this celebration of free artistic labour is infected by a strain of idealism. The act of artistic willing is constitutive, creating the very forms which make up the world; as such, these artists are the authors of their own reality.

Yet, this is not the only account of the art-commodity divide in modernism. By contrast, the authors I examine in this dissertation object not to mechanization per se but the domination of an abstract and instrumental rationality over modern life. This mode of rationality transforms every act, every relationship, into a matter of a self-interested and future-oriented calculation. For Stein, Barnes, and Woolf, this mode of rationality is unethical, bending others and the natural world to the will of the subject, and ironically self-defeating. The domination of others and the world ends up reverting into a kind of self-domination: in particular, it suppresses the passionate, desiring, and affective dimension of the human subjectivity.

This critique also replays certain themes in Marx's analysis of the commodity. According to Marx, commodification is characterized by the predominance of exchange-value over use-value. Whereas use-value describes the needs a product satisfies, and is necessarily tied to the sensuous and qualitative aspects of an object, exchange value is an abstract, quantitative, and relative measure of a product's value. It is the power of the commodity to trade itself against other commodities or a standard measure like money. In a society in which exchange value is dominant, fungibility rules the day. Deprived of inherent worth, things possess value only insofar as they can be made liquid and traded for abstract quantities of money. Those attributes of the

object that are concrete, context-dependent, qualitative, and particular—those things which resist translation or exchange—lose all authority and significance.

In a world dominated by exchange value, the dominant mode of rationality is instrumental and mired in what Marx calls “the icy-waters of egotistical calculation” (*The Communist Manifesto* 222). With the help of exchange value, the capitalist can treat the world—its things and people—as resources to be coolly manipulated in the pursuit of profit and power. She or he looks at nature and sees abstract resources waiting to be transformed into consumer goods. She or he looks at consumer goods and sees place-holders for future capital. As such, the capitalist is largely indifferent to the particular products that procure this return, since those objects are fundamentally replaceable with any other product that might achieve the same goal. Said differently, the capitalist pursues an end (money, surplus value) that is non-specific to the activity that procures it. The point is not simply that the capitalist is greedy but that the calculative attitude forecloses certain possibilities—namely, that the subject and his or her projects be moved, influenced, and changed through the encounters with the world. Indeed, market ideology presupposes an individual that is fully-formed, autonomous, prior to their encounter with others and society.

For the writers I analyze, this attitude is both ethically suspect, because it seeks to dominate others and the natural world, and harmful to those who perpetrate it. The latter point is made in Stein’s argument about the journalist and the “metropolitan newspaper.” According to Stein, the journalist filters the world through rigid schemas that order events for readers so that they are easily understood, categorized, and incorporated into existing world views. Yet, by making the world more manageable and “soothing,” it simultaneously deprives events of their capacity to startle and surprise readers—to challenge and alter the reader’s frame of reference.

Stein suggests that, in doing this, the newspaper robs us of a fundamental aspect of experience: the excitement that is entailed in discovery or encounters with singular people, things, and events.

Barnes and Woolf similarly protest against the fantasy of mastery inherent in instrumental reason. Barnes indicts the characters in *Nightwood* who, in translating Robin Vote into their day-time language, making her commensurable with their schemas of knowledge, disavow her difference. This disavowal is characterized by Barnes as a violent act of objectification, damaging to Robin, and simultaneously harmful to the objectifying subject, sequestering them in a world of their own imagining. Woolf critiques the sovereign masculine subject's fetish for currency, and the pure and abstract power it promises, over the concrete pleasures and benefits derived from individual acts of consumption. It is a fantasy that prioritizes an ever-receding and idealized future over the ephemeral present.

In short, these writers retell Hegel's fable about the ironic fate of the master. In subjugating the slave, the master seeks to establish himself as a free being. Yet, in doing so, he has divested the slave of the very thing he wants recognized in himself and thus robbed the slave of the capacity to bestow the recognition desired. If the abstraction critique diagnoses the problems of the master (of domination and self-sabotage), the mechanization critique laments the situation of the slave (of enforced passivity and dependence). For Stein, Barnes, and Woolf, the radically active subject posited by their modernist peers is exemplary of what they consider to be wrong with a commodified world: egotism and the human domination of nature. While the advocates of the mechanization critique would distinguish the artistic world-creator from the capitalist, entrepreneur, or scientist, Stein, Barnes, and Woolf consider them all as variations of the same will to power—a drive rooted in a disavowal of finitude and doomed to failure. In opposition to

this willful, world-creating subject, these writers posit passive subjects who exemplify non-reifying modes of engaging with others and objects: Stein advances the writer as a “caresser of nouns” and a collector; Barnes is fascinated with the female film star and, in particular, a Garboesque disengagement, obliquity, and ironic passivity; and Woolf envisions both the “Society of Outsiders” and the female consumer as deploying indifference as a tool against the “unreal loyalties” of her culture. In each case, these writers posit modes of estranged, alienated, and reified subjectivity as alternatives to the sovereign, masterful, and disengaged subject of modernity.

Yet, if the modernists I consider in this dissertation only approached the problem from only one angle—the problems of the master—then it remains unclear how their critique manages to be more nuanced than their peers. I contend that Stein, Barnes, and Woolf approach the dichotomies of master/slave, radical independence/object passivity, abstract conceptuality/raw materiality as two sides of the same coin, as constituting the crises of modernity *by virtue* of their split (or radical opposition to one another). They eschew these conventional dichotomies and this masculinist form of dialectical thinking. Stein, for instance, does not advocate simple passivity, but an active-passivity—a subversion of the opposition of activity and passivity through tropes of collecting, etc. Although they challenge these dichotomies from the position of the subordinate term (passivity or particularity for instance), they aim ultimately to subvert this dualistic worldview and embrace a dialogic one.

### **Constellations of difference: Shock, subjectivity, and futurity**

Throughout the dissertation, I have focused predominantly on close examinations of the attitudes of Stein, Barnes, and Woolf to the commodification of society and the experience of

alienation and fetishism. My argument has been that these writers' texts, taken together, embody an alternative approach to the critique of commodification than the hegemonic modernist one, best exemplified by "the men of 1914." Yet, in the course of articulating Stein, Barnes, and Woolf's shared project, important differences have emerged. It is these points of internal contention I will turn to now.

Stein, Barnes, and Woolf all theorize a moment of shock that is important insofar as it defeats the narcissism of the world-creating subject and brings about important experiences of passivity. Stein, who theorizes this moment of shock most extensively, calls it "discovery," and construes it as an experience in which the otherness of the object breaks through the (weakened or relaxed) rational defences of the ego and impresses itself upon the subject. One of her models for this is the yellow press, and the way stories, personalities, or headlines, bombard and overwhelm the reader, stripping them of their ability to categorize and master what they are consuming. The newspaper can work in the opposite direction too, however, neatly packaging events and personalities for easy digestion. For Stein, the experience is a "violent kind of delightfulness": violent because it destroys fantasies (of omnipotence, mastery, etc.), and delightful because it puts the subject in touch with a material realm that subtends experience—that is the necessary and pleasurable condition of their subjectivity (*TB* 10). Said differently, these experiences are violent and delightful because they subvert fantasies that were *always* ultimately harmful but nevertheless exerted a hold on the subject. As such, the moment of shock is both for the sake of the subsumed thing or other (letting it appear as different and separate) and for the sake of the subject who has been living in a mode of denial. In seeking to address domination and alienation, shock is both ethically and existentially important.

Yet, does the experience of shock always operate in the service of ethics? In *Nightwood*,

the characters crave to reify their fantasies of complacency and security, and shock occurs when unintended chinks and fissures appear in the characters' fictions of total control and mastery, and they are rendered suddenly vulnerable in the face of the other. Typically, Barnes marks this moment by having her characters stumble, fall to their knees, or momentarily lose their sight. While unsettling, the loss of self in *Nightwood* does not produce an ethical relation to the other. Rather, experiencing this moment of shock and self-loss solely as damaging—as “violent” but not “delightful,” to employ Stein’s terms—they immediately resort to old fantasies of mastery and domination. *Nightwood* testifies to the capacity for defences to be rebuilt following their breakdown. As a result, Robin’s plight in *Nightwood* is to vacillate forever between being the absolute other—the realm of pure night—and being a mere prop in the psychodramas of the other characters.

Woolf considers shock explicitly in her essay, “A Sketch of the Past” (1939), a text I do not explore in my chapter on Woolf, but in which important affinities emerge between her thinking and Stein’s. Woolf establishes a direct link between shock and her creative powers, claiming “the shock-receiving capacity is what makes me a writer” (72). For Woolf, shock is a passive experience, something undergone not willed, and, as it often is for Stein, something violent, akin to a “sledge-hammer blow” (78). It is violent insofar as it disrupts the subject’s habituated mode of being or what Woolf refers to as the “nondescript cotton wool” of “non-being” (70). Her construal of shock recalls Stein’s notion of discovery and its defamiliarization of the everyday, which breaches the borders between “inside” and “outside” and destabilizes the equilibrium of the subject, and is akin to the moment of loss or expenditure that ruptures the continuity of history and self in *Between the Acts* (Na 40). Importantly, the creative act is linked not to a willful fashioning of the world in accordance with an inner vision, as it is in the

masculinist project of Wyndham Lewis, but a passive and receptive encounter with an alterity that shatters the subject's organizing frame. Rather than the unidirectional vector, progressing from subject to world, established by Lewis as characteristic of artistic production, here creativity occurs in the space between subject and world, an in-between that dislocates self and object in a process of mutual becoming.

In Woolf's *Between the Acts*, moments of self-loss and shock occur in acts of unproductive expenditure and gift-giving. In these cases, the subject spends monies or erotic energy recklessly without expectation of return. At minimum, gift-giving and non-productive expenditure yields a moment of liberation from the imperative that all actions be (re)productive and a pleasure from immersion in the particular and sensuous. While Woolf places a certain radical potential in the figure of the spendthrift, the spendthrift is constantly at risk of being re-appropriated and subsumed to the capitalist system, her consumption transformed into a form of productive work. Woolf provides glimpses of a potential alternative to this world of work and waiting, but the novel's bleak ending is bereft of optimism. Despite her yearning for a "new plot," Isa reconciles with her husband at the novel's end, spending the evening dutifully paying her bills and squaring her accounts. Her spendthrift ways are contained within an economy of exchange. Meanwhile, Miss La Trobe neutralizes the radical potential of her experimental moment of present time by embedding it in a promissory narrative of futurity, one that indexes the present moment against a future one in which all losses will be made whole.

While Barnes and Woolf could be charged with pessimism, Stein might be charged with a certain naïveté. Of the three, Stein seems the most optimistic that the fetishism of the commodity and the sensationalism of advertising can be used to combat a rationalized world. Yet, how seriously can one take her proposition, for instance, that the yellow press solves the problems

posed by the traditional newspaper? Is not the yellow press and all its frenzied excitement merely the obverse of the regular newspaper's manufactured sameness—the other side of the same coin? Is it not a purveyor of superficial shocks and thus equally expressive of the reified world?

If all three are interested in a concept of ethical passivity, they construe differently the threat to which ethical passivity responds. Stein is worried that, as a result of reification, the modern subject will forget or disavow the *social* origins of her existence, her fundamental dependence on others and the material world. Her many ruminations on language and writing tend to suggest that one becomes a subject by internalizing a pre-existing language and culture. Since this language is not created, chosen, or owned by the subject, the subject remains dependent for its existence and identity on something external the self.

For this reason, Stein objects to a prevalent modernist conception of writing in which the writer is construed as using language to express some hidden, authentic and non-linguistic interiority. This concept of writing typically leads its observers to adopt a hostile and dismissive attitude towards ordinary language. How can common, mundane, everyday words express what is absolutely singular and unique? In some cases, these individuals posit that artists must forge their own private language, one specially engineered to convey the deep authenticity of the subject.<sup>2</sup> To Stein, this is nonsensical. Since humans are fundamentally social beings, what counts as subjective, as “inside,” necessarily exists simultaneously outside the self in a shared language and culture that preexists the individual subject and indeed inaugurates subjectivity. Since one's self-expression depends on something that preexists and is not chosen or created by the self, the notion of a pure self-presence through writing is a fiction. Shared language and ordinary words are constitutive of the self, and thus the subject's interiority is neither pre-linguistic nor radically original. In order to make this point aesthetically, Stein dislocates

language to make one feel language as other and unowned, and yet nevertheless a part of ourselves—an alterity within. Her writing reminds us simultaneously that one is an embodied being dependent on language and others, and that this dependence is not a restriction on experience, but its condition of possibility.

Barnes diagnoses the crises of subjectivity in modernity differently. She, like Stein, believes the subject to be fundamentally social. Yet, this sociality renders the subject acutely vulnerable to the controlling violence of others. Barnes is concerned about the possibility of heteronomy within contemporary society, of being subjected to another's will and deprived of one's personhood. Further, *Nightwood* points to the critical lack of reciprocity built into society's networks of recognition, and the ways in which certain marginalized others are systematically deprived of even the most provisional form of independence.

Consequently, Barnes creates Robin Vote, a character who is defiantly asocial, repudiates the claims others make upon her, and asserts her difference. Yet, importantly, she does this without at the same time endorsing the fiction of the *fully* and *radically* autonomous subject—that is, without denying her dependence on a world of others. Robin performs a kind of present-absence that gestures towards her difference without specifying a fully realized, autonomous identity. Robin's detachment (like Garbo's absent gaze) negates her surroundings and implicitly posits an alternative world, and thus Robin's disengagement contrasts with Stein's emphasis on sensuous engagement with the immediate at hand.

Isa Oliver also often appears disengaged from her surrounding world, even anti-social (for instance, as she fantasizes about the gentleman farmer in front of the mirror). This self-immersion is, like Robin's, a turning away from oppressive social scripts and the reproductive futurism that would enlist her labour in the service of an endless progress. She embraces the

autoerotic, exemplifying a mode of expenditure that refuses the imperative to be productive—to prioritize gain, return, and symmetrical economic relations. Yet, Isa does not pursue the autoerotic mode fully, at times imagining this expenditure as a form of self-enrichment or an escape from earthly limits, thereby reinvesting in notions of growth and endlessness, and by novel's end reconciles with her husband, Giles, and his economies of thrift. As such, her fantasies function, at best, as harmless distractions, and, at worse, as compensatory fictions that blind her to the reality of her situation, and strengthen the relationship's hold over her. Woolf counterposes Isa with the novel's other artist figure, Miss La Trobe, who is deeply engaged with society (and her audience), but is domineering and authoritarian. While superficially opposites, they are revealed as complementary in the novel's conclusion, as each demonstrates their complicity with an economy of exchange and accumulation.

Whereas Stein stresses the social nature of subjectivity in opposition to market society's reification of the autonomous subject, Barnes posits an asocial subject as the alternative to an oppressively identitarian regime. Woolf sees the problem from both perspectives, and does not strictly advocate either Barnes's or Stein's concept of the subject. Her characters demonstrate both the problem with an escapist asociality and an aggressive sociality, which are presented as false alternatives that are nevertheless expressive of the crisis of commodification. In all three cases, subjectivity is imagined as a dialectic of independence and dependence, and the commodified world is conceived as reifying the two poles of this dialectic. Yet, each writer proposes a different antidote to this problem—a dependent and immersed subject (Stein), an asocial and indifferent subject (Barnes), and a subject-to-come that would split the difference between an aggressive sociality and escapist solipsism (Woolf).

Stein, Barnes, and Woolf's theorizations of subjectivity and society frequently invoke

temporal concepts. In particular, these writers probe the parallels between certain dispositions towards time and certain dispositions towards commodification, money, and credit. Whereas there are certain similarities to their thinking about time, there are also distinct and important differences.

Barnes's *Nightwood* advocates a kind of negative utopianism. In denying her present and its asymmetrical social relationships, Robin implicitly posits an alternative future, yet without presupposing its details. If Barnes embraces a negative utopianism, Woolf more steadfastly resists a future-oriented ideology altogether. Woolf observes that the dominant concept of time in modernity is one in which the present is *perpetually* subordinated to the future. Even if the capitalist realizes the desired profits, these profits are quickly reinvested in the next round of production in order to procure ever greater returns. The instrumental logic of money circuits is capable of infecting concepts of progress, too. If the goal of progress is simply quantitative accumulation (of resources, power, freedom), and thus capable of perpetual increase, or if the goals of progress are Utopian fantasies, and hence likewise forever receding, the present will always be a time of waiting and work—and never one of fulfillment. Woolf imagines breaking free of this temporal trap and countering the endless concept of time by directing one's attention to the moments between acts. In Benjamin's terms, this would constitute realizing "a present which is not a transition" ("Theses on the Philosophy of History" 262).

Temporality is not a major focus of my chapter on Stein; however, I do briefly explore Stein's concept of seeing without "recognizing resemblances," or of "looking" without "remembering" (*LIA* 188). In her lectures, Stein stipulates that writers must avoid "recognizing resemblances," a process in which memories or experiences influence perceptions of an object in the present. When one "recogniz[es] resemblances" one becomes blind to the object's

particularity in the here and now, assimilating it to a remembered object by virtue of a few privileged, shared traits. “Recognizing resemblances” is a means of using the object to get *beyond* the object, to the memory or subconscious association, and thus represents an instrumental (or grasping) relationship to the world. This relationship, Stein believes, leads to a destructive form of narcissism. One looks at the world and sees one’s self (one’s history, psychology, and beliefs) reflected everywhere. Stein thinks an important form of pleasurable and epistemologically significant experience is lost in this kind of instrumental thinking. By contrast, Stein proposes to focus on the object as an end in itself to be experienced in the present without regard to the future. All of this might be taken as an explanation for what Stein means by seeking to create the “continuous present” in her writing (“Composition as Explanation” 498).

Thus, of the three, Barnes is less interested than Stein and Woolf in the temporality of the now. While Barnes implies the present moment cannot simply be transcended, Robin’s present-absence forever gestures to an elsewhere, an alternative society, a transformed world. But does Barnes’s negative utopianism fail to go far enough? Does it remain complicit with an instrumental concept of time? Conversely, one might ask of Stein and Woolf, whether one can realize a “now-time” in a present that is resolutely future-oriented? If the dominant concept of temporality is one of deferral, work, and waiting, can one by dint of effort alone escape this normative and institutionalized model to experience an immersion in the present? Perhaps, as Barnes believes, it is necessary to project a future in which time is not understood as endless and infinite. In other words, must one, paradoxically, employ futuristic thinking in order to imagine a time free from futuristic thinking? Perhaps Stein and Woolf are the ones entrapped by fantasy for imagining that these moments of immersion in the present could take place without a more fundamental transformation of our social and cultural fabric.

In addition to writing *about* commodification, Stein, Barnes, and Woolf were directly *subject* to the forces of commodification, writing as they did during a time of literary celebrity. Brenda Silver argues that by the 1920s, the motion pictures' star-system had expanded to include other spheres of cultural production, including book production (Silver 88). This translated into "increased emphasis on an author's personality," exemplified by the elaborate book advertisements American publicists ran in major magazines and newspapers, which typically featured prominently the author's photograph (Silver 88).

Stein, Barnes, and Woolf experienced this phenomenon of celebrity to varying degrees. Stein was well-known in America even before *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* became a best-seller and her 1934 lecture tour of America sold out, but these events raised her to a level of fame typically reserved for film stars. While Barnes was never famous like Stein, her 1928 novel, *Ryder*, was briefly a best-seller, and, within literary circles, Barnes was renowned for her "glamour," while living a bohemian lifestyle in Greenwich Village and Paris in the 1920s and 1930s. Moreover, she developed a devoted and cult-like following in the years after the publication of *Nightwood*.<sup>3</sup> True to her feminist critique of the education system in *Three Guineas*, Virginia Woolf refused all honorary degrees and honorary lectures, including the prestigious Clark Lectures at Cambridge. In this way, Woolf resisted fame, yet, despite these efforts, she could not escape celebrity entirely. In 1937, Virginia Woolf, although already a figure of significant renown in Europe, was exposed for the first time to the American publicity machine when she was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine shortly before *The Years* became a best-seller in America. This brought her a level of fame in America on par with Stein's.

Stein's lecture tour of 1934, following on the heels of the popular success of the very accessible *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and the debut of *Four Saints in Three Acts*, was

closely covered in American newspapers and magazines.<sup>4</sup> Many reporters covering the talks expressed surprise at how sensible and down-to-earth Stein's persona was (Leick 179). She was unaffected, direct and candid—not at all the snobbish charlatan detractors made her out to be. These reporters emphasized her 'Americanism' and noted the way she commanded and captivated an audience (Leick 176). Thus, there was an openness to Stein's performance of celebrity, evident in her good-natured willingness to answer questions, to satisfy the public's curiosity, even if it meant making a spectacle of herself and exposing herself to caricature and parody. Her direct manners, and preference for a simple diction, create the impression of one for whom nothing is hidden. Yet, belying this openness, Stein's lectures and speech are aphoristic and filled with riddling statements that are not easily comprehended or consumed. Indeed, reporters also often commented that she baffled, even as she won over, her audiences (Leick 182). For this reason, Richard Schickel observes that Gertrude Stein becomes synonymous with "the artist as incomprehensible" (76).

Barnes, in contrast to Stein, shirked the public's gaze. Although she never inspired the same media spotlight as Stein, she typically rebuffed what little attention she did receive. In her later years, while living a reclusive existence in New York, Barnes was occasionally sought out by admirers, including writers inspired by her work, like Anaïs Nin, Carson McCullers, and Bertha Harris, but she refused the majority of this contact.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps this resistance to fame should come as no surprise. In her early journalism, Barnes interrogated female stardom and often noted how female celebrities are manipulated and exploited by their show business bosses, and objectified by a consuming public. Moreover, *Nightwood* depicts Robin's passive rebuff to those who would constitute her as the object of a pursuit. Yet, there are occasions when Barnes admits a more positive response to female stardom and its possibilities for agency—most notably

in the case of Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich. For Garbo, mystery functions not as resistance to fame, but as a component of it—indeed, she was known for being unknown. To a certain extent, the same could be said about Barnes. Her public image was carefully and calculatingly constructed to evoke a glamorous enigma. While in Paris between the wars, she dressed somewhat eccentrically in a black cape and cloche (Caselli 2). This became her trademark look and earned her notoriety in Parisian literary circles. The cape is both a means to stand out and to shroud oneself—to solicit the gaze in the very act of hiding the self. As Daniella Caselli notes, this mirrors the way Barnes’s texts function, “resist[ing] unveiling, play[ing] with the tension between mystery and revelation, and constantly turn[ing] depth into surface and vice-versa” (29).

Virginia Woolf’s cover for *Time* in 1937, which coincided with the American publication of *The Waves*, was, according to Brenda Silver the event that “signifie[d] her arrival as star in the United States” (90) The cover photograph, taken by Man Ray, and the accompanying article, “set the stage for the battles fought over her meaning” (Silver 90). Silver claims that Woolf was constructed as being “very scary,” from the very beginning: “simultaneously sensitive, aesthetic, and asexual; aristocratic, feminist, and intellectual” (96). In the Man Ray photograph, Woolf is captured from her waist up, but the viewer’s eye is drawn to her face and, in particular, her intent, powerful gaze. Silver argues that these photos inaugurate the connection between Woolf and a Medusa-like, feminist menace, which informs texts like Edward Albee’s play, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962). In the years since the *Time* cover, Woolf’s image has been the site of contestation, subject to a proliferation of different interpretations: she is variously an exemplar of aristocratic privilege, feminist power, and the beautiful soul. As such, given this multi-valence, Woolf constitutes the commodity as ambivalent and over-determined sign, a

reflection of her culture's vexed and contradictory anxieties surrounding gender, class, and sexuality.

In some respects, Barnes is to Stein as Robin Vote is to Doctor Matthew O'Connor. Barnes deflects and entices the gaze simultaneously, drawing attention to what is withheld, reserved, private, even if that withheld *something* is itself a fiction or lie (the illusion of self as a stable, object-like thing capable of being hidden or revealed). Stein seems to hold back nothing, yet what she so eagerly reveals often confounds and confuses. Barnes emulates the glamorous, evasive, and ultimately empty allure of the commodity, Stein its ready availability, but both resist in different ways the commodity's use value in consumption. Woolf, in the cultural imaginary of her time, is the elitist to Stein's populist, and more akin to Barnes in her construction as outsider and uncannily threatening. Yet, on the whole, Woolf's star text is more difficult to categorize than either Barnes's or Stein's. As such, she reflects the commodity's mutability, its status as a site where competing vectors of value meet and clash.

### **Art and Commodification Today**

In 2013, American philosopher Peter Singer invited controversy when he published an essay for the *New York Times* in which he contends that art museums are "bad charities" (SR4). He compares donating to an art museum with donating to an organization striving to reduce the incidence of trachoma, a preventable eye disease that affects children in developing countries. According to Singer, the social benefits of giving to the art museum are trivial in comparison with those of giving to the trachoma organization. To give to the art institution instead of medical research would be to prioritize rich Westerners' ability to see beautiful objects over third-world country inhabitants' ability to see anything at all. "Philanthropy for the arts or for

cultural activities is,” Singer insists, “in a world like this one, morally dubious” (*The Life You Can Save* 149).

Yet, Singer’s objection to the art-world runs deeper. It is not simply that preventing blindness is more important than funding art museums. He believes that the art-world is hopelessly ineffective at achieving even its own stated goals, and is easily co-opted for other ends. In “The Ethical Cost of High-Price Art,” he points to the startling chasm between contemporary artists’ ethical ideals and the actual impact of their work. He quotes an interview with American artist Jeff Koons, in which Koons claims that his work contests the social and economic policies of Ronald Reagan: “social mobility is collapsing, and instead of a structure composed of low, middle, and high-income levels, we’re down to low and high only. . . . My work stands in opposition to this trend” (quoted in Singer, “The Ethical Cost of High-Price Art.” n. p.). Given these lofty political aspirations, it is ironic and telling that Koons’s works regularly sell for millions of dollars apiece—evidence that the “art market’s greatest strength is its ability to co-opt any radical demands that a work of art makes, and turn it into another consumer good for the super-rich” (Singer, “The Ethical Cost of High-Price Art.” n. p.).

Singer’s arguments about the arts are the subject of considerable debate and have led to passionate defenses of charitable giving to the arts. Yet, the basic observation he makes about the art world is an exceedingly familiar one. It is a version of the “astonishing discovery” that, according to Yves-Alain Bois, was made a century ago with the sale of the *La Peau de l’Ours* (236).<sup>6</sup> It is the realization that the work of art is a commodity, and a potentially profitable one at that, a realization that calls sharply into question the narrative that stresses art’s opposition to consumer society.

At stake in Singer's argument is the status of what Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello call the "artistic critique" of capitalism (Boltanski xiii). For Boltanski and Chiapello, the "artistic critique" attacks capitalist alienation and spectacle, while making demands for autonomy, freedom and authenticity; it

foregrounds the loss of meaning and, in particular, the loss of what is beautiful and valuable, which derives from standardization and generalized commodification, affecting not only everyday objects but also artworks (the cultural mercantilism of the bourgeoisie) and human beings. [. . .] To this it counterposes the freedom of artists, their rejection of any contamination of aesthetics by ethics, their refusal of any form of subjection in time and space, and its extreme forms, of any kind of work. (38)

Though the characterization is contentious (I would suggest that there is more than one artistic critique of capitalism and that the artistic critique does not always entail a rejection of "contamination by ethics") what interests me particularly is Boltanski and Chiapello's conclusion. The authors argue that, in the wake of the 1968 student protests in France, contemporary management discourse absorbs and repurposes the artistic critique by promising workers creative, flexible, and self-fulfilling forms of labour, and a more open, fluid, and networked workplace (103-105). Like Singer, the authors emphasize capitalism's capacity to assimilate and thereby disarm its own critique.

These examples provide evidence of the continued relevance of the art-commodity divide, begging the question: why, a century after *La Peau de l'Ours*, is contemporary society still discovering art's complicity with the commodity form (or with the ideologies of liberal capitalism)? And why does this observation still elicit surprise and outrage, on the one hand, and

virulent denial, on the other? Surely, art's fall from grace has been enacted often enough to be considered farce, not tragedy.

In one sense, the postmodern age spelt the end of the avant-garde's utopian narratives linking aesthetic and political radicalism, and promising emancipation through artistic creativity. The arguments against the "artistic critique" are by now familiar: in addition to the contention recounted above, that capitalism has co-opted this critique, the "artistic critique" of the avant-garde has been charged with being totalizing, even oppressively authoritarian, the relic of an outmoded and elitist political vanguardism. It has also been condemned for vastly overestimating art's capacity to effect societal change and failing to comprehend art's inevitable entanglement with the marketplace.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, a weaker, less utopian version of the avant-garde's emancipatory vision has survived the postmodern offensive. In recent years, there has been a resurgence of scholarly interest in the connection between aesthetics and politics, with some positing a "new aestheticism" (Joughin and Malpas 1). In the anthology, *The New Aestheticism*, John J. Joughin and Simon Malpas acknowledge that:

Notions such as aesthetic independence, artistic genius, the cultural and historical universality of a text or work, and the humanist assumption of art's intrinsic spiritual value have been successfully challenged by successive investigations into the historical and political bases of art's material production and transmission. (1)

Yet, they contend that these critiques risk "throwing out the aesthetic baby with the humanist bath-water" (1). They suggest that, "in the rush to diagnose art's contamination by politics, theoretical analysis has tended always to posit a prior order that grounds or determines a work's aesthetic impact, whether this is history, ideology or theories of subjectivity," and that, as a result, "the aesthetic is [. . .] explicated in other terms, with other criteria, and its singularity is

effaced” (1). While the resurgence of philosophical aesthetics can be traced to the work of a number of scholars—Joughin and Malpas cite J. M. Bernstein and Andrew Bowie—certainly one of the most influential figures has been French philosopher Jacques Rancière. Rancière flips critical theory’s traditional inquiry into the link between aesthetics and politics on its head: instead of asking how aesthetics is (or becomes) political, Rancière examines the ways in which politics is always already aesthetic (*Disagreement* 58). Politics is aesthetic insofar as it concerns itself with the “distribution of the sensible,” the ordering schema that determines, for a given society, what presents itself to perception—in other words, who is made visible and accorded a voice, and who is not; what can be said, done, and made, and what cannot. Authentically political acts are ones in which an excluded group contests their disenfranchisement and demands to be recognized as equal and thus to be made visible (*Disagreement* 30). In doing so, they force a reconfiguration of society’s sensible order, one that is not simply a matter of adding a previously excluded group to the existing whole, but of radically disrupting and re-envisioning that totality (*Disagreement* 42).

For Rancière, the political act is analogous to those moments in modern art when the “heterogeneous sensible,” those fragments of material otherness, disrupt the harmonious order of the work and insist on themselves (*Aesthetics and its Discontents* 34). Thus, the aspect of the avant-garde “artistic critique” that persists for Rancière is the idea that art can and should function as a disruptive force within society, one uniquely capable of unsettling one’s habituated modes of understanding and relating to the world. In Stein’s language, it is equivalent to the notion that art can and should spur experiences of “discovery,” experiences in which the subject confronts a heterogeneity (or “heterogeneous sensible”) that exceeds their organizing framework, demanding a reorientation of the subject in relation to the thing.<sup>8</sup>

Yet, commodification, understood through a Marxist lens, is the logic of commensuration—an attempt to translate all things of the world into the universal language of money—and thus by definition a neutralization of these kinds of emphatic and transformative experiences of the “heterogeneous sensible.” Commodification abstracts from the singular object to the level of the universal concept, enabling the subject to, figuratively speaking, grasp the object and deploy it to his or her ends. As such, it reverses the relation of subject and object so important to aesthetic experience. Seemingly, art’s capacity to compel moments of discovery, reconfigurations of the sensible, and its status as a commodity are at odds with one another.

I am suggesting that the art-commodity divide remains relevant today, even controversial, because contemporary art culture is unable to fully dispense with a relic of romantic aesthetics: the idea that art acts as a vehicle for difference, experience, particularity, and as such combats an abstract and instrumental rationality. Yet, by equal measure, this culture is unsure about how to reconcile this idea with the (now undeniable) fact of art’s commodification. If art is a commodity, and commodification is the logic of commensuration, one must either relinquish art’s connection to sensuous particularity and sever its link to critique, or explain *how* art can be *both* critical and a commodity. Since it seems impossible or undesirable to fully mourn art’s critical function, and since art’s complicity with the commodity is irrefutable, the latter route proves the most promising. Yet, while it is commonplace to assert that art challenges our dominant structures of power from within—from a position made possible by the very structures it opposes—explanations as to how exactly this works, particularly with respect to the commodity, are sorely lacking.<sup>9</sup> This is the gap my dissertation has attempted to fill through its exploration of literary modernism’s paradoxical relationship to fetishism and alienation.

I suggest that one way of beginning to answer these questions is by returning to the writings of Stein, Barnes, and Woolf. Their feminist, materialist, non-naïve responses to commodification inhabit the tensions and contradictions of the commodity form, tracing the mechanics of fetishism, alienation, and separation—but differently. They suggest that the fetishistic logic of the commodity exists in tension with the instrumental rationality of the marketplace. By turning the former against the latter, these writers attempt to deconstruct the commodity form from within, and in doing so promise an alternative, less violent way of relating self and other, humanity and nature, production and consumption.

## NOTES

### Introduction

<sup>1</sup> Wyndham Lewis coined the phrase in his autobiography, *Blasting and Bombardiering* (1937), using it in reference to himself, James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound. As Colleen Lamos notes, the phrase is frequently employed in recent scholarship as “shorthand for a reactionary version of Anglo-American modern literature” (478). I am using the term in a similar fashion, designating the work of early male modernist writers who, I suggest, exemplify a particular attitude toward modernity and, more specifically, commodity culture. At this juncture, the term is only a provisional heuristic, one that enables me to set apart and contextualize the very different stances of Stein, Barnes, and Woolf, but I acknowledge the challenges attendant in using a generalization such as this one. Like Jessica Burstein, I find that the heteromasculinism attributed to “the Men of 1914” is no less “accurate” for being “obvious,” but I simultaneously heed Colleen R. Lamos’s contention that close examination of these writers reveals that their heteromasculinism is often fraught with unresolved tensions and is prone to “lapses” that complicate our understanding of their work (Burstein 221, Lamos 479).

<sup>2</sup> Taylorism, also known as the scientific management of work, was named after Frederick Winslow Taylor, the author of the very influential *Principles of Scientific Management* (1911). Taylor proposed management principles and labour structures that would streamline the production process by eliminating “awkward, inefficient, or ill-directed movements” (*Principles* 7). James Knapp has argued that Taylorism and its rationalization of work processes provoked widespread concerns about worker estrangement and passivity, and informed modernist protests “against the degradations of work” (Knapp 18).

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed discussion of the “caress,” see Ch. 1, below.

<sup>4</sup> The idea of *homo economicus* is most frequently attributed to John Stuart Mill, although he did not use the term directly (Peresky 222). In “On the Definition of Political Economy,” Mill proposes “an arbitrary definition of man, as a being who inevitably does that by which he may obtain the greatest amount of necessaries, conveniences, and luxuries, with the smallest quantity of labour and physical self-denial with which they can be obtained” (326). The term first emerged in the responses of various late nineteenth-century writers to passages such as the above in Mill’s work (Peresky 222).

<sup>5</sup> The lead in paint tubes may have contributed to artists’ illnesses, including Van Gogh’s mental fragility. See Weissman.

<sup>6</sup> Andreas Huyssen argues that the threat of mass-culture and conspicuous consumption is figured by many male modernists as distinctly feminine (49). Miranda Hickman observes a “phobic reaction” in the theoretical writings of Vorticists to the effeminacy (“languor, passivity, and weakness”) they perceived in Oscar Wilde and other aesthetes, a reaction that informs Vorticist polemics about the need for a muscular, austere, and angular geometrical formalism (xvi, 19). Peter Nicholls suggests that “the men of 1914” insist on “aesthetic form and ironic tone” as the necessary defense against a feminine otherness, which is associated with nature, the body, and fluidity (4).

<sup>7</sup> The first critic to discuss the possibility of the flâneuse was Janet Wolff. See *Feminine Sentences* 34-50.

<sup>8</sup> For Benjamin’s account of the utopian “wish images” contained in commodity culture, see *The Arcades Project* 4-5.

<sup>9</sup> Rainey is exemplary of a broad and productive focus in contemporary scholarship on the ways in which modernism negotiates the technologies and institutions of the marketplace,

particularly the machinery of marketing, promotion, and publicity. In addition to Rainey, see Pease; Turner; Wexler; Wilson, Gould, and Chernaik.

<sup>10</sup> Bernstein contends that modernist art's "existence derives from the ever-expanding rationalization of the dominant practices governing everyday life to the point at which those practices no longer emphatically depend on individuals' sensuously bound, embodied encounter with the world for their operation and reproduction" (*Against Voluptuous Bodies* 3).

<sup>11</sup> I do not think Jaffe is asserting that modernism was *merely* an "academic invention," only that modernism inevitably had an academic representation, and that a key feature of its early representation was the notion of modernism's "antagonism" to mass culture. He believes that the narrative of "antagonism" is more prominent in the academic representation of modernism than in modernist texts themselves.

<sup>12</sup> See Brown, "Thing Theory," *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature*, and "The Secret Life of Things (Virginia Woolf and the Matter of Modernism)". In relation to object-oriented ontology, see Harman; Bryant, Harman, and Srnicek.

<sup>13</sup> Boscagli might consider my concern for how relationships between humans and objects are mediated by commodity fetishism to be consistent with an older and, in her view, outmoded version of materialism, one she associates primarily with Marxist thought. According to Boscagli, this version of materialism posits that "the subject's experience of materiality in modernity is governed by reification—the subject's alienation from the sensual real, brought about because matter, once commodified, had its true nature, the labor involved in producing it, hidden" (4). Combatting the notion that material things are exhaustively defined by their commodity status, Boscagli "insists on the fungibility of matter and on the plasticity possible at the moment of subject-object interaction" (4). I steer clear of the reductiveness Boscagli

attributes to the Marxist tradition by understanding commodity fetishism through the idiosyncratic Marxism of Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, both of whom are sensitive to the ways in which commodity fetishism can, in certain circumstances, foreground rather than suppress the “unruliness” of matter.

## Chapter 1

<sup>1</sup> Lewis’s passage gives expression to virulent homophobia and misogyny evidenced in his elevation of the phallic, masculine, and producing artist over the queer, feminine, and receptive one. I return to this political/socio-sexual subtext later in this chapter and treat it more fully in both the second and third chapters. To reiterate a point made in my introduction, a central claim of my dissertation is that Stein, Barnes, and Woolf respond to the implicit misogyny and homophobia in the aesthetic philosophies of their male modernist peers. Their celebration of sensuous experience has a distinctly political dimension and constitutes a direct rebuke to capitalist modernity’s (and these male modernists’) privileging of masculine will over feminine materiality.

<sup>2</sup> Following Jonathan Monroe, I view *Tender Buttons* as a collection of prose poems, though I acknowledge that the work, in many ways, confounds genre and that Stein herself challenges easy categorizations of her work. In “Poetry and Grammar,” for instance, Stein asks, “What is poetry and if you know what poetry is what is prose” (*LIA* 209)? It is beyond the scope of my argument to give this question its full due, but for a nuanced analysis of the politics of genre in Stein’s *Tender Buttons*, see Monroe 177-210.

<sup>3</sup> For more on Stein and commodity culture, see Conrad; Curnutt; Schultz; and Leick.

<sup>4</sup> For others who endorse this approach, see Bridgman; Sutherland.

<sup>5</sup> Levinas suggests that, in touch, there is a proximity of self to other. This proximity contrasts to the feeling of distance that, according to Levinas, pervades our experience of vision and fosters an instrumental relation to the world. Thus, touch entails a greater intimacy with the other than vision (Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy," 64). Levinas highlights the "caress," in particular, as the mode of touch most opposed to the instrumentalist tendencies of vision:

The caress is a mode of the subject's being, where the subject who is in contact with another goes beyond this contact. [. . .] The seeking of the caress constitutes its essence by the fact that the caress does not know what it seeks. This "not knowing," this fundamental disorder, is the essential. (Levinas, "Time and the Other" 51)

Luce Irigaray agrees with Levinas that the value of the "caress" stems from its rebuke of a technical means-ends rationality. She emphasizes that the "caress" reconnects the subject with its corporeal intersubjectivity:

The caress is a reawakening to the life of my body: to its skin, senses, muscles, nerves, and organs, most of the time inhibited, subjugated, dormant or enslaved in everyday activity, in the universe of needs, in the world of labour, in the imperatives or restrictions necessary for communal living.

The caress is an awakening to intersubjectivity, to a touching between us which is neither passive nor active; it is an awakening of gestures, of perceptions which are at the same time acts, intentions, emotions. This does not mean that they are ambiguous, but rather, that they are attentive to the person who touches and the one who is touched, to the two subjects who touch each other. ("The Wedding Between the Body and Language" 20)

Like Irigaray, Merleau-Ponty is interested in the intertwining of self and other, subject and object, in touch. He famously objects to Cartesian dualism by means of an anecdote about touch:

If I touch with my left hand my right hand while it touches an object, the right hand object is not the right hand touching: the first is an intertwining of bones, muscles and flesh bearing down on a point in space, the second traverses space as a rocket in order to discover the exterior object in its place.” (*Phenomenology of Perception* 92)

The embodied self is at one and the same time touching and touched—two roles that are inextricable from each other and yet never fully identical (there is no final resolution of the differences between toucher and touched). While this intertwining is characteristic of perception in general, it is highly significant that Merleau-Ponty relies on the tactile realm to illustrate the point. For Merleau-Ponty, vision is tied in the philosophical tradition to the epistemology of the “outside spectator,” despite its inter-corporeal nature (*Phenomenology of Perception* 332).

<sup>6</sup> Heidegger’s distinction between “object” and “thing” is relevant here. The “object” is present to us initially by means of its “handiness,” its usefulness, and as such becomes a thing *for us*. The object’s status as “thing,” by contrast, refers to its existence “out there” in its “objective being,” or rather as a thing *for itself* (*Being and Time* 70). Bill Brown interprets Heidegger as arguing that the “thing” indicates both “the amorphousness out of which objects are materialized by the (ap)perceiving subject” and “what is excessive in objects, as what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects” (“Thing Theory” 5). To employ Heidegger’s terminology, Stein’s poems focus on the thing rather than the object—or rather they work towards an acknowledgement of thing (since things can only be gestured toward, not represented). The difference between Stein’s approach and Heidegger’s is that Stein, while wanting to move beyond the psychological, does not foreclose the subjective. Instead, she is keenly interested in the subject’s somatic experience of the thing—so that the thing is simultaneously *for us* in being *for itself*. Nor is this somatic experience straightforwardly

opposed to the conceptual, psychological experience of the object, but instead is its condition of possibility. Stein's point in highlighting the somatic is to counteract the modernist overemphasis on the conceptual and its disavowal of passive, sensuous experience. The somatic is never experienced in the absence of the conceptual—indeed, even to emphasize “looking” without “recognizing resemblances” is to attempt to conceptualize the experience of the somatic. Stein acknowledges this, highlighting the somatic by fostering dissonance in the conceptual register, which forms the background against which the thing is fleetingly glimpsed.

<sup>7</sup> Stein's thought approaches Clement Greenberg's overly familiar notion of “medium specificity” in modernist art, or the idea “that the unique and proper area of competence of each art coincided with all that was unique in the nature of its medium” (86). The difference is that Stein shows little concern for the “purity” of any given artistic medium (86).

<sup>8</sup> For other poems with scatological references, see “A BROWN” and “A PAPER” (*TB* 12).

<sup>9</sup> James Joyce is another modernist who employs excremental metaphors extensively, particularly in the “Calypso” chapter of *Ulysses* and throughout *Finnegan's Wake*. Catherine Whitley argues that, in the *Wake*, “history itself is figured as a waste product, ejected by the peristalsis of a nation's forward movement in time” (81). Joyce creates “alternative histories in prose marked by stylistic excesses that offer a plethora of signification, meanings in excess of the reader's ability to digest them”; Whitley views these ultimately as an attempt to “reinvent Ireland in his works” (81).

<sup>10</sup> For an account of Stein's correspondence with the *Herald Tribune's* Joseph Alsop Jr., see Leick, 165.

<sup>11</sup> The Dionne quintuplets, the first quintts to survive infancy, were born in Callander, Ontario, on May 28, 1934. News of the girls' birth made headlines internationally.

<sup>12</sup> Summarizing Derrida's thinking about the event, Simon Morgan Wortham contends, "an event worthy of the name must be radically singular, irruptive, unanticipatable and, in a certain way, beyond apprehension" and that it must "go beyond the realms of an already-possible possibility" (Wortham 48). In "A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event," Derrida considers the news media in his discussion:

Television, radio, and newspapers report events, telling us what happened or what's happening. We have the impression that the extraordinary progress in the development of information machines, of machines made for saying the event, should in some way increase the powers of speech vis-à-vis the event, the power of informative speech. Without dwelling on the obvious, may I remind you that this would-be saying, and even showing of the event, is never, of course, commensurate with it and is never reliable *a priori*. (447)

Derrida's account of the news media's desire to "sa[y] the event," and the impossibility of actually doing so, bears similarities to Stein's account of reporters depriving events of "discovery." For Derrida, the representation of events in the pages of a newspaper is necessarily doomed to "miss [. . .] the singularity of the event": by seeking to "sa[y] the event," they turn it into something repeatable and exchangeable, something completely translatable into information (446). The news media distort and remake the event, but cover over this disfiguration by claiming that the news provides a direct and unmediated representation of "what's happening." Similarly, Stein is concerned that the newspaper's attempt to explain events, render them information, strips them of their singularity and unexpectedness, and with it, their power to

startle the subject into a new understanding of the world. In Derrida's terms, Stein's argument is that the newspaper's attempt to explain the event keeps it firmly within the "realm of an already-possible possibility." Derrida contends that, in the face of reductive news media, a "political vigilance" is necessary in order to expose "the appearance of *saying* the event" as an instance of "making it, interpreting and producing it" (447). Stein's antidote to the news media is perhaps more surprising. As I will demonstrate, she finds great potential in the sensationalism of the Yellow Press to invigorate the news, restoring some of the affect and transformative power lost in conventional newspapers' pursuit of "pure" information. Perhaps, in the Yellow Press, Stein celebrates an attempt to go beyond "saying" the event—an abandonment of the desire to transcribe events accurately as information and thereby master what is new. It is unclear whether Derrida would discern a similar potential. See also Esch for an analysis of news media, particularly live television, and its mediation of the event.

<sup>13</sup> See Bernstein *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* 392-394. Bernstein observes: "an item is exemplary only if although derived from no previous rule, principle or idea, it makes original sense, that is, provides a new rule for a practice: from now on the practice is to be understood from out of the exemplary instance. Exemplary instances are not explainable or derivable because they are to be what gives a rule, what will be the model or origin or explainer for what is to, normatively, follow it" (392-393). The exemplary event is one that cannot be subsumed to existing schemas of understanding but that discloses new schemas, provoking a fundamental reorientation of the subject in relation to the world.

## Chapter 2

<sup>1</sup> Guy Debord uses the term “society of the spectacle” to refer to “the autocratic reign of the market economy which had acceded to an irresponsible sovereignty, and the totality of new techniques of government which accompanied this reign” (Comments 2). Building on Marx’s concepts of fetishism and alienation, spectacle describes a historical reality in which subjects are reduced to passive consumption and commodities appear independent of the processes that made them. Of particular relevance to my work is the tension inscribed within spectacle between a world reduced to commodified, exchangeable, and easily consumable facts and the quasi-religious nature of modern advertising, which leads to “moments of fervent exaltation similar to the ecstasies of the convulsions and miracles of the old religious fetishism” (Society 67). I argue that it is tensions like these, internal to commodities, that modernists seek to exploit, deploying the fetishistic tendency of commodification to combat the instrumental rationality of the marketplace.

<sup>2</sup> The female vampire appeared in many works of Gothic fiction throughout the Victorian period, perhaps most notably in Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu’s story “Carmilla” (1872).

<sup>3</sup> The vamp is usually an exotic and mysterious foreigner. While Dietrich and Garbo were actual foreigners (Dietrich was German and Garbo, Swedish), Theda Bara was an American, born in Cincinnati. Fox, however, billed Bara as the Egyptian-born daughter of a French actress.

<sup>4</sup> Barnes can be seen as imitating the style of Walter Winchell, America’s first gossip columnist. He began writing a gossip column for the *Evening Graphic* in the 1920s and, by the 1930s, was a widely-syndicated writer, with his column reaching over 50 million households. For an account of the influence of gossip writing on modernism, see Starck.

<sup>5</sup> Garbo orders a whisky in the opening scene of *Anna Christie* (1930). This was Garbo's first talking role.

<sup>6</sup> In an article on Garbo and modernism, Judith Brown briefly discusses the parallels between Robin and Garbo, noting their shared association with somnambulism as well as Robin's many cinematic gestures and postures (117).

<sup>7</sup> The Rousseau to which Barnes refers in this passage is Henri Rousseau, the French Post-Impressionist painter most famous for his jungle paintings. In *The Dream* (1910), Rousseau depicts a naked woman lying on a red couch in the midst of a jungle, surrounded by various animals, including a monkey playing a horn. The contrast of the domestic interior with untamed wilderness, and the association of feminine spectacle with animality, is echoed in this scene from *Nightwood*.

<sup>8</sup> Tomas L. Cooksey finds a similar use of the monocle in Proust's *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, where it "imposes a literal monoscopic vision, a one-dimensional view of the world on the part of the observer" and that, in turn, the monocle "points metaphorically to an expression of the wearer's one-dimensional perception of the world" (281).

<sup>9</sup> While monocles were introduced in the early 1800s, Hentea notes that the "modernist period abounded in them" (213). Hentea lists W. H. Auden, André Breton, Mikhail Bulgakov, G. K. Chesterton, Joseph Conrad, Janet Flanner, Radclyffe Hall, Fritz Lang, Sergei Diaghilev, G. E. M. Anscombe, Tristan Tzara, among others, as famous monocle wearers of the modernist era (214).

<sup>10</sup> Robin and her singular form of passive resistance resemble the title character from Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street" (1853). Bartleby is hired by a Wall Street lawyer to copy legal documents, but, after an initial period of high productivity, he

begins declaring, “I would prefer not to” to his boss’s requests (25). The curious statement, an assertion of preference, is not a straightforward refusal. As Giorgio Agamben observes, “Bartleby does not consent, but neither does he simply refuse to do what is asked of him; nothing is farther from him than the heroic pathos of negation” (*Potentialities* 256). Agamben suggests the phrase opens “a zone of indistinction between yes and no” (256). Indeed, what seems to aggravate his boss most is not the denial of work but this “indistinction.” Seeking to clarify Bartleby’s intent, the boss asks “You will not?” to which Bartleby insists, “I prefer not” (25). Indeed, it is Bartleby’s strange eschewal of willfulness that proves most threatening to a Wall Street world that takes *homo economicus*, the autonomous, rational, and self-interested agent, as its model for human subjectivity. Similarly, Robin, like Bartleby, neither fully consents nor fully refuses the characters around her, exemplifying a resistance without volition that causes Nora and Felix to reflect on and question their assumptions about what constitutes the human.

<sup>11</sup> In *Nightwood*, the use of sexological terms (“invert,” “third sex”) to describe Robin can be understood as a form of reification, and a continuation of the troubling ways in which these characters view Robin—that is, as part of their attempt to know Robin from a distance and to use, rather than acknowledge, Robin. For a collection of contemporary viewpoints on sexology, see Bland and Doan.

<sup>12</sup> For examples of psychoanalytic approaches, see Allen; Coffman; De Lauretis. For examples of new historical approaches, see Carlston; Parsons, “Women in the Circus of Modernity: Djuna Barnes and *Nightwood*”; Roos.

### Chapter 3

<sup>1</sup> While Woolf does not espouse the homophobia typical of Pound's attitude to finance capitalism, she cannot be said to also elude his anti-Semitism. There are several examples of anti-Semitic tropes in Woolf's work, perhaps most notably her short story, "The Duchess and the Jeweller" (1938). The story's protagonist is Oliver Bacon, a Jew and Britain's "richest jeweller" (249). The story abounds in anti-Semitic clichés, including a lengthy description of Bacon's nose:

[. . .] his nose, which was long and flexible, like an elephant's trunk, seemed to say by its curious quiver at the nostrils (but it seemed as if the whole nose quivered, not only the nostrils) that he was not satisfied yet; still smelt something under the ground further off. Imagine a giant hog in a pasture rich with truffles; after unearthing this truffle and that, still it smells a bigger, a blacker truffle under the ground further off. [. . .] For was he not still a sad man, a dissatisfied man, a man who seeks something that is hidden . . .?" (249).

Through animalistic imagery, Woolf transforms his nose into a symbol of greed and insatiability—two characteristics that figure prominently in Woolf's description of the professional man. Woolf's critique of the banker and finance capitalism, in general, is, unfortunately, tainted by anti-Semitism.

<sup>2</sup> Woolf's use of guineas in the title is intriguing, since the guinea was replaced as the official unit of currency by the pound in 1816. Following this re-coinage, the term guineas took on an upper-class connotation—the cost of land, for instance, continued to be quoted in terms of guineas. Woolf's use of the term foregrounds the fact that money language is not neutral but enmeshed in networks of power and privilege. Moreover, the term guineas is derived from the Guinea region in Africa, where much of the gold used to mint coins was mined. Woolf links

money and the finance economy to the history of British colonialism. This contextual gesture works to re-materialize the inherently abstract medium of money. See Naomi Black, *Virginia Woolf as Feminist*, 175-7.

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Baptiste Say was a nineteenth-century French economist. His law states that the production of goods generates the income needed to purchase other goods and thereby create demand. Thus, the source of demand is production rather than money (Hoek 1365). One of the implications of this law (which Keynes is questioning in this passage) is that production, not consumption, is the key driver of economic growth.

<sup>4</sup> Of course, imagining snakes as luxuriously over-indulging is an anthropomorphic projection, not a scientific fact, but my point is that Woolf has carefully chosen this image to demonstrate something about Giles's psychology.

<sup>5</sup> Many of the lines of verse that Isa speaks throughout the novel are taken from a number of small poems Woolf composed in notebooks throughout the 1930s (Scott 52). These poems were written "on the spur of the moment" and Woolf judged them "not very good," though writing them gave her pleasure (*Diary*, 5: 180, 313). I agree with Bonnie Kime Scott that "Isa has been written off too easily in accounts of *Between the Acts*" and that Isa's "artistry is typically neglected in favor of the flamboyant pageantry of Miss La Trobe" (62).

<sup>6</sup> The "tingling" echoes a moment of satirical fun in *Orlando* (1928). When Orlando becomes a Victorian woman, she feels the oppressive "spirit of the age" as a tingling in her ring finger, which occurs because she is naked and she is "single, [. . .] mateless, [. . .] alone" (246). She attempts to stop the tingling but by putting a ring on the finger but does not succeed. In this scene from *Between the Acts*, the "tingling" is emblematic not of the social norm of marriage but of an autoerotic pleasure.

<sup>7</sup> For an account of the connection between Woolf's fiction and scientific theories of wave-particle theory and electrical systems, see P. T. Brown; Whitworth.

<sup>8</sup> Louis in *The Waves* is, like Isa, a somewhat furtive poet. The fact that Louis is both a poet and a banker and that Isa records her poems in accounting books is illustrative of the fact that Woolf does not assume a radical opposition between art and the professions she critiques.

<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Abel contends that the novel suggests “(hetero)sexuality [. . .] as our covert truth” (108). I think this reading misses the myriad of ways in which *Between the Acts* subverts heteronormativity. Woolf's ending implies that heterosexuality is the “truth” only for one very particular social formation, reproductive futurism—a social formation that is, in my reading, the object of the novel's critique. Thus, there is nothing necessary or essential about heterosexuality for Woolf.

<sup>10</sup> Woolf makes a similar argument in “Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid” (1940), suggesting that to avoid future wars one must engage in, to quote William Blake, a “mental fight,” which requires “thinking against the current, not with it” (244). In making this argument, Woolf notes a collusion between the genocidal violence of Hitler and the patriarchal and imperialistic culture of Britain. To “think against the current” thus means to eschew these militaristic habits of thought that produce war yet often go unnoticed in times of peace. Ann Carlston, summarizing Woolf's argument, contends:

Barbarism is not an aberration in the history of Western civilization but inheres in the culture of the fathers . . . the fight against tyranny demands a radical transformation of the world, including the individual and the private sphere” (154–155).

I am suggesting that Woolf sees the practices of finance capitalism as a component of this militaristic and patriarchal culture that breeds war and, indeed, constitutes war by other means.

<sup>11</sup> I consider Foucault only briefly in relation to Woolf, but for an account of how Foucault's concept of governmentality relates to Virginia Woolf's depiction of power in *Mrs. Dalloway*, see Higgins and Leps.

<sup>12</sup> For an account of how management discourse in the late twentieth-century appropriates the rhetoric of the avant-garde, see Boltanski and Chiapello 57-102.

<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, Woolf also uses a train motif and emphasizes interrupted progress in her account of the General Strike of 1926. She writes in her diary of the strike, "it is all tedious & depressing, rather like waiting in a train outside a station" (*Diary 3*: 77).

<sup>14</sup> Gift-giving has been a popular theme in recent Woolf scholarship. Kathryn Simpson contends that Woolf posits an "alternative feminine libidinal economy," premised on gift-giving, which acts "as a disruptive force [. . .] destabilising hierarchies and rational systems, and undermining property rites" (2, 29). Rebecca Colesworthy points to similarities between Woolf's concepts of gifts and exchanges and those of French sociologist Marcel Mauss, whose *The Gift* (1925) looks at the economic practices of archaic societies. Colesworthy interprets *Mrs. Dalloway* and Mauss's *The Gift*, both published in 1925, "as analogous responses to changes in metropolitan market society," namely the rise of social welfare and the shift from a production to a consumption-oriented economy (160). She differs from Simpson, however, in suggesting that Woolf and Mauss reject the opposition between gift-giving and exchanges (167). Colesworthy observes of Clarissa Dalloway that her penchant for throwing parties is "like the Maussian gift" in appearing both "gratuitous" and "ultimately constrained, for although she here figures her parties as free gifts [. . .] she also figures them as gestures of reciprocation, as offerings to and for life" (175). I view Miss La Trobe less positively than Simpson, suggesting her act of gift-giving is undermined by her own anxious desire to retain control over the gift and its reception—in

short, her treatment of the gift as property. Like Colesworthy, I suggest there is a paradox necessary to the logic of useless expenditure that Woolf advocates in *Between the Acts*: the defeat of calculative logic inherent in acts expenditure brings a benefit to the self, even if it combats the egotism of the “professional man.” There is a pleasure in experiences of “ending” and self-loss that eludes those obsessed with accumulation and self-development. See also Colesworthy, *Returning the Gift: Modernism and the Thought of Exchange*.

## Conclusion

<sup>1</sup> These two critiques could be divided further into sub-categories, or, conversely, it could be demonstrated that both of these critiques are present, ironically, in the same authors. Nevertheless, I believe this provisional opposition enables one to pinpoint some highly significant tensions within Anglo-American modernism, and thus fulfills an important heuristic function, even if it is by no means an exhaustive account of modernist attitudes towards the commodity.

<sup>2</sup> I have in mind Eugene Jolas primarily, who argues that the task of the modern artist is to create “a new metaphoric language that might approach the mood of illumination” (284). Wyndham Lewis, reflecting on painting rather than language, expresses a similarly idealist thought when he observes: “theoretically, even, a creative painter or designer should be able to exist quite satisfactorily without paper, stone or paints, or without lifting a finger to translate into forms and colours his specialized creative impulse” (*The Caliph’s Design* 37). The “specialized creative impulse” exists independently and outside of its expression in a particular medium. The artist aspires to a self-expression that is completely unmediated by anything external to the subject.

<sup>3</sup> John William Crowley notes that Barnes was “renowned for her beauty and notorious for her eccentricity and slashing wit” and that she “attract[ed] a cult following” (115). Deborah Parsons contends that this cult status “obscure[s] serious recognition of her work” (*Djuna Barnes* 1).

<sup>4</sup> *Four Saints in Three Acts* premiered at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut, on February 7, 1934, and then opened on Broadway on February 20, 1934. Stein attended performances in Chicago and New York during her lecture tour of 1934. For a comprehensive account of the creation of *Four Saints in Three Acts*, see Watson.

<sup>5</sup> See Field 233; Fitch 212.

<sup>6</sup> “*La Peau de l’Ours*” was the name adopted by an association of thirteen art collectors who bought paintings by Picasso, Matisse and Marquet, among others, in the early years of the twentieth century (Green 54). Organized by André Level, their aim was always to sell the paintings for a profit; in 1914, they realized this goal, auctioning off the entire collection for roughly four times their initial investment (Brauer 139). Christopher Green contends that the profit was significant enough to make the sale newsworthy and that it was “the first comprehensive public demonstration of the market potential of modernism” (54).

<sup>7</sup> For Pierre Bourdieu, aesthetics is an ideology that naturalizes the consumption preferences of the ruling class in an act of symbolic violence against lower classes (247). Terry Eagleton similarly construes aesthetics as being complicit with the capitalist order: “The construction of the modern notion of the aesthetic artefact is thus inseparable from the construction of the dominant ideological forms of modern class society, and indeed from a whole new form of human subjectivity appropriate to that social order” (3). Paul de Man critiques aesthetics for seeking a false or coerced synthesis of a series of related antinomies: intelligibility

and sensuousness, concept and intuition, form and material. In his view, aesthetic ideology is aligned with a universalistic liberal humanism, on the one hand, and with totalitarianism, on the other. The latter finds its ultimate expression in the fascist vision of politics as a work of art. See Bourdieu 3-7; Eagleton *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* 1-9; de Man 129-162.

For accounts of the death of the avant-garde project in the postmodern era, see Anderson 78-138; Călinescu 120-125; Huyssen 160-179.

<sup>8</sup> Also relevant to this discussion is the recent resurgence of materialist thought, referenced in my introduction, with some critics heralding the “new materialism,” and others an “object-oriented ontology.” These theorists react against the linguistic turn in continental philosophy, and (what they view as) its inordinate emphasis on the discursive nature of reality. The new materialism “question[s] the anthropocentric narrative that has underpinned our view of humans-in-the-world since the enlightenment, a view that posits humans as makers of the world and the world as a resource for human endeavours” (Barrett, Estelle, and Bolt, 2-3). Art is given a privileged role in the challenging this “anthropocentric narrative,” as it was in the avant-garde, again showing the persistence of a belief in the disruptive powers of the aesthetic mode. See Barrett, Estelle and Bolt; Dolphijn and Tuin.

<sup>9</sup> I concur with Stewart Martin’s assessment:

Art’s relation to commodification is an unavoidable and entrenched condition for much of the theory, history, and practice of art today; so entrenched, in fact, as to have become implicit and assumed for many. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, considerations of this relation have been marginal to most of what passes academically for the philosophy of art. (15)

There are exceptions, the most notable being found in the work of the Frankfurt school and in the work of Giorgio Agamben. See Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, 36-46; Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 21-28.

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