

DISABLING MODERNISM: LITERATURE, HISTORY, EMBODIMENT

by

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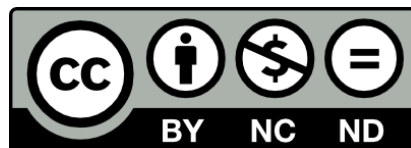
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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Title: *Disabling Modernism: Literature, History, Embodiment*

Before history had christened modernism, the movement had emerged in disabled concepts and forms. It was “degenerate art,” as Hitler infamously put it, before it was modernism. Yet when scholars and many readers examine modernist literature, disability often disappears from the discussion, even though physically or cognitively impaired characters feature extensively. This dissertation considers the stakes of representing deafness, impotence, prostheses, blindness, and shell shock in literary art—especially when that task is taken up by able-bodied writers, and when encountered by their able-bodied readers.

“Disabling Modernism” argues that, in distinction to adjacent early twentieth-century public discourses surrounding non-normative bodies, modernist literature significantly destabilizes and denaturalizes disability—often in historically unprecedented ways—while also placing dynamic images of disablement among its central concerns. Many powerful sociopolitical actors, including eugenicists, legislators, and social theorists, worked to erase disability from the public sphere in the early twentieth century. The overlooked vein of “disabling” modernist literature evoked throughout this study seeks instead to recuperate and prize that which modernity has so often desired to eradicate.

“Disabling Modernism” examines literature of this period that commits to nuanced, candid, and often uncomfortable dialogues with disability. This discomfort is meant to span the spectrum of embodiment, reaching and affecting both able-bodied and disabled communities, though likely in different ways. While this dissertation centers disability within our understanding of modernism, it does so by turning primarily to under-studied writers who rarely are given space to speak, let alone to one another: Carson McCullers, Wyndham Lewis, Jean Toomer, and Rebecca West. Each chapter focuses on key texts by these authors: *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1940); *Blast* (1914) and *Snooty Baronet* (1932); *Cane* (1923); and *The Return of the Soldier* (1918). But the arguments made throughout reach beyond the literary and aesthetic into the historical and theoretical realm, braiding them together. These four careers are viewed as complex, even historic, sites rich with unexpected value. This dissertation displays how unnerving pasts can reveal much about the social, political, and even semiotic structure of the present, and it asks us to rethink how modernism intersects with disability.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“The body is a curious monster, no place to live in,
how could anyone feel at home there?”
—Katherine Anne Porter, “Pale Horse, Pale Rider”

Two powerful images of modernism hail us from the past. The first: in the mid-1920s, just a few years after the tectonic shifts of *Ulysses* and with the pains of iritis upon him, James Joyce sits alone in a dark Parisian cinema, blind. He attends the matinée, we are told, because he enjoys listening to the actors, although he cannot see them.¹ Sitting in our seat beside him, his iconic eyepatch in side-view, we imagine how the screen’s voices transform for Joyce from light into sonic waves. The notes of dialogue ring with dynamic new meaning, ones which a blind Wyndham Lewis would later call sound’s rich “added significance,” each further extending the Irishman’s sharp ear for his already highly musical sense of the world and its capacity, at times, for synesthesia. A redolent image of modernism’s afterlives, this scene invites us to close the eyes and to open the ears, to imagine an embodiment bereft—joyfully, even—of the perhaps tyrannical grip sight seems to hold over so many narrow relationships to the body.

This received portrait of Joyce alone and blind at the movies, at once mythic and humble, redirects cinema’s visualization of narrative into a rich aural soundscape. It offers a view of blindness not as an abstruse or even abject darkness, but as a disablement *alive* with vibrancy, with the unexpected, the bountiful, even the profound. Such scenes

¹ This image is memorably captured in the chapter “The Man Who Was Marked for Death” in *A Moveable Feast*, among other places. Hemingway writes: “One day, years later, I met Joyce who was walking along the Boulevard St.-Germain after having been to a matinee alone. He liked to listen to the actors, although he could not see them” (100).

of disability lend themselves spectacularly, as it will turn out, to modernist defamiliarization: here, by undercutting holistic senses of embodiment, but also by scrutinizing for the sighted, especially, how their dependence on sight can blinker or eclipse the other senses. Like so many of Joyce's fictions, the image disarms, unsettles, beckons. It undoes and refutes the rehearsed responses of the sighted (pity, sorrow, misfortune, bafflement), materializing the impoverishments of such limited perspectives. In re-learning how to hear that which he can no longer "fully" see, Joyce does not offer an image of lamentation but one, ironically, of *insight*, one radiating outward, piercing us and our misapprehension like a Barthesian punctum.² The image thus *reviews* blindness not as a deficit marking an invalid body, but as a considerable reimagining of what such disabled embodiments help make "visible." It recalls our bodily life back to us, throwing into relief the falsities through which the able body tries in vain to keep its borders distinct by dejecting the sensory "losses" of its disabled others.

Home from the cinema, Joyce offers an equally powerful second image. Committed to the impossibility of the *Wake*, itself awash in a deliciously disabled aesthetic, Joyce entrusts his young literary apprentice Samuel Beckett to run the errands he no longer can complete. He sends Beckett mostly to libraries scattered across Paris. He can no longer read reference cards, call numbers, or fine typescript, and so he employs Beckett, in part, to track down for him many of the famously esoteric allusions that come to riddle what Larry McCaffery aptly deemed "the greatest unreadable novel ever

² In one of his many delightful descriptions of an image's *punctum*, Roland Barthes turns, in fact, to the figure of blindness: "However lightning-like it may be, the *punctum* [or an image's capacity to affectively pierce us beyond signification] has, more or less, the power of expansion. This power is often metonymic. There is a photograph by Kertész (1921) which shows a blind gypsy violinist being led by a boy; [...] I perceive the referent (here, the photograph really transcends itself: is this not the sole proof of its art? To annihilate itself as *medium*, to be no longer a sign but the thing itself?), I recognize, with my whole body, the straggling villages I passed through" (45, emphases in original).

written.” Beckett in time unearths for Joyce long forgotten passages from the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* and ancient Greek phrases presaging the Bible; he translates into French over a thousand names and references to rivers which then flow into the unwieldy manuscript (Beckett, *Letters* 22n2). At times Joyce has to dictate parts of his “Work in Progress” to Beckett as his aide, therefore trusting the manuscript and, later, galley proofs to another person. Joyce soon finds the release of total artistic control, however, too much to bear (Ellmann 649). No stranger to his own extensive, lifelong psychosomatic health complications, Beckett begins distancing himself from the man whom he had first affectionately referred to as “the Penman” (Beckett, *Letters* 19).³ Though both overall show comfort with non-normative understandings of the body, their relationship sours, ironically, when Joyce fails in his matchmaking efforts to pressure his would-be protégé into courting Lucia, his daughter who has eyes for Beckett and was schizophrenic, after which the two part ways for some time.

These two opening images call out in related ways. Both observe towering figures of modernism within an intimate, unexpected, and yet profuse disabled context: the first, learning to experience the cinema anew; the second, taking on a role remarkably akin to a caregiver. Joyce, after all, paid Beckett specifically to aid him with those tasks his eyesight rendered nearly impossible. Disability in modernism, located in unassuming images like these, too often goes without rigorous comment, as though it begins and ends as a mere modal or aesthetic flair, one indicative, perhaps, of what Adorno would have

³ Beckett experienced extensive impairments throughout his life. As a young man he contended with bouts of intense anxiety bordering on what was then simply called, overwhelmingly for women, “hysteria,” even to the point that he displayed symptoms ranging from “shudders, panic,” and night tremors, to an “arrhythmic heart,” and even occasionally “total paralysis” (Knowlson 169). He also experienced many painful internal boils and sebaceous cysts, pleurisy, and neuritis of the right shoulder, among other things.

championed as aesthetic autonomy.⁴ (How easily Joyce’s actual blindness can keep slipping, curiously, from view.) So, too, can these two images help us begin to re-view disability within modernism—its literature, history, and historic explorations of embodiment. They also prepare us for some of the core questions of “Disabling Modernism.” How is it, to start, that modernist literature could extensively appropriate disability when the period was marked by a violent rejection and even persecution of the same bodies upon which its literature depended? Is this body of disabled literature, written overwhelmingly by nondisabled writers, best understood as appropriative? Or might there be a generative counter-reading to be found within it, one which complicates the place able-bodied readers and writers may (or may not) occupy within critical discussions of disability? Why has it taken a century to recognize the centrality of disability within modernism, and what has this absence hidden from view?

“Disabling Modernism” considers the stakes of representing deafness, impotence, prostheses, blindness, and shell shock in literary art—especially when that task is taken up by able-bodied writers, and when encountered by their able-bodied readers. At the same time, one must remember to place such literary imaginings into real, lived contexts in order to understand how embodiment conjoins materialism with its discursive excess. This meeting place spans human embodiment; it paradoxically holds together and threatens to break that which divides the nondisabled from their disabled “other.” Such are the stakes of this study’s theoretical interjection. The chapters that follow thus reconsider not only the gravitas of thinking theoretically and critically about historicized

⁴ See, for instance, Adorno’s “Reconciliation under Duress,” among numerous other places, for a view of his anti-realist position (contra Lukács et al.) in defending the “virtue[s] of art’s own autonomous status” (162).

representations of disabilities. They also reconsider the consequences of merely thinking about disability figuratively. The idea is not to flip the dis/ability binary but move beyond its limits, finding the meeting place of materiality and discourse within and as human embodiment. The body houses a physical, material reality that cannot be entirely abstracted away, regardless of one's ability status. But the body's materiality also refuses to be divorced from its profuse social, political, historical, and aesthetic meanings—its signification as well as its significance. The point in what follows is not to think of disability as a purely discursive *or* material phenomenon. To return to our opening image: sighted readers can never fully understand Joyce's experience in the cinema as a blind person, regardless of what motivations, enjoyment, or insight he may have found there. But neither should one deny this scene's discursive work in undermining compulsory able-bodied conceptions of embodiment either. Nor should one overlook this scene as an embodied appreciation of art's capacity to shift how one fundamentally "sees" the world. "Disabling Modernism" argues that, in distinction to adjacent early twentieth-century public discourses surrounding non-normative bodies, modernist literature significantly destabilizes and denaturalizes disability—often in historically unprecedented ways—while also placing dynamic images of disablement among its central concerns. There is an overlooked vein of modernist literature I am calling "disabling" evoked throughout this study that seeks to recuperate and even prize that which modernity has so often desired, then and now, to eradicate.

Disabling modernism, both as a dissertation-length endeavor and a localized critical method deployed throughout, means to examine literature of this period that commits to nuanced, candid, and often *uncomfortable* dialogues with disability. This

discomfort is meant to span the spectrum of embodiment, reaching and affecting both able-bodied and disabled communities, though likely in different ways. While archives like ours—understudied and undervalued histories and literatures of modernism—may frequently offend present-day political imperatives, much can be gained within disability and modernist studies, these chapters will insist, by dwelling at an uncomfortably close distance with such materials. As something of a litmus test, then, “Disabling Modernism” puts a four-decade view of Wyndham Lewis at its structural center. Perhaps no modernist figure better calls for alarm or causes such acute discomfort as Lewis, one whose reputation for repugnant vitriol (ranging at times from homophobia and misogyny to ableism and anti-Semitism) continues to baffle and offend. And yet even figures like Lewis, as we will see, can be read against the grain to better reveal the many sociopolitical hats the disabled body wore throughout the modernist era, particularly around issues of race, gender, and sexuality as they intersected with social theories of degeneration. Lewis in many ways exemplifies what a disabled modernism must confront head on and continue to reckon with in the present, rather than turn from view as merely an unfortunate chapter of history we can deem concluded to quell discomfort. As “Disabling Modernism” displays, such unnerving pasts reveal much about the social, political, and even semiotic structure of the present, helping us better navigate the so-called dis/ability divide.

As each chapter explores, eugenicists, social theorists, scientists, legislators, and physicians on both sides of the North Atlantic mobilized *en masse* in the first half of the twentieth century with the shared goal to segregate, sterilize, and even euthanize people with disabilities. Such groups hid disabled bodies from public view by banishing them

most often to the asylum, captured in legislation like the “ugly laws” of some American states.⁵ Yet, whereas these powerful sociopolitical actors worked to erase disability from the public sphere, modernist literature repeatedly put disabled bodies and minds center stage. Modernism in many ways has never fully detached from its early cultural branding as the “art of the asylum,” a reclaimed pejorative marker (then and now) turned instead into something like a badge of honor, a prolific deviation from the homogenizing norms of modernity.⁶ Indeed, much of the notorious difficulty of modernist literature can be understood as a result *of* its relentless pursuit of such aesthetic and political deviation.

At its best, modernism defamiliarizes us, sometimes painfully, from the “natural” world, near the perceived center of which rests the presumed immutability of the human body. The Katherine Anne Porter epigraph which opens this introduction tightly captures the modernist defamiliarization of the natural(ized) body so central to this study, as do the many cubist, expressionist, surrealist, dadaist, and vorticist paintings of modernism, including those of Wyndham Lewis (Figure 1). Modernism exposes the ideological lies that substitute nature for culture. As this study will detail, its aesthetic consistently turns to the disabled body to signal its affective imperatives—often those of defamiliarization,

⁵ For this context, see Susan M. Schweik’s fascinating *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public* (NYU, 2009).

⁶ Art critics and scholars have long been interested in highlighting modernism’s seeming affinity for psychological modes which evoke “madness” or “insanity” (at the level of both form and content). For a thorough overview, for example, see David Trotter’s *Paranoid Modernism: Literary Experiment, Psychosis, and the Professionalization of English Society* (Oxford University Press, 2001). Perhaps the most important piece of scholarship on this affinity or overlap, though, is Louis A. Sass’s *Madness and Modernism: Insanity in the Light of Modern Art, Literature, and Thought* (Oxford University Press, 1992). Sass’s philosophical project sought to “view the poorly understood schizophrenic-type illnesses in the light of the sensibility and structures of consciousness found in the most advanced art and literature of the twentieth century, the epoch of modernism.... Modernist art has been said to manifest certain off-putting characteristics that are reminiscent of schizophrenia” (8).



Figure 1: Wyndham Lewis, *Figure Composition (Man and Woman with Two Bulldogs)*, circa 1912-1913, pen and ink, watercolor, gouache, 31.3 x 21.7 cm.

estrangement, detachment, and disquiet. Yet, core historical concepts like modernism's defense of aesthetic autonomy and its disavowal of literary realism's pretenses never signified, as some scholars contend, that modernism wanted to separate itself entirely from the "natural," political, "real" world.⁷ Rather, notions of anti-realist autonomy expose that much of what is mistakenly called the natural world takes on meaning and shape only through a similar "aesthetic" constructedness.⁸ The scare quotes around "aesthetic" constructedness are meant to remind us that many of the naturalized forms of modernity—which are always to some extent aesthetic as *forms*—move far beyond the concerns of the pen and brush by taking on powerful shapes that structure our social and political world, often in unseen ways. Perhaps the common credo of modernism—the Nietzschean denouncement that "the truth's a lie"—most impactfully takes shape in its ability, as we will see, to deconstruct essentialisms positing the natural where there ought to be the cultural, the constructed.⁹

⁷ See, for example, Herbert Marcuse, who remains a powerful articulator of such disavowals in texts like *The Aesthetic Dimension*. Evoking modernism's "estranging form" (10, emphasis in original), Marcuse argues that art "breaks open a dimension inaccessible to other experience.... The encounter with the truth of art happens in the estranging language and images which make perceptible, visible, and audible that which is no longer, or not yet, perceived, said, and heard in everyday life" (72). As former students and eventual critics of Louis Althusser, Marcuse and Jacques Rancière align on this front. Compare this quotation with note 8.

⁸ Perhaps no one has been more important in theorizing the "aesthetic" forms upon which the structures of our political and social world depend than Jacques Rancière. As Rancière identifies in *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (2004): "[A]esthetics can be understood...as the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience. It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience. Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it...[,] around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time" (13).

⁹ Though it was not published until the modernist period, this philosophical denouncement goes back at least as far as 1873, when Nietzsche wrote his unpublished proto-deconstructive text, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense." He chides equating the constructedness of our linguistic reality with some natural, metalinguistic truth—a "masterpiece," as he says, "of deception": "The liar uses the valid designations, the words, to make the unreal appear as real.... What, then, is truth? [...] Truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are" (1; 3).

This brief philosophical detour helps return us to the material body, especially to cultural views which posit its semiotics as an immutable or authentic expression of nature. By calling into question how the “natural” or universalized body had been arrogated by an implicit white, male, able-bodied “wholeness,” and by reveling in the formal unmaking and remaking of the body’s competing meanings, the disabling vein of modernism, we could say, lays the early groundwork so central to contemporary critical theory: both mercilessly lay siege to fixed or “pure” views of identity and epistemology. Modernism, even in its political failings from the vantage of the present, thus begins the century-long process of destabilizing and denaturalizing the “normal” body and mind, two core verbs which remain key to contemporary understandings of human identity and embodiment. Many canonical modernists, including Faulkner, Joyce, and Woolf, invite us into a paradoxical literary performance of such denaturalization. That is, many bring us into an intimate internal perspective (the stream-of-consciousness, the historic proliferation of first-person narrative, the fragmentation of the self) even while estranging us from these very modes of being. As these chapters witness, the bodies of modernism are both incredibly intimate and dramatically othered: fragmented, disjointed, “neurotic,” and often disabled—and yet intractably human because *of* such “deviant” embodiments, ones which fly in the face of cultural ideals. The unitary, natural self becomes one of modernism’s favorite lies to unmask. When the hollow center of normal can no longer hold, the shared spectrum of being and difference replaces it.

As the powerful public institutions of doctors, scientists, politicians, and social theorists promised a modernity which would eradicate disability from the earth, they enacted horrific eugenics protocols to achieve this utopia. In response to a perceived

degeneration of the West that demanded such vile remedies, the vein of modernism this study champions offered instead a sense of the self inextricably bound to notions of a fragmented or even impaired embodiment. For those writers operating within this overlooked vein of modernism, disability—both its lived embodiment and semiotic implications—often felt the condition of the age. This presented a wry paradox, however, given the zeal with which these myriad forces tried to scrub all differently abled bodies from the public sphere. Recall that the birth of modernism shared its entrance into history with the medical arrival of shell shock and the countless “mental complexes” uncovered by novel social sciences like psychology. Freud even went so far as to equate modernity (industrial, mechanical, chaotic, inorganic) to a condition of *shock* nearing psychological impairment.¹⁰ Somatically speaking, the modernist moment also saw a major advancement in health technologies like the modern, metal prosthesis, as well as the rise of institutions and societies for both the Deaf and the blind. Nor can we downplay the central fact that within just a few years, the First World War significantly wounded and permanently impaired some 28 million people globally. While some modernists abused the literary power of disabled figures, turning to artistic images of grotesques and flippantly rendering the subjectivities of “insanity,” numerous others began the century-long process of deconstructing the social, political, scientific, and aesthetic hegemony of normalcy. Our interest here will fall on the latter.

Modernism, after all, has always been disabled. Before history had christened modernism, the movement had emerged in disabled concepts and forms. It was “degenerate art,” as Hitler infamously put it, before it was modernism. Approaching

¹⁰ This is especially true of the introduction to *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), as well as his seminal modernist text, “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917).

much of the brushwork of Picasso or Munch without “deformity” or a fragmented (dis)embodiment is perhaps unthinkable.¹¹ Yet when scholars examine modernist literature—in canonical writers like Beckett, Conrad, and Hemingway, to start—the language of disability disappears from the discussion, even though physically and cognitively impaired characters feature extensively, and often in historically unprecedented ways. Beyond the fictive page, literary heavyweights like Beckett, Conrad, T. S. Eliot, Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, Flannery O’Connor, William Carlos Williams, and Woolf, among others, at times experienced disabilities of their own, though scholars rarely attend to this fact with more than a passing glance.¹² As undergraduates often learn, it continues to speak volumes that perhaps the most iconic character of American modernism remains Benjy Compson, the Shakespearean “idiot” through whom Faulkner tells his monumental tale “full of sound and fury / Signifying nothing” (*Macbeth* 94). Benjy’s cognitive impairment served as both a new literary hermeneutic and a contentious opportunity for Faulkner to radically fragment and “deform” the text, defining an American modernist aesthetic in the process, one whose literary impact has endured well into the twenty-first century.

¹¹ See also Linett’s *Bodies of Modernism* for a reading of Picasso’s *Old Guitarist*, featuring a blind elderly man playing in the street, an image which comprises the cover to that monograph.

¹² Definitions about what “counts” as a disability/impairment continue to be debated today, especially concerning “invisible” conditions. Does the fact that Conrad experienced what at the time was simply referred to as a weeks-long “nervous breakdown” during the composition of *Under Western Eyes*, including periods where he believed his characters were debating before him, “count”? What about Woolf’s life-long struggle with critical depression and likely bipolar disorder? Or that Carlos Williams suffered from strokes, much like Carson McCullers, for nearly two decades? Eliot had a distressing congenital double inguinal hernia, and Lawrence experienced respiratory illnesses throughout his life, eventually dying, like Katherine Mansfield and Kafka (and, nearly, Katherine Anne Porter) of TB. Who, then, is *really* disabled or impaired?

It may, then, seem counterintuitive why an extended consideration of modernism and disability such as this would go out of its way *not* to discuss *The Sound and the Fury*, and to largely bracket World War One wherever possible, rather than treating the two as inescapable centers of gravity around which everything else must orbit. An incredible amount of scholarship, much of it exceptional, has of course been devoted to the war, including some reconsiderations of shell shock and prosthetic cultures in its disabled wake. Much of the scholarship that has revised our understanding of the First World War has already been brought to bear on modernism, especially in observation of the war's recent centenary. The "war" chapters of this study (Chapters III and V) indeed turn to such scholars to help contextualize the indelible role the war played in shifting political, medical, and cultural discourses of disability. Yet, in both chapters, our concern lies not with the war as such, but with how it affected disabled contexts surrounding it, like pension systems (Chapters III and V), public debates over impaired masculinities (Chapters III and IV), and a gendered view of the home front deserving of an equal claim to traumatic shock (Chapter V). As with bracketing Faulkner, perhaps the one modernist writer about whom disability scholars have written a good deal, our goal is to offer a fresh perspective, one which yields insight into the unexpected fruits a disabled modernism can bear.

This study is therefore partially framed by a historical curiosity that revises the current dialogue between disability and modernist studies. Even when approached from a perspective distanced from the well-tread paths of Faulkner, Beckett, Conrad, and Woolf, one realizes that disability abounds in modernism. As it was (and is) in our culture, non-normative bodies and perspectives saturate modernist works of all stature, from the most

lauded to the under-appreciated. The same is true if one looks beyond the well-known generational impact of the Great War. The war no doubt helps contextualize some of the chapters that follow, but each also keeps it at a notable distance. Scholars and readers have identified the political and aesthetic role disability plays in Benjy and in trench poets like Wilfred Owen. But what else? The intent is not to ignore these considerations but to look beyond at what such a reframing as ours might bring into focus. If disability in modernism is as pervasive and even perhaps definitional as this study contends, it makes sense *not* to look at what we already know and expect to find. We ought to look instead to the quiet, unassuming places for such an argument to hold water.

How did oralism, for instance, a popular ideological approach to deaf education in the early twentieth century, bolster a damaging internalization of the consequences of needing to “pass” as a hearing person in Depression-era America? What was the transatlantic connection between such logics of erasure, cultural norming, and fascism? How might a postwar shift in prosthetic culture complicate our understanding of the politics of heteromale autonomy? How was the disabled male body weaponized in competing ways within the British crisis of masculinity? What did blindness have to do with racialized discourses in America in the twenties, those implicated within a eugenic cultural fear of a “genetic other”? What did blindness share with public rhetorics over miscegenation, and how did some “New Negro” writers like Jean Toomer deploy blindness in response to a Black history marked (inescapably, perhaps) by the traumas of slavery and the terrors of American history? How might reading against the grain of identifying ableism *tout court* as an end in itself bring the centrality of disability back to

its rightful place within such transatlantic contexts, histories, politics, and aesthetic production? What, then, *is* a disabled modernism?

If the four chapters that follow centralize disability within our understanding of modernism, they do so by turning primarily to under-studied writers who rarely, if ever, are given space to speak to one another (or in some cases simply to speak at all): Carson McCullers, Wyndham Lewis, Jean Toomer, and Rebecca West. An unexpected company, to be sure. At a literary level, each chapter focuses on central texts from these four authors: *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1940); *Blast* (1914) and *Snooty Baronet* (1932); *Cane* (1923); and *The Return of the Soldier* (1918). But the arguments made within each chapter reach far beyond the literary and aesthetic into the historical and theoretical as well, braiding them together. By taking an expansive view of our authors, one which pulls from their letters, auto/biographies, essays, political tracts, manifestoes, comments on the art of fiction, and adjacent literary productions, as well as decades of scholarship, each chapter considers these four careers as complex, even historic, sites rich with unexpected value when set within a disabled modernism. The subtitles of each chapter therefore emphasize the names of our primary figures, rather than their fictions.

These four chapters are thus not intended to be read as only localized arguments about a handful of literary artifacts. They are meant to suggest an entire vein of literature that has largely been missed—a vein marked by an historic attempt to bring disabled bodies into the foreground of public culture and dialogue, putting complex, nuanced, often uncomfortable representations of disability near the center of its concerns. This vein of disabling modernism sought to dwell with, recuperate, and even prize that which was elsewhere being hidden, banished from public view, and often placed under eugenic

threat of erasure. As intertextual and transatlantic dialogues, each chapter draws on, prefaces, and extends the others. The first body chapter has as much impact on the three which follow as the latter material does on the opening. The same is true throughout. Structurally, the study is rhizomatic rather than teleological; it draws a constellation, not a totalizing master statement. Though they can be meaningfully read in any sequence, the body chapters move in reverse chronological order, starting with McCullers in 1940, a moment in which the eugenic and fascistic zeitgeist had drawn the world into its second total war in two decades. From there we begin moving backward: first into the interwar period with Lewis (with an early detour into the teens), then into the twenties with Toomer, and, finally, we end stranded in the middle of the Great War thinking about the Edwardian period with West. Part of the spirit of this reverse chronology is to resist a progressivist historicism which assumes that our understanding of the disabled body within modernism necessarily becomes more complex, dynamic, or revealing the closer to the present we are. By moving backward, one hopes, and by drawing points of literary, historical, and theoretical connection nonlinearly, we may avoid the urge for a presentist moment of “arrival.” We may instead begin to see the varied, often vexed ways disability became a permanent fixture of literary modernism in an uneven sense of time stretching back to its inception. The dialectic drawn here temporally between modernism and disability does not unfold neatly or uniformly but in unexpected shifts and movements, ones that, as these chapters explore, move both toward but sometimes also away from a more just, equitable world.

As we move backward roughly a decade at a time, the temporal shifts of each chapter also oscillate us spatially on each side of the North Atlantic, alternating from

America to England and back with each author. Given the reach of this study's argument in suggesting a broad constellation of a disabling modernism, it makes sense to look beyond national boundaries, as well as to both metropolitan and rural spaces within these locales. To some extent, as scholars have long noted, modernism, traditionally defined, has always been a transnational phenomenon; we will look to both American and British modernists, drawing textual and contextual points of connection between them throughout.¹³ That said, while our broad geographical and often theoretical strokes aspire to a transatlantic view fitting of a claim that reaches Anglophone modernism, it is important to note that each chapter's historicism moves in the opposite direction, getting as local, contextual, and, as we will see, "uncomfortably close" as possible.¹⁴ The goal is to balance our theoretical aims with a much more localized, intimate methodology. The two middle chapters—Lewis and Toomer—share an attention to disabled masculinity, though Lewis sets his sights on its relationship to a heteronormativity viewed as in decline, whereas Toomer sets his on blackness and eugenic fears of miscegenation. The arc of the whole similarly bookends with related dialogues—between McCullers and West—over the destabilized and contested status of deafness and shell shock as disabilities, determining the myriad stakes of who does and does not have a claim to

¹³ Raymond Williams springs to mind as one of the most influential in emphasizing modernism as a transnational movement of immigrants and exiles. See, for example, his "Metropolitan Perceptions and the Emergence of Modernism," where he writes that "The most important general element of the innovations in [modernist] form is the fact of immigration to the metropolis, and it cannot too often be emphasized how many of the major innovators were, in this precise sense, immigrants" (45).

¹⁴ In this sense the scale of "Disabling Modernism" is balanced by a methodological approach that shares some of Paul K. Saint-Amour's influential call for a "weak modernism," one which resists totalizations and "all-or-nothing arguments" without middle ground (438) in favor of a descriptive turn which emphasizes "local inflections, subjunctive moods, and lateral assemblages" (455). Like Saint-Amour, however, I remain uncertain that the benefits of such a descriptivist approach to modernist studies ought to necessarily herald with it a full-fledged embrace of post-theory or "post-critique" (439) across humanistic disciplines.

disability, and what remains contested in entering such difficult dialogues. We conclude overall with the first literary attempt to capture shell shock, the psychosomatic impairment presented to the public in fiction before the medical community had fully understood it. This moment, as we will see, helped braid disability from the first as a permanent fixture of literary modernism.

The chapters that follow detail how modernist literature engenders readers to sustain a serious inquiry into complex expressions of disabled embodiment in historically unprecedented ways. At the same time, none of these nondisabled writers can lay claim to being a paragon of ethical representation. If anything, the following chapters demonstrate what modernist and disability scholars gain in resisting the urge to neatly place such authors as wholly praised or condemned, as either reclaimed through recovery or jettisoned far from view. The novels examined here help move modernist and disability studies beyond the dyadic policing of “good” or “bad” representation; beyond either/or logics that limit that which should instead be kept open and engaged critically. It is not about historical apologies or seeking impunity, but about reckoning with such literary offerings in all their disquieting complexity. There is much to be gained by leaning into discomfort, resisting the impulse so pervasive today within and beyond the academy to disavow all that which offends, causes disagreement, or discomfort. These chapters seek to model how the unseemly or misguided, especially concerning able-bodied engagements with disability, can offer generative critical revaluations and more dynamic historical views of disability within the messy chronicles of history. The powerful, varied meanings of disability did not, of course, emerge in a vacuum. Returning to the past to

trace and dwell with the archive's shortcomings gives fuller insight into the present and can offer us paths forward into better futures as well.

In spanning from disability and modernist studies to nondisabled readers in particular, this study's methodological emphasis on discomfort shares much with Ato Quayson's "aesthetic nervousness," through which able-bodied readers in particular are thrown into a critical confrontation with disability that "short-circuits," as he says, their literary encounter. As a related critical tool, our emphasis on scenes of discomfort in some ways extends Quayson's interest in "holding out the possibility that the nondisabled may ultimately be brought to recognize the sources of the constructedness of the normate and the prejudices that flow from it" (18). "Aesthetic nervousness," he goes on,

...is triggered by the implicit disruption of the frames within which the disabled are located as subjects of symbolic notions of wholeness and normativity. Disability returns the aesthetic domain to an active ethical core that serves to disrupt the surface of representation.... In other words, the representation of disability has an efficaciousness that ultimately transcends the literary domain and refuses to be assimilated into it. (19)

The "uncomfortable closeness" that "Disabling Modernism" deploys at each level (literature, history, embodiment; or: text, context, theory) seeks to perform a crisis of normative constructions of being. As texts of a "disabling modernism," the work we will consider brings the anxious "threat" of disability *to* the able-bodied; symbolically speaking, these chapters hold a hope to "disable" such normative constructions of being. In other words, this study reimagines and strives toward a perpetual crisis of normate embodiment through uncomfortable literary encounters. Though our work shares Quayson's interest in disrupting or positioning the able-bodied into a crisis, this only half captures the critical thrust of this study's emphasis on "discomfort." The chapters that

follow depart from Quayson in asking disability scholars and disabled readers to also dwell at an uncomfortably close distance to what on the surface may appear merely offensive or unproductive. Each of our literary encounters asks that disability scholars (as well as disabled readers) consider what might be gained by engaging with what will be defended as the generative, valuable offerings of such uncomfortable modernist explorations of disability, even as they are presented imperfectly by nondisabled writers.

With discomfort in mind, then, note that the “disabling” of the title acts as both an adjective and verb. As an adjective, “disabling” indicates something about our literary objects of study. Disabling modernism means bringing disability back to its rightfully foregrounded position within this literature, illuminating what modernist scholars have missed when it slips from view into the margin yet again. The term is not intended as a catch-all to describe those innumerable texts which merely “feature” a minor disabled character for what disability scholars identify as *narrative prosthesis*. This key disability studies term, evoked throughout this study but often kept at some distance, refers to the way many narratives “use” disabled bodies or characters as a “crutch” that supports the story, often through symbolic means which obscure or erase the complexities of disability. Such narratives are therefore assumed to necessarily exploit the representation of the disabled body in ways that perpetuate cultural and political disenfranchisement, disempowering people with disabilities by reinforcing damaging, inaccurate, often ableist views of non-normative bodies. Somewhat distinct from narrative prosthesis, *disabling modernism* in its adjectival sense describes an unexplored vein of modernist literature in which disabled embodiment nears or becomes the central concern of such texts—whether thematically, symbolically, contextually, or (most often) some combination of the three.

We could equally rephrase this adjectival sense of the term to describe texts whose modernities cannot be severed from their concerns with disability; whose sense of modernity itself is inextricably bound to a complex disabled embodiment in some constitutive way.

As a verb, however, our disabling of modernism describes a methodological operation, at least to the extent a single byword can capture such a complex process. This applies to the categories of this study's subtitle as well: we will equally disable modernist literature, its history, and its denaturalization of embodiment. The three terms of the subtitle thus structure each chapter, indicated throughout by section breaks. In its simplest sense, "Disabling Modernism" brings the critical tools of disability studies to modernist studies. It attempts to "disable" a scholastic field and a body of literature which continue to overlook what should be a central concern.

Yet, to disable modernism also means to interrogate the historical, political, and literary conditions which have kept disability from view for the greater part of a century, as well as how this past continues to structure the present. Though disability cannot be used analogically in a one-to-one manner—as being "like" race, for example—part of the intersectional methodological work of "Disabling Modernism" unmask and makes visible how the myriad concepts of able-bodiedness are integral to any definition of disability. "When we consider two or more aspects of identity together," as Elizabeth Wheeler helps remind, "problems and solutions swim into view that were previously out of sight" (10). The goal here, as we have said, is not to flip the dis/ability binary, but to level it into a shared spectrum of embodiment. This remains a key first step in dismantling the power imbalance that this divide reinforces.

To understand disability, one must concurrently understand the ways ability tries to define, instantiate, and often disenfranchise its other. Like all ideologies, ableism operates as a social and political process of imbalanced power relations that people reinforce both wittingly and unwittingly. Yet, to be able-bodied, it is important to remember, does not inherently equate to being *ableist*, nor should falling prey at times to the ableist trappings which overwhelm our culture justify condemning or rejecting such objects of study as necessarily worthless. This study in fact looks especially *at* able-bodied writers engaging, often uncomfortably, with literary disability in ways that go beyond identifying the impoverishments of ableism. It is, functionally, a recovery of a literary countertradition we will shorthand as a “disabling modernism.” While fields like critical race studies have recently turned to deconstructing whiteness as a necessary concept to bring into its discussions, a similar need, this study assumes, exists in disallowing the nondisabled to remain “invisible,” detached, or to be separated from interrogations of human embodiment, whether normative or non-normative. After all, no historical work of recovery such as that to which “Disabling Modernism” commits can be “an impossibly virtuous affair” (Sorenson 197). As McCullers, Lewis, Toomer, and West will make plain in their own ways, even occasionally falling into the historical hegemony of ableism does not ensure that able-bodied engagements with disability have little to nothing to offer disability studies. Quite the contrary, this study will insist, is often true.

Like any work of scholarship, this too enters the critical conversation *in medias res* to build on what is exigent. A small handful of scholars over the last few years have begun remediating the neglected task of disabling modernism. This study draws on and expands this small body of work, even as its introduction announces its contribution, and

as its chapters sail outward to chart new waters.¹⁵ Michael Davidson's *Invalid Modernism: Disability and the Missing Body of the Aesthetic* (Oxford, 2019) recently became the newest voice to be added to the conversation. Unlike what follows, Davidson's keen work stands primarily as a theorization within the realm of literary aesthetics, thinking critically about how modernist art engaged with idealized and disparaged bodies, ones that take on meaning through beautiful and grotesque forms that reinforce hegemonic norms. The interplay between aesthetic and individual autonomy—the dependence of both on concepts of whole or fragmented forms that confirm or deviate from aesthetic norms—is central to Davidson, as are his considerations of affect, biofuturity, and what he calls “negative intersectionality.” Within the realm of aesthetics, *Invalid Modernism* showed that modernist art mediates how “normative identity is produced through bodies deemed invalid according to some standard of physical and cognitive purity” (8).

Important to note, though, is that, while “Disabling Modernism” shares some of Davidson's investment in “the degree to which disability interrupts a certain aesthetic modality,” the aims of this study rest outside the literary formalism of aesthetic theory.

¹⁵ The so-called “disability turn” in modernist studies, however local, began in earnest in many ways with the *Journal of Modern Literature*'s special issue on “Disability and Generative Form” (2014), edited by Janet Lyon. Maren Tova Linett likewise edited a special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* in 2019 on “Crippling Modernism.” Though I cite only my immediate critical interlocutors who address modernist disability explicitly, I would be remiss not to mention here a few of the pivotal pieces of scholarship that considerably inform the pages that follow. Even without an explicit turn to disability, much of the work to which this study is indebted has focused on expanding historical and theoretical views of embodiment within modernism. Chronologically, these include: William Greenslade's *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel: 1880-1940* (Cambridge, 1994); Tim Armstrong's *Modernism, Technology, and the Body* (Cambridge, 1998); Donald Childs's *Modernism and Eugenics: Woolf, Eliot, Yeats, and the Culture of Degeneration* (Cambridge, 2001); Hal Foster's *Prosthetic Gods* (MIT, 2004); Jessica Burstein's *Cold Modernism: Literature, Fashion, Art* (Penn State, 2012); Paul Peppis's *Sciences of Modernism: Ethnography, Sexology, and Psychology* (Cambridge, 2013); Trevor Dodman's *Shell Shock, Memory, and the Novel in the Wake of World War I* (Cambridge, 2015); and Andrew Gaedtke's *Modernism and the Machinery of Madness* (Cambridge 2017), among others.

“Disabling Modernism” pivots its focus away from formalist aesthetic theory to locate the missing disabled bodies of modernist histories, as well as their offerings to contemporary theorizations of embodiment. Our concerns rest, in other words, as much beyond the modernist novel as an autonomous literary artifact as within it. Rather than focusing on the role “invalid bodies” play within modernism’s claim to aesthetic autonomy, “Disabling Modernism” links its literary instances as integral to and often historically unprecedented within public discourses of disability that stretch far beyond the aesthetic realm to include the historical and theoretical. While each chapter offers extensive close readings of literary texts, their individual arguments do not concern themselves with aesthetic ends, nor with defining and outlining the formalist characteristics of modernist literary practice as it deviates from such norms.

Methodologically, “Disabling Modernism” can be viewed in spirit as a partial response to Quayson’s *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* (Columbia, 2007). As a postcolonial scholar, however, Quayson has little to say about modernism (though he does give an enviable reading of Beckett). Nor does *Aesthetic Nervousness*, much like *Invalid Modernism*, share this study’s extensive investment in historicism by providing what I am calling “uncomfortably close” readings of modernist histories and theory as concomitant to its literature. In asking and theorizing what able-bodied modernists could possibly bring to disability studies, “Disabling Modernism” also takes much in spirit from the audacious methodology of Deaf studies scholar Rebecca Sanchez, whose recent work showed how we could brilliantly “deafen” modernist poetry *without* any marks of literal deafness. Sanchez in some ways has critically expanded Lennard Davis’s influential suggestion that the act of reading itself is, in many ways, a

“deafened modality or moment” (*Enforcing* 4). What happens, this study wonders, if we move from verse to prose to bring a similar “deafening”—reimagined here as a disabling—to modernist fiction written, specifically, by nondisabled writers? What might the anxiety or trepidation of some (myself included) over imagining such a project reveal about the need to do just this? Sanchez’s “Deaf insight or Deaf epistemologies,” as she calls them, will hold particular importance in our reading of McCullers.

In many ways, though, Sanchez’s influence can be sensed more fully (albeit implicitly) in the remaining chapters as they seek to theorize what affordances, if any, nondisabled writers and readers might bring to critical disability studies, and vice versa. In thinking about the murky waters of Deaf and disability studies “without” deafness or disability, Sanchez’s *Deafening Modernism: Embodied Language and Visual Poetics in American Literature* (NYU, 2015) opened doors that many in these fields likely viewed as not just undesirable, but unthinkable; such doors would have stayed shut without her, and her work has strengthened modernist, disability, and Deaf studies. While disability never leaves our view in what follows, nor does the crucial disquieting fact that none of our authors experienced the disabilities about which they wrote.

Outside of verse and inside the realm of prose narrative where we will overwhelmingly stay, at least half, if not all, of these chapters can be read as critical dialogues, however latent, with the important foundation Maren Tova Linett has begun laying in bringing disability to modernist studies, both with *Bodies of Modernism: Physical Disability in Transatlantic Modernist Literature* (U. Michigan, 2017) and *Literary Bioethics: Animality, Disability, and the Human* (NYU, 2021). In identifying and critiquing how modernism “used physical disabilities as a means to question ideas”

bearing little resemblance to the actual lives of people with disabilities, Linett's *Bodies of Modernism* "demonstrates modernism's multifaceted dependence—for its dramatic power as well as its self-presentation as a break from past forms—on metaphoric uses of disabled bodies" (3, emphasis added). In short, *Bodies of Modernism* surveyed the movement's extensive dependence, according to Linett, on what is functionally narrative prosthesis, finding ample room for a sustained critique of modernism's many abuses of literary disability. While "Disabling Modernism" shares Linett's focus on interrogating the vast symbolic or aesthetic meanings disability undeniably holds in modernist fiction, it moves beyond the (important) identification of bad metaphors and bad faith literary engagements with disability. These shifts in argumentation, methodology, and objects of study separate this study's critical work within modernist fiction from both Linett and Davidson. "Disabling Modernism" seeks to couple modernism's dynamic, aesthetic literary meanings with its theoretical and historical counterparts, suggesting in the process that an historically unprecedented and critically generative countertradition exists that is worth reconsidering. Modernism, like perhaps any body of literature, does indeed "use" disability in figurative ways. But it also dwells with key questions that *also* present a valuable offering to disability studies, not "as a means to question" something always beyond or other than disability, but rather within embodiment itself. Though its argument and methodology are often at odds with Linett's, "Disabling Modernism" owes the form of its commitment to her perspicacious, valuable critical offerings.

When I began this study, only two books—both published within three short years prior—had taken disability and modernism as their theoretical and analytical object of inquiry. Since then, one more has followed. The work has begun, but the lacuna is far

from filled. Given that disability is the largest minority category in the world and given the unspoken weight we will see that it holds in modernism in particular, we ought to be suspicious of this fact when considering the volumes that have been written, for example, on race, gender, and sexuality in modernist studies. This is not to disparage such valuable work. But it is our call for pause, reflection, and action.

Chapter Overview

Beginning with McCullers, Chapter II traces a Deaf-oriented rhetoric within *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, examining the consequences of reading and understanding deafness metaphorically, both on and beyond the fictive page. It situates deafness within a competing matrix of eugenic and oralist forces during the modernist period of American cultural history and makes the case for why McCullers and *The Heart* deserve to be critically reconsidered by both Deaf and literary disability studies. Both ask these fields to dwell in uncertainty, anxiety, and even ambivalence by offering a perspective that raises unsettling questions about who may engage with Deaf and disability studies and who may not.

Though Deaf and disability studies remain separate entities, this chapter follows the spirit of Susan Burch and Alison Kafer in trying to highlight moments of generative intersection where “scholars in one field have drawn on insights from the other” (Burch and Kafer xvii). As such, I deploy scholars of both fields to mutually illuminate one another and help situate my claims. The chapter historicizes the arrival of deaf institutions in the United States, sketching how that story intersects with a nationalist politics which sought to erase deafness from public view. Building on the theoretical and

historical Deaf studies work of Douglas Baynton, Burch, Sanchez, and others, it situates protagonist John Singer's litany of communicative skills as indicative of this larger Deaf history in America, particularly as movements like oralism and eugenics produced a considerable self-estrangement for deaf individuals. The chapter turns then to a reading of *The Heart* which argues that Singer's estrangement from his own embodiment results from an internalization of his disabled otherness as it emerges out of the other characters' symbolic treatment and enforcement of his silence. We conclude with what I call the "return of the real" in *The Heart*, wherein the ineradicable embodiment of deafness forcefully re-emerges through experiential and affective pain as a bodily revolt. In determining the logics of erasure which lead to Singer's suicide, Chapter II reflects on McCullers's critical reminder that the body can never be entirely abstracted away, and how such metaphorical readings enable remarkable violence against deaf individuals. McCullers ultimately shows in slow motion the violence perpetuated against the Deaf when they are replaced by literary parables, and when an ableist society seeks to silence the full range of deaf expression.

Moving across the Atlantic, Chapter III gives a four-decade view of Wyndham Lewis that begins before the war and concludes in the 1950s when he went blind. This chapter argues that *Blast* (1914-1915) and *Snooty Baronet* (1932) detail how the disabled male body was rhetorically weaponized in contradictory ways within the British crisis of masculinity, being largely rejected before the war as impotent, but ultimately redeployed and for some even championed through the prosthesis in the war's violent wake. Lewis exposes, in its complexity and discomfort, how the historical grouping of masculinity, impotence, virility, and prostheses concomitantly rewrote one another in early century

Britain. For all his shortcomings, Lewis grants valuable insight into two historical developments within the crisis of masculinity, each intersecting with disability and building on one another throughout the chapter. First, he helps us better recognize how the period's emasculating rhetoric of impotence became tethered to a heteromascularity viewed as in sharp decline to the point of national "degeneration" in the opening decades of the century, the concern of the first half of Chapter III. Second, he helps us understand how this masculine crisis could then expand, paradoxically, to incorporate the prosthesis as a gendered symbol of strength and vigor rather than weakness or a deficit for returning British soldiers. When combining these as a literary counter-history, Lewis helps witness an interwar rewriting of disabled masculinity not as invalid but to be reclaimed as dynamic and denaturalizable. *Blast* and *Snooty Baronet*, in other words, lend a microcosmic view of the battlefield over which heteromascularity was partially fought during and after the war. Lewis helps us, finally, not only expand the politics of British masculinity under rapid revision; he also gives unexpected insight into the under-recognized political role disability played in this history, further illuminating the key invisible presence disability maintains in both modernism and its scholarship.

As exciting recent feminist work like that of Erin Carlston has shown, Lewis's gender politics at their most radical expose a thinker struggling to get outside of the typical binary mode historically available to him and into some future in which masculinity in particular could be denaturalized and pluralized. In what presumably might call for a double take for those only distantly familiar with Lewis, Carlston goes so far as to approximate his gender politics in the interwar period to the "radical anti-essentialism of third-wave feminism" ("Women, Masculinity" 126). Chapter III adds

disability to Carlston's claim that by the later portion of his career Lewis "is much less interested in salvaging masculinity than in interrogating and reworking the categories of masculine and feminine altogether" ("Acting the Man" 774). Here we retrace Lewis's progression to the interwar period and beyond by reconsidering the well-known British crisis of masculinity largely through Lewis's vantage. In doing so the chapter identifies the key under-recognized role disability rhetoric played in this heteromasculine crisis, first through a cultural obsession with impotence and degeneration primarily before the war, and then through the language of prosthetic veteran rehabilitation after it.

Moving back to the US in the roaring twenties—largely to rural Georgia—Chapter IV identifies the racialized social and symbolic roles visuality plays in Toomer's *Cane*, arguing that it explores its complex sense of blackness and Black heritage in part through the figure of blindness. *Cane* indexes myriad literary sites which visualize a cultural memory marked by beauty and strength, but also terror and trauma. In exploring Black blindness, *Cane* does much more than fall into the familiar trappings of "ocularcentrism" which conflate seeing with knowing. It instead foregrounds racial performativity, making the distinction between the spectator and the spectacle hypervisible, reorienting some of the performative work Lewis captures in the previous chapter. As with McCullers and Lewis, the spectatorial distinction Toomer paints admittedly finds its rhetorical power in walking the dangerous path between a productive use and a violent abuse of representational disabilities. One can feel such figurative power in the swing between these poles.

Cane invests itself in deconstructing racial spectacle, coming to a dramatic head in the final section, "Kabnis," in which the presence of the blind and seemingly deaf old

Father John not only estranges spectators from each routine action in the *mise-en-scène*. He ultimately overpowers the stage and arguably the entire hybrid text, driving characters and narratives to their conclusive endpoints. One could unequivocally charge *Cane* with exploiting the image of blindness for its rich symbolic resonance, particularly as a traditional literary trope linked to mystical prophets and the double entendre of their “vision.” Father John’s blindness promises to be an oracular conduit through which all will be revealed, and spectators within and beyond the drama await a bestowal of its significance. But revelation never comes. Toomer, crucially, refuses this gesture. While he repeatedly casts the lure of metaphorical disabilities, his engagement with the politics of racial visibility proves far more complex when placed under an uncomfortably close reading seeking to disable modernism.

Each section of Chapter IV oscillates between the discursive and material implications of blindness and blackness, both in *Cane* and its contexts. While the first section traces the interwoven histories of literary blindness, religion, and oppression as they contribute to blindness’ *symbolic* apparatus, the second section then recovers the *materiality* of eugenics, miscegenation, and what I call fear of the “genetic other.” These first two sections build toward the concluding reading of *Cane* by detailing how Toomer historicizes and mobilizes an oracular vision linked in the text to various affinities and disavowals of blackness. This final section asks us to re-view the visibility of *Cane*’s many portraits to recover their roots and histories, their tokens of character and heritage. Though the focus remains predominantly on the experimental drama “Kabnis,” I also invoke *Cane*’s prior two parts as intertextual dialogues that Toomer laces throughout his hybrid text. The gaze of racial visibility lurks behind perhaps every line, a trope whose

politics exceeds its form. This racial visibility most powerfully and directly bursts forth in “Kabnis,” compelling a more sustained and uncomfortably close reading than its precedent sections. As *Cane* articulates, an uncomfortable and productive engagement with blindness and race necessitates a keen awareness of how tropes cannot be neatly placed along a simplistic ethical or unethical axis. Toomer instead ensnares us within a literary net which ultimately brings blindness together with miscegenation, articulating in eugenic thought the fear of the genetic other, and speaking to the terrors of America’s racist history.

Our final chapter turns to Rebecca West to argue that *The Return of the Soldier* exposes three key problems disability studies continues to struggle with, and at times turn from its view. The first problem questions how to determine a viable ethics of care concerning people with disabilities, especially if nondisabled caregivers, most often women, advocate for “curing” the disabled loved ones they view as being unable to make that decision for themselves. West’s ironic novella in many ways plays out the current and ongoing tension, in this regard, between disability scholars (most of whom advocate for the inviolable rights and sanctity of all disabled bodies) and familial caregivers (many of whom are able-bodied mothers or wives with competing demands). How do we square an ethics of care, which continues to be overwhelmingly gendered feminine in theory and praxis, with a seemingly related impulse to “cure” or “overcome,” particularly when regarding the non-congenital disabilities of loved ones?

The second problem reconsiders the status of traumas like shell shock within disability studies, including the theoretical and aesthetic complications they pose as literary representations. *The Return* reveals what has remained at stake for a century

when the able-bodied—either at the level of character, narrator, author, or that of many readers—seek to understand and empathize with those with disabilities, demonstrating in the process the risks of an indiscriminate identification born through a desire to know, transgress, or “transcend” bodily difference in fiction. The status and role of the able-bodied in relation to disability, whether as ally or constitutive “other,” remains entrenched in such uncertainty and contention.

The third and final problem poses questions over how disability studies can best approach shell shock on its own terms as an invisible or psychosomatic disability without bringing with it a host of issues from trauma studies. Shell shock manifests both physically and psychologically, often confusing the so-called inside with the outside of the body. Seeking to approach and confront shell shock from the perspective of disability equally necessitates attending to a related methodological lack: how does one accomplish such a task without capitulating to much of trauma theory, something which—as the last section shows—many in disability studies have resisted for foundational reasons, and which many continue to describe as an irreconcilable academic opposite? Despite the continued importance of resisting most trauma studies approaches when considering disability, shell shock brings the two fields uncomfortably close in its formidable resistance to representation, even at times suggesting the limits of linguistic expression entirely.

We could say that while the first three chapters of this study expose and explore scenes of literary, historical, and theoretical discomfort for both the able-bodied and people with disabilities in their comingling, this final chapter turns the discomfort of art’s cracked mirror back onto the fields of disability and modernist studies. How to materially

navigate or analyze a disability that perpetually risks abstracting itself away from the body as arguably unspeakable, unknowable, unrepresentable? What would doing so from within disability studies look like? The concluding section of Chapter V thus theorizes the dividing lines that often displace traumas like shell shock into the periphery of disability studies in unsustainable, unhelpful ways, and reflects on our continued need for more capacious understandings of embodiment. This final meditation, expanded into the coda as well, concludes by significantly opening up, rather than closing down, the unfinished, if at times uncomfortable, project of disabling modernism, thinking further about the stakes of determining who may or may not engage with modernist and disability studies.

CHAPTER II

DEAFNESS, ESTRANGEMENT, AND THE RETURN OF THE REAL:

CARSON MCCULLERS

A portion of this chapter was previously published. See Steele, Alexander. "Estrangement and the Consequences of Metaphorical Deafness: Reconsidering *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*." *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2021, pp. 57-73.

"Who can reach the deaf,
Who can speak for the dumb?"
— W. H. Auden, "September 1, 1939"

In the outline of her developing first novel *The Mute*, twenty-one-year-old Carson McCullers explained to her Houghton Mifflin editor: "All the parts dealing directly with Singer are written in the simple style of a parable" (*Carson* 487). Though the title changed at publication two years later in 1940 to *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, the parabolic style of John Singer, its deaf protagonist, remained largely untouched. "On the whole," McCullers continued, "the interrelations between the people of this book can be described as being like the spokes of a wheel—with Singer representing the center point. This situation, with its attendant irony, expresses the most important theme of the book" (*Carson* 504). Countless readers have aimed to account for the symbolic surplus surrounding the "parable" of Singer, and for obvious reasons. McCullers's novel, in classic literary fashion, revels in the metaphoric excesses of its "deaf-mute" protagonist (*The Heart* 23). To many, *The Heart* presents an endless series of signs and fixes them directly onto Singer's overdetermined deafness. He has been a failed Christ figure, a

stand-in for the silence of God, and a confessional priest for a lost American South.¹⁶ Taken from a secular vantage, the pale eyes of Singer's gaze have been understood as the Sartrean "self-look," through which "the characters attempt to navigate the hopelessness of existentialism" (Lenviel 119). Some see him incredibly as "reflecting on a small scale the alienated masses' identification with Fascist leaders" (Brinkmeyer 237). Others retort that the reality effect of Singer rests precisely in that "he does not make a good political abstraction" (Kaiser 298). Like the figure in Henry James's "Carpet," scholars have fixated, when examining this neglected modernist text, on solving the enigmatic "parable" of Singer and his deafness in relation to the novel of which they comprise, in McCullers's words, "the center point." Like the disciples to whom Christ tells parables because only they can understand them, readers and characters alike believe only they can answer for the "mystery" of John Singer.

Yet as a delightful irony atop further ironies, in the eighty years since its publication, none has been able to totalize, to fully account for, the stylistic parable McCullers maintained with her deaf protagonist which launched her overnight into literary stardom. "The fundamental idea of the book," her outline concludes, "is ironic—but the reader is not left with a sense of futility" (*Carson* 509). McCullers flashes a red-herring in the novel's most basic low-hanging ironic conceit: four isolated, misunderstood, and lost individuals in a small southern mill-town believe they find solace during the Depression in vocalizing the struggles of their unconcealed "real" selves to

¹⁶ To address these readings briefly and respectively: Jan Whitt argues "Singer, a deaf mute, becomes a paralyzed Christ figure, so restricted by the expectations of others that he is fictionalized by them" (26); Katalin G. Kállay asks: "When the world falls mute around us, are we more likely to perceive a sudden absence or a sudden presence? Is the absence of sound the same as the presence of silence?" (131); and Ihab Hassan maintains that "To [Singer] flock all who would unburden themselves: their desperation requires no fuller response than a mute can offer, and their Protestant confessions need only a deaf confessor" (213).

Singer. The levels of irony quickly scaffold upward. First, from the obvious fact that those who seek out Singer—tomboy teen Mick Kelly, racially disillusioned Doctor Copeland, Marxist agitator Jake Blount, and café proprietor Biff Brannon—feel they can only fully express themselves to a deaf middle-aged man whom they believe cannot communicate in return.¹⁷ The unexpected builds upon itself when readers realize that Singer shares the same communal sense of loneliness and frustration over expressing his “true” self as his hearing counterparts. If the fundamental idea is ironic, as McCullers claims, things reach a breaking point near the conclusion when Singer, whom the other characters have idealized in their own respective images as well-adjusted and self-possessed, shockingly brings out “a pistol from his pocket and put[s] a bullet in his chest” (*The Heart* 326).

This chapter traces and argues for a Deaf-oriented rhetoric within *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, examining the consequences of reading and understanding deafness metaphorically, both on and beyond the fictive page. *The Heart* performs an uncomfortably close sketch of these consequences, culminating in Singer’s suicide. I situate deafness within a competing matrix of eugenic and oralist forces during the modernist period of American cultural history. Rather than being cast as “deaf and dumb” as was commonplace during the Depression, Singer rises to unimaginable heights in the minds of others, both inside and outside the text. While much care needs to be given to the lived experience of deafness as an experiential fact of the world, one cannot do so by ignoring the metaphorical effects packed on top of its material reality. Pushing against the (sometimes fatal) consequences of metaphorizing deafness cannot mean ignoring its

¹⁷ The exception to this is Biff, who knows Singer can read lips and communicate in writing if he wants, a fact which the other characters (and most scholars) either suspend or of which they seem unaware.

subjectively felt effects, nor the power of symbolic signification. As Susan Burch has argued: “The real *and* symbolic value of sign language remains at the crux of Deaf people’s identity” (*Signs* 45, emphasis added). Purely discursive or ideological understandings of deafness obscure its embodied reality. Such understandings function instead as symbolic substitutions which “speak for” deafness, giving it a metaphorically charged presence beyond what many hearing individuals assume to be a mere absence, a silent void.

Yet to claim a model of literary deafness, as with disability, entirely detached from discourse too easily leads back to the extensive failings of the medical institution’s impairment model which ignores constructionism.¹⁸ In the case of Singer, this means approaching him through what Tobin Siebers has called a “complex embodiment” both biological *and* constructed, attending to his estrangement from community and eventually himself as a consequence of that community’s unwillingness to connect meaningfully with its only deaf citizen from within a Deaf context (*Disability Theory* 25). Even when keeping Singer’s embodied deafness in the foreground, *The Heart* makes real the inability to detangle the material reality of deafness from the “parables” of its discursive excesses. Embodiment conjoins the two. The communal violence done to Singer comes first and foremost from the urges of his hearing visitors to place his deafness within a purely symbolic register, and then to replace it with an endless series of metaphorical

¹⁸ Most disability studies scholars, particularly in America, identify themselves as operating within the social model of disability, in which constructionism plays a central role—an approach largely in opposition to the medical model, which views impairment as individual “problems” to be “overcome.” As Tom Shakespeare glosses, the social model comes with benefits (it generates a clear progressive politics), but also weaknesses (it tends to neglect “impairment as an important aspect of many disabled people’s lives” [217]). Unlike other identity categories like race, gender, or sexuality, however, disability means not only “discrimination [but] intrinsic limitations” that cannot be simply critiqued away as merely a social construction (Shakespeare 220).

substitutions. Yet at a material level, these forces understand Singer's deafness only as a medical impairment, disavowing his affective estrangement from a normative hearing society which fails to understand even basically what it is to be deaf.

The Heart more broadly deserves to be critically reconsidered by both Deaf and literary disability studies because it moves into the valuable realms of discomfort and unease. It asks the fields to dwell in uncertainty, anxiety, and even ambivalence by offering a neglected perspective, one that raises unsettling questions about who may engage with Deaf and disability studies and who may not. The curious case of McCullers—who was disabled, but not deaf, and interested in metaphorical deafness, but to deconstruct it—makes it difficult to answer to what extent she appropriates deafness. But she poses considerable and pressing questions that need to be faced, not effaced. It is not about damning but dwelling—if just for a moment—in indeterminacy, reexamining calcified assumptions too often taken for granted. By no account does McCullers represent a paragon of ethical Deaf representation. This is beside the point. For all of *The Heart's* failings, it nonetheless offers a nuanced, candid, and—most importantly—an *uncomfortable* exploration of literary deafness that was unheard of in the late-1930s.

McCullers shows what both Deaf and disability studies gain by leaning into discomfort, into the uneasy and the gray: she ethically refuses to grant hearing readers full access to a deaf embodiment which she cannot claim herself, and she devastatingly deconstructs the consequences of treating deafness metaphorically. These cannot be denied wholesale because of her shortcomings, even those occasionally of ableism. In the same sense, scholars need to resist the urge to neatly “place” a modernist author like McCullers as wholly praised or condemned, as either reclaimed through recovery or

jettisoned far from view. Reconsidering uncomfortable texts like *The Heart* helps move both fields beyond the dyadic policing of “good” or “bad” representation; beyond either/or logics that limit that which should instead be kept open and engaged critically. It is not about historical apologies or seeking impunity, but about reckoning with such literary offerings in all their disquieting complexity. Though Deaf and disability studies remain separate entities, this chapter follows the spirit of Burch and Alison Kafer in trying to highlight moments of generative intersection where “scholars in one field have drawn on insights from the other” (Burch and Kafer xvii). As Brenda Jo Brueggemann has written of the “tango” between the two fields, what matters most in this exchange is not “building binaries, delineating differences, or even articulating boundaries but more about the subtle bodily shifts each makes as, in the dance, first one leads and then the other” (248). As such, I deploy scholars of both fields in what follows to mutually illuminate one another and help situate my claims.

At its core this chapter extends Deaf scholar Rebecca Sanchez’s “deafening modernism,” not to formulate a particular modernist aesthetic in McCullers, but to reconsider a modernist novel from which deafness might be approached untraditionally. For Sanchez, this has meant bringing “a Deaf epistemology” to a body of largely modernist poetry with “no obvious or literal connection to deafness” (3); for me, it means uncomfortably approaching deafness in McCullers when the author herself did not experience a hearing impairment. McCullers, in this sense, offers a prime example of Deaf scholar Christopher Krentz’s “hearing line” in which a hearing author explores literary deafness in ways that have “shape[d] the meaning of deafness [and] deaf people” (428). I stake a claim for including McCullers in the disabled community as well as more

generatively in Deaf and disability studies. Looking to her autobiography, I detail her self-awareness of disability as a critical modality through which she not only staged much of her writing, but also considered an important marker of her identity. After warning of the historical misuses of over-emphasizing her disabilities in interpretations of her art, I consider the sticky ethics of McCullers's commitment to understanding and exploring deafness, a disability which she herself never had. This first section concludes with a reflection on delimiting appropriation and determining the role of good faith in disabling modernism.

Section two turns to the arrival of deaf institutions in the United States, sketching how that story intersects with a nationalist politics which sought to erase deafness from public view. Building on the theoretical and historical Deaf studies work of Douglas Baynton, Burch, Sanchez, and others, it situates John Singer's litany of communicative skills as indicative of this larger deaf history in America, particularly as movements like oralism and eugenics produced a considerable self-estrangement for deaf individuals. This section bookends by identifying how McCullers came to link this deaf history to the rise of fascism before the Second World War by surveying these political forces within her novel.

These opening sections provide the framing and theoretical orientation for the more intimate critical analysis of *The Heart* in the second half of the chapter. This final section builds an understanding of Singer's gradual estrangement from his community and then from himself. It does so by detailing McCullers's deconstruction of the consequences of understanding deafness only metaphorically. I argue here that Singer's estrangement from his own embodiment results from an internalization of his disabled

otherness as it emerges out of the other characters' symbolic treatment and enforcement of his silence. The section then demonstrates what I call the "return of the real" in *The Heart*, wherein the ineradicable embodiment of deafness forcefully re-emerges through experiential and affective pain as a bodily revolt. In determining the logics of erasure which lead to Singer's suicide, it concludes by reflecting on McCullers's critical reminder that the body can never be entirely abstracted away, and how such metaphorical readings enable remarkable violence against deaf individuals. McCullers ultimately shows in slow motion the violence perpetuated against the Deaf when they are replaced by literary parables, and when an ableist society seeks to silence the full range of deaf expression.

The Disabled Hunter

Though the term did not yet exist in her time, Carson McCullers was a part of the disabled community. From a young age until her early death, hardly a year of her life passed without a major illness, disorder, operation, or recovery. She suffered from repeated attacks of anemia and pleurisy, and an improperly diagnosed case of rheumatic fever as a child set the stage for her many disabilities later in life (Carr, *Understanding* 9). As she describes in her autobiography, unpublished at the time of her death: "Late that summer I developed a low-grade fever, and the [doctor] suspected Tuberculosis, so I was kept at home. It turned out to be a childhood attack of Rheumatic fever, but was never properly diagnosed" (*Illumination* 17). She adds in her understated style: "too much running around put a strain on my heart so that it caused embolisms" (*Illumination* 44).

At only twenty-four years old, McCullers suffered her first stroke, affecting her eyesight (McDowell 25). As she began composing *The Heart*, a respiratory infection kept her bedridden throughout the winter. While drafting, McCullers wrote with silent trepidation about “the sinister illness that haunted my life all during my youth.... I live[] in a constant fear of strokes” (*Illumination* 32). Before her thirtieth birthday, her fears came true as another stroke partially paralyzed the left half of her body, resulting in the years that followed in her needing a wheelchair for mobility. She recounted this incident with terrifying precision:

[W]hile there, alone in the house, this final stroke happened. I was just going to the bathroom when I fell on the floor. At first it seemed to me that the left side of my body was dead. I could feel the skin clammy and cold with my right hand. I screamed, but no one answered, no one was there. I lay on the floor, helpless, from about eight in the evening all through the night until dawn, when finally my screams were heard. (*Illumination* 43)

Following this incident in Paris, the muscles in her leg, arm, hand, and wrist eventually atrophied, leading to a series of operations to replace her fractured hip and elbow. Four heart operations sought unsuccessfully to offer her a permanent end to the strokes. Beyond these illnesses, McCullers also had a mastectomy, and temporarily went blind in one eye: “[O]ne day I noticed that my lateral vision was affected. Immediately I sensed what it was, a second of those terrifying strokes.... [The doctors] said it was a very peculiar case, because they never heard of a person having strokes at my age. The vision was never restored” (*Illumination* 40-43). Near the end of her life she had plans to amputate her atrophied left leg: “The doctors have decided that my crippled leg must be amputated.... They are going to chop off the leg so I can have more mobility and can get from the bed to the wheel-chair more easily” (*Illumination* 38-39). As she neared her

premature death, McCullers began dictating to her aides a series of reflections on fellow artists who also had physical disabilities. She could no longer write because of her atrophied hand and wrist. She planned to conclude her autobiography, the posthumous *Illumination and Night Glare*, with these short reflections, including one on Sarah Bernhardt, Cole Porter, and James Joyce. She outlined her intention to write another on Helen Keller but could not complete it in time. A final stroke left her in a forty-seven-day coma, and McCullers died on 29 September 1967. She was fifty years old.

Many scholars fixate on McCullers's disabilities, as with Singer's, when explaining how her significance and work have been received.¹⁹ Tennessee Williams, a long-time close friend of McCullers, recognized this from the start. His foreword to Virginia Carr's definitive biography of McCullers, 1975's *The Lonely Hunter*, describes hesitating to speak with Carr after reading an early scholarly book "which had placed its main emphasis on the physical illnesses which had beset her." He claimed these made "of their circumstance a base for attack on her stature as an artist" (xi). Rather than a base for attack, her disabilities are usually placed in a commonplace able-bodied symbolic register that views her "endurance" as somehow inspiring and brave, shot through with a patronizing pity all too familiar to those within the disabled and Deaf communities. Margaret McDowell, for example, writes: "The loss to literature was great when she became ill, yet her twenty years of debilitating suffering do not diminish, but make more remarkable, her total achievement" (9). McCullers undeniably suffered because of the pains of her body. Yet the objectionable issue arises when attempting to cross the great theoretical divide between the inside and outside of the text, transposing the "grotesque,

¹⁹ See Benjamin Saxton (104) and Melissa Free (429), among others.

the freakish, [and] the incongruous” elements of her body of fiction directly onto her material body (Hassan 207). Doing so only reiterates on a smaller scale the same symbolic logic which perpetually replaces lived embodiment with a fictive set of signifieds.

A heap of scholars dedicated to understanding the “freaks” of McCullers’s fiction have done so by conflating them with her actual disabilities, as though into each character she transparently wrote only herself. To make matters worse, this substitution usually goes a step further by emphasizing the mind’s supposed gains in response to the body’s perceived lacks: “Adolescents and freaks are her rueful heroes...but in both[,] physical incompleteness is the source of a qualitative, a spiritual difference” (Hassan 208). For many, McCullers shared with her literary creations “a fear of the freakish (self) and a fear of the social structures created to suppress and deny it” (Downey 366). She therefore portrayed her characters as “terrorised simultaneously by their own abnormality and by the looming social threat of judgement and ostracism, creating an inescapable atmosphere” (Downey 366). If this atmosphere supposedly cannot be escaped within her fiction, it seems most cannot avoid it in describing McCullers’s life either. Able-bodied unease over her “abnormal” disabilities and those of many of her literary creations produces, for some, the atmospheric “terror” of her work. Throughout her career McCullers variously fictionalized deafness, dwarfism, gigantism, cripples, and insanity with remarkable candor. The terror some find in her frank portraits of disability comes from without, from a fascinated able-bodied gaze “inward.” The same cannot be said with certainty in the other direction.

Placing McCullers within a disabled context does not come without concerns. At five-foot-nine, she of course cannot be claimed as either a dwarf or a giant. Though two of her strokes severely affected her eyesight, she never legally went blind. Her work instead tends to think about blindness, like so many other writers and thinkers, metaphorically as epistemological knowledge “in ways that are dislodged from the subjective experience of disability” (Russell 64). And while a cripple herself, none of her main characters shared her disability.²⁰ Most important, her hearing always remained intact. So how can she rightfully write: “I’ve never known [a deaf person], but I know Mr. Singer”? (Carr, *Understanding* 16). She comes so close to appropriation at times as to be nearly inexcusable at first gloss: “I become the characters I write about. I am so immersed in them that their motives are my own.... [W]hen I write about a deaf mute, I become dumb during the time of the story” (McCullers, “Flowering” 163). For McCullers’s generation, *dumb*, like *queer*, carried in its common use a literal and a latent pejorative meaning, making it difficult to know with certainty which she meant. Queer herself, McCullers was undoubtedly aware of queerness’ productive conceptual capacity for ambiguity, for estranging or defamiliarizing us from the world. Inherited from the Germanic, *dumb* first emerged (c.1000 CE) as the familiar deafness adjective: to be without the faculty of speech.²¹ But within two centuries it took on its “modern” connotation of unintelligence: “Applied to the lower animals (and, by extension,

²⁰ Though a minor character, Willie (Doctor Copeland’s son) in *The Heart* does become tragically crippled by the Georgia prison institution following a work-gang debacle. Remarkably, Copeland expresses his disbelief at his son’s crippling through the figure of deafness, telling his daughter Portia: “I am deaf... I cannot understand” (254-55).

²¹ From the *OED*: “C1000 West Saxon Gospels: Matt. (Corpus Cambr.) ix. 32 Hig brohton hym dumbne man [Rushw. G. monnu dumb and deaf]” (“Dumb”).

inanimate nature) as naturally incapable of articulate speech” (“dumb”).²² McCullers gets uncomfortably close to appropriation in claiming she became “dumb” while writing Singer’s character. Yet as I argue below, her engagement with deafness in *The Heart* offers at least two critically worthwhile avenues to explore, including delimiting appropriation and determining the role of good faith within literary deafness and disability. McCullers ultimately redeems her historical oversteps through her careful negotiation between these two hazardous paths.

First, does McCullers inexcusably or unethically appropriate disability in exploring literary deafness without being deaf herself? Perhaps. Our answer requires flipping the methodological script current within Deaf and disability studies. Rebecca Sanchez helps make this reorientation not only thinkable but desirable by “deafening modernism,” as she calls it. As a member of the Deaf community and a Deaf studies scholar, Sanchez has dramatically expanded literary modernism’s interaction with American Sign Language.²³ Yet she weaves these two communities together by arguing audaciously *against* the need to examine any deaf characters at all. A few key theoretical moves make this possible. She draws forth “a Deaf theory that engages with but is not restricted to identity-based understandings of deafness” (2). Sanchez pushes against needing deaf characters to deploy Deaf theory by reminding us of the term’s capaciousness as a verb: “To deafen is to ‘deprive of the power of hearing, to stun with noise,’ a definition that is itself revealing of some of the valuable critical work such a

²² From the *OED*: “?1225[:]... Of dumbe bestes leorne wisdom & lare” (“Dumb”). The term referred only to the disability sense in Gothic, Old Norse, and Old English. In Old High German it shared the sense with those of stupid and deaf.

²³ Sanchez (like myself) uses the upper-case “Deaf” to refer to the cultural minority and ‘deaf’ to refer to the audiological condition of deafness, as well as to describe individuals for whom (either because of age or the time in which they lived) it would not make sense to talk about a Deaf cultural identity” (153n7).

concept might perform” (2). Deafness *is* often a biological fact overburdened by its social construction. But it “can also function as a lens through which we gain new appreciation of issues such as silence and voice that are central to literary works” (2).

Sanchez sees the act of reading as the most crucial deafening moment, drawing on the well-known work of Lennard Davis from a decade earlier. Davis writes: “As an example of the act of defamiliarization I am discussing, consider that everyone who reads this book is deaf. You are in a deafened modality or moment. All readers are deaf because they are defined by a process that does not require hearing or speaking” (*Enforcing* 4). Sanchez goes on to delineate how “deafening” modernist texts brings them “into dialogue with the culture and history of the Deaf” (3):

Deafening modernism, then, involves both cultural and historical recovery—situating literary modernism in the context of the history of a frequently ignored minority—and the development of a critical lens, which I will variously term Deaf insight or Deaf epistemology. This process will also help reveal some of the elements of modernist language to which we have been deafened by the incredibly powerful and institutionalized accounts of the period that have tended to exclude the deaf. (3)

Sanchez proves the utility of her approach by reading modernist poems neither about, nor written by, deaf individuals, emphasizing the illumination Deaf studies makes possible with “no obvious or literal connection to deafness” (3-4). She explores instead how deafness and modernism reconfigure themselves when mutually detached from concerns over valid representations and sanctioned perspectives. Her work in other words dissolves the dyad which only registers deafness as a transparent representation validated from within a deaf perspective and by a deaf author. As she reminds us: “This is an understandable strategy, but it unfortunately contributes to the mistaken belief that

disability insight is only applicable in such contexts” (4). As though anticipating resistance from fellow Deaf scholars, she flags the double-standard naysayers would have to maintain in order to discount her approach. It would be absurd, she says, “to argue that critical discussions of race should be limited to texts that prominently feature bodies of color or that queer theory provides valuable perspectives only when the characters or authors being considered belong to a sexual minority” (4). Many scholars would be unlikely to reject outright when Zora Neale Hurston or James Baldwin write a novel from a white perspective, or when William Maxwell writes from a queer perspective as a heterosexual.²⁴ And while some gender reversals between writer and character produce problematic narratives, plenty more offer keen insights. What then makes disability different, particularly in the case of McCullers?

The trepidation of some has to do with the paradoxical situation in which disability theory has found itself. On the one hand, disability—unlike race, gender, or sexuality—permutates continuously over time. People do not awake, as the analogy goes, to find themselves suddenly a member of a different race or with a different set of genitalia, at least not often without expendable capital and considerable forethought. Some of course find that their sexuality evolves or shifts. But practically everyone, at some point in their life, becomes disabled. And not only in old age. Approximately 15 percent of Americans are disabled, and 650 million people are impaired globally, making disability the largest minority category in the world (United Nations, “Fact Sheet”). On the other hand, while disability offers to some the ultimate postmodern identity, one which elides categorization at all times, always threatening to collapse itself in the face of

²⁴ Meaning, respectively: *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948), *Giovanni's Room* (1956), and *The Folded Leaf* (1945).

high theory's attempts to contain it, others understandably react by policing its boundaries, determining with more reserve and conservatism who can and cannot be considered "truly" disabled. Sanchez tightly captures this paradox when she writes: "If all bodies are disabled, then none are" (7).

The contextual matrix of Carson McCullers—disabled, but not deaf; interested in metaphorical disability, but to deconstruct it—problematizes to what extent she appropriates deafness. From the strictest conservative position, she probably does so inexcusably. More importantly, though, she flies in the face of common accusations from Deaf theorists. Rather than excluding the deaf like many of her modernist contemporaries, McCullers makes deafness "the center point." In condemning tendencies to use and abuse disability as a violent metaphorical substitution, McCullers "deprives us of the power to hear" the ableist ideology which surrounds us. She "deafens" us with the loud silence of Singer's suicide, defamiliarizing typical modernist reading methods which overinvest in formal symbols at the expense of the material body's content. And while not deaf herself, she reminds us of "the valuable critical work" a deafened and disabled modernism affords. McCullers does not appropriate disability; she commits herself to it, exploring how its concepts regulate the privileging of able bodies—and how able bodies conceive of its concepts in return.

Beyond the question of appropriation lies another still greater: does the lacing of modernism with Deaf and disability studies require at an inalterable level an amount of good faith to operate when the former approaches the latter from an able-bodied perspective? Despite being disabled herself, McCullers retained at times a remarkably pernicious ambiguity in her writings about disability generally and deafness particularly.

Good faith skeptics will have no trouble finding a small number of ambivalent and even blatantly offensive statements regarding her interest in deafness for the purposes of her work. The most damning and difficult of these to rationalize concerns her declined opportunity to attend a “deaf-and-mute convention” near her hometown in Georgia. Seeing his wife labor tirelessly to understand John Singer and his role at the center of her flourishing narrative, Reeves McCullers heard about the convention and told Carson they should go together as a learning experience:

When I was nearly finished with *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, my husband mentioned that there was a convention of deaf mutes in a town near-by and he assumed that I would want to go and observe them. I told him that it was the last thing I wanted to do because I already had made my conception of deaf mutes and didn't want it to be disturbed.
 (“Flowering” 162)

As though this were not bad enough, at another point she called Singer “a symbol of infirmity” (“Flowering” 163). Even those faithful to good faith arguments about disabling modernism have to question whether McCullers invested in Singer as yet another convenient prosthetic narrative function in her comment.²⁵ McCullers deliberately seems to leave her “conception” of deafness undisturbed because she finds in it the same symbolic richness and metaphorical excess which we need to actively resist. The convention would have offered McCullers an actual embodied context against which her literary conception could have been balanced. She instead entrenched a hard line between “us” and, as she indelicately put it, “them.”

²⁵ As David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder famously coin *narrative prosthesis*: “[D]isability pervades literary narrative, first, as a stock feature of characterization and, second, as an opportunistic metaphorical device.... Physical and cognitive anomalies promise to lend a ‘tangible’ body to textual abstractions; we term this metaphorical use of disability the *materiality of metaphor*.... [W]hile stories rely upon the potency of disability as a symbolic figure, they rarely take up disability as an experience of social or political dimensions” (*Narrative* 47-48, emphasis in original).

Yet squaring McCullers's troubling statements becomes frustratingly difficult when offset by the basic fact that she had written, in 1940, probably the most nuanced and realized deaf character of her time, if not in Western literature at that point. No amount of disquietude or offense can deny the historical significance of *The Heart*, nor can a wholesale rejection of McCullers. Debates around her disposition toward deafness, however, have to consider carefully the extent to which her good faith rings true. Some of our unease over McCullers's comments needs to be understood as a small part of her larger stylistic effect that emphasizes pathetic irony and a gothic penchant for violence when it comes to embodiment. None would rightly reject these as key markers of McCullers's fiction.

Yet so too do these markers bleed-over beyond the fictional page into her non-fictional accounts of her own lived embodiment as well. She notably had no problem directing the same tonal effects toward her own sense of her disabled body, sharing her dispensation with that of her characters. Most often she directed these tonal effects, like her southern contemporaries Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor, at an embitterment verging on the grotesque that stuck to nearly each body she described, whether disabled or able-bodied.²⁶ She flippantly captured her dislike for genteel, gentle, and toothless language by simply reminding her readers: "I don't like the word prose; it's too prosaic" ("Flowering" 163). In a typical modernist mode, McCullers rejected any fidelity to what she saw as the irrelevant tyranny of prosaic realism, a realistic lack that some scholars

²⁶ O'Connor's extensive disabilities are curiously more known and noted than McCullers's. Like McCullers, O'Connor also turns her narrative violence toward bodies, and embodiment more conceptually, if much more emphatically.

have used to critique McCullers's actual investment in deafness.²⁷ As she put it: "Reality alone has never been that important to me. A teacher once said that one should write...about the things that one knows most intimately. But what is more intimate than one's own imagination? The imagination combines memory with insight, combines reality with the dream" ("Flowering" 163).

If McCullers causes discomfort over what can sound like an inappropriate tone toward deafness marked by a stylized pathetic irony and gothic violence, she paradoxically coupled these with what close friend Richard Wright famously declared to be her "astonishing humanity" ("Review" 195). Part of the good faith element of McCullers comes from her unbridled compassion beyond and because of differences in race, gender, sexuality, and disability, despite her historical shortcomings. In Wright's 1940 review of *The Heart*, the same year he published *Native Son*, he said her dispensation "seems to stem from [her] attitude toward life which enables Miss McCullers to rise above the pressures of her environment and embrace white and black humanity in one sweep of apprehension and tenderness" ("Review" 195). Wright recognized from the first the interplay of her contradictory style, the affective and effective fruits it bears: "[T]he value of such writing lies not so much in what is said as in the angle of vision from which life is seen.... [T]his is not so much a novel as a projected mood, a state of mind poetically objectified in words, an attitude externalized in naturalistic detail" ("Review" 195). Her commitment to "know[ing] Mr. Singer"

²⁷ McCullers, for example, conjectured incorrectly about the extent to which deaf individuals synesthetically thought less "in words but in visual impressions" (*Carson* 488). For Maren Tova Linett, McCullers's comment exposes her lack of care for actual deafness, rather than historical inaccuracy. Linett charges that McCullers's comment "points to a technical problem she decides not to try to solve—how to depict the thoughts of someone who thinks visually—but also suggests that visual thinking, on some level, doesn't give rise to genuine subjectivity" (98).

admittedly has less to do with the minute by minute realities of deafness than to celebrating Singer's variegated humanity, critiquing an ableist American culture which would deny him this, and exploring with him the same complex contradictory drives, wants, feelings, thoughts, hopes, and fears as his hearing literary counterparts. We cannot forget that she completed *The Heart* in the late 1930s.

McCullers found in the imaginative space of fiction the means to dwell *with* deafness, "commit[ing]," as she said, "my whole soul to *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*" ("Flowering" 162). Though not deaf, McCullers makes plain what can be gained in examining deafness and disability from a (partially) able-bodied perspective. *The Heart* neither erases nor reduces deafness. It asks instead that hearing readers especially enter into an intimate and sometimes uncomfortable dialogue with it and with Singer, denying them the easy and violent tendency to metaphorize deafness away as merely rhetorical, metaphorical, unreal. Singer's suicide at a basic plot level speaks to the consequences of such ableist engagements with disability. Neither Mick, nor Blount, nor Copeland, nor Biff resist their temptations to transform Singer's deafness into their own symbolic systems. *The Heart* places a lure for readers to invest in the same quest, to account for an unaccountable parable. Yet by the end of the narrative McCullers creates another "attendant irony" in sundering a critical distance between how *The Heart's* hearing characters "use" Singer for their own purposes and how many hearing readers come to understand the violence done in such actions. Readers, too, risk becoming complicit in Singer's suicide. Many come to realize only at the moment of his unexpected death that they, too, have perpetuated the same logic that "speaks for" Singer's deafness, using him as a literary means to a metaphorical end, rather than considering for a moment how

utterly he has been dis severed from all community, and from understanding his actual lived experience.

The Heart also asks hearing readers in particular to imagine seriously deaf embodiment while crucially denying their full access to that bodily space. Part of McCullers's wisdom in retrospect comes from her self-awareness that her commitment to "becoming deaf" necessarily needed to be strictly bound, kept in check, and as un presumptuous as possible, all while earnestly seeking understanding. As her outline detailed, she refused to focalize from Singer's internal perspective in the same way she granted herself access to her hearing characters through free indirect discourse.²⁸ She insisted on an unbreachable, detached narrative distance that refuses fully accessing Singer's body and mind. This partially accounts for her decision to take the "tone of a legend" with his character, one "written in the simple style of a parable" and put to devastatingly critical ends (*Carson* 487). Some see her distance from Singer's bodily interiority as further evidence that McCullers only wanted Singer as a narrative prosthesis; that she never had any true commitment to exploring an isolated deaf individual in earnest.²⁹ I contend that good faith dialogues over deafness from a hearing perspective must respect and recognize the same critical impasse that McCullers set for herself. Modernism's predilection for internalizing subjectivity and entertaining notions

²⁸ Though beyond our current purview, it is worth considering the ethics of McCullers's comfort with inhabiting a Black, masculine perspective in Doctor Copeland. McCullers clearly impressed Richard Wright with her ability to do so, as he saw it, openly and honestly: "To me the most impressive aspect of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* is the astonishing humanity that enables a white writer, for the first time in Southern fiction, to handle Negro characters with as much ease and justice as those of her own race" ("Review" 195). Not everyone, surely, agrees.

²⁹ In her critique of how McCullers "uses" Singer, Linett argues that "McCullers artificially isolates Singer in service to [oralist] ideology" (99), and that, for McCullers, Singer either "has no 'psychic rhythms,'" or else "they are inaccessible even to his own creator" (98). I discuss oralism in the next section.

of “trans-corporeality” only make attending to this all the more important when exploring deafness.³⁰

Yet while *The Heart* vivifies the fundamental impasse that severs the dis- from ability, it simultaneously underscores a shared, incorruptible, implacable humanity founded on sameness *without* dissolving difference. Ironically for a modernist, McCullers unironically championed her own version of humanism, one which emerged out of her internalized sense of bodily difference founded on her gendered place within a patriarchal southern culture, her bisexuality, and her life-long struggle with disabilities. McCullers sought in fiction’s imaginative space an understanding of deafness in much the same way she did by considering male queerness and Black masculinity in *The Heart*. As she expressed late in her career:

How, without love and the intuition that comes from love, can a human being place himself in the situation of another human being? He must imagine, and imagination takes humility, love, and great courage. How can you create a character without love and the struggle that goes with love? (“Flowering” 163)

Good faith when balanced with critical skepticism can go a long way in disabling modernism, showcasing how an able-bodied perspective can seek a fuller, humble understanding of its supposedly disabled other in generative and even generous ways. Yet the same good faith can only be earned by thoroughly examining context skeptically, by scrupulously confronting the “outside” of the text with the same uncomfortably close attention as its “inside.” We have modeled this work here with McCullers, but countless other opportunities in modernism and beyond lie waiting. Treating contextual work with

³⁰ The case of trans-corporeality is especially true for Virginia Woolf. For disability in Woolf, see Lyon. See, also, Matt Franks, “Crip/Queer Aesthetics in the Great War,” pp. 78-81, for his reading of a queered disability in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925).

the same uncomfortable intimacy ironically entails its own level of good faith on the part of scholars and critics. It demands a willingness to be open to the past and curious of its precarious contours, as well as resisting the anachronistic tendency to discard the archive when it fails to meet the political demands of today and tomorrow with impunity.

When thinking about the murky waters of deafness without deafness, as Sanchez does, or of disability from a partially able-bodied perspective, we must reckon with the fact that recovery can never possibly be an “impossibly virtuous affair,” nor can disabling modernism.³¹ McCullers offers a model of what Deaf and disability studies can gain from disabled narratives written by hearing and able-bodied writers, and how disabling modernism in particular brings a complexity and nuance to this interchange unique to its historical moment. Such a braiding can only happen with prudence, caution, and care, and by thinking about similitude and difference simultaneously as McCullers does. “[C]an a human being place himself in the situation of another human being?” The benefits of McCullers’s attempt to do so ultimately outweigh the risks and shortcomings of her pursuit.

Oralism and the Legacy of Deaf Boarding Schools

The politics of early American deaf educational history give insight into Singer’s competing communication modalities as they vie within him for full expression. Singer’s uncertainty over the “proper” way to communicate in many ways mirrors the broader conversation in America concerning the place and politics of Sign in the early twentieth century. The complicated history of Sign throughout the period is largely a history of

³¹ I am borrowing this highly useful characterization from Leif Sorensen (197).

struggle between oralism and manualism. As Douglas Baynton points out, though oralism and manualism are often described in opposition to one another, it is important to remember that both “created images of deaf people as outsiders, with the implicit message that deaf people depended on hearing people to rescue them from their exile” (*Forbidden* 16). Oralism gained significant public traction following the 1880 Second International Congress on Education of the Deaf in Milan, which resolved to ban sign language education throughout Europe and the US. The National Association of the Deaf formed in opposition to the Congress and what its bolstering of oralism represented, producing former NAD president George Veditz’s important 1913 short film, “The Preservation of Sign Language.” Presented without subtitles and with austere lighting, the short film advocated for the rights of the Deaf to communicate in Sign. While oralism indeed enjoyed a rise in US political and popular support following the Congress, the opposition in places like Gallaudet College remained fierce and considerable. This tug-of-war contention at the *fin de siècle* comes into even sharper focus when placed within a modernist context marked by eugenics and the legacy of intense nationalist anxieties over (spoken) English. *Singer* serves as a site for exploring this history.

After his only deaf friend Antonapoulos has been sent away to the “state insane asylum” near the opening of *The Heart*, *Singer* focuses on fluttering childhood memories to try and steady his emotional turmoil (10). He remembers that,

although he had been deaf since he was an infant, he had not always been a real mute. He was left an orphan very young and placed in an institution for the deaf. He had learned to talk with his hand and to read. Before he was nine years old he could talk with one hand in the American way—and also could employ both of his hands after the method of Europeans. He had learned to follow the movements of people’s lips and to understand what they said. (11)

Nowhere else than in this quick and quiet memory does McCullers reveal more clues about the blank spaces of Singer's mired past. The bulk of the narrative pointedly takes for granted his supposed incapacity to communicate fully outside of sign language, a false assumption made by his hearing "interlocutors." But this past reflection ends up dismissing future misreadings of him as well. These misreadings include not only those made within the text by his visitors, but often those outside it by readers as well.

McCullers invalidates misunderstandings of Singer's communication means by making plain his litany of expressive skills, skills which he willingly withholds from those by whom he feels cast-out and stigmatized. Singer's various communication modalities, in other words, quietly offer a model of a resistant counter-reading that has gone unnoticed by scholars who obfuscate or miss Singer's agency in deciding which method he puts into practice.³² Even when Emily Miller Budick recognizes that he "chooses to remain voiceless," she somewhat cruelly claims that his doing so "represents a flight from the possibility that he may well be understood, not as a brilliant, multilingual student but as a mere mortal, who gropes for and stumbles over words that may not only express what he wants to say but that may expose all his human frailty" (145; 151). Singer can not only move effortlessly between the American and European systems of signing. Most crucially to any accurate understanding of *The Heart*, he can also flawlessly read people's lips, as well as read and write notes if he so desires. In his

³² Kállay is one of the few who recognizes Singer chooses not to communicate outside of sign language, rather than lacking the ability to do so, tracing how his gestures outside of Sign signify (138). Kállay missteps, however, in treating Singer's suicide as yet another metaphorical gesture, turning the real pain of estrangement from community into yet another symbolic function (144). Building on Kállay, Frances Freeman Paden takes things a step further by reading the "autistic gestures" of the characters' hands as expressive of their "alienation" (454).

pockets he stuffs not just his hands to avoid the temptation to sign, but a notepad, a fountain pen, and a card with which he introduces himself when necessary. On one side he engraves his name, and on the other, “with the same elaborate precision,” he writes: “I am a deaf-mute, but I read the lips and understand what is said to me. Please do not shout” (55). To each confused stranger who talks *at* him Singer offers this card. Jake notes how carefully Singer looks at his lips, yet even after Singer gives his card to Jake after offering him a place to sleep off his drunken stupor, he still thinks Singer “a dummy!” (55). McCullers introduces another double entendre to add to *dumb* and *queer*: while Singer makes it clear that he literally understands what Jake says, Jake thinks Singer too ignorant (“deaf-and-dumb”) to understand the full implications of his zealous Marxist monologue. McCullers threads this paradoxical dual meaning—that people believe Singer “understands” the “real” them without his “understanding” what they literally say—throughout *The Heart*. Ironically, she makes the opposite true. Only through the detached distance between character, narrator, and reader does this irony become obvious.

Yet *The Heart*'s perplexing layers of irony cut in all directions, including Singer's. Despite his communicative skills and his insight into his interlocutors' baffling idolization of him, Singer ironically remains unaware of how he reproduces nearly the same process when it comes to his only signing friend, Antonapoulos. Like so many of McCullers's characters, hearing and deaf alike, Singer endlessly seeks community—the “hunting” of the novel's title—almost in spite of the fact that he cannot seem to find it. Though *The Heart* struggles to tie together the loose threads of all the characters' shared yet missed opportunities to build a community out of alterity, its struggle exposes the

outlines of what we could call a “phantom coalition”—the early markings of intersectional allyship in its historical becoming.³³ Like Biff, who suppresses his queerness, Singer takes a keen interest in understanding what mysterious force attracts his visitors to him. Singer instead seeks the company of Antonapoulos, who has been institutionalized following the (inexplicable) emergence of a cognitive impairment bordering on legal insanity.³⁴ If Singer’s visitors idealize him, conjuring various metaphors out of his deafness which help fill their own unfulfilled desires for community, Singer unwittingly replicates this substitutive process with his close friend and possible former lover.³⁵ While Singer notably refuses metaphorizing Antonapoulos’s deafness for his own self-serving desires, he nonetheless transforms his memories of their previous life together into an impossibly idealized figure of community, understanding, and love. He transposes this imaginary figure, whether platonic or amorous, onto Antonapoulos in the present, even as his friend slips into increasing cognitive impairment. Singer resists abstracting Antonapoulos’s deafness away metaphorically, but, ironically, he yields to committing a related substitution: he loses sight of the material reality of his friend’s unstable state by clinging to their romanticized past.

These various ironies become obvious through the detached distance between character, narrator, and reader. While Singer knows perfectly what his visitors say, he cannot fathom *why* they repeatedly confess their feelings to him as though he were a speechless sage. Singer not only comprehends what others say to him by lipreading, but

³³ This wonderful coinage was suggested to me in conversation by Betsy Wheeler.

³⁴ See Heidi Krumland’s “The Big Deaf-Mute Moron” for a thorough critique of McCullers’s lack of this historical context and one-dimensional treatment of Antonapoulos.

³⁵ See Gayatri Spivak’s “Three Feminist Readings” for the most famous queer reading of *The Heart*.

he wields his various communication modes to his advantage when he tires of his visitors speaking and thinking only of themselves. We are told he sometimes “pretend[s] that he [does] not understand their questions,” meeting their selfish inquiries with an “inscrutable smile” (*The Heart* 94).³⁶ For Maren Tova Linett, “Singer is a mysterious cipher to whom ‘nobody’ has access” (*Bodies* 102). When Mick articulates this same misconception in the novel, Linett charges McCullers with insisting that “sign language isn’t really communication and that a nonspeaker’s thoughts must forever be inaccessible.... [Singer’s] lack of speech is tied by the text to this inhuman separateness” (102). Rather than doubling down that Singer and “other deaf people simply don’t count” for McCullers, as Linett insists, I suggest that Singer’s knowing smile and his canny ability to “pretend” at times to listen demonstrate that McCullers’s entire point is to underscore the self-centered “dialogues” the visitors think they are having with Singer. Linett is right (but for the wrong reasons) when she claims: “there is no suggestion that [Mick, or any of the other characters] could learn sign language to draw out Singer’s thoughts” (102). Indeed: this very fact is a large part of McCullers’s critique, not her indulgence in narrative prosthesis; it further indicates how *The Heart* “engages in a conflict against its narrative” (Berger, *Disarticulate* 38). All suggestions of “inaccessibility,” of easy notions of deafness as a silent void untouchable by and outside of the modernist crisis of (spoken) language, find themselves dashed against the theoretical rocks as balderdash.

When Singer chooses to disengage from communicating with those outside the Deaf community, he does so as a reaction to his experiences with an ableist and oralist

³⁶ Michael Merva almost unbelievably claims Singer’s “inscrutable smile” indicates how he is “much like a wall—not because he is emotionless or cold, but because one talks at him while receiving little more than a smiling visual image (which in the case of Singer is enough) in return” (43).

culture marked by eugenic thought. And as his memory intimates, he does so in reaction to a painfully formative childhood “lesson” which traumatizes, shames, and alienates him from the speaking and hearing world:

Then finally he had been taught to speak.

At the school he was thought very intelligent.... But he could never become used to speaking with his lips. It was not natural to him, and his tongue felt like a whale in his mouth. From the blank expression on people’s faces to whom he talked in this way he felt that his voice must be like the sound of some animal or that there was something disgusting in his speech. It was painful for him to try to talk with his mouth.... Since that time he [had met Antonapoulos he] had never spoken with his mouth again. (11)

We can and should locate Singer’s affliction in the lived reality of trying to alter his deafness. Yet at the same time his pain meaningfully reflects his affective response to his own deafness, to his own internalized otherness within the oralist institution. In pursuing what looks uncomfortably like the school’s ableist education goals, Singer wants to “get beyond” his deafness. He wants to resituate himself within an American social context which makes full oral and aural faculties “normal” by default. McCullers questions the “natural[ness]” of this cultural context by emphasizing Singer’s venture to speak, his painful reaching out to a foreign aural community, despite its being “not natural to him.” He internalizes a tragic sense of his speech as sounding “disgusting” and “like an animal” to hearing others after anguishing over their “blank expressions” at his difficult efforts. While still in the deaf boarding school he forsakes his new verbal faculty. He does so despite showing at first an unremitting resolve to gain entrance into the speaking community which surrounds him within and beyond the walls of his classroom.

Singer rejects the spoken word after internalizing the speaking and hearing community’s rejection of his own endeavors to speak. He expresses himself after this

almost exclusively with the fluid and rapid signs of his hands. As McCullers describes, he knows “the American way” as well as “the method of Europeans.” Yet Singer only grants himself license to sign when in Antonopoulos’s company. Better understanding the politics of these transatlantic deaf educational histories help give insight into Singer’s competing communication means as they vie within him to achieve full expression.

Parisian Abbé Charles-Michel de l’Épée opened the first free deaf school on the Continent in 1755. Most French deaf children encountered other deaf people for the first time in de l’Épée’s school, sharing among themselves their *ad hoc* signs for communicating with their friends and families, and starting to create together a unified sign system that had not yet been codified. Within five years of the opening of de l’Épée’s school, Thomas Braidwood started Braidwood’s Academy for the Deaf and Dumb on the other side of the English Channel, relocating it from Edinburgh to London in 1783. Across the pond, as Sanchez has detailed, “educational prospects for deaf American children remained quite limited. They were either placed in hearing schools, where they could not understand the instructor, or kept at home” (17). This all changed when American preacher Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet met his neighbor’s deaf daughter, Alice Cogswell.

Dismayed at the lack of educational support available for Alice and wanting to ensure her salvation through accessing the Gospel, Gallaudet began a concerted effort to found the country’s first school for the deaf. He voyaged to Europe at the request of Alice’s father to find and return with an implementable education model of their own. In London, however, Braidwood shamelessly refused to share his Academy’s methods with Gallaudet, investing instead in personal gain over shared knowledge. Gallaudet

fortunately found Abbé Roch-Ambroise Sicard and his highly educated pupil, Laurent Clerc, while still in London. They ushered him to Paris to learn Clerc’s rapidly developing new language. This soon became the French Sign Language and, impressed by Clerc, Gallaudet convinced Clerc to re-establish his burgeoning career alongside him in America. In 1817 they established together the American Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb (Figure 2), the first school of its kind (Baynton, *Forbidden* 15).

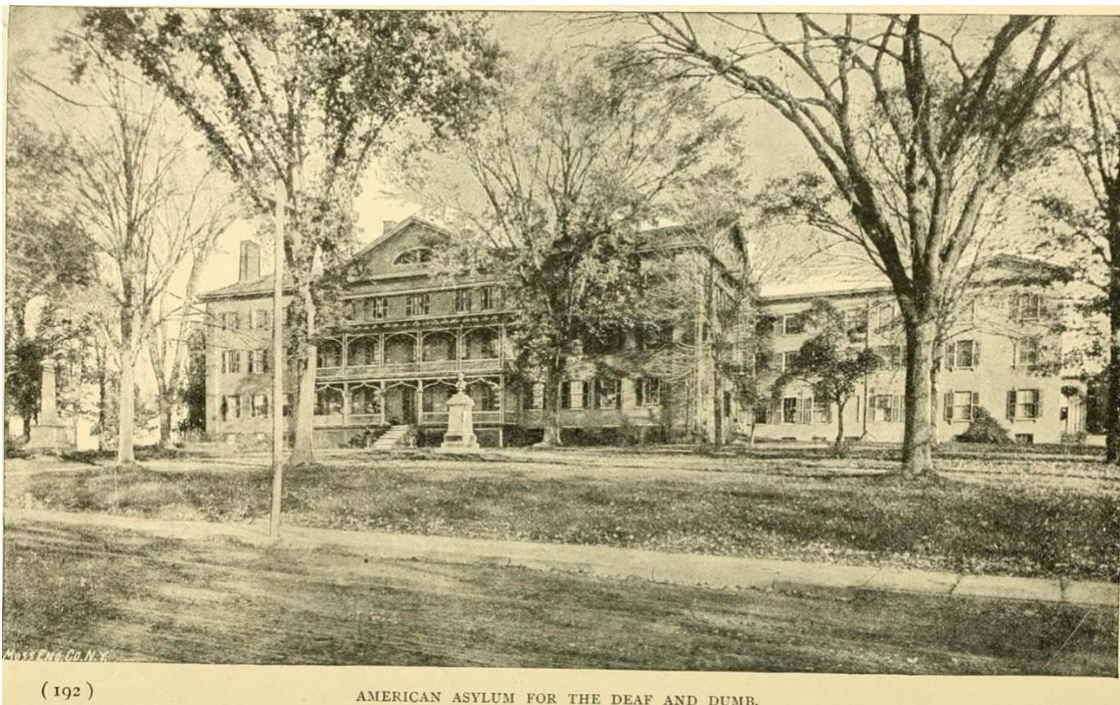


Figure 2. The American Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb (1889)

Like the French and British schools, the American Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb offered one of the first sustained and organized occasions for a large, heterogeneous group of deaf people to meet, communicate, and share with one another, establishing some of the core beginnings of today’s Deaf culture. Many of Gallaudet’s initial students arrived from the island of Martha’s Vineyard off the coast of New England’s Cape Cod, a space which Sanchez deems “the home of the first Deaf

community in the country. Because of a high rate of genetic deafness—in the late 1800s, one in 155 people was born deaf, nearly thirty times the national average—it was, for nearly two centuries, just as common to find islanders communicating with sign as with English” (17). Though not officially formalized and recognized until the 1960s, American Sign Language birthed itself out of the interactions of Gallaudet’s wide range of students, out of their idiosyncratic and pragmatic personal sign systems, as they mixed together. In the following generation, many of Gallaudet’s pupils established deaf schools of their own, and by the *fin de siècle* of the nineteenth century, eighty-seven such American institutions opened (Fay). Gallaudet’s son Edward Miner went on to start the country’s first college for the Deaf, which in 1986 was renamed Gallaudet University, and remains today the only liberal arts college for the Deaf.

Yet even deaf educators like those Singer encounters in *The Heart* misunderstood at first the nature of signing as its own legitimate, complete language. Part of this arose from initial linguistic misconceptions about sign language’s supposed universality, that it could be transposed across all cultures and people, and that it could be disembodied, abstracted away from the individual bodies of signers. Today we know the opposite to be true. Just as we need to reject disembodied readings of literary deafness and disability without recourse to material, lived contexts, the same must be acknowledged at the level of the signed word and the signer: “there can be no disembodiment of ASL” (Sanchez 25). And as any translator or student of a foreign language knows too well, some signs—whether spoken, read, or physically expressed—simply fail to be mutually intelligible in translation.

Early educators and theorists of sign language believed it to be a communication system of pantomime or gesture, rather than a complete language with a recognizable and consistent syntax, grammar, and so forth. Many took things a step further in resisting sign's legitimacy by linking what looked to them like mere pantomime with social markers of inferiority and intellectual limitation. Others believed the gestures of signs pointed only outward toward their "real" spoken words, lesser copies of richer signifiers. Such limited thinking brought with it once again the implicit pejorative meaning of "dumb" from centuries past. Whether arguing from a nefarious position or one of historical ignorance, most at this time thought that signing constituted "an Ideographic language [which is...] less symbolic" than its spoken counterparts, one which "lacks precision, subtlety, and flexibility" (Myklebust 241). Language pathologist Helmer Myklebust argued as much as late as 1957, adding: "It is likely Man cannot achieve his ultimate potential through an Ideographic language," and that "manual sign language must be viewed as inferior to the verbal as a language" (242). Many deaf students sadly internalized the supposed inferiority of their expression to the speaking world as an unavoidable consequence of their language. Only recently has Sign been accepted as non-ideographic, as more than basic silent pantomime, and as a linguistically legitimate and rich language of its own.

The US's historical rejection of American Sign Language comes into sharper focus by placing theories like Myklebust's within a modernist context marked by eugenics and the legacy of intense nationalist anxieties over English. Redrawing this frame also brings us slowly back to Singer and American deaf schools in the decades leading up to the Depression. As has been well-documented and discussed at length in

and beyond modernism, the waning decades of the nineteenth century and the opening few of the twentieth saw a massive immigration wave to the United States.³⁷ Over 30 million Europeans emigrated between 1836 and 1914, making 14 percent of a country of 92 million first-generation immigrants by 1910 (Bailey, *Speaking* 144). America's emergence as a young imperial power only exacerbated the growing unease that had begun a half century before, following the Civil War, that it lacked a shared imagined community. This lack becomes especially apparent when viewed in contrast to established European colonial powers, modern empires whose imperialist exploits and racial injustices were typically rationalized by its political leaders through familiar nationalist narratives of capital-P progress and prosperity. "What this meant in terms of national identity was that [America] now consisted of even more individuals who did not share a single history, culture, appearance, or language" (Sanchez 11). In 1900 in Chicago, for example, an estimated two-thirds of the population spoke languages other than English (Bailey, *Speaking* 144). An unabashedly racist American Congress responded by introducing a flurry of anti-immigration laws to slow a polyglot citizenry it viewed as running amok.³⁸

Burch has recently explored how such immigrants sometimes found themselves unjustly institutionalized and declared "insane" by the state, often for political reasons well outside the realm of public safety. In retrieving "dislocated histories," as Burch calls them, scholars can begin to reconsider early twentieth-century asylums as important

³⁷ See Williams, for example (*Politics* 45).

³⁸ In terms of anti-immigration laws, these included 1875's Page Act, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, 1906's Naturalization Act, the Immigration Act and the Emergency Quota Act of 1921, and 1924's revised Immigration Act. In terms of codifying and enforcing a national language, the American Academy of Language was founded in 1894 to address the issue head-on, with the National Speech League of 1916, and the Linguistic Society of America of 1924, to follow (Miller 9).

communities in their own right, ones which signal much in fact about the racist and ableist programs which defended mass institutionalization through highly dubious means (142). Many immigrants by the same token were commonly equated with the “mentally feeble,” especially following the popular 1912 publication of Henry H. Goddard’s eugenic-laden *Kallikak Family*, which claimed that as many as “50 percent of immigrants were feeble-minded” (qtd. in Krumland 37). Heidi Krumland has drawn a helpful connection between the mutual rise in immigration and mental institutions in the US, and *The Heart’s* troubling representation of the Greek immigrant Antonapoulos. Expanding Burch’s work on the era’s mental institutions, Krumland provides the critical asylum contexts McCullers suspiciously leaves out. In the three decades before the Great Depression, American asylums had more than doubled in size (Krumland 39). Krumland rightfully arraigns McCullers for her “one-dimensional” treatment of Antonapoulos, showing how the novelist “unconsciously resort[ed] to commonly accepted ideas about a cognitively different person being a mix between a burdensome child and a social menace,” and whose institutionalization “is never depicted as worthy of future contemplation” (35; 37).

While many immigrants and other “undesirables” began filling asylums, intellectuals and educators rushed to cement and legitimate a national English language distinct from its global Anglophone predecessors. If in France in 1906 Gertrude Stein found the space to undertake her radical experiments on the English language, investing herself in the abundant play she prized in clashing American idioms, the national front back home found instead a staunch conservative reaction to constrain it. With the passing of the Naturalization Act of 1906, President Theodore Roosevelt won his brief language

war by legalizing a precedent which equated citizenship with demonstrable command of American English. Not only must an American's linguistic command have fallen in line with an Americanized version of English which was being developed and politically sanctioned, but their command notably became demonstrable *by speech*. Roosevelt best captured the oralist orientation of his investment in "Amerenglish" in "Americanism," his hostile *raison d'état* from 1907: "No man can be a good citizen if he is not at least in the process of learning to speak the language of his fellow citizens" (464-65). Singer's attempts to dissuade Antonapoulos's cousin Charles Parker from committing his only deaf friend to the state insane asylum fall short because the Greek immigrant Parker does not "know much about the American language" (*The Heart* 9).³⁹ While McCullers almost never uses the term in *The Heart*, she typically reserves "American" not as a nationality or an imagined community, but in relation to language, emphasizing the intense nationalist language politics at play even into the Depression. Roosevelt proselytized within a year of his landmark legislation: "We have room for but one language in this country, and that is the English language, for we intend to see that the crucible turns our people out as Americans, of American nationality, and not as dwellers in a polyglot boarding house" (qtd. in Crawford 8). Roosevelt's language position in many ways reflected his larger assimilationist politics, "envisioning," as Mark Whalan writes, "an

³⁹ The "state insane asylum" to which Antonapoulos is sent, roughly two hundred miles from the mill-town, is based on Milledgeville in Georgia. Authorized in 1837, the institution was first named the Georgia State Lunatic, Idiot, and Epileptic Asylum. It quickly became the largest such institution in the world, and McCullers was well aware of its looming presence in her home state. As Stephanie Rountree points out: "[T]he rate of institutionalization in the South nearly tripled during the 1900-1940 boom" (189). People with disabilities were often sent to the Asylum and locked away, rather than provided proper help. The state fully committed itself to removing disability from public view in ways that mirrored many country-wide legislative efforts.

‘unhyphenated America,’ where divided national loyalty was tantamount to ‘moral treason’” (*American* 29).

Like two peas in a hegemonic pod, capitalist *par excellence* Henry Ford supplied Roosevelt with a “process” which helped Americans “learn[] to speak” in the “proper” way the President demanded. The automobile tycoon opened the Ford English School in 1914, building it on the same property as his revolutionary car plant. Historians more commonly note the legacy of the Ford School in establishing and regulating social norms for workers’ hygiene and etiquette.⁴⁰ Ford infamously tried to mechanize workers by treating them like Model Ts, hoping to build in the process hyperproductive American workers by maximizing their efficiency and profitability through social norming. Ford responded to Roosevelt’s call to arms against improper English by redirecting the normalization of his factory lines onto bodies and language themselves. Davis has detailed how the entire concept of *the norm* becomes thinkable only in a fully mechanized, industrial society. The *OED* confirms this, dating *norms*, “a standard or pattern of behavior that is accepted in or of a group,” to modernism’s own birth (give or take) in 1900 (“Norm”). The fledgling new field of statistics played a key role in establishing language norms like Ford’s. Davis deserves quoting at length on this point:

The rather amazing fact is that almost all the early statisticians had one thing in common: they were eugenicists.... Statistics is bound up with eugenics because the central insight of statistics is the idea that a population can be normed. An important consequence of the idea of the norm is that it divides the total population into standard and nonstandard subpopulations. The next step in conceiving of the population as norm and

⁴⁰ Earlier models (placed within a racialized discourse) included Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee University, with its well-known “gospel of the toothbrush.” As Carl A. Zimring describes: “[Washington’s] insistence on the gospel of the toothbrush refuted the corrosive new racial order and sought to place black Americans at the forefront of modern, hygienic society in hopes that attention to hygiene would improve the community, rather than making it servile to the needs and wants of whites” (104). My thanks to Cassie Galentine for pointing this out to me.

non-norm is for the state to attempt to norm the nonstandard—the aim of eugenics. Of course such activity is profoundly paradoxical since the inviolable rule of statistics is that all phenomena will always conform to a bell curve. So norming the non-normal is an activity as problematic as untying the Gordian knot. (*Enforcing* 30)

Beginning with standardized hygiene and etiquette before moving on to proper language use, Ford's English School established norms over not only "the kinds of language people used but also the ways their bodies looked, moved through space, and interacted with other subjects while engaging in linguistic activities" (Sanchez 68). Sanchez helpfully calls these intersections *communicative norms*, reminding us that "[i]dentifying and thinking through" norms such as Roosevelt's and Ford's "force[] us to confront the physicality of our linguistic practices" (68). In describing his tongue as feeling "like a whale" when attempting to speak "properly" in his deaf school, Singer confronts the physicality of his linguistic practice at the same time as we do (*The Heart* 11).

Yet Ford and others like Alexander Graham Bell sought to suppress the physicality of such deaf linguistic practices as Singer's. If Ford tried to normalize the "polyglot boarding house" of spoken American English, Bell took things a step further (though getting started on the social project earlier) by trying to teach deaf students like Singer how to pass as hearing and speaking persons. Likely because his mother and wife were deaf, Bell had a complicated relationship with fellow eugenicists regarding deafness. As Brian Greenwald has illuminated, pervasive misunderstandings of Bell's position on deaf reproduction have detracted scholars from his greatest "threat to the Deaf community: his staunch support of oralism" (259). Bell was instrumental in establishing oralism, an educational school of thought which rose in prominence in the mid-nineteenth century, and which continued up into the twentieth. Denying sign

language for many of the supposed intellectual limits discussed above, oralists instead insisted on the social need to teach deaf students how to speak at all costs and how to read lips. Instructors at Bell's school forbade sign language, mistakenly believing that it "retard[s] the student's progress with speech" (Sanchez 20).

Like Ford, Bell's *modus operandi* underscored national conformity norms by reinforcing the same eugenicism as Roosevelt. Bell's New York Institution for the Improved Instruction of Deaf Mutes, founded in 1867, disallowed any communicative exchanges between deaf children. Bell's sympathies for, and contributions to, the American eugenics movement make this fact unsurprising.⁴¹ As Davis reminds us: "it must be reiterated that the eugenics movement was not stocked with eccentrics.... Prime ministers A. J. Balfour, Neville Chamberlain, and Winston Churchill, President Theodore Roosevelt, H. G. Wells, John Maynard Keynes, and H. J. Laski, among others, were members of eugenicist organizations" (*Enforcing* 37). Like his eugenicist peers, Bell feared the idea of deafness being generationally reproduced, and he tried to sever all communication between deaf people by pushing American politicians and educators to reject sign language outright. He went so far as to propose to American eugenics societies ways to eradicate deafness systematically from the human genepool by legally denying deaf people the right to bear children. By forcing deaf students through the immensely difficult and largely unsuccessful process of communicating verbally, and by fixating on the specious viability of lipreading, Bell shared with Ford a concerted effort to blot out any visual and physical markers of difference in speech. They wanted, in effect, an ableist utopia which no longer had to encounter deafness, and Bell made the discomfort

⁴¹ Bell's allegiance to eugenics has been traced by Davis and others. See his *Memoir upon the Formation of a Deaf Variety of the Human Race*, specifically.

some hearing people have over deafness uncomfortably clear: “People do not understand the mental condition of a person who cannot speak and who thinks in gestures.... He is sometimes looked upon as a sort of monstrosity, to be stared at and avoided” (qtd. in Gannon 79).

By placing Singer within the historical legacy of transatlantic deaf schools, we recognize that his fluency in American and European sign systems points to a thorough early education in a school like Gallaudet’s. Yet Singer’s ability to read lips, his shame over the visual markers of his deafness, his suppression of sign language, and his attempt to pass at times as speaking and hearing persons suggest he attends an oralist school like Bell’s as well. Given that Roosevelt’s legislative efforts to penalize non-normative speech occurred before the First World War, Singer likely joined the oralist school after a deaf institution first raised him as an orphan and taught him sign language.⁴² Singer reveals the shame he incurred from his oralist education in the sight of speaking and hearing people by continually hiding his hands from view in his pockets. He writes a short note to Biff in his first interaction with any of *The Heart*’s major characters detailing the meals he wants to eat daily at the café. Biff reads the note before beginning to scan Singer, trying to understand the unusual communication method of his quiet patron. With Biff’s uncomfortably scrupulous gaze in plain view, the narrator shares that Singer’s “gait was agitated and [that] he always kept his hands stuffed tight into the pockets of his trousers” (12). As a bartending *flâneur* with a keen eye for understanding

⁴² We are never given Singer’s exact age, but we know he is middle-aged. The novel takes place between spring of 1938 and August of 1939. If we assume Singer was born at or near the turn of the century (making him middle-aged in the narrative), that would put him in a deaf school like Gallaudet’s as a young child. McCullers gives Singer nearly no history beyond the two passages cited above. She does, however, mention that he was orphaned while “very young” and is thereafter raised “in a deaf institution” (*The Heart* 11). This would place him near his teenage years by the time Roosevelt’s investment in oralist schools like Bell’s occur.

people's bodily quirks, Biff identifies Singer's concealment habit almost immediately, expressing for the first time a central motif of McCullers: "[Biff] was thinking that in nearly every person there was some special physical part kept always guarded. With the mute his hands" (29).⁴³ Before Biff even learns his name, he susses out Singer's self-consciousness over his hands as though fearful lest others see him and his deafness, as Bell puts it, as a "monstrosity" to be "stared at and avoided." Yet McCullers ironizes Biff's inability to intuit his *own* body's guarded "special physical part," the "ring on his little finger" with which he perpetually fidgets, symbolizing his failing marriage and failure to perform sexually (29).

Like those who attend Ford's English School, most hearing and able-bodied people surrounding Singer feel a similar anxiety over how their bodies deviate from eugenics-tinged modern American norms. Feeling too tall, Mick smokes cigarettes at fourteen to "stunt the rest of her growth" (111). Jake fails to hold his "stunted body very straight" when townspeople laugh off his tirades against unfettered capitalism (154). Mick's older brother Bill feels ashamed of his size thirteen shoes and tries "to hide his feet by scraping one foot behind the other" when standing up, "only mak[ing] it worse" (43). Even if the townspeople manage to avoid feeling humiliated by the deviance of their bodies from the norms of Ford and others, they internalize instead other violent reactions toward their physical selves. After breaking his hip, permanently impairing his mobility and his future livelihood, Mick's father lives in a circle of regrets over the ways "he could have made money and didn't" with his once-able body (46). McCullers's pathetic

⁴³ While Biff is not by any means a "man of leisure," his observational skills for reading crowds and his small personal collections link him in interesting ways to Walter Benjamin's concept of the *flâneur* (40).

irony abounds in sketch after sketch of people trying to reject or reform their bodies into impossible alternatives.

Her pathetic irony hits a poignant fever pitch when Mick hosts a mock prom at her house and Harry Minowitz, a scrawny Jewish boy in love with her (and to whom she later gives her virginity), shows up to the dance without his “horn-rimmed specs.” Not only must Harry “cock his head sideways like a bird in order to see,” bumping awkwardly into Mick’s girlfriends, but he leaves exposed a “red, droppy sty” on one of his eyes. Like Biff when he meets Singer for the first time, Mick notices straight away how Harry’s “long, thin hands [keep] touching around his sty as though it hurt him” (110). His poor vision requires eyeglasses, yet Harry feels enough embarrassment over his vision impairment that he would rather stumble through the room while trying to hide his sty than wear and be marked by his specs to the dance. Adolescence, as Mick comes to rage against, seems to demand social conformity above all else, particularly in normative gendered terms. Yet for those like Singer isolated from the deaf community, the pressures to conform to bodily social norms not only continue, but increase, well after prom night ends.

As we have seen, figures like Roosevelt and Bell set the political tone for an American eugenics movement which only built throughout the modernist era. Meanwhile on the Continent during the American Depression, Hitler and Mussolini began putting their own take on the American eugenics template into devastating action, taking license in part from it to erase bodily difference with an historically unprecedented violence.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Stefan Kühl’s *The Nazi Connection: Eugenics, American Racism, and German National Socialism* remains a key text in establishing how the Nazis turned to American eugenicist legislation as a template for some of their own practices.

Hitler's genocide against people with disabilities has been well documented, though fewer have focused on how his logics of erasure found momentum in the early thirties not just in political tracts but also in their close counterparts, in theorizations of art and its embodied figures.⁴⁵ Hitler lambasted what he saw as the "degenerate" bodies of modernism, the same central disabled figures on canvases that I claim have been largely obscured from our accounts of the movement's written word. While unveiling the new House of German Art museum during the Great German Art Exhibition of 1937, Hitler proclaimed that the German people "only want the celebration of the healthy body in art" (qtd. in Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* 29). His remark makes more sense when understood as reactionary to the competing Degenerate Art exhibit which opened in Munich at the same time, an exhibit which sought to provoke fascism's ableist imaginary with works by painters like Georg Grosz and Otto Dix (see Figure 7) which heavily featured disabled veterans. After viewing modernist works by Klee, Chagall, and others, Hitler charged the exhibit with an inexcusable interest in what he called "deformed cripples and cretins, women who only inspire disgust, men who are more like wild beasts, [and] children who, if they were alive, would be regarded as God's curse!" (Ibid. 29). Hitler utterly rejected the so-called modernist art of the asylum. His comments instead evoked an ableist ideal and provoked an impulse for bodily conformity.

McCullers scrutinizes *The Heart's* variegated impulses for such conformity. She haunts the background of her first novel with eugenic and fascistic forces. Before America entered the war, and even before it began across the sea, McCullers had already

⁴⁵ See especially David T. Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's documentary, *A World Without Bodies* (2001), which details the social and medical justifications which led to the systematic extermination of more than a quarter of a million people with disabilities during the Second World War.

laid bare the intertwined relationship between the conformist logics of eugenics and fascism on both sides of the Atlantic. She did so principally through Doctor Copeland, Harry Minowitz, and John Singer. As an adherent to W. E. B. Du Bois's "talented tenth" philosophy, Doctor Copeland discourages the families of his poor and sick Black patients from reproducing whenever possible. Copeland encourages limiting reproduction to champion instead what he calls the "fortunate few of our race" (*The Heart* 193).⁴⁶ What little optimism he holds for a future Black Marxist liberation he finds counterintuitively with the support of the "Eugenic Parenthood for the Negro Race" (74). Similar politics likewise wrapped up in the escalating political crisis in Europe surround Mick. While she buys cigarettes, Biff's café radio "talk[s] about the crisis Hitler had cooked up in Danzig" (355); her father discusses "Chamberlain and Munich" in the evenings (124); and Harry Minowitz teaches her the need to resist anti-Semitism, fascism, and Nazism (112). One day he tells Mick "all about the Fascists": "He told how the Nazis made little Jew children get down on their hands and knees and eat grass from the ground. He told about how he planned to assassinate Hitler... He told about how there wasn't any justice or freedom in Fascism" (245). Even as an adolescent boy, Harry speaks from a radical, disenfranchised, and often violent position, one which brings the fringe political contexts in *The Heart's* margins into central view.

McCullers ultimately converges the braided contexts of fascism, eugenics, and deafness through Harry's otherwise minor Jewish character. While laboring over early drafts of the novel before she sent material to Houghton Mifflin, McCullers questioned

⁴⁶ "The Talented Tenth of the Negro race must be made leaders of thought and missionaries of culture among their people. No others can do this work and Negro colleges must train men for it. The Negro race, like all other races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men" (Du Bois 75).

why all these characters revolved around and spoke incessantly to the “hub” at the center of her narrative wheel. At this point of drafting, her central figure was neither deaf, nor named John Singer. She centered instead around a Jewish middle-aged man named Harry Minowitz. McCullers awaited what she later called the “illumination” of the work, the moment in which it would reveal its larger significance to its creator. In her only sustained text on the art of fiction, she details this mysterious process: “The dimensions of a work of art are seldom realized by the author until the work is accomplished. It is like a flowering dream [and...] these illuminations are the grace of labor.... After months of confusion and labor, when the idea has flowered, the collusion is Divine” (“Flowering” 162). For McCullers, *The Heart*’s flowering dream hit her in a flash. Like any good myth, she never revealed the fine details of her epiphany beyond stating:

For a whole year I worked on this book and I didn't understand it at all. All the characters were there and they were all talking to this man—but I didn't know why they were talking to him. Then one day, after working very hard on this novel I did not understand, I was walking up and down the floor when suddenly it came to me that Harry Minowitz (his name) is a deaf-mute and immediately the name was changed to John Singer.
(qtd. in Evans 189)

Scholars have long had trouble knowing how to account for McCullers’s cryptic story, as well as the fuller significance of her protagonist’s instant rechristening. Part of the confusion results from how much McCullers obscures her “divine collusion.” Nearly all note the irony of Singer’s name given his deafness; but few seem to apprehend what hides in plain sight beyond this trite observation (an observation I suggest McCullers undoes as another lure for uncritical, metaphorical readings of deafness). Rather than needing to rewrite Singer entirely, McCullers recognizes “suddenly” the shared histories of Jews and people with disabilities, which in her time unquestionably included the deaf.

No one articulates this shared history more vividly than Doctor Copeland, whose Black heritage he adds to the polyvalent history of oppression: “So far as I and my people are concerned the South is Fascist now and always has been” (299). Copeland names Singer directly as the lynchpin holding these conversations together while debating Marxist reform with Jake: ““The Jew and the Negro... The history of my people will be commensurate with the interminable history of the Jew”” (299). When Jake denies Copeland’s claim that “Mr. Singer is a Jew,” the doctor replies: “I am positive that he is. The name, Singer. I recognized his race the first time I saw him... Besides, he told me so” (300). Copeland could be lying to himself and Jake to protect his conception of Singer as the only white person deserving of his respect, as “belonging to a race that is [also] oppressed” (*The Heart* 135). Each character, as the following section explores, similarly sees Singer as they wish him to be. Yet whether Singer is actually Jewish or not, McCullers leads us to the same conclusion. In shifting from Minowitz to Singer, McCullers magnetizes the proximity between the castigated histories of Jewish people and people socially marked as deaf or disabled. She illuminates how the eugenic and fascistic forces which hover at the silent peripheries of her narrative enmesh themselves with deafness and other disabilities, and how this enmeshment cannot be disentangled. She comes to recognize that the well-known ostracization of Jews which saturates Western history shares an intimately related, though far less-known, story that weaves together with deafness and disability. And she tells this story, as the next section will show, through the deaf John Singer.

The Affective Materiality of Metaphors: Self-Estrangement and the Return of the Real

The way Copeland and Jake stage their argument over the veracity of Singer's Jewishness underscores the central driving force of *The Heart* and a core component of my argument about the consequences of metaphorizing deafness. Each character sees Singer as they wish him to be, sharing a blatant unwillingness to challenge or question their conceptions against Singer's own thoughts and feelings. But McCullers goes further, to evaluate how this process produces what the narrator calls a violent "feeling of estrangement" in Singer from his lived experience of deafness (*The Heart* 30). His deafness runs the gamut of signification, each figuration relative to his visitors' yearnings. But for all the incredible variety within that gamut of metaphors, none accurately reflect Singer's internalized alterity to his various externalized selves, nor his estrangement from himself in the gap between these disparate representations. Singer's literal silence serves as a suspiciously convenient blank canvas onto which characters and readers alike paint a supplemental and often allegorical portrait of his deafness, one infused with a significance that only takes on meaning metaphorically. "The other who understands," James Berger argues of Singer, "can only be someone at the margins of language, a magic, transcendent presence, or, in the psychological terms the novel suggests, an imaginary, projected site of fulfilled desire" (*Disarticulate* 39). Led and lured on to "speak for" his deafness, both characters and many readers become complicit in the unfolding process of Singer's estrangement from the deaf and hearing community, and eventually from himself. Hence, the disconnect in each portrait between the metaphorical presence of deafness and the material absence of his lived experience produces the pained affective materiality of Singer's estrangement while also

contributing to his suicide. Tracing these gaps in the portraits of his four visitors will outline the contours of his precarity.

Jake, for instance, thinks Singer the only person besides himself “who knows,” a figure of speech he assigns to those few supposedly enlightened enough to see through capitalist false consciousness, whom to him see that “the whole system of the world is built on a lie” (152). The narrator intimates the “significance” of Singer’s deafness for the first time in *The Heart* in exchange with Jake: “They both were looking at each other. The mute’s eyes were cold and gentle as a cat’s and his body *seemed* to listen. The drunk [Jake] was in a frenzy. ‘You’re the only one in this town who catches what I mean... For two days now I been talking to you in my mind because I know you understand the things I want to mean’” (23, emphasis added). The narrator subtly brackets a distance between how Jake interprets Singer’s body, the significance for him of Singer’s silent gaze, and the critical qualifier on which the entire scene depends: not Singer’s actual interiority (which McCullers denies us access to), but how his exteriority *seems* to Jake. Readings which insist McCullers shops in narrative prosthesis fail to consider the important work the narrator’s “seemed” contributes to distancing how Jake wants to read Singer’s body and how the narrator positions readers both within and outside his gaze.⁴⁷ In displacing readers within the many focalized levels of author to narrator to café onlooker to Jake, McCullers entices us, through Jake’s perspective, to equate the significance of Singer’s body with what Jake reads as Singer’s uncanny knowledge, as the “one who knows” what

⁴⁷ Jennifer Murray captures this distance nicely when she argues that the reader is given access to an awareness that the characters are intimately connected (109). This distance and readers’ awareness of its effect, I would add, becomes key to how McCullers bifurcates how we receive Singer as a symbol and as a person.

Jake “want[s] to mean.” Within the opening chapters McCullers has already set the lure to metaphorize deafness which she will eventually deconstruct to horrifying ends.

Unaware yet of Singer’s deafness, Jake unconsciously sees himself reflected in Singer, offering readers the seeds of McCullers’s favored mirroring motif.⁴⁸ While many onlookers laugh because “without knowing it the drunk had picked out a deaf-mute to try to talk with,” Jake instead tries “to ascertain if the mute really understood what was said to him. The fellow nodded frequently and his face seemed contemplative. He was only slow—that was all. Blount began to crack a few jokes along with this talk about the knowing” (24). At first Singer’s smile hangs “on his face a little too long,” a smile for which Jake tries to account with the lacuna (“—”) between Singer’s seeming “slow” and Jake’s suspicions about his “listener.” Yet Singer’s “uncanny knowledge” quickly distills for Jake into something more deeply unsettling and “downright uncanny” (25). Just as quickly as McCullers casts her lure to metaphorize deafness for the first time, she reels back from Jake to focalize from the perspective of the crowd of dining onlookers, quietly commenting on *the* main risk of reading deafness metaphorically as it unfolds in the café: “The fellow was downright uncanny. People felt themselves watching him even before they knew that there was anything different about him. His eyes made a person think that they heard things nobody else had ever heard, that he knew things no one had ever guessed before. *He did not seem quite human*” (25, emphasis added). For Jake, Singer’s deafness signifies an uncanny, almost superhuman, knowledge, a transhistorical,

⁴⁸ In Richard M. Cook’s *Carson McCullers* (1975), he claims that Singer’s “physical handicap alone speaks so eloquently of human isolation that other solitary individuals find themselves drawn to him as to a reflection of their secret inner selves” (22).

transnational class-conscious wisdom that can see through the false consciousness from which Jake wants to awaken his fellow working-class townspeople.

At later moments Singer's eyes "almost hypnotize[]" Jake, "seem[ing] to understand all that he had meant to say and to hold some message for him" (69). Jake transforms Singer into the "only one in this town who catches what I mean," separating him from those ignorant others who repeatedly spurn and ridicule his communist dogma. Ironically, Jake later betrays his "friendship" with Singer by conflating his dislike of the townspeople with disability terms: not only does he deride those Americans who "don't know" as living in "a crazy house," but he lambasts everyone else as "blind, dumb, and blunt-headed—stupid and mean" (152; 69). Like the critical distance between Singer's actual body and how it appears to Jake as "not seem[ing] quite human," McCullers rends Singer's variegated humanity from those who participate in abstracting his deafness away, stealing his humanity in the process. If McCullers withholds the consequences of this metaphorical substitution in the opening chapters, she unbridles them with Singer's eventual suicide and with it a violent and all-too-human return of the real, a point with which we will conclude.

But how could Singer avoid "not seem[ing] quite human" within such a symbolic system of substitutions? Doctor Copeland, who intellectually idealizes Spinoza and Marx (both of course Jewish), insists that in Singer's face "there was something gentle and Jewish," and that he "was not like other white men" (135). For Copeland, Singer's supposed Marxist sympathies take on meaning specifically because of their shared racial consciousness, a unified vision between the two which "other white men could not" see (135). Not even the doctor's children share with their father the racial consciousness he

grants Singer, an irony captured in Copeland naming his lost prodigal son Karl Marx. While Singer obviously “understands” what it means to be oppressed and abused as a deaf citizen in an ableist society, he too suffers a different kind of subjection when Copeland transforms his deafness into something metaphorical: racial consciousness.

Copeland, distressed that he cannot lead a shift in his Black community’s thinking to enable progressive change, begins seeing the illnesses and even disabilities of his patients as portents of his shame and failings as one of the so-called Talented Tenth. He tells his daughter Portia: “I have a deaf-mute patient... [A] boy of five years of age. And somehow I cannot get over the feeling that I am to blame for his handicap. I delivered him, and after two post-delivery visits of course I forgot about him... When it was finally brought to my attention it was too late... But I have watched him carefully, and it seems to me that if he were normal he would be a very intelligent child” (85-86). Not only does Copeland make the ancient mistake of reading disability as a sign of an inherited moral wrong, mistake, or injustice, as a physical mark of one’s inexcusable misdeeds in the eyes of the gods, but he, too, conflates deafness with ignorance, implying an equivalence between the “abnormal” and the unintelligent. Copeland even internalizes the same troubling language for his own failings, choosing to “sit in a corner like a man who is blind and dumb” to sulk and brood (148). The Eugenic Parenthood for the Negro Race again rears its ugly face. That he links Singer’s silence with racial kinship only makes his reading of deafness all the more contradictory and “abnormal.”

Part of Copeland’s cognitive dissonance with Singer emerges from the narrative return of a thread already weaved in: like the others, the doctor believes Singer understands the “real” him without Singer’s needing to comprehend what he literally

says, means, or does. He idealizes Singer's quietness as a viable humility accessible through Jewish whiteness that can rise above social abuse; a quiet meekness he links with submission when coming from a Black perspective, but with pride and racial sensitivity when coming from Singer's. McCullers again allows irony to do much of the heavy lifting in critiquing Copeland's contradictory view of deafness as a quiet and (paradoxically) meek pride. Copeland despises the "quiet insolence of the white race," fearful that he would "lose his dignity in friendliness" should he co-opt the same disposition in striving for Black justice (84-85). Yet Singer's silence miraculously speaks volumes to the doctor about their shared racial consciousness at the same time. He finds his children's "silence" in response to his intellectual lectures "so strong that he [has] to speak," charging them with "idleness and indifference" when they meet his guidance with only "blank misunderstanding" (89). Yet for Copeland Singer's deafness does not signify "blank misunderstanding" but raises him to the heights of a nearly messianic absent-presence. As McCullers slowly increases narrative pressure, the gap between deafness as metaphor and embodied reality begins to buckle under Copeland's contradictory view of Singer.

Away from Singer's Jewish identity, Biff somewhat caustically labels Singer a "home-made God" (232). "Owing to the fact he was a mute," Biff reasons, "they were able to give him all the qualities they wanted him to have. Yes. But how could such a strange thing come about? And why?" (232). Often stacking ironies on top of one another so that one contradicts or even cancels the other out, McCullers spells out and dispels two processes at once with Biff's reasoning. He diagnoses how Singer's other visitors metaphorize his deafness, "giv[ing] him all the qualities they wanted him to have" (232).

At the same time, McCullers bends Biff's supposed abstention from this process back on itself by undercutting the objectivity of his observation. He, too, falls into the same trap of making Singer's mystical effect on people the ultimate puzzle to square in his mind. Of all the interesting drifters, drinkers, and loners who inhabit the café, none elicit in Biff such a strong curiosity to make sense of their behavior and symbolic place within the town as Singer. While working the nightshift one evening, Biff is pondering his concern over his loveless, failing marriage when "at last his attention rested on the mute at the middle table. He saw Mick edge gradually up to him and at his invitation sit down.... Nobody but a freak like a deaf-mute, cut off from other people, would ask a right young girl to sit down to the table where he was drinking with another man" (134). Inflecting the third-person narration with the free indirect discourse of Biff, the narrator subtly introduces the barkeeper's mixture of jealousy and fascination with his only deaf customer. Considering his reasons for doing so will reveal much about him and his sharp critique of the "home-made God."

Biff uses "freak" in contradictory ways that resist being merely neutral or pejorative, mostly because he has internalized himself as a freak, something over which he feels conflicted and at times deeply ashamed. As an impotent man, Biff is *The Heart's* only other main disabled character. The narrator never makes explicit Biff's complex, fluid sexuality and its possible relationship to his cross-dressing forays when alone in his bedroom. His sexual dysfunction causes an insurmountable rift between himself and his dying wife, Alice. Perhaps because of his disability, Biff declares to Alice that he

liked freaks. He had a special feeling for sick people and cripples. Whenever someone with a harelip or T.B. came into the place he would set him up to beer. Or if the customer were a hunchback or a bad cripple, then it would be whiskey on the house. There was one fellow who had had

his peter and his leg blown off, and whenever he came to town there was a free pint waiting for him. And if Singer were a drinking man he could get liquor at half price any time he wanted it. (22)

Biff's conflicted identification with freakness becomes even more distressing to him and (presumably) to readers when his feelings for young Mick enter the equation. Biff finds himself attracted both physically and characteristically to Mick's adolescent boyishness as it mixes with her young womanhood. At times he waxes philosophical that "[by] nature all people are of both sexes" (132).⁴⁹ His tense attraction to Mick and what he sees as their shared androgynous qualities, however, take on a number of competing registers which will bring us back to the tension Singer's deafness instills in him.

One of these registers for Biff is simultaneously paternal and maternal: "the part of him that sometimes almost wished he was a mother and that Mick and Baby [her brother] were his kids" (132-33). In her interest in absent mother figures in southern fiction, Louise Westling makes the case that the "real maternal figure in [*The Heart*] is the androgynous café keeper Biff Brannon" (110). Yet at other times Biff struggles to suppress and make sense of his attraction to Mick, which has shifted as he has meticulously watched her enter late adolescence behind his cash register. The narrator focalizes through Biff without breaking the third-person: "Mick had grown so much in the past year that soon she would be taller than he was. She was dressed in the red sweater and blue pleated skirt she had worn every day since school started. Now the pleats had come out and the hem dragged loose around her sharp, jutting knees. She was at the age when she looked as much like an overgrown boy as a girl" (132). The

⁴⁹ Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) and *A Room of One's Own* (1929), as well as Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* (1936) and McCullers's *The Member of the Wedding* (1946), immediately spring to mind here as worthwhile modernist comparator texts in pursuing early-century explorations of sexuality and gender roles through the performativity of cross-dressing and the discourse of androgyny.

hyperattention to the physical details of Mick's body and her clothing, as well as her androgyny, set this observation in Biff's lexicon as being seen through his eyes.⁵⁰ More than this, it helps make better sense of how Biff's critique of Singer reveals instead self-critique: not only of his own internalized physical "freak[ness]," but how he symbolically treats deafness as that which allows Singer to sit casually in public at a table with Mick with impunity—something of which he can only daydream and, like his sexual frustrations, which he must refract, redirect, or repress. Singer's deafness allows Biff just the right-sized target for his silenced frustrations. When Biff experiences momentary revulsion that Singer "ask[s] a right young girl to sit down to the table where he was drinking," he exposes his own desire. And in pejoratively claiming "only a freak like a deaf-mute, cut off from other people" would dare such a socially uncouth action, he ironically identifies himself with the very person by whom he ostensibly feels repulsed, but actually envies. His envy, however, can only emerge through a violent abstraction away from lived deafness which enables Biff to identify with and sympathize as a "freak" without having to encounter fully the estrangement of his own complex sexuality and mixed-gender identification.

Wonderfully capturing Biff's voyeuristic gaze, McCullers places us telescopically beside and slightly behind him as we watch Biff watch Jake and Mick who in turn watch Singer at their shared table in the room. Biff notices the two "both kept their eyes on Singer. They talked, and the mute's expression changed as he watched them. It was a funny thing. The reason—was it in them or in him?" (134). With exposed jealousy and an

⁵⁰ See Thomas Fahy's *Freak Shows and the Modern American Imagination* for a reading on the link between the "freak show" and McCullers's interest in using "freak shows" in *Member of the Wedding* to "present the nuclear family as a questionable antidote for unconventional behaviors and desires" (114).

ambivalent identification with Singer, Biff observes that his silent patron “sat very still with his hands in his pockets, and because he did not speak it made him seem superior. What did that fellow think and realize? What did he know?” (134). Transforming the effect Singer’s deafness has on people into an enigmatic mental game to be reasoned through, Biff lies awake at night “turn[ing] over questions and solutions in his mind without satisfaction. The puzzle had taken root in him. It worried him in the back of his mind and left him uneasy. There was something wrong” (134). The proverbial (if silent) elephant of course sits “in the middle of the room.” At times evoking a performed play, *The Heart* hypervisibly stages the bodies of its characters, with most scenes placing Singer “at the table in the middle of the room” (131). Singer eats his dinner and tries to understand his unusually fascinated onlookers; it is the disciples who wrongfully obsess over making sense of the parables they think he and his deafness bestow only to them.

Mick proves perhaps the most nuanced in how she treats Singer’s deafness. Infatuated with the idea of becoming a composer and concert pianist like “MOTSART,” whose name she lovingly graffitis with red and green chalk into a construction wall, Mick longs to express herself nonverbally (*The Heart* 38). She splits her adolescent world into what she calls two rooms: one inside, into which she keeps like a secret her most treasured and untarnished feelings, aspirations, and beliefs; and one outside, a space best understood as full of all the impending realities of adulthood, its responsibilities, demands, and the levies of its emotional taxation. Trying to stave off the loss of her childhood which she recognizes as imminent, Mick seals off and protects what she places in the inside room. As she tells her little brother Bubber: “Some things you just naturally want to keep private. Not because they are bad, but because you just want them secret”

(40). Within the walls of the inside room Mick explores those feelings most dear, affects which (as they do) resist vocalized expression and linguistic signification. She saliently aligns her lack of expression with Singer. McCullers writes:

With her it was like there was two places—the inside room and the outside room. School and the family and the things that happened everyday were in the outside room. Mister Singer was in both rooms. Foreign countries and plans and music were in the inside room. The songs she thought about were there. And symphony... The inside room was a very private place. She could be in the middle of a house full of people and still feel like she was locked up by herself. (163)

Mick keeps in the inside room her love of classical music and the nonverbal language she feels it provides her in expressing and exploring her most intimate thoughts and feelings about her complicated family life. She places there also her longing plans to escape the stifling small-town southern atmosphere she has known since birth. But whereas she denies her family and even Harry Minowitz access into this nearly sacred space, she eventually grants Singer admission, if only metaphorically. Like Biff, Mick at first takes an interest in Singer as a puzzle to solve, but over time he becomes for her nearly indistinguishable from the music which she feels constantly swelling within her. Singer passes like a silent ghost between the walls of Mick's inside and outside rooms, able to exist almost miraculously for her in both.

One summer night while walking aimlessly “with her hands in her pockets” like Singer, Mick hears music from the inside radio of an upper-class home, a device which she longs for but cannot afford. Sneaking beneath the windowsill, Mick sits in that “very fine and secret place” and listens to Beethoven's *Eroica* streaming out of the open window. The symphony causes an emotional and erotically charged reaction, and Mick realizes the “music was her—the real plain her” (118) and links this experience to Singer.

She muses: “The fellow Motsart’s music was in her mind again. It was funny, Mister Singer reminded her of this music.... She wondered what kind of music he heard in his mind that his ears couldn’t hear. Nobody knew. And what kind of things he would say if he could talk. Nobody knew that either” (53). With Mick’s fumbling metaphors and facile assumptions about deafness she tries to grasp her emotions with each likened substitution and comparison. The physical and emotional contours of her experience of the symphony converge when Mick “hit[s] her thighs with her fists” until she cries in pain. She then

whisper[s] some words out loud: “Lord forgiveth me, for I knoweth not what I do.” Why did she think of that? Everybody in the past few years knew there wasn’t any real God. When she thought of what she used to imagine was God she could only see Mister Singer with a long, white sheet around him. God was silent—maybe that was why she was reminded. She said the words again, just as she would speak them to Mister Singer. (119-20)

What begins as a musical presence (“like God strutting”) gives way for Mick into something far less certain, eventually becoming—symbolically, literally—a silent absence of sound as emotion. Reflecting on music’s capacity to express her feelings indirectly and nonverbally, Mick’s musical and deistic metaphors unexpectedly turn to Singer, offering her an immaculate image of the confusing relationship of emotion as a non-expressive absent-presence. She begins conflating through music, its notes and pauses, her adolescent existential crisis, her incapacity to express her emotions meaningfully, and her reckoning with the absence of God with the literal and metaphorical silence of Singer. Singer’s deafness becomes for Mick an impossibly expressive, perfectly resonant metaphor for her feelings, for the “real” Mick Kelly.

Even those unacquainted with Singer cannot help but metaphorize his deafness, repeatedly finding only themselves in the process. “The Jews said that he was a Jew. The merchants along main street claimed he...was a very rich man” (200). As the rumors grow bolder, Singer’s estrangement from his community and himself become more concrete, more personal.⁵¹ “An old Negro woman told hundreds of people that [Singer] knew the ways of spirits come back from the dead.... The rich thought that he was rich and the poor considered him a poor man like themselves. And as there was no way to disprove these rumors they grew marvelous and very real. Each man described the mute as he wished him to be” (223). Of course, the way to disprove these rumors hides silently in plain view: communicate with Singer. His personal card informs anyone who needs to know that he can read lips and that he understands what they say to him; he can also communicate with them in writing. Even if the townspeople cannot or will not sign with him, his litany of expressive skills invalidate claims of inaccessibility. McCullers highlights instead a willful ignorance which enables them, a willfulness which she explicates as not only selfish but remarkably violent. “The desire and drive to create signs,” writes Benjamin Bahan, “is deeply rooted in our fundamental human need for communication.... ‘[To] impede communication is to reduce people to the status of things.’ Deaf people, being of a human variety, have refused to be reduced to the status of things and have found ways to communicate visually and developed visual languages” (84). In a novel more broadly about the failings of all communication types to escape the isolation of the self, it speaks volumes that only Singer of all the characters experiences

⁵¹ Critics and scholars are often curiously silent about this fact. This goes all the way back to the original and reissue reviews of *The Heart*. Mary Sarton’s 1940 review, “Pitiful Hunt for Security,” for example, articulates: “Every one of these people is driven by an idea, by an inner necessity” (20), and yet she entirely ignores Singer in her argument, having seemingly nothing to say about his own “inner necessity.”

critical depression, internalizing an estrangement from community and himself so strong that he ends his own life.⁵² These can be, and for *The Heart* are, the sometimes-fatal consequences of treating deafness metaphorically, and how such a violent rift leads both to something “not quite human” and “something more than human” at the same time and by the same forces (*The Heart* 25; 198).

With each visitor Singer remains open to dialogue, the starting point for community, in subtle but crucial ways that go unnoticed or ignored by his visitors and their incessant monologues masquerading as conversations. Singer notably “always carrie[s] in his pocket” his notepad and informational card (9). He “love[s] to shape words with a pen on paper and he form[s] the letters with as much care as if the paper had been a plate of silver” (213). Singer works in the town as a silver engraver, and in writing notes with his “silver pencil” McCullers draws a proud, if quiet, link in him between his etching work and his communicative abilities (69). At times Singer even tries to initiate a dialogue or some reciprocated communication through gestural expression without the use of his hands, hands which he often stuffs out of view as though ashamed of their significance or trying, at times, to pass to strangers as a speaking and hearing person. When a drunken Jake begins unexpectedly crying in the café from an excess of anger and embarrassment following a fistfight, Biff glances at Singer in a rare moment of genuine, shared communication, one of the few times this gestural exchange happens: “Biff shrugged his shoulders at the mute and raised his eyebrows with a what-to-do? expression. Singer cocked his head on one side” and, noticing Biff’s uncertainty of how

⁵² In his review of the 1966 reissue of *The Heart*, Julian Symons recognizes this anomaly: “Singer, in whom each of the others finds some fulfillment of the longing for intimacy, is himself utterly alone” (“Lonely” 23).

to deal best with the violent drunk, he takes the opportunity to demonstrate his communication skills even further (28). Taking out his silver pencil, Singer writes to Biff what starts the plot's interconnection of the main characters by offering Jake a place to sleep it off.

This gradual constellation of characters arises out of Singer's reaching out to initiate dialogue with a speaking and hearing person, but also out of his selfless concern for others: "If you cannot think of any place for [Jake] to go," he writes Biff, "he can go home with me. First some soup and coffee would be good for him" (28).⁵³ Even while drunk Jake notes Singer's gestures, and how Singer looks at him with "patient interest." When Singer follows this up with yet another means of reaching out, writing "very carefully on a slip of paper, *Are you a Democrat or Republican?*," Jake just stares into Singer's eyes and disregards his question by dismissively saying, "You get it" (69). Almost never does a visitor ask Singer a question, much less a question about himself, even after he explains his range of communicative capabilities. The few questions people do ask mask narcissism. After Singer nurses Jake for the night, Blount asks: "Are there any other deaf-mute people here? [...] You have many friends?" (56). Singer finds the question so foreign and unusual that Jake has to repeat it to him. When he shakes his head no, Jake asks: "'Find it lonesome?' The man shook his head in a way that could have meant either yes or no" (56). Even after Singer puts him up and gives him money, Jake fails to meet Singer half-way in the dialogue by pursuing honest and full answers to his disingenuous and clipped questions. Jake instead feels it "a queer thing to want to talk

⁵³ Louise Gossett conflates Singer's physical disability with pity and a capacity for sympathy—not a particularly productive way of understanding Singer's compassion from the "outside-in," rather than in the reverse (168-69).

with a deaf-mute” (64). McCullers captures the too-little-too-late absence of these faux dialogues only after Singer kills himself. Jake wonders about the only question of importance left to the characters in the closing chapters—“why had Singer wanted to end his life?” (341)—as though the answer were impossible to derive.

At times some misread Singer’s silence as inner-peace or wisdom, but at others it becomes clear what a torment silence can be to him in the absence of a deaf community or friend. Singer’s motivation to suppress his hands from signing betrays him, however, underscoring ironic misreadings: “His hands were a torment to him. They would not rest. They twitched in his sleep, and sometimes he awoke to find them shaping the words in his dreams before his face. He did not like to look at his hands or to think about them” (206). Singer catches himself signing when remembering his former life with Antonapoulos before the state commits him. Though infrequent, Singer finds that when traveling to visit his friend there “was so much to say that his hands could not shape the signs with speed enough” (93).

The unconscious reemergence of his signing hands, stuffed otherwise into his pockets out of sight, points both to Singer’s repression and a damaged internal space to which McCullers ethically denies hearing readers full access. If she falls short elsewhere in her treatment of deafness, one of her unheeded offerings is her refusing to assume she can access Singer’s body and mind as a hearing person. As his body begins revolting and betraying the intentions of his conscious mind, his suddenly expressive hands silently point to the gap between how he has acted and how he wants to act, how he has been seen and how he sees himself. His hands “insist on the disjunction between his prescribed role in the community” and his desire for “mutual communication” (Russell 81). They also

point to those who have surrounded him and to the community by whom he desires to be surrounded. His unintended outbursts of signing to an empty room emphasize his estrangement from the Deaf and hearing community.

With the unexpected outbursts of sign come what I am calling “the return of the real” for Singer, a gradual narrative recognition of how his metaphorized deafness takes on a lived, embodied affective pain that cannot be abstracted away from the body.⁵⁴ For the countless critics who charge McCullers with *using* her characters as easy allegorical placeholders, it is worth thinking about why, in an ironic novel in which all characters relate through their failed relations, lack of community, and fundamental loneliness, only the deaf John Singer takes his own life. If the heart is a lonely hunter, then that loneliness is compounded tenfold for Singer: *not* because his deafness is a stereotypical metaphor about human isolation and communicative inaccessibility, but because the narrative itself performs the violent consequences of what it means to treat the Deaf as an abstraction, as a literary function. No one kills themselves metaphorically. McCullers gambles on her riskiest lure to abstract away Singer’s deafness in her daring readers to rationalize his suicide as merely thematic, rather than seeking to understand his motives and real pain. *The Heart* implicates hearing readers, as much as the characters, in the same substitutive process which pushes Singer to the brink. By the time the gun goes off, it is too late: this loud moment performatively estranges all those who have interacted with Singer from their desires to answer for his parabolic “mystery.” Such are the unconsidered ethics of

⁵⁴ I am aware of Hal Foster’s initial use of this term but am redeploying it here away from the Lacanian sense of the Real in favor of the definition I have given. Foster glosses his coinage as “the return of a traumatic encounter with the real, a thing that resists the symbolic, that is not a signifier at all, which thus exists beyond the *automaton* of the symptoms, beyond ‘the insistence of the signs,’ indeed beyond the pleasure principle (*Return* 138, emphasis in original).

this imperfect novel. He does not kill himself metaphorically but because of a violent dehumanizing process perpetuated by characters and many hearing readers alike. He feels, tragically, the materiality of these metaphors as embodied affects, as abstractions that have nothing to do with his lived experience of deafness. For Singer the return of the real means a return to the material body, and that embodiment is affectively marked by a severing from community—most importantly a Deaf one—and ultimately a self-estrangement indicative of the deepest human depression from which he cannot escape. It is true McCullers did not know deafness herself, but she knew well the loneliness of alterity as a disabled, queer woman caught within a racist, southern patriarchal culture.

Singer's infrequent "outbursts" to Antonopoulos, whether written or signed, detail his gradual estrangement from the Deaf and hearing community, and eventually from himself. McCullers declares in her outline that the principal theme of *The Heart* "lay in the first dozen pages: an individual's compulsion to revolt against enforced isolation and his or her urge to express the self at all costs" (qtd. in McDowell 31). One might recall here Brenda Jo Brueggemann's poignant image of the hypothetical Deaf subject as displaced: "She finds herself placed, then, *between* on many matters of her identity, and she wonders how she feels about this. She notes how that between space is one of longing, yet also one of belonging, and one, too, of limits. She paces in this anxious between space" (2). Reckoning with the compulsive urges of Singer's hands as a bodily revolt against his "enforced isolation," as McCullers renders it, becomes key to understanding the return of the real—the ineradicable embodiment of Singer's affective pain, and its refusal to be abstracted away from the body.

McCullers offers in the first dozen pages a real community between two deaf people, however precarious or romanticized: “In the town there were two mutes, and they were always together.... At home Singer was always talking to Antonapoulos. His hands shaped the words in a swift series of designs. His face was eager and his gray-green eyes sparkled brightly” (1-2). Yet they lose this community when Antonapoulos’s increasing cognitive impairment turns legally insane. When he begins stealing from stores, having violent outrages, and masturbating in public, his cousin commits him to the “state insane asylum” (9). Antonapoulos has often been seen as one of McCullers’s characters most resistant to totalizations, in part because she offers so few details about him. Even a passive gloss, particularly from the perspective of deafness, suggests McCullers again shops here in narrative prosthesis: by having Antonapoulos “descend into madness” from the outset she can artificially isolate Singer from others and treat Antonapoulos one-dimensionally at the same time. She can “use” the cognitively impaired Greek, in effect, to shift Singer into the “center hub” of her narrative wheel once she has deprived him of a Deaf community, as well as his possible former partner (*The Heart* 211). By all accounts E. M. Forster would suggest McCullers portrays Antonapoulos as a “flat” character (103). She also sets him within a consistent tradition in modernist southern Gothic fiction by sending a disruptive or troublesome character to the asylum.⁵⁵ Antonapoulos indeed perfectly caricatures the “feble-mindedness” eugenicists feared were driving national decay, linking it “as a direct cause of poverty, crime, sexual deviance, and moral degeneration” (Carey 56). But the inexplicability of his sudden insanity takes on fuller meaning beyond narrative prosthesis when considered alongside Singer’s “inexplicable”

⁵⁵ Faulkner is a prime example of this. See both Benjy in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and Darl in *As I Lay Dying* (1930). My thanks to Mark Whalan for pointing this out.

suicide. Despite Antonapoulos's troubling flatness, the *senseless* eruption of insanity can, to some extent, be read against the grain. It speaks once again to the ineradicable embodiment of disability, to its resistance to control, logocentrism, symbolic logic, and theoretical abstraction. McCullers undeniably renders Antonapoulos one-dimensionally. Yet what feels unrealistic about Antonapoulos's sudden insanity may also mask our deeper revolt against the all-too-real material body, against the uncomfortable hyperrealism that disabilities can arrive at any time for anyone; that its arrival cannot be rationalized away symbolically; and that with our resistant reactions to its senselessness comes the return of the real.

The return of the real for Singer, on the other hand, merely *seems* inexplicable at first glance with its dramatic narrative surprise. The brief, final section of *The Heart* finds Biff, Mick, Copeland, and Jake seeking personal answers to the same question: "why had Singer wanted to end his life?" (341). Their failure to answer meaningfully and their raising the incredulous question at all says much about McCullers's sharp critique of their treatment of Singer, of their unwillingness to consider how it might have been to be the only deaf individual in the town, and of the violence they each perpetuated against his deafness. Yet unlike Singer's visitors, McCullers grants us access to his relationship with Antonapoulos, as well as to the compulsive urges of his hands to express his bodily revolt against the emotional pain of his estrangement. When he "suddenly went away without warning" to visit his now-institutionalized friend, the others cannot "imagine why he left like this" (92). "When his visitors came and saw the room empty they went away with hurt surprise," and when Singer returns, "[e]ach one of them wanted to know where he had been and why he did not let them know about his plans" (92; 94). Their reactions

foreshadow their self-consumed responses to his eventual suicide as well. His voyages to visit his deaf friend instill in him an excitement otherwise unseen in Singer, who spends “all of his summer vacation in the town where Antonapoulos was being kept in the asylum. For months he had planned this trip and imagined about each moment they would have together” (92). Singer longs to express himself to Antonapoulos. This should not come as a surprise given how the speaking and hearing community uses and abuses him as a therapeutic means to selfish ends. The critique does not rest merely in their inability or unwillingness to sign, but in their incessant failure to share one of any number of other communication methods at Singer’s disposal. They fail, in short, to engender a reciprocal relationship at all, willfully choosing a cognitive dissonance which substitutes Singer’s supposed lack of apprehensive understanding for his supposed metaphorical understanding of their “real” selves. By failing to initiate a dialogue with him *they* ultimately “enforce” the “isolating” silence of McCullers’s outline, a silence against which Singer’s hands revolt. The revolt of his hands to express himself in the face of an enfeebling and enforced silence which erases his experience manifests in two ways. At times he finds his hands expressively signing without his awareness as though “convulsively” revolting when alone. At other times his hands silently express his feelings by “shap[ing] the signs with loving precision” by writing letters to, and signing conversations with, his only (deaf) friend.

Singer realizes that his visitors think he has uncanny access to their real, authentic selves in ways that elude even them. He also comprehends that their near-religious interest in him operates solely by reinforcing his silence through ceaseless monologue. He internalizes his alterity even further, having somehow to square in his mind the

incredible significance his deafness has taken on in the town with a lived experience throughout his life marked instead by ostracization, shame, and alienation. Once his hands begin tormenting him, he stops keeping meticulous care of them, care which he had insisted on until then. Though his work as an engraver is messy, he now “only scrub[s] them roughly with a brush two times a day and stuff[s] them back into his pockets. When he walked...he would crack the joints of his fingers and jerk them until they ached. Or he would strike the palm of one hand with the fist of the other” (206). Singer starts redirecting the symbolic violence he can now see being perpetuated against his deafness into a real, material outlet: he starts, like Mick, to beat himself by turning his expressive hands against his own body with his fists. His disconnect from himself, his visitors, and even his idolized Antonapoulos converge in the “convulsions” of his hands, hands marked again by shame. While sometimes he strikes himself, at other times

when he was alone and his thoughts were with his friend his hands would begin to shape the words before he knew about it. Then when he realized he was like a man caught talking aloud to himself, it was almost as though he had done some moral wrong. The shame and the sorrow mixed together and he doubled his hands and put them behind him. But they would not let him rest. (206)

McCullers expresses Singer’s estrangement from himself and others through shame, a shame which she ironically details through a hearing analogy: “like a man caught talking aloud to himself.” If the analogy implies embarrassment in the out-of-body experience of talking aloud to one’s self, for Singer this experience causes “shame” and “sorrow” to “mix[] together.” Shame because of his oralist background and the social markings of his deafness, and sorrow because he now begins enforcing his own silence, an enforced isolation from the self which had begun with his visitors’ monologues.

Unable to express himself, “alone,” as he says, “in an alien land,” and now enforcing his own silence, Singer internalizes his alterity to the brink of complete estrangement. In a final effort of revolt, he begins writing Antonapoulos letters even though he knows his friend cannot read them. If McCullers caricatures Antonapoulos as “the moron,” she paradoxically complicates this representation with Singer’s insistence on his friend’s full immutable humanity. His last letter cannot casually be described as a suicide note, but his awareness of its complete lack of recipient does open it up to a critical set of questions regarding its role. The longest and last of these letters makes up the single largest passage from his perspective, and also *The Heart*’s only non-dialogue section that breaks third person. He also uses first-person plural pronouns for the only time, all of which draw a considerable amount of attention to his composition:

My Only Friend:

I see from our magazine that the Society meets this year at a convention in Macon... Remember we always planned to attend one of the conventions but we never did. I wish now that we had... But of course I could never go without you. They will come from many states and they will all be full of words and long dreams from the heart... [But my] hands have been still so long that it is difficult to remember how it is. (213-14)

After detailing his shame over beginning to forget his own language and emphasizing his isolation through the first-person plural, Singer goes on to describe “the four people I told you about when I was there” (214). He writes that they “are all very busy people,” but that “I do not mean that they work at their jobs all day and night but that they have much business in their minds always that does not let them rest” (214). Biff, he says, “is different” because “[he] watches” (215). Jake “I think is crazy... He thinks he and I have a secret together but I do not know what it is” (215). He likes that Mick will “come and see me. She comes all the time now that I have a radio for them. She likes music. I wish I

knew what it is she hears. She knows I am deaf but she thinks I know about music” (215). Copeland he tells “is sick with consumption” and talks continually about “Freedom” (215). He then dispels all sense of community: “[You] would think when they are together they would be like those of the [Deaf] Society who meet at the convention in Macon this week. But it is not so. They all came to my room at the same time today. They sat like they were from different cities. They were even rude, and you know how I have always said that to be rude and not attend to the feelings of others is wrong” (216). Readers’ sudden access to Singer’s confession reveals the embodied pain that his visitors’ symbolic accounts, and the narrative’s “parables,” have concealed until now.

Singer seems to call out to himself in writing through the same meticulous self-awareness that now estranges him: “It has been five months and twenty-one days now. All of that time I have been alone without you... If I cannot come to you soon *I do not know what...* I am not meant to be alone and *without you who understand*” (216-17, emphasis added). Much has been made of *The Heart*’s perhaps supreme irony that Singer, the one supposedly with uncanny knowledge and access to a so-called real, authentic self, falls prey to the same idolization, only with Antonapoulos. To spell it out: Antonapoulos of course cannot understand much of anything by the time of his institutionalization. Yet to “understand” Singer’s letter as merely a final narrative irony atop ironies, and to ignore the blatant warning signs of his affective pain, is to be complicit once again in a symbolic logic which ignores the return of the real, even in a moment of crisis. No amount of metaphorical accounting for Singer’s idol Antonapoulos can abstract away the affective pain of his estrangement from himself, his community, and his deafness. He does not kill himself, as I have said, metaphorically. If anything,

Singer's idolization of Antonopoulos only momentarily staves off the return of the real, a violent return which ends with his self-inflicted conclusion. If the idol of Biff, Mick, Copeland, and Jake saves them from their alienation even in the aftermath of his suicide, Singer's idol fails him when the weighty burden of his deafness in the eyes of hearing others becomes too much to bear. Singer's romanticization of his lost deaf friend only makes him more human, more real, not an object of ridicule. And while the others enforce his communicative silence, notably only Singer expresses the moral center of *The Heart*: that "not attend[ing] to the feelings of others is wrong." None in fact attends to his. In the uncritical move to read only irony in Singer's misreading of Antonopoulos, we miss how McCullers separates him from, rather than conflates him with, the hearing disciples that flock to his deafness.

Singer's yearning to escape his estrangement hits a breaking point while visiting Antonopoulos for the last time. He recognizes his inability to communicate with his friend in writing or through sign, but his need for community remains so strong that he settles for a silent and "submerged communication" when "they were together in the flesh" (322). Upholding his idol as long as possible, Singer exposes his need to be "united" with anything outside himself (322). Antonopoulos's unexpected death steals with it Singer's last meaningful connection. Leaving the asylum for the small town in which his friend had been kept, he aimlessly finds his way past the windows and open door of a billiard hall. Recalling her opening line as though the community of the past could be regained, McCullers writes that in front of Singer there "were three mutes inside and they were talking with their hands together. All three of them were coatless. They wore bowler hats and bright ties. Each of them held a glass of beer in his left hand. There

was a certain brotherly resemblance between them” (325). Distraught over the news of Antonapoulos’s death, Singer tries to steady his sadness by projecting outward onto the first group of deaf people he has met since his friend’s institutionalization over a year ago.

As he feared in his letters to Antonapoulos, he struggles to sign the words quickly after being severed from signing for so long. “Then clumsily he formed a word of greeting. He was clapped on the shoulder. A cold drink was offered. They surrounded him and the fingers of their hands shot out like pistons as they questioned him” (325). Unlike the pool players, Singer has slowly become devoid of personality as his visitors have carved away his sense of self, substituting there the many symbolic roles he has played since Antonapoulos’s absence. McCullers captures his vacancy with brutal understatement:

He told his own name and the name of the town where he lived. After that he could think of nothing else to tell about himself. He asked if they knew Spiros Antonapoulos. They did not know him. Singer stood with his hands dangling loose... He was so listless and cold that the three mutes in the bowler hats looked at him queerly. And when they had paid for the rounds of beers and were ready to depart they did not suggest that he join them.
(325)

Having to reckon with his now complete literal and metaphorical estrangement—from the hearing and Deaf community, and from himself—Singer holds true to the threat in his confessional note to Antonapoulos. After he returned home to his room, he “drank a glass of iced coffee and smoked a cigarette. Then when he had washed the ashtray and the glass he brought out a pistol from his pocket and put a bullet in his chest” (326). The return of the real returns us to Singer’s materially affected body at the moment when

metaphorical understandings of his deafness have estranged him from even his own embodiment. *The Heart* is a worthy offering.

CHAPTER III

IMPOTENCE, PROSTHESES, AND THE BRITISH CRISIS OF MASCULINITY:

WYNDHAM LEWIS

“Man has, as it were, become a kind of prosthetic God.”
— Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*

“All the lot. Their spunk is gone dead... I tell you, every generation breeds a more rabby generation, with India rubber tubing for guts and tin legs and tin faces. Tin people! It's all a steady sort of bolshevism just killing off the human thing, and worshipping the mechanical thing.” — D. H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*

As modernism's high dark priest of pricks and kicks, Wyndham Lewis spent the majority of his waking days blasting rather than blessing the world around him. An *enfant terrible* who lived to scorn and upset, Lewis to many represents the most repugnant and irredeemable of a bygone version of modernism, the least famous (or most happily forgotten) of the so-called men of 1914, the modernist old boys' coterie defined no less by Lewis himself.⁵⁶ Given his elitism and a trademark hostility best described as misanthropic, it comes with genuine surprise to find in his career any complex, illuminating encounters with disability. In offering an historical counter-reading which necessitates a textual and contextual closeness I am calling uncomfortable, it is Lewis who perhaps best captures the anxiety, discomfort, and instability at the core of what it means to disable modernism. Lewis in many ways exemplifies the litmus test of what a disabled modernism needs to confront head on.

⁵⁶ While Lewis first placed James Joyce, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and himself within this elite inner circle of “high” modernists, it was Hugh Kenner's seminal *The Pound Era* (1971) that was primarily responsible for perpetuating the term into the later century in the academy.

This chapter argues that *Blast* (1914-1915) and *Snooty Baronet* (1932) detail how the disabled male body was rhetorically weaponized in contradictory ways within the British crisis of masculinity, being largely rejected before the war as impotent, but ultimately redeployed and for some even championed through the prosthesis in the war's violent wake. Lewis exposes, in its complexity and discomfort, how the historical grouping of masculinity, impotence, virility, and prostheses concomitantly rewrote one another in early century Britain. For all his shortcomings—or perhaps more accurately because of them—Lewis grants valuable insight into two historical developments within the era's so-called crisis of masculinity, each intersecting with disability and building on one another throughout the chapter. First, he helps us better recognize how the period's emasculating rhetoric of impotence became tethered to a heteromascularity viewed as in sharp decline to the point of national “degeneration” in the opening decades of the century, the concern of the first half of this chapter. Lewis himself partook in such practices. Second, he helps us understand how this masculine crisis could then expand, paradoxically, to incorporate the prosthesis as a gendered symbol of strength and vigor rather than weakness or a deficit for some returning British soldiers. When combining these as a literary counter-history, Lewis helps witness an interwar rewriting of disabled masculinity not as invalid but to be reclaimed as dynamic and denaturalizable. Despite being able-bodied for much of his life, Lewis's unexpected prescience in reclaiming a positive prosthetic masculinity prepares part of today's crip theory, or that which “question[s] the order of things, considering how and why it is constructed and naturalized; how it is embedded in complex economic, social, and cultural relations; and how it might be changed” (McRuer 2). The terms and history of the chapter's first half

then serve as the foundation for the reading of *Snooty Baronet*, an understudied novel told from a disabled perspective through which Lewis wages an anti-behaviorist critique against essentialized and constricting constructions of masculinity.⁵⁷ This concluding reading of *Snooty* thus argues that Lewis finds in the prosthesis the effective means to imagine a radically denaturalized “modern” masculinity, identifiable in part through disability, that seeks to reclaim individual autonomy for itself.

If the largely symbolic threat of impotence suggested the undoing of heteromascularity, the postwar prosthesis in many ways promised to heal and make whole the masculine fracturing that the war had made literal. Yet this shift did not come without considerable revision to the rhetoric of “invalidity” surrounding disabled masculinities. Such a history is tense, dense, and at times upsettingly offensive. But from it we can review not only how modernism interacted with disability. We can also consider how this moment contributed to an emerging rhetoric of a reclaimed masculinized prosthesis still seen in part today.⁵⁸ *Blast* and *Snooty Baronet*, in other words, lend a microcosmic view of the battlefield over which heteromascularity was partially fought during and after the war. Lewis helps us, finally, not only expand the politics of British masculinity under rapid revision; he also gives unexpected insight into the under-recognized political role disability played in this history, further illuminating the key invisible presence disability maintains in both modernism and its scholarship.

⁵⁷ It is worth mentioning that by 1940, Lewis only considered three of his books “fiction”: *Tarr*, *Snooty Baronet*, and *The Revenge for Love*. While the first and last of these have received their share of scholarship, *Snooty* remains, it seems to me, unnecessarily marginalized as a minor work. See Lewis, *Letters* 273.

⁵⁸ For a view of the continued rhetorical power of a highly sexualized prosthesis when attached to athletic male bodies in particular, see David Serlin’s introduction to *Phallacies: Historical Intersections of Disability and Masculinity*, especially his reading of a men’s underwear advertisement featuring disabled US Marine Alex Minsky.

Lewis continues to provoke, irritate, annoy, and above all offend, no doubt much to his delight and contrarian credo. His tireless antagonism seeks less to rally supporters to himself than to call into question the received ideological “truths” of the world he inhabits. Though almost certain to arouse further suspicion, we could accurately set Lewis’s self-fashioning as first the Enemy and then the Tyro within a broader philosophical tradition best exemplified by Nietzsche and the early Derrida.⁵⁹ Like them, the verve of his skepticism and distrust often borders on contemptuous and seem to know no bounds. As the Enemy, Lewis assumed a related position to “a Nietzschean moralist” attempting “to distance himself from society, constitute himself as an opposite, and thereby act on society dialectically” (Ayers 194). Lewis was also fiercely antiwar and abhorred physical violence for its own sake. He took great pleasure nonetheless in aiming his violent intellectual attacks against communist and, later, fascist efforts to reforge the world. He often did so though with the goal of denaturalizing and then reconstructing the theoretically autonomous liberal individual that has come, in many ways, in part to define modernity in the West.

None of which intends to suggest that Lewis was a humanist, even by the most capacious definitions, although a few intrepid scholars have attempted to justify just this.⁶⁰ A simple passing glance at the litany of charges levied against him from critics old and new brings his aggressive antihumanism back to the fore, a rhetorical posture that likely offends and perturbs even more today than it did a century ago. At the same time,

⁵⁹ See Shane Weller’s “Nietzsche among the Modernists: The Case of Wyndham Lewis” for an overview of the comingling of these two iconoclasts.

⁶⁰ See, especially, Stephen Sicari’s chapter on *The Revenge for Love* in *Modernist Humanism and the Men of 1914* for an argument about a “humanist turn” in late Lewis.

our reactionary aversion to what looks like his no holds barred intolerance often obscures yet another Lewisian propensity: his remarkable skill for contradicting himself, as though he sought in the neither/nor space of indeterminacy the means to propel his self-appointed role as the Enemy of bourgeois modernism indefinitely. Competing iterations—contradictory self-constructions—of the “real” Wyndham Lewis vie for primacy.

As Hugh Kenner first noted in his early study of Lewis just before Lewis’s death, not only must any engagement with the author of *Tarr* and the painter of *Timon of Athens* struggle either to keep the artist from the art or conflate them; even within the art one finds competing Lewises.⁶¹ His contradictory personae riddle his halfbaked and hasty political tracts of the 1930s with misogyny, for example, while at other times literally *blissing* feminism, particularly of a militant style.⁶² His is a kind of self-divisibility that underscores not a so-called fascist modernism bent on molding the world into the image of its sanctified forms, but in fact a modernism bent on *destabilizing* essentialized forms of being in the act of their remaking, in the creation and re-creation afforded through artistic mastery. Taken from any approach for critique, a similar pattern of contradictions emerges.⁶³ Lewis, to take another flash example, at times displays many markings of anti-

⁶¹ Interest in these competing Lewises is nothing new. See Kenner’s “Note” to his 1954 *New Directions* study, often taken as the first major critical reappraisal of Lewis. See also William H. Pritchard’s opening chapter to his early biography of Lewis as well.

⁶² Even Lewis admitted to the slapdash style of his polemics: “The pamphlets are written just as one talks, and nearly as fast as talking. To write they are often a great bore—they are usually quite carelessly written” (qtd. in Meyers 200). For a critique of how Lewis smuggles a “patronizing” (358) view even into his expressions of admiration for feminists, see Erich Hertz.

⁶³ Fredric Jameson understands Lewis’s contradictions in terms of class, particularly as indicative of a petty bourgeois false consciousness: Lewis “lived a grinding contradiction between his aggressive critical, polemic and satiric impulses and his unwillingness to identify himself with any determinate class position or ideological commitment” (*Fables* 17).

Semitic paranoia, uncomfortably rampant from the vantage of history on both sides of the Atlantic during the interwar years, especially in the long shadow of the Depression. He then also goes on to write an entire book denouncing anti-Semitism—but not without christening it first with the intentionally sardonic title, *The Jews: Are They Human?* What to do with such a paradoxical vortex of a person, and why bother?

In this same contradictory vein, the gravitational pull of the Lewis-as-Fascist nexus feels inescapable, and so here seems the necessary place to summarize quickly this convoluted context, as it too demonstrates Lewis's many competing poses. His contrarian love of playing with fire eventually scorched Lewis badly, leaving him to tend for the rest of his life to his most infamous and, for many, fatal error. By the time of *Snooty Baronet* in the early thirties Lewis's paranoia over what he believed was soon to be an inevitable global revolution of mass bloodshed had reached its zenith, correctly fearing that 1914-1918 (during which he served as an artillery officer) was only a warmup for the "unavoidable" total war he anticipated would soon follow (Lewis, *Letters* 316).

Imperative to remember is that Lewis was defiantly anti-communist and considerably outspoken about defending civil liberties of all kinds.⁶⁴ He equally denounced monarchical rule and, coming from a lower-class family, harbored a life-long distrust of (some would say a grudge against) inherited wealth and power. Some evidence indicates that Lewis would not have contested an oligarchy—assuming of course the leaders were gifted artists such as himself. But if we were today to name Lewis's political "position," assuming it were not riddled with contradictions and in constant flux, it would likely be

⁶⁴ Leon Surette has argued, overly simplistically, that Lewis, Eliot, and Pound's anti-Marxism followed from their fear that it "threatened individual liberty, and they believed individual liberty to be the *sine qua non* of true artistic achievement" (9).

libertarian, one whose politics depended on an unflagging if questionable meritocratic logic.⁶⁵

The core of Lewis's paranoia in the early thirties housed a conviction that liberal democratic republics could never survive the feared oncoming political and military onslaught, and that in the end they would be forced to submit to either communist or fascist rule. In what is surely among the biggest of historical errors in Anglophone literary history, he believed in the early thirties that in helping solidify an anti-communist front and in restoring economic and political stability to Western Europe the recently elected chancellor Hitler could help avoid a second disastrous war, the war-weary Lewis's primary concern. This led to his now-inconceivable public statement in 1931 that he thought Hitler would be "a man of peace." All of this after spending only a couple of weeks in Berlin (even the initial reviews of his report of Nazism found it "poorly researched" [Rainey 174]) and not having read *Mein Kampf*. Upon reading Lewis's book, Goebbels in fact later found it sufficiently critical enough of Nazism that he had it "pulped and burned" (Meyers 190). As Jeffrey Meyers has detailed, Lewis's "description of Hitler had almost no relation to the real man." The publication "revealed not that he sympathized with Fascism, but that he grossly misunderstood its true nature" (189), as Lewis would later lament: "fascism—once I understood it—left me colder than communism" (qtd. in Ayers 199). Lewis's flippant posture rightly outraged the British reading public, and he publicly denounced fascism thereafter, chiding in particular its fetishization of violence. Hitler, as he wrote to British sculptor Eric Kennington, is "that most detestable of things[,] a chronic and unteachable little militarist, who just would

⁶⁵ I am not the first to want to place Lewis in this camp. Charles Sumner has suggested that what he calls Lewis's "ego armoring" was put toward "libertarian ends" (29).

have his good second war, because it is for such hideous childishness that such men live. Nor can they understand how anybody else can do otherwise than love violence too” (Lewis, *Letters* 324). Even in Lewis’s opportunity for atonement, though, he somehow found a way of getting a jab in at his old rival Filippo Marinetti, whom he labeled the “father of Fascism,” and whose body itself, according to Lewis, held the far-right ideology’s “true innards” with his futurist “outpourings in praise of speed and force” (Lewis, *Letters* 310).

The most important of Lewis’s contradictions, though, come in his approaches to gender. While he rejected what he saw as the gender primitivism of D. H. Lawrence, among his most cherished of punching-bags, Lewis could then himself espouse a scarcely different ideal of Men and Women dangerously close to that of the author of *Sons and Lovers*. Yet as exciting recent feminist work like that of Erin Carlston has shown, Lewis’s gender politics at their most radical expose a thinker struggling to get outside of the typical binary mode historically available to him and into some future in which masculinity in particular could be denaturalized and pluralized. In what presumably might call for a double take for those only distantly familiar with the Enemy, Carlston goes so far as to approximate Lewis’s gender politics in the interwar period to the “radical anti-essentialism of third-wave feminism” (“Women, Masculinity” 126). What follows adds disability to Carlston’s claim that by the later portion of his career Lewis “is much less interested in salvaging masculinity than in interrogating and reworking the categories of masculine and feminine altogether” (“Acting the Man” 774). The three sections that follow retrace Lewis’s progression to the interwar period and beyond by reconsidering the well-known British crisis of masculinity largely through Lewis’s

vantage. In doing so the chapter identifies the key under-recognized role disability rhetoric played in this heteromasculine crisis, first through a cultural obsession with impotence and degeneration primarily before the war, and then through the language of prosthetic veteran rehabilitation after it.

Impotence, Virility, Degeneration: *Blast* and the British Crisis of Masculinity

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a modernist man in possession of a good fortune must be impotent. Considering the incredible literary production of 1922, the year of course seen as the central locus of modernism's traditional history, it comes as a surprise that one could also ironically shorthand it as the year of literary impotence. 1922 finds Joyce and Eliot—half of Lewis's men of 1914—staging impotence as a core theme of *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*, both in the symbolic cuckolding of Leopold Bloom and in the eunuch Fisher King of the Grail legend.⁶⁶ The burgeoning of this literary sexual disability has overshadowed (and often overdetermined) modernist hermeneutics ever sense. Perhaps inescapably in literary representations of disability, modernist explorations of impotence and, as we will see later, the prosthesis oscillate between the literal and the symbolic in similar ways exposed by Carson McCullers in the previous chapter. Occasionally modernism *does* render impotence strictly within a metaphoric, symbolic, or allegorical realm, like the verminous Gregor Samsa shrinking to

⁶⁶ There are, of course, numerous iterations of the Fisher King and the legend of the Holy Grail. Some interpret the king as having been badly injured in the thigh or the groin; others, that the wound operates euphemistically for a literal loss of the king's penis; others still as a symbolic impotence because of which he cannot reproduce, leading to his kingdom becoming a barren wasteland. Of the various iterations of the king's phallic disability, see, among others, Chrétien de Troyes's *Perceval, the Story of the Grail* (1180), Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* (1210), and Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485). In relation to modernism, the biggest influence on the Grail legend is Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* (1919), a text to which Eliot makes extensive reference in *The Waste Land*.

Kafkaesque insignificance and powerlessness in 1915, or like the later narrators of Beckett's *Trilogy* (1951-1953), whose bodies decay into pieces at a horrifyingly expeditious rate. Transatlantically, the symbolic potency of literary impotence quickly finds its American modernist counterparts, most famously in *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), wherein the Great War has rendered veteran Jake Barnes literally impotent, forever deferring his competing attraction to, and repulsion from, Lady Brett Ashley. Fitzgerald, too, clearly found the figure too symbolically resonant not to try his own hand as well with his autobiographically charged portrait of the almost unbelievably named Dr. Dick Diver. Dick's marital problems with his likely schizophrenic wife (of course modeled on Zelda Fitzgerald) lead to the famous physical and psychological breakdown of their tortured relationship in *Tender Is the Night* (1934). Of all the modernist texts which feature impotent men though, none perhaps match the pains *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) takes to foil the war paralyzed and sexually impotent Clifford, "immobile" in his wheelchair, with the untamable virility of his gamekeeper, Oliver Mellors, the titular lover of Lady Chatterley. Impotence clearly marks modernist literary masculinities. Largely unheeded, though, is how this literature emerged from a cultural milieu in which impotence found itself a key concern of public discourses ranging from the political and aesthetic to the scientific and nationalistic.

Reexamining this cultural milieu aides in revealing the structural narrative load modernism often tasks disabilities like impotence with carrying to render itself legible. Yet as McCullers has already helped us see, once we re-view (and review) disability's competing and often uncomfortable functions within modernism, it becomes impossible to unsee; the exception nears the rule. Modernism, as I have claimed before, has *always*

been disabled. Central to disabling modernism is an assumption that the latter in part constitutes the former. We are only now beginning to see and, more importantly, to reckon with their interrelation. Modernist literature of course has not changed. Changes in how we understand literary disability and the body's innumerable hieroglyphics instead call forth a rereading of the modernist body of literature and its embodied discontents.

Modernism's fixation with impotence developed within a broader historical and often eugenic concern over a sense of national degeneration, especially before the Great War. Even after the war the Eugenics Education Society deployed their influence where possible to convince legislators that servicemen dismissed from the military due to illness should be denied pensions (Bourke 59). Early century anxieties over national degeneracy cannot be severed from the era's so-called crisis of masculinity, a crisis which lies at the heart of the period's obsession with impotence. Especially before the war, public debates concerning a crisis of masculinity came largely as a reaction formation to the rapid political shifts in gender and sexuality which shaped it on both sides of the Atlantic. Yet so too did this historical reaction later expand to repurpose a postwar masculinity that emerged through its revised relation to prostheses as well.

By the *fin de siècle*, dandy aesthetes and first-wave feminists were brazenly subverting the British stiff upper lip of heteronormative masculinity, a performative pose whose idealized status as patriarchal posture continues to hold cultural gravitas today.⁶⁷ No popular figure transgressed gender and sexual norms from a masculine perspective

⁶⁷ Elaine Showalter's *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* has remained an influential text in discussions over the curious cultural upheavals commonly brought about by centennials, particularly the historical reflexivity about past and present they call forth. See especially her chapter on the Wilde trials.

more than the dandy aesthete, epitomized for the British public by Oscar Wilde. Wilde turned the stoicism that had defined Victorian masculinity and sexual mores on its head, flaunting a liberated and playful flamboyance in ways that, while decades ahead of its time, scandalized the bourgeois public and led to the Irish writer's highly publicized legal trials. In the wake of these trials, "effeminacy" became the galvanizing word of the moment, one which public parlance had begun conflating with sodomy, or what Wilde during his trial famously euphemized as "the love that dare not speak its name." The literary dandy aesthete became synonymous with a homosexuality which signaled for normative England a degeneracy and cultural decay running (apologies) wild. Following the scandalous trials which saw him criminalized for "posing," as one paper tellingly misprinted, as a "Somdomite" [*sic*] for Lord Alfred Douglas, Wilde thereafter came to signify "a host of cultural practices" concerning male sexuality, including "the criminal, the dandy, the Aesthete, and the sodomite, fusing all these figures and instantiating them in one body, such that in the public mind, each came to imply the others" (Hickman, *Geometry* 52-53).

Modernist hostility toward femininity and effeminacy, directed in turns at suffragettes, "new women," and the coded-homosexual dandy aesthete, has retained a ubiquitous foothold in critical revaluations of it. In "Lewis's diction," writes Miranda Hickman, to be modern is "to establish a masculinity predicated on exorcism of such forms of femininity and effeminacy, which represent weakness and degeneration" (Hickman, "Gender" 120). Many feminist reappraisals have theorized the gender dynamics of modernism's supposed rejection of mass culture—here, the middlebrow and

popular; there, the “domestic” fictions like those of Virginia Woolf.⁶⁸ Modernism’s central male practitioners commonly viewed such cultural products as feminine and effeminizing. Yet even in shifting from the literary, artistic, and philosophical movement to the broader cultural sphere one finds a concurrent trepidation over the perceived public threat to heteronormative masculinity, a threat commonly expressed in the public imaginary as not just effeminate but embodying a disabling impotence of degeneration. Lewis, Eliot, and Pound in fact share a vivid anxiety over a decline in what social theorists of the time generally labelled the racial or racialist tradition, with race being then commonly equated more or less with what today we would generally call nationality. As Pound famously pronounced, such (male) artists needed to become “the antennae of the race” (297).

Paul Peppis has helpfully classified this sense of British tradition as the “racialist view of nationality,” tied to the period’s preoccupation with national character—including its perceived degenerative decline. As an “internal and essential category” of the period, this view follows from “an ‘heredity’ that fundamentally defines the character of individuals of a particular ‘race’ or nation” (Peppis, *Literature* 17). Imported German texts like Max Nordau’s *Entartung* (translated as *Degeneration* in 1895) and Oswald Spengler’s *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (1926’s *The Decline of the West*) captured the transatlantic anxiety over an assumed cultural decay bound up with the crisis of masculinity, observable in the popular publication success of these otherwise academic

⁶⁸ 1986 in particular saw this feminist critique rapidly develop in seminal texts like Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *No Man’s Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, as well as Andreas Huyssen’s *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*. Rita Felski’s *The Gender of Modernity* also remains a core text. Key, too, to these developments has been the work of those like Cassandra Laity and Bonnie Kime Scott. Of Laity and Scott see, respectively, “H.D. and A.C. Swinburne: Decadence and Modernist Women’s Writing” and *Gender in Modernism: New Geographies, Complex Intersections*, respectively.

debates. By the 1930s across the Atlantic, for example, “conservative critics had already sounded a note of fear over what they perceived to be the erosion of masculinity among American men during the work shortages of the Great Depression” (Serlin, “Engineering” 46). In England, the most commonly cited such example followed the beginning of the Second Boer War during which masses of volunteers were rejected for service due to being unfit. Of the 20,000 volunteers, only 14,000 passed muster, prompting alarmist discussions of waning “imperial prowess and national efficiency” (Bourke 13).

Texts like Nordau’s and Spengler’s bolstered a public perception of nationalist decline across Europe in part by scrutinizing the rise of Decadent art. A rowdy new wave of liberalism equally found itself the target of national scorn when suffragettes took to the streets, at times defacing and destroying museum artworks they saw as emblematic of exclusionary spaces under patriarchal rule.⁶⁹ Often backed by the pseudoscientific logic of eugenics in ways that echo those considered in Chapters II and IV, sexologists took aim at an “inversion effect” which charged the “unnatural ‘masculinization’ of modern women and the ‘effeminization’ of modern men” with significantly destabilizing British masculinity (Hickman, *Geometry* 55). As Lisa Tickner has influentially shown:

It was widely asserted that “masculine” women and “feminine” men were among the indices of social degeneration, that women pursuing emancipated activities in higher education or the professions impaired their fertility and maternal capabilities, that the birth rate was falling among the middle classes who would be swamped by the eugenically inferior inheritance of the lower orders, and that enfranchising women

⁶⁹ Though Lewis blesses suffragettes in *Blast*, writing “WE ADMIRE YOUR ENERGY,” he adds what is to him an important caveat in light of recent public acts of artist destruction and defacement: “WE MAKE YOU A PRESENT OF OUR VOTES. ONLY LEAVE WORKS OF ART ALONE.... IF YOU DESTROY A GOOD WORK OF ART you are destroying a greater soul than if you annihilated a whole district of London. LEAVE ART ALONE, BRAVE COMRADES!” (151-52, capitals in original).

would compromise the virility of the state... (170)

Even in the late nineteenth century, though, some forward-looking discussions of gender coupled with those of sexuality to emphasize their points of connection. Occasional neoteric texts of the period such as *Sexual Inversion* (1897) sought to normalize the “inversion” of sexual identifications in ways similar to those Tickner outlines for gender. In his consideration of *Sexual Inversion* Peppis reminds of the period’s constraints to “rewrite homosexuality and reconfigure popular, medical, and legal constructions of homosexuality at a time of widespread hostility toward and prejudice against homosexuals” (*Sciences*, 108). One can witness such hostility and prejudice in texts like *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886) which attempted to justify themselves with the aid of the fledgling scientific field of sexology (Peppis, *Sciences* 104).

By the publication of the first issue of *Blast* near the eve of the First World War Lewis had already entered the public debate around the crisis of masculinity with no shortage of pomp, weaponizing at points homophobia, misogyny, and a hostility to effeminate passivity as a reactive reassertion of patriarchal domination (Figure 3):



1

BLAST First (from politeness) **ENGLAND**

CURSE ITS CLIMATE FOR ITS SINS AND INFECTIONS

DISMAL SYMBOL, SET round our bodies,
of effeminate lout within.

VICTORIAN VAMPIRE, the LONDON cloud sucks
the TOWN'S heart.

Figure 3. Opening Page of the Vorticist Manifesto in *Blast: Review of the Great English Vortex* (1914)

Lewis appropriates from the *Manifesto del Futurismo* (1909) Marinetti's charged verbs and his rhetorical pose of cavalier hypermasculine aggressivity. Incorporating the novel techniques of advertising, as Peppis has shown, *Blast's* first Manifesto seeks to "promote Vorticism as the most authentic and significant modernist movement." It will "BLESS those the Vorticists see as suitably modern, rebellious and experimental, and BLAST those they deem retrograde, sentimental and feminised" ("Schools" 34, caps in original). Lewis takes as the opening target of his Vorticist Manifesto not so much a timid and toothless Victorian culture, but how such a "climate" has "infect[ed]" its citizens with an affectatious and "polite[]" effeminacy that plagues England in its rapid spreading. From a heteronormative perspective, Vorticism promised to be the much-needed antidote to the crisis of masculinity and its symbolically disabling impotence. Blasted as a vampiric figure responsible for "suck[ing]" dry England's *vitality*—a core term almost always coded phallically in Lewis—the culture of emasculating effeminacy *Blast* conjures bears within it the related registers of "dismal" impotence which surround it.

Yet despite Lewis's penchant for macroscopic assertions reaching all facets of England and sometimes even "the West," his opening blast, his first curse, strangely presents itself through a locally embodied "lout" smothered in a miasmatic effeminacy. "Lout" in fact shows Lewis again turning toward the contradictory in his tethering it to "effeminacy." If the latter provokes (or offends) as a reactionary posture seeking to countermand the period's flaccidity, the former imparts a far less certain pose, one which bears within it Vorticism's anxious proximity to the "detached" poetics of Wildean Aestheticism which it inherits. An emasculating culture, to Lewis, parasitically infects England as overly refined and polite, effeminate to the point of symbolic impotence; and

yet this malignity infects ultimately not a dandy Oscar Wilde but a *lout*, a ruffian, a hooligan—a Wyndham Lewis.

Being uncomfortably close to competing models of masculinity, Lewis curiously rejects both Wildean Aestheticism and the *übermensch* of futurist Marinetteism. The former he blasts as emblematic of the effeminizing homosexual male further spreading cultural impotence; the latter he humorously lambasts as a fetish of technological violence bordering on the homoerotic. Even before *Blast*'s Manifesto, though, the little magazine-*cum*-manifesto had already conflated in its opening pages these two masculine models as something to be demonized within Lewis's own brand of vorticist heteromascularity (Figure 4). In "Long Live the Vortex," he penned:

AUTOMOBILISM (Marinetteism) bores us. We don't want to go about making a hullo-bulloo about motor cars, anymore than about knives and forks, elephants or gas-pipes.

Elephants are VERY BIG. Motor cars go quickly.

Wilde gushed twenty years ago about the beauty of machinery. Gissing, in his romantic delight with modern lodging houses was futurist in this sense.

The futurist is a sensational and sentimental mixture of the aesthete of 1890 and the realist of 1870.

Figure 4. From *Blast*: Conflating Marinetti and Wilde in "Long Live the Vortex"

How then to square yet another Lewisian circle? Most importantly for our purposes, his insistent dissociation from existing models of masculinity exposes much about a cultural moment in which this British gender crisis sought to disentangle itself from its "outside," in other words from heteromascularity's other. These forces, as Lewis insistently lampoons, constellate around the suffragette movement, the dandy aesthete *qua* homosexual, and—after the war—a generational mass of amputee veterans being emasculated by a public rhetoric of pitiful invalidity which only further suggested a

disabling impotence. Of seeking to disentangle masculinity from its supposed outside, Pound's now mythic modernist credo to "make it new," I would add, reveals a fanciful modernist (male) desire to emerge as a *sui generis* cultural force that violently breaks from the past, aspiring at its most radical (or, competing, its most ideologically suspect) to step outside history into an autonomous untainted space of and for itself. Writing of the title *Blast* itself, Paul Sheehan helps extend this point: "on the one hand, it connotes an explosive shock that can destroy, and on the other, a germ cell or embryo ('ectoblast', 'blastoderm') for cultivating new life" (152). The merging of these contradictory meanings suggests much about the era's heteronormative crisis and its pretensions to escape its mutually constitutive "effeminate" or impotent outside. The modernist historical moment at the same time expresses a related fantasy of a "pure" masculinity created and expressed *ex nihilo*, without what Lewis calls the "infectious dismal symbols" it fears the feminine and degenerate have "set round [its] bodies."

The intractability of Wilde's Aestheticism, Marinetti's Futurism, and Lewis's Vorticism has previously been detailed.⁷⁰ Yet thinking about the integral role disability plays in the crisis borne within these avant-gardes has not: first with a cultural obsession with impotence and degeneration, and later with a prosthetic rhetoric that underwent significant revision to incorporate it into the era's larger discourse around masculinity. We will see this postwar shift when turning from *Blast* to *Snooty Baronet*. One cannot understand the latter without further extending their view of the former. Miranda

⁷⁰ Chief among these scholars, as what follows makes clear, are (in order of publication) Miranda Hickman and Paul Sheehan. Surprisingly, Sheehan fails to cite Hickman a single time, despite considerable overlap in their shared Wilde-Lewis postulations. A surprising coincidence, it seems. See *The Geometry of Modernism: The Vorticist Idiom in Lewis, Pound, and H.D.* and *Modernism and the Aesthetics of Violence*, respectively.

Hickman, for example, convincingly argues how “Vorticism’s forcible rewriting of Wilde, designed to evacuate any lingering association with effeminacy, makes it at once Aestheticism’s inheritor, betrayer, and transformer; it both emulates it and strains to ‘correct’ and purify it” (*Geometry* 72). Not only does *Blast* rely on “the figure of the Aesthete to perform its work of purgation” (Ibid. 50). The “basic terms of Vorticism, for instance—Life, Nature, Mind, Art—are distinctively Wildean, as are Lewis’s overt insistence on the radical disjunction between Nature and Art and his demand that the artist reject Nature to devote himself to Art” (Ibid. 58).

At the same time Lewis vocally distances himself from Wilde in light of the public response to his trial, especially by revising *l’art pour l’art* within a vorticist perspective.⁷¹ If Wilde celebrates the *jouissance* of severing art from life or nature, famously insisting that “Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life” (29), Lewis intends Vorticism to transfuse that art directly *into* life, and by aesthetically violent means if necessary. Worth iterating is that Lewis views such a vorticist transfusion—the forceful thrusting of art into life—as a highly masculine (or at least masculinized) vocation. But this does not exempt women, for Lewis, from performing this same identity. As Anne Quéma details, Lewis “argues that his use of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ does not carry sexual or biological connotations, as the terms can be interchangeably applied to both man and woman” (89). Yet vorticists like Lewis consistently “feminize what they devalue” at the same time (Ardis 384). Vorticism, an

⁷¹ Sheehan helpfully glosses the logic of how Lewis separates himself from this Wildean principle, though Sheehan perhaps understates Lewis’s indebtedness to the Irish playwright. Lewis, he writes, is the only one of the Men of 1914 “who rejects [this] legacy root and branch. [He] excoriates art for art’s sake and everything it stands for, starting with the name. Because art’s values are resolutely contingent, he avers, rather than self-sustaining, ‘They stand or fall with other values than their own’; *ergo*, there can be no such things as art for its own sake” (104).

important voice in public negotiations over masculinity in Britain, becomes in short “a new form of Aestheticism *expunged of effeminacy*,” along with its associations at the time with its supposedly related cultural cousin: impotence (Hickman, *Geometry* 41, emphasis added).

Vorticism in other words recasts in normative terms what we could call Aestheticism’s queer drive to transgress, or to oppose, as Sheehan writes, “the bourgeois order and its ideological substrate, the social natural” (92). A voice of militant transgression “expunged of [Wildean] effeminacy” thus riddles *Blast*, if not Lewis’s entire *oeuvre*; a similar reactive voice heard throughout the era in response to this masculine “crisis” (Figure 5):

CURSE **3**

WITH EXPLETIVE OF WHIRLWIND
THE BRITANNIC ÆSTHETE
CREAM OF THE SNOBBISH EARTH
ROSE OF SHARON OF GOD-PRIG
OF SIMIAN VANITY
SNEAK AND SWOT OF THE SCHOOL-
ROOM
IMBERB (or Berbed when in Belsize)-**PEDANT**
PRACTICAL JOKER
DANDY
CURATE

BLAST all products of phlegmatic cold
 Life of **LOOKER-ON.**
CURSE

SNOBBERY
 (disease of femininity)
FEAR OF RIDIGULE
 (arch vice of inactive, sleepy)
PLAY
STYLISM
SINS AND PLAGUES
 of this **LYMPHATIC** finished
 (we admit in every sense
 finished)
VEGETABLE HUMANITY.

16

Figure 5. From *Blast*: The Ableist “Curse” of “Vegetable Humanity”

Lewis repurposes the force of Marinetti's outpourings that had captivated his young self. He appropriates Marinetti's violent rhetorical force while disavowing the Italian's penchant to advocate actual violence. Early reviewers of *Blast* in fact mistook Vorticism as a substrate of Futurism. The denials with which Lewis must have reacted can only be imagined. He nonetheless included the *Morning Post*'s review of the first issue in *Blast II*, the "War Number," wearing its displeasure like a badge of honor: "The first futurist quarterly is," the *Post* writes, "full of irrepressible imbecility which is not easily distinguished from the words and works of Marinetti's disciples" (Lewis, *Blast II* 104). The historical appeal of Marinetti's voice speaks volumes about the role transgression played after it had been appropriated and aggressively redeployed within discourses over an "impotent" masculinity.

In the place of effeminacy rises the dynamic *vitality* of Vorticism, "the phallic compound devised by Pound and Lewis to advance the cause of masculine modernism" (Sheehan 16), a direct repudiation of a disabling impotence "plaguing" the West. Sheehan has detailed Lewis's contradictory incorporation of the aesthete into the vorticist as evidenced in the pages of *Blast* and—as I am adding—in the public debate of the early century over degeneration and a heteromascularity generally seen as flaccid.⁷² He aptly argues that the amalgamation of the aesthete and the vorticist results from "the crucial

⁷² Hence Sheehan's separation from Hickman, despite their shared argumentative dependency on Wilde's role in understanding the early Lewis. Hickman renders Lewis's denials of his influences in the language of "expunging" them (particularly in the threats someone like Wilde posed to heteromascularity). Sheehan, however, redeploys this through the language of "aesthetic violence," extending this to a broader coterie of "masculine modernism": "The premise of my argument, then, is that there is an aesthetic of violence at work in a number of modernist writers, a disposition of playful yet provocative belligerence that is coded as 'masculine', and that this violent aesthetic...is consubstantial with the nineteenth-century narrative of transgression" (13).

element of sexual dissidence [being] repressed; instead, it is homophobia, misogyny and hetero-normative conflict that characterize the modernist sexual imaginary” (92).

Our understanding of this sexual and gendered modernist imaginary has at the same time obfuscated how the rhetoric of disability informed and at times sought to embody the same (hetero)masculine imaginary Sheehan underscores. The modernist crisis of masculinity, as *Blast* evidences, repeatedly capitalizes on the imagery of impotence as embodying the symbolic absence of male vitality so culturally ubiquitous at the time. It is this same cultural sense of impotence that heteronormative reactions like Lewis’s sought to “cure” by blasting them into the Victorian past and ushering in a new masculinity fit for a modern world. No apologia can reason away Lewis’s prewar homophobia, misogyny, and ableism, nor is this my intention in dwelling with this history. Yet as we will see, his postwar engagement with prosthetic masculinity at the same time leads itself from his troubling prewar position to a complex, illuminating approach. If even feminists have recently found a generative or partially redeemable view of masculinity in the late Lewis, I suggest that the same surprising possibility can lend itself to disability, specifically as a meeting between the two. The early Lewis of *Blast* bares his often ugly attempt to embody the other of his gender politics as an impotent “looker-on” dandy “aesthete” to be “curse[d]” and “blast[ed]” for his “phlegmatic” and “lymphatic” “plague,” all of which contribute in the end to what Lewis crudely calls a “vegetable humanity.” In turning to ableist rhetoric marked by the sickly language of a virus, Lewis villainizes the “impotent” dandy, one whose symbolic embodiment hyperbolically stands in for a eugenic fear of degenerative decay and its supposedly symptomatic emasculation.

Yet it does not necessarily follow that Lewis cannot offer in his considerable failings a fuller, more revealing historical perspective of modernism grappling with, if at times blatantly abusing, disability, especially as a key cultural debate concomitant with the British “sex war” of the opening decades of the century. More important than blasting Lewis’s repugnance simply to justify barring him as an object of study, we ought to recognize instead that he offers a more revealing (if far less savory) cluster of ideas around what British modernism’s early engagements with disability looked like from an able-bodied heteromasculine perspective. Nor can ignoring the real, material instantiation of this history, however much it offends our present moment, contribute to the ongoing pursuit of disability rights. To ignore the unseemly and belligerent only impoverishes, limits, and forecloses our knowledge of the present. Disabling modernism requires leaning *into* our discomfort, confronting through disability a literary and cultural history far more nebulous and complex than many today seem willing to face in fear that it upsets or falls short of the politics of the present. We should resist capitulating to an anachronist and dyadic criticism that seeks only to condemn or condone, reject or redeem, a writer and artist like Wyndham Lewis wholesale. As with Carson McCullers in Chapter II, we ought instead to investigate carefully two related concerns: what such troubling figures like Lewis reveal about the uncomfortable vortex of disability and modernism, and how disability could come so suddenly to constitute modernist art and literature in its historical becoming.

Heteromascularity, as we have seen, reacted against an embodied “crisis” of flaccidity or impotence, a crisis which increasingly signified a feared cultural, national, and biological degeneration. But so too did it react against the rise of the disembodied

“sciences of modernism” (ethnography, sexology, psychology, and the like), many of which promised through competing “modern” methods to capture human behavior as a series of predictable, analyzable causes and effects. Above all in relation to the potent symbology of impotence were social sciences whose pathologizing threatened to strip individuals of their autonomy, their agency, as will be central to our turn to *Snooty Baronet*. As scholars have noted, “Lewis objected throughout his career to any doctrine which he felt sundered agency from the individual” (Burrells, “Wyndham” 294). Chief among the novel social sciences contributing to a public dialogue of absent male autonomy and impotence were Freudian psychology and Watsonian behaviorism. This latter science, for Lewis, “denies agency to the intellect and destroys the possibility of individual artistic expression” (Burrells, “Satire” 63). Following Freud’s lead, psychoanalysis sought to reduce human behavior, cognition, and even sexuality to a series of analyzable unconscious mental structures imparted—permanently, it seemed—during childhood. Over such “complexes” one has little to no control. As Freud boasted of his work: “the most irritating insult is flung at the mania of greatness by present-day psychological research, which wants to prove the ‘I’ [or Ego] is not even master in its own home, but is dependent upon the most scanty information concerning all that goes on unconsciously in its psychic life” (248). Across the Atlantic, Taylorism and Fordism (as we saw in Chapter II) achieved an ever-increasing mechanization of labor from which even human speech, etiquette, and mores could be systematized and replicated *en masse*. More critical to a growing male anxiety over agency and its symbolically disabling social inverse, impotence, were the competing scientific attempts to capture, contain, and even control human behavior. Few disciplines captivated the public’s attention and, for many,

disquiet in this regard like behaviorism, the antithesis in many ways of psychoanalysis. As Lewis helps make clear, behaviorism, like disability, also became unexpectedly wrapped up in the British sex war, particularly as another cultural force which threatened the sense of autonomy, agency, and individualism so central to the era's politics of masculinity. A better view of behaviorism will help elucidate both this fact, and its importance to Lewis, at its apex by the time of *Snooty Baronet* in the thirties.

The year before Lewis printed his Vorticist Manifesto in *Blast*, the American John B. Watson published his own scientific manifesto, "Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It" (1913), a tract against studying, as he surprisingly labeled it, the "stream of consciousness" (248). "I believe we can write a psychology," he waged, "and never go back upon our definition: never use the terms consciousness, mental states, mind, content, introspectively verifiable, imagery, and the like.... What we need to do is to start upon psychology, making *behavior*, not *consciousness*, the objective point of our attack" (250; 253, emphasis in original). Watson, like Lawrence and the Bloomsbury Group before him, seemed poised from the first to share a canvas space on Lewis's rhetorical punching-bag, with the writer and painter lampooning and contending with behaviorism for nearly his entire career, most memorably in *Snooty Baronet*. In taking implicit aim at Freudianism, the behaviorist manifesto sought to redirect the fledgling field into an explicitly scientific methodology.⁷³

While psychoanalysis busied itself attempting not only to describe but analyze the interior mind, a task taken up concurrently of course by many modernist stream-of-consciousness writers, Watson's introduction of behaviorism advocated a psychological

⁷³ Erik M. Bachman's "How to Misbehave as a Behaviourist (If You're Wyndham Lewis)" traces Lewis's critique of Watson all the back to "Cattleman's Spring-Mate" in 1917.

approach entirely concerned with the external body.⁷⁴ If its experiments could not be observed, measured, and independently repeated (as the psychoanalyst failed to do), it could not classify itself as a real empirical science. As Watson adjured:

The time seems to have come when psychology must discard all reference to consciousness.... We have become so enmeshed in speculative questions concerning the elements of mind, the nature of conscious content...[,] that something is wrong with our premises and the types of problems which develop from them. There is no longer any guarantee that we all mean the same thing when we use the terms now current in psychology. (249)

While the male psychoanalyst worked harder to penetrate the mind more deeply (Freudian sexual connotations intended), the behaviorist somewhat counterintuitively rejected a psychology that concerned itself with an “inside” mind at all. Understanding human behavior, Watson averred, could never be captured scientifically in the messy “tunnels” of internal consciousness, as Woolf once wrote. He instead advocated a theory of behavioral psychology observable through and as a complex interaction between human animals and the stimuli responses of their environments. Following the lead of Pavlov’s early experiments in classical conditioning, Watson tried to flip the subjectivism of early psychology right side up onto its properly objective head, as the opening of his manifesto makes plain: “Psychology as the behaviorist views it is a purely objective experimental branch of natural science. Its theoretical goal is the prediction and control of behavior” (248).

Such prediction and control return us to the British public reactions against a symbolically stigmatizing impotence located by thinkers like Lewis near the core of the

⁷⁴ For a revised literary history of modernism that rejects interiority entirely, following Watson, in favor of a “pure” exteriority, see especially Jessica Burstein’s wonderful *Cold Modernism: Literature, Fashion, Art*.

crisis of masculinity. For Lewis, actionable vitality would countermand such impotence. If the dandy aesthete signaled a homophobic and disabling cultural degeneration which marked the “modern” man as effeminate at best, and impotent at worst, the swift rise of popular sciences like behaviorism and psychoanalysis boded a further enfeebling of masculine vitality.⁷⁵ To thinkers like the early Lewis of the teens, behaviorism spelled only further impotence in refusing the agency of reclamation central to the male position in the British “sex war,” and to what many like him viewed as the erosion of heteronormative masculinity. If non-normative public figures like first-wave feminists and dandies fought to pry power away from a patriarchal structure under siege, behaviorism could be seen as the biggest threat to heteromascularity of all, one which reduced in fact *all* humans not just to brute animals responding to their environments, but as agentless masses controlled by their environmental stimuli. As Lewis glossed it: “the behaviorist animal dreams of a *perfect* world (for behaviorists) where everything would occur ‘in terms of stimulus and response’ (immediate, evidence, unequivocal, objectively ascertainable, response), and ‘in terms of habit formation’” (*Art* 341-42). The more nefarious implication here being, as Lewis repeatedly fixated on throughout his career, that the behaviorist conflated individual subjects with a herd of automatons not just without any control, but by extension *controllable* by those with enough power to move the stimuli strings behind the curtain.

By the time of Lewis’s “puppet fictions” like *Snooty Baronet* in the thirties, Lewis’s fixation on human automatons observable by only the most perspicacious like

⁷⁵ Quéma has attempted to understand Lewis’s baffling, often contradictory, almost always brazen views of gender in relation to psychoanalysis, relating, for example, Lewis’s “demotion of woman” to “the imperative psychological need to assert an identity for oneself” (90).

himself left the British writer uncomfortably close to the behaviorist he claimed to loath: “The root of the Comic is to be sought in the sensations resulting from the observations of a *thing* behaving like a person. But from that point of view all men are necessarily comic; for they are *things*, or physical bodies, behaving as *persons*” (qtd. in Levenson 245-46). The only difference between Lewis and Watson in the former’s mind (a difference which he considered absolute) was his indebtedness to satire and ironic distance as an autonomous observer: hence his satire of behaviorism, even while exposing many similar assumptions about the masses of humanity.

While behaviorism from the perspective of Lewis can sound conspiratorial, alarmist, and perhaps contrived, Watson’s language leaves little room for misinterpretation, consistently embracing the eugenic implications hovering in its silent, foreboding margins: “The psychology which I should attempt to build up would take as a starting point, first, the observable fact that organisms, men and animal alike, do adjust themselves to their environment by means of heredity and habit equipment. . . . In a system of psychology completely worked out, *given the response the stimuli can be predicted; given the stimuli the response can be predicted* (250-51, emphasis added). Behaviorism’s theoretical goal, to repeat Watson’s unnerving proclamation, was after all “the prediction and control of behavior” (248), a goal uncannily familiar in our current era of predictive analytics and machine learning. All fine, to some, in the dusty academic hands of scientists, but what about its co-optation by rulers of all political flavors? What could signal the eradication of traditional British masculinity more than behaviorism’s utter absence of autonomous agency, so consistently synonymous with not just the political

power inherent in (white, hetero) male privilege, but in its attendant obsession with vitality, action, and liberty?

In the wake of modernism's academic institutionalization, most scholars take for granted the period's preoccupation with subjectivity as social and scientific theories concomitantly turned their attention to the conscious and unconscious mind. Even given the vast expansions of the new modernist studies, many still shorthand an introduction to modernism as being equated with the experimental stream-of-consciousness literary method, linking it forever it seems with psychology. Such reductions lose sight though of the milieu out of which this "inward turn" took shape, as well as how this contested turn also enmeshed with the crisis of masculinity and its later bearing on prosthetic rhetorics. Just as behaviorism thwarted the pretensions of psychoanalysis in refuting any human perspective predicated on an unobservable, unknowable interiority, so too did the modernist avant-garde scene in which Lewis participated expose at times a revising of embodiment as purely external, as evidenced in work like Raoul Hausmann's *Mechanical Head* (Figure 6).

Subtitled "The Spirit of Our Age," Hausmann's Dada sculpture says much about the contested status of the conscious subject in the first decades of the century. Taken rhetorically, the sculpture suggests a world in which the bourgeois identification with an isolable self becomes not only unthinkable and dense, but already out of date with the anatomical, empirical, and mechanical conceptions of the human as they burgeoned with the geist of science. Watson surely would have appreciated the sculpture, were he to miss its ironic political thrust. Hausmann notably called it a "head" and not a mind or self or ego or even brain. When viewed mechanically, everything of interest about a head—and

by extension a person—is visible and exterior, quantifiable, measurable, knowable, seen. There are no secret compartments, hidden desires, or Woolfian tunnels to explore. “We are surface creatures,” Lewis announced in *The Art of Being Ruled*. “There is no meaning except on the surface. It is physiologically the latest, the ectodermic, and the most exterior material of our body that is responsible for our intellectual life: it is on the faculty for exteriorization that our life depends” (231).



Figure 6. Raoul Hausmann, *Mechanical Head (The Spirit of Our Age)*, circa 1920, Wooden assemblage

The Futurism of Marinetti, typically historicized as the century's first avant-garde movement and central to any understanding of Lewis, shares with behaviorism, Taylorism, and Fordism a view of embodiment which likewise reconceived the human mind and body in highly mechanical terms, ones which equally suggest, like Watson, a devaluation of interiority. Though put to different ends, each proposed a self-proclaimed "modern" vision of disembodiment which redeployed the rhetoric of automation in terms that border—if not fully embrace—the utopian and millenarian. Early twentieth-century technophilia found its brazen spokesperson in Marinetti, who espoused a "technological romanticism" in praise of "biomorphic technologies" (Gaughan 141). The futurists sought to dissolve the division between organic and inorganic bodies, a division nowhere better captured, as we will see, than in the prosthesis. Though these espousals looked to Lewis like "objects of worship" whose "utility was lost beneath idolatry" (Burstein 93), there would be no *Blast* without the *Manifesto del Futurismo*, through which Marinetti galvanized a generation of largely white masculine minds like those of the young Lewis. Whether in his publications or in his lectures delivered across Western Europe, Marinetti symbolized a fully committed, militaristic pose of a new masculinity. He was an early trial of a panacea promising to cure European decadence and degeneration through a so-called return to order which would play out in the most destructive half century the world has ever known.

Numerous studies have detailed a pre-war European culture drunk on the possibilities of violence, viewed by many at the time as necessary to dust off nearly a century of Queen Victoria's rule and usher in a new century with gusto. As Peppis clarifies, a "prewar cult of masculine vitality" shouldered "not only Vorticism's project

of avant-garde imperialism, but the general ideological edifice of the prewar nation-state system” (“Surrounded” 61). The Italian futurists found the speed, violence, and control they associated with modernity’s machine marvels infatuating and empowering, the hyperaccelerated means to blast themselves from the stagnant history of the Ancient Romans and the Renaissance into a teleologically glorious future. As Marinetti professed in ways that continue to haunt and galvanize the present: “We intend to glorify war—the only hygiene of the world—militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of anarchists, the beautiful ideas worth dying for, and contempt for woman” (qtd. in Poggi 51). Even the arrival of the war, which most thought would be a brief conflict, hailed a much-needed “cleansing” of impotent effeminacy coddled by an overextended period of peace. Conscripting soldiers meant the “toughening up” of men. The war on the near horizon of course quickly saw this eager infatuation with violence having to reckon with such naïveté in unprecedented ways.

But in 1909, with war only a distant unlikely contingency, Marinetti espoused a futurist humanity marked by *disembodiment*, a posture which praised a hardened external shell, the banishing of contemplative interiority, and the need to destroy the old world to rebuild the new.⁷⁶ This glorious future would find the means to propel itself into reality through the disembodied melding of man and machine, technological emblem of a fully realized industrial society. This set it apart from how the end of the nineteenth century modelled many technological developments on the body: “the telephone emerging from

⁷⁶ Though Hal Foster’s reading of *Snooty Baronet* introduced many interesting early engagements with prostheses in Lewis, his methodological attachment to psychoanalysis leads him to symbolize the prosthesis in ways I am departing from and somewhat resisting. Central to his reading of Lewis in *Prosthetic Gods*, for example, is that the vorticist interest in the prosthesis draws on Futurism as a sort of mechanical, hardened shell one attaches to one’s masculinity.

research on the mechanism of the ear; the typewriter from a desire to let the blind write by touch; film from the persistence of vision” (Armstrong 81). As “an intensely priapic masculine poetics,” Futurism “celebrates the fusion of man and machine” (Goldman 164). “We intend to hymn man,” Marinetti wrote, “at the steering wheel, the ideal axis which intersects the Earth, itself hurled ahead in its own race along the path of its orbit” (Ibid. 51). In a phrase which has come not only to dominate the historicization of Futurism but led to Lewis later charging Marinetti as the true father of fascism, the Italian gushed: “We affirm that the beauty of the world has been enriched by a new form of beauty: the beauty of speed. A racing car with a hood that glistens with large pipes resembling a serpent with explosive breath ... a roaring automobile that seems to ride on grapeshot—that is more beautiful than the *Victory of Samothrace*” (Ibid. 51, ellipses in original). A technology running on “grapeshot” shrapnel held the cure, and its symbolic and literal incorporation into embodiment offered a key turning point in not just the crisis of an “impotent” masculinity, but in the growing role the prosthesis would play in public negotiations of this crisis after the war.

The Return of the Disabled Soldier

More than the vorticists, post-war dadaists took umbrage with Marinetti’s model of masculinity which marked itself as a destructive and mechanized future being. Fiercely anti-war like Lewis, Dada took particular issue with how such a figure eschewed the violence wrought upon the body by the very modernity which before the war appeared to be leading it to its Nietzschean becoming. “In the hands of theosophists, futurists, and similar European avant-gardes,” Andrew Pilsch helpfully glosses, “Nietzsche’s idea of a

break from the human becomes coupled with modernist topoi that mark the cognitive pressures of industrialization, globality, and urbanization as forces driving us beyond the human” (26). Dada, in short, became something like an incredulous reaction to the desire to supersede embodiment. If the British crisis of masculinity set its sights on a supposedly degenerative impotence before the war, this crisis increasingly turned to “invalid” veterans in the war’s aftermath. The rhetoric of the prosthesis curiously found its way into the existent public discourse around a masculinity which was now visibly disabled in unfathomable numbers.

The Dada canvases of Otto Dix, for example, take as their own topoi the task of linking the “pressures” Pilsch identifies directly to the structures of “techno-capitalism” in the years following the Great War. Such a linkage can be seen in Dix’s *Pragerstrasse* (1920) (Figure 7). Set in Prager Straße, a highly fashionable retail area in Dresden akin to Bond Street in Lewis’s London, a figure, presumably a veteran, begs for money with the only remaining organic limb he has. In front of him another figure, possibly a medic, wheels past on a makeshift wheelchair. A number of prosthetic appendages display themselves behind the veteran, including the arm and legs he lacks, for sale amongst various mechanical and eroticized female body augments, including a bizarre metallic corset and garter set beside wigs. Dix portrays a blatant anti-capitalist disconnect between the use- and exchange-value of the prostheses. On the one hand, by placing a mechanically rigid corset beside a leg, Dix pathetically ironizes a culture which could view prostheses as a fetishized luxury beyond the means of the disabled veteran alms beggar. On the other, this ironic pathos grants Dix’s painting the critical thrust which tries



Figure 7. Otto Dix, *Pragerstrasse*, 1920, Oil and collage on canvas, Galerie der Stadt, Stuttgart

to overturn Futurism's biomorphic idolatry. *Pragerstrasse* finds in techno-capitalism not the glorious return to "strong" masculinity promised by Futurism and Vorticism before the war, but the very cause for the deep social gaps—and missing limbs—of the postwar present.

As German paintings of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, the great outpourings of Dix's disabled subjects speak to the competing national responses to disabled veterans after 1918, particularly between the artist's home country and Britain. The mutilated or severely disabled body of returning British soldiers, as has been shown, "was not explored as a site of shame and revulsion in the way it was in Weimar Germany" in the work of Dix, Max Beckmann, George Grosz, and the like (Biernoff 667).⁷⁷ The war permanently disabled roughly twice as many German ex-servicemen as British at 1.5 million and 750,000 respectively (Cohen, *War* 4). Whereas the British government repeatedly tried to displace the economic responsibility of caring for and reemploying a generation of disabled men onto private businesses and philanthropists, the Weimar Republic viewed its obligation, in the words of its first president, as the country's "foremost duty" (qtd. in Cohen, *War* 4). As historian Deborah Cohen has persuasively shown in distinguishing the Weimar response to that of the government of the British Isles: "In the latter half of the 1920s, Germany's first democracy spent almost 20 percent of its annual budget on war victims' pensions; in Britain, by contrast, war pensions occupied less than 7 percent from the annual budget from 1923 onward" (7). By the time the Depression hit, the Weimar investment in rehabilitation was so robust that "severely disabled workers were twice as likely as their able-bodied counterparts to retain their jobs" (5). Securing these rights however could not have happened without the public show of solidarity expressed by German ex-servicemen by protesting and organizing,

⁷⁷ While "revulsion" in any register may prove too offensive for many, I would be remiss if I did not mention that Biernoff is considering how the severe facial mutilation of British soldiers was met by the able-bodied public typically with much more horror and even disgust compared to amputee survivors.

sometimes through radical means, capturing the attention of the able-bodied public and directing the national conversation through media like that of Dix's disabled canvases.

Cohen's lauding of the Weimar response to rehabilitation retains much of its impact when set in distinction to that of the British, but others have found ample room for critique as well. Foremost among these is the work of Heather R. Perry, who has argued persuasively that though the German investment in rehabilitation was formidable and, in some ways, commendable, it did so principally by two dubious logics. First, it dehumanized disablement by once again substituting real, material embodiment for a symbolic body.⁷⁸ In other words, the disabled soldier came to represent "the larger German nation, one who was crippled in battle and needed to be economically and physically rebuilt" ("Re-Arming" 97). Scholars of other warring nations like France have argued a similar synecdochal substitution in which the body of the maimed soldier became the necessary "fantasy site for dreams of national recuperation" (qtd. in Ott 34n7). Second, and perhaps more damningly, the Weimar rehabilitation programs reproduced and reinforced the class distinctions that predated the war. Perry has shown in this regard how tailored prostheses were crafted specifically to the wearer's prewar profession, becoming in the process not just a marker of class, but in fact "firmly [binding] the worker to his profession, and by extension, to his class," and ultimately "reproducing prewar identities on Germany's veterans" by "inscribing" class literally upon the body ("Re-Arming" 97).

Yet irrespective of national responses to disability, the First World War produced a scale of amputation and mutilation unprecedented not only then, but still. While

⁷⁸ We ought here to heed Ott's wise reminder that "[k]eeping prostheses attached to people limits the kinds of claims and interpretative leaps a writer can make" (4).

statistics tend to lose their edge when offered in excess, those of World War One have retained much of their shock. Many scholars rightly stress the need to resist a monolithic view of the Great War, reminding us that the ties between the late nineteenth and early twentieth century are stronger than initial modernist historiographies had suggested in rejecting all things Victorian.⁷⁹ At the same time the so-called war to end war stole 9.5 million lives over just fifty-two months, “severely wound[ing]” an estimated 20 million, with 8 million returning home “permanently disabled” (Cohen, *War 1*). The ubiquitous array of disability within modernism is far too complex to be reduced to any singular historical thesis, but the explosive emergence of 28 million severely wounded and non-congenitally disabled people in only a few short years also continues to speak for itself. Important to remember of the war is that 22 per cent of the British male population fought (Bourke 22). 300,000 servicemen of all warring nations suffered an amputation (Guyatt 311), and orthopedic cases contributed to one-quarter of all British military hospital casualties during the conflict (Bourke 33). British amputations during the war exceeded 41,000: 69 percent losing a leg, 28 percent losing an arm, and close to 3 percent losing both (Ibid. 33). 60,500 Brits suffered head or eye injuries, and 89,000 more came home with other serious physical injuries (Ibid. 33). At one Kent hospital specializing in facial surgery, an astounding 11,000 operations took place between 1917 and 1925 (Biernoff 666). “The most important point to be made about the male body during the

⁷⁹ For reconsiderations of World War One, particularly as complications of Paul Fussell’s seminal *The Great War and Modern Memory*, see the work of Vincent Sherry, Jay Winter, Marina MacKay, and Joanna Bourke, among others.

Great War,” Joanna Bourke insists, “is that it was *intended* to be mutilated” (31, emphasis in original).⁸⁰

Typical of innumerable microhistories within industrial capitalism, prostheses expanded greatly to meet the demands created during and in the wake of war. In the nineteenth century, the production of wooden artificial limbs was a craft-based profession, with tailored appendages typically taking more than six weeks to make and having little to no oversight by medical physicians (Anderson 160). The first modern alternative to the peg leg came from British manufacturer Potts in 1816 after being commissioned by the Marquess of Anglesey (who had his leg amputated during Waterloo) to improve the crude design (Guyatt 308). The result was the “Anglesey Leg,” a term signifying the complex mechanisms at both the knee and ankle still used, though modified, to some extent today. The middle of the century witnessed new amputation techniques, including the amputation of the foot by James Syme and that at the knee by Stephen Smith. “No matter how proficient the limb maker, without a functioning stump an artificial limb was useless” (Anderson 162).⁸¹ Both the Crimean and American Civil War in the middle of the century saw prosthetic production rapidly increase. The latter conflict produced an estimated 35,000 amputees and is sometimes argued in distinction to World War One as the first truly “modern” or mechanized war (Ibid. 308). While beyond the scope of this chapter, the history of prostheses of course extends far beyond warfare

⁸⁰ Though perhaps erring on the superfluous side, Katherine Ott similarly writes: “Nothing has effected how we understand the integrity of the human body more than war and its aftermath of injured soldiers, human casualties, and the sequelae of generations dwelling with land mines and other live ordnance” (26).

⁸¹ The quality of the amputation was particularly bad before the widespread use of antisepsis, with many surgeries ending in death. Ott has noted that during the Civil War “a surgeon might use the same knife all day, wiping his hands and blade on his apron between patients,” leading to a soldiers’ “macabre joke that, given the choice, they would rather have a limb shot off than cut off by a surgeon” (14).

and veterans. “[The] electric motor and steam engine,” a *Scientific American* 1895 issue covering prostheses claimed, “continue to make as many cripples as did the missiles of war” (Brown 136). By the end of the nineteenth century, industrial modernity stood as the greatest threat to the body’s vulnerable parts. As Mary Guyatt has argued, “as the number of workers engaged in . . . precarious occupations increased over the following century, so did the number of accidents: in 1905 one American manufacturer suggested that the growing demand for prostheses was proportionate to the increasing mileage of railroads. Also worth remembering,” she helpfully adds, “is the fact that during the nineteenth-century [*sic*] diseases such as polio, rickets and congenital tuberculosis resulted in abnormal limb growth on a scale it is hard to imagine today” (308).

By the time of the Second Boer War, British officials changed the Regulations for Army Medical Service to guarantee a prosthesis as recompense for maimed soldiers, ensuring £15 for servicemen in need of an artificial limb (Anderson 163).⁸² Though it underwent many iterations and continues today with a contested status by scholars, the legacy of state investments in British veterans who endured amputations or were disabled more broadly remained a fixture throughout much of the last century. “In 1920,” for example, “pensions were still being paid to 31,500 men as compensation for having an arm or leg amputated. Just before the Second World War, 222,000 officers and over 419,000 servicemen in other ranks were still being paid disability pensions. In the middle of the 1970s, there were nearly 3,000 limbless survivors of the Great War living in the

⁸² In 1919, a skilled craftsman earned an average wage of £2 a week (Bourke 45). The price of a prosthesis varied greatly depending on the type of amputation and the material of the appendage. Roehampton recommended the following for various amputation prostheses: “Ankle joint £6; Below the knee £11-15 (depending on type of prosthesis); Thigh, knee joint or upper third of the thigh £15; Hip joint £18; Below the elbow £6; Above the elbow £8 8s. or more” (qtd. in Anderson 166).

United Kingdom” (Bourke 33). Roughly concurrent with the dawn of the new century, British state investments in newly disabled homebound soldiers found their way into public discourse as matters of national necessity, something of which Lewis seemed well aware, especially as an ex-serviceman himself. In 1898 Queen Victoria, for example, personally visited Netley Hospital to oversee the newly funded programs which would provide artificial limbs at a much faster rate (Anderson 163), and in 1919 the King’s National Roll Scheme (KNRS) was instituted (Kowalsky 568).

Spearheaded by Henry Lesser Rothband, the King’s Roll was among the most important interwar voices in generating a public discourse that insisted those rendered disabled by the war deserved the full economic support of the nation’s taxpayers. Like Sir Michael Kell-Imrie, the protagonist of *Snooty Baronet*, Rothband was awarded a baronetcy in 1923 (Kowalsky 573). By 1919, the KNRS sought to reemploy 100,000 disabled British ex-servicemen through legislation which would enforce mandatory employment of scores of disabled veterans at private businesses. After failing to pass in the War Cabinet, the KNRS had to turn instead to a voluntary program which implored British employers to hire on grounds of moral obligation. This “failure” to ensure compulsory participation has been the pivotal point in revaluations of the KNRS’s effectiveness ever since. At the time, Sir Jack Benn Brunel-Cohen, head of the Committee on the Employment of Severely Disabled Men, a Member of Parliament, and double-leg amputee himself, unsuccessfully “implored the commons that the State could not rely on goodwill” alone (Kowalsky 572). Businesses who nonetheless participated voluntarily were awarded the “King’s Seal,” which signaled to the public their participation in the program and signified their investment in people whose disabilities

were precipitated by fighting on their behalf. “Firms whose workforces consisted of at least 5 percent disabled men were permitted to use the King’s Roll seal on their letterhead and, as of 1920, were granted preference in obtaining government contracts” (Cohen, *War* 40). Such businesses added the seal to their advertising and in shop windows, further contributing to the public visibility of disabled veterans after the war and meant to bolster support for purchasing products from companies stamped with the insignia. In an attempt to win the favor of business owners who balked at employing disabled men, Rothband’s scheme would go out by Royal Proclamation, and, in addition to being awarded the King’s Seal, participating companies would be added to a national Roll of Honour (Kowalsky 569).

Though the KNRS indeed failed to make participation compulsory and left much of the economic weight to be picked up by philanthropists, a damning fact effectively taken to task by Cohen, others like Meaghan Kowalsky have defended the program, arguing that the scheme stands as “the most important piece of legislation put in place to assist disabled ex-servicemen in the interwar period” (575). Not only did the King’s Roll successfully oversee that “80 per cent of all disabled men awarded a pension were employed” between 1921 and 1936 (575). The KNRS also “involved unprecedented state involvement in a disability welfare scheme catering for ex-servicemen” (575), significantly changing the tenor of not just the government’s obligations, but also the able-bodied public’s perceptions of disabled masculinities. While the KNRS could accurately be considered a material or economic failure, its contribution more meaningfully rests in the role it played in shifting (and in some cases simply initiating) public discourse around the significance of the war-maimed soldier.

With the return of countless disabled soldiers, the gendered rhetoric of prostheses underwent some important revision, as evidenced in the important social club The Guild of Brave Poor Things changing its name in 1916 (though still offensive by today's standards) to the more neutral Guild of the Handicapped. Even the Guild's statement regarding the name shift reveals the way masculinity had begun influencing how Brits talked when they talked about disability in the wake of the war: "[Our] lads and younger men are very anxious for the [name] change. They have told us they find the name misunderstood by their friends.... We think some will join us and we already know that 'Guild of the Handicapped' makes more appeal to the wounded soldier than 'Brave Poor Things'" (qtd. in Bourke 41).

The rhetorical shift in public discourse around disability from passive to active suffering largely tracks a related social shift in how able-bodied society positioned itself in relation to people with disabilities, however short lived. As has been persuasively shown in both material and discursive ways, the body of postwar physically disabled men came increasingly to signify a transferring of "guilt and responsibility for disablement from the individual to the collective" (Bourke 41).⁸³ Cohen's extended critique of the British state's failings to meet the economic needs of its veterans delineates many of the key negotiations concerning national responsibility, and deserves full quotation:

What were the state's obligations to the victims of the war? Was a pension fair compensation for permanent disability even if, as in the majority of cases, the rates paid were not sufficient to support a man and his family? Or was the state's responsibility even more profound...extending to an obligation to return the man to the position in civil life he had occupied before the war? The discussion was a theoretical, an economic, and finally a moral one, but its consequences for disabled veterans were eminently

⁸³ Anderson formulates this somewhat similarly, if more generally, with the soldier in mind: "The prosthesis became further legitimized as compensation for the loss of a limb in the war" (170).

practical. Either the state would secure the compulsory employment of tens of thousands of injured men, or it would subject those who had suffered on the nation's behalf to the vagaries of the marketplace and the pity of their fellow citizens. (*War* 39)

The physically maimed soldier, visually foregrounded in the public imagination as the jobless amputee in need of a prosthetic limb to be made a “man” again, came to represent the debt the country owed to a generation who suffered on its behalf, an embodied reminder of the many deep gaps in need of mending.⁸⁴ This undoubtedly reflected the fact that by 1916 Britain had turned to conscription, only heightening a pervasive sense that the nation owed both a debt of gratitude and the economic support which it historically had refused. While the verve of its initial economic promise did not last for long, the state actively invested in supporting the reconstitution of disabled soldiers in the interwar period in ways it had outright refused—and would continue to refuse until World War II—for non-veterans. By 1918 no institution held a more influential or powerful position in the recovery of disabled soldiers than the Ministry of Pensions. By the middle of the war, with support from both the Ministry of Pensions and philanthropists like Gwynne Holford, the production, research, and application of artificial limbs had become well-funded.

Even by the turn of the century the process of properly fitting and administering a prosthesis was poorly understood. Soldiers whose limbs needed to be removed, for instance, commonly required multiple re-amputations, sometimes as many as five, to secure a comfortable and operable stump, though the general lack of surgical experience

⁸⁴ Though beyond the range of this chapter, worth briefly mentioning is that men born disabled or whose jobs in dangerous industrial occupations had disabled them were frequently blamed for their position, ranging from moral sin to accusations of negligence respectively, thereby absolving the state of its economic obligations.

given the sudden demand for doctors partially contributed to this grim fact (Anderson 167). Both on the battlefield and off, gangrene also proved a lethal foe during amputation surgeries. “6 per cent of soldiers who had their limbs amputated at the Front,” for example, “died—but when infection was present, this jumped to 28 per cent” (Bourke 34). Though the extent to which the design of prostheses changed during the war has been contested and tempered, advancements nonetheless took place. Anderson, for example, argues that while “there [is] no denying that the material used to construct artificial limbs improved and numbers manufactured increased exponentially, there appear[s] to be little in the actual design of the prosthesis that differed from those constructed in the latter stages of the nineteenth century” (173). The principal change can be located instead in “the proximity of the medical profession and the limb manufacturer,” as well as in “the relationship between the surgeon and the limb maker” (Ibid. 174). No doubt the largest material shift in the production of prostheses resulted from the introduction of the aluminum-alloy duralumin, successfully implemented into an artificial limb by Desoutter Bros. in 1913 (Guyatt 316). Yet at £80 the Ministry of Pensions refused to supply them. This changed when, in 1921, the newly founded Disabled Society advocated on behalf of veterans, signaling a more active and historic social construction of people with disabilities. Their first order of business became convincing the Ministry that ex-servicemen far preferred the Desoutter limb for comfort and functionality (Ibid. 316). Following the Society’s successful advocacy, the Desoutter limb found itself a popular option to be supplied to ex-servicemen by the Ministry of Pensions, so popular in fact that three-fifths of all prostheses were modelled on this new limb by the mid-1920s (Ibid.).

In a similar sense, the extent to which prosthetic technology changed in the interwar years has overshadowed the much larger and more important shift in public discourse concerning the symbolic significance the amputated male body came to signify, if only for roughly a decade. Lewis explores and repurposes the symbolic quality of the maimed man and his contested status within public discourse, putting them both to work literarily, as we will see in the next section. “[J]ust as technologies are ideological tools,” writes Ott, “prosthetic technologies are no different. They are systems of power and economics that converge within the mainframe of technology, ideology, and the human body” (16). Yet material developments in prostheses did occur; tracing them exposes how artificial limbs represent what Guyatt calls the “fusion of technology, culture and the organic” (307). Roughly a dozen manufacturers of prostheses operated in Britain by 1914.⁸⁵ With the support of a philanthropic committee led by Holford and with close consultation with the Ministry, the Roehampton Hospital in Southwest London was founded a year later specifically to address amputations and administer prostheses.⁸⁶ Much like the economically gridlocked debate experienced with the King’s Roll, the Ministry of Pensions “refused to open a state factory for the production of artificial limbs,” choosing instead to establish a research laboratory “for the purpose of developing new materials of the industry” (Guyatt 312). This resulted in a failed investment in a

⁸⁵ These included, among others, W. R. Grossmith, Masters & Son, Anderson & Whitelaw, Chas Blatchford & Sons, F. G. Ernst, and Mayer & Meltzer, as well as the Desoutter Bros.

⁸⁶ The same story more or less happened concurrently across the Atlantic, with the US Veterans Administration (VA) administering amputation centers after World War I, and “an artificial limb lab [being] established at Walter Reed Hospital in 1918” (Ott 15). For more on American veteran rehabilitation and on prosthetic masculinity in WWI from a US perspective, see: Mark Whalan, “Fictions of Rehabilitation” in *World War One, American Literature, and the Federal State*, and Michael J. Lansing, “Salvaging the Man Power of America’: Conservation, Manhood, and Disabled Veterans during World War I.”

material called certalmid, but also in developing the Standard Wooden Leg, among the most common prostheses deployed to ex-servicemen, and worn, we will soon note, by the “snooty” baronet, an ex-serviceman who served in the trenches.

By the conclusion of the war, the national conversation around the able-bodied public’s responsibility toward supporting physically disabled veterans had shifted. Honoring and remembering the sacrifices of young men for many became tethered to “re-membering” their newly disabled bodies with a prosthesis to fold them back into British culture and economic modes of production.⁸⁷ The artificial arm or leg again pulled double duty when attached to an amputee veteran as not just a literal but symbolic prosthesis, seeking to make whole that which the war had shattered into so many missing bodily pieces. As will be true with Snooty’s wooden leg as well, the cultural significance of the artificial limb in this moment recalls the well-known concept of narrative prosthesis in which the disabled body serves as a discursive or social necessity, moving effortlessly between the literal and symbolic.⁸⁸ “The absent parts of men’s bodies,” in other words, “came to exert a special patriotic power. In the struggle for status and resources, absence could be more powerful than presence” (Bourke 59).

There was a considerable difference, however, between the visible absence of an amputee and the invisible absence of a shell-shocked serviceman. This difference was especially apparent within the inequitable support systems available to amputees when compared to those of shell-shocked soldiers. Those suffering from shell shock were often

⁸⁷ I am borrowing this term from Heather Perry. “Programmes which provided disabled soldiers with career counseling, vocational training, and job placement were all part of the larger project of *Wiedereingliederung* [re-membering]” (110). See especially chapter three of *Recycling the Disabled: Army, Medicine, and Modernity in WWI* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014).

⁸⁸ See Chapter II, note 22 for Mitchell and Snyder’s term.

met instead with medical skepticism or accused outright by military leaders of either desertion or fraud, consequently being far less likely to be awarded pensions. Though we will take up the separate modernist history of shell shock explicitly in Chapter V, Jay Winter helps preview it when he writes that, because many shell-shocked soldiers “suffered from more than one ailment[,] some physicians were prone to see the problem as arising from a latent or underlying condition. This was a major problem,” he continues, “for many disabled men who sought pensions for their war-related conditions” (“Shell Shock” 314). “Those who were seen as dissimulators, men trying to avoid the risks of service by acting their [invisible] illness, could face court-martial and execution” (321). It appeared as though public dialogues over collective obligation toward maimed veterans, if not shell-shocked veterans, would at least have an impressionable impact on not only ex-servicemen but civilians as well. Yet this hope largely dissolved when it became clear that part of the rhetorical appeal that garnered national attention and eager investment in re-membering veterans operated by denying soldiers suffering from shell shock the same investment in rehabilitation.

Perhaps nothing demonstrates the masculinization of disability in this moment more than the rhetoric of the prosthesis, of remembering by re-membering (including, of course, its phallic suggestions). The social goal of such re-membering sought in prostheses the means to functionally make men “men” again—and in ways that remained unavailable for shell-shocked soldiers, as Chapter V will cover. This meant not only returning veterans to their prewar, typically industrial employment after supplying their missing limbs. It also attempted to reverse the stigmas of impotence associated with “invalidity.” Some returning soldiers tried to substitute in its place a new masculine

imagery which harked back to a futurist and vorticist vitality of hardened exteriority by melding man and modern machine. The prosthesis, for ex-servicemen like Lewis, could signal a phallic emblem of modern manhood divorced from vulnerable flesh and crystalizing a hardened heteromascularity decades in the forging.

In rearing its brash head once again, the rhetorical force of masculine vitality so pervasive before the war could find in the protheticized ex-servicemen a new kind of emblem, for those like Lewis, in the interwar years. Not everyone, of course, agreed. Trench poets like Wilfred Owen lamented the war's irremediable absences, captured in lines from poems like "Disabled": "To-night he noticed how the women's eyes / Passed from him to the strong men that were whole" (68). At the same time, physically disabled veterans increasingly exemplified—in the public imaginary, at least—"a higher ideal. Their masculinity, forged amid suffering, was expressed through self-control and the denial of pain. This vision of manliness was not new. Victorians had...judg[ed] his imperturbable reserve an important counterpoint to feminine emotion. Disabled men's good cheer proved that their tragedy had ennobled them; *their manhood had been strengthened, not sapped, by adversity*" (Cohen, *War* 130, emphasis mine).

Advertisements and product catalogues developed as key public spaces in which the virility of this new "strengthened," though disabled, manhood took shape. Those in need of an artificial limb looked primarily to newspapers for information regarding types and advancements in prosthetic technology.⁸⁹ The work of de-stigmatizing amputated soldiers often registered itself through a rhetoric of mobility, speed, and the power of machinery

⁸⁹ According to Anderson: "[T]he local press carried a significant number of advertisements for artificial limbs. It is evident from the sheer quantity of advertisements appearing on a daily basis in local and national newspapers that the public were the main consumers and selected their own artificial limbs from individual manufacturers" (160).

highly reminiscent of Futurism and, to a lesser extent, Lewis's Vorticism. For example, the catalogues for the Desoutter Bros.'s new, lightweight mechanical leg, with telling titles like *Progress*, *Nature's Rival*, and *A Remarkable Type of Limb*, feature photos like that of its founder—himself a leg amputee—flying an airplane (Figure 8).

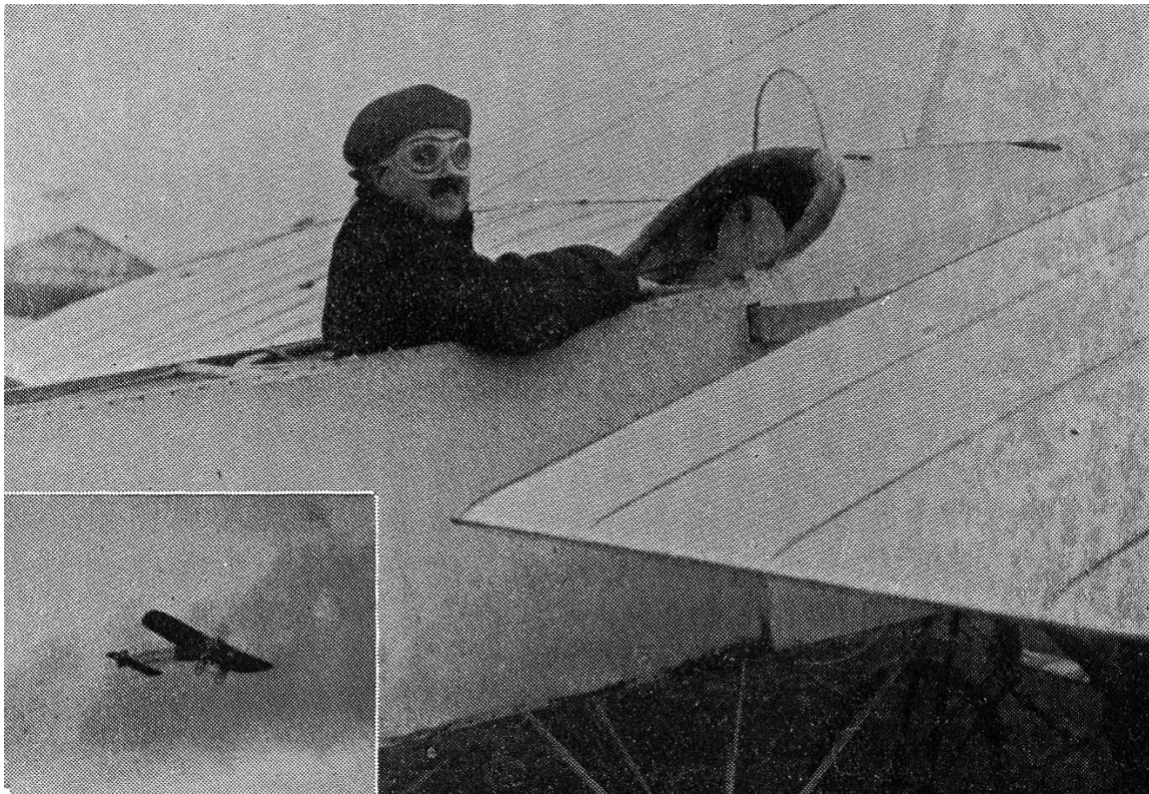


Figure 8: Leg amputee Marcel Desoutter flying his plane to promote the Desoutter Leg. Featured in *Progress* (1922) to underscore mobility and a “modern” prosthetic masculinity

The photograph's subtext scans as a metallic prosthetic masculinity freed from immobility, rendered as far stronger than its wooden predecessor, and linked explicitly to the novel technologies of modernity.⁹⁰ Catalogues like the 1905 *Manual of Artificial Limbs* likewise went out of their way to consistently feature photographs of disabled men

⁹⁰ Guyatt and Kowalsky have also commented in different ways on this important photograph.

operating machines and pursuing their pre-amputation lives in stereotypically masculine settings. Such images typically drew attention to the recovery of one's livelihood and identity, while often also emphasizing an implicit connection linking industry and technology directly to the prosthesis. Rhetorically, such images suggest the prosthesis, especially of metal varieties, as an emblem of modernity itself (Figure 9). Others feature veteran amputees "using prosthetic devices to perform 'normal' male activities—such as lighting and enjoying a cigarette—[as] deliberate attempts to challenge the reputation of the male amputee as ineffectual or effeminate" (Serlin, "Engineering" 61). Katherine Ott has furthermore responded to similar images by reminding that "[m]asculinity, as represented with prostheses, often entails not so much 'passing' for nondisabled as acting hypermasculine" (10). In analyzing an image of an ex-serviceman using his multiple-



Figure 9: A man with a mechanical arm constructing a prosthesis with the aid of a drill press

action shoulder to help him shoot a rifle, for example, she claims that “both manhood and disability are redeemed and even esteemed through the deployment of a prosthesis” (10).

Though not the norm, important cultural changes had helped amputee veterans shed some of the discursive stigmas of invalidity, impotence, and pity by the mid-twenties, witnessing a rare public desire to engage with disability rather than hide it from view. Yet these temporary gains did not come without some highly damaging logics. If culturally the prosthetic male body gradually came to be seen as recuperative, a symbolic extension of the debt due to soldiers maimed and murdered on behalf of the nation (as Lewis was well aware), those same bodies were subjugated by the state to a high stratification. Whereas culturally the prosthesis came to be worn by some as a marker of one’s masculinity, one’s strength forged through endurance, economically they weaponized the body against individuals as indicating one’s allotted pension, and by indirect extension one’s claim to said manliness. “Each part of men’s bodies was allocated [by the Ministry of Pensions] a moral weighting based on the degree to which it incapacitated a man from ‘being’ a man, rather than ‘acting’ like one. Thus, men who had lost two or more limbs or suffered severe facial disfigurement were said to have 100 per cent disability (with a pension 27s. 6d.) while men who had lost two fingers of either hand were said to have a 20 per cent disability (worth 5s. 6d.)” (Bourke 65).

Such rationing exposed a latent resistance from the beginning on the part of the British government to commit to sustained economic support for rehabilitation. George Barnes, the first Minister of Pensions, likewise represents one of the most telling examples of this disingenuous commitment to rehabilitation, something which will be lampooned further by Snooty, Lewis’s war-maimed protagonist. When questioned about

the government's resistance to awarding full pensions to innumerable disabled veterans, he publicly disparaged some of the recruits as ““veritable weeds”” (qtd. in Cohen, *War* 24). And indeed, by the late 1920s it started to become clear that the brief public support ex-servicemen had garnered immediately following the war would ultimately be lost by the thirties.⁹¹ Bourke perhaps best sums up what takes volumes to properly record, suggesting that although initially disabled ex-servicemen

won special status, the broader public to whom they appealed eventually reverted to pre-war ways of thinking about disabled bodies.... Although medically and technologically the experience of all disabled people was fundamentally changed by the war, within a short time public assumptions about the war-maimed came to be identical to those of the wider population of disabled men, women and children prior to 1914. (20)

As economic depression set in fully, and as the war's unmended wounds were gradually normalized or willfully forgotten, state-sponsored support beyond bare minimum pensions all but evaporated. What collapsed in the process was the distinction some ex-servicemen had opened up in reclaiming a disabled masculinity briefly marked by vorticist vitality.

Autonomy, Automaton, and the Politics of Prosthetic Masculinity: *Snooty Baronet*

By 1950, after consulting with physicians across North America and Europe, and after undergoing nearly two decades' worth of surgeries for his deteriorating health, Wyndham Lewis confronted the fact that within a year he would be blind.⁹² His left eye

⁹¹ The economic history of the British de-investment in support networks for ex-servicemen is extraordinarily complex, and far beyond the scope of this chapter. See chapters 2 and 3 of Cohen's *War Come Home* for a detailed account of this gradual shift through the twenties and leading up to WWII. See also chapter 3 of Perry's *Recycling the Disabled* for a related history from a German perspective.

⁹² See Meyers's chapter “Blindness, 1950-1954” in his biography of Lewis for the most detailed overview of his disability, and which I draw on in what follows.

he had damaged as an adolescent, causing poor vision throughout his life. But by the mid-40s, after first incorrectly diagnosing him with glaucoma, ophthalmologists finally identified a pituitary tumor pressing against the optic nerve of his right eye. “Lewis’ chromophobe adenoma,” Meyers summarizes, “grew upward behind the nose, from the pituitary gland at the base of the brain, and gradually pressed on the chiasma, or crossing of the optic nerves, and caused optic atrophy. These nerves had been permanently damaged and could not have re-grown, but Lewis could have retained his impaired vision if the tumor had been removed in the 1940s” (303).

Before this diagnosis, Lewis’s health had already diminished in the thirties when intestinal bacteria from an old gonorrheal scar spread to his bladder, producing cystitis and requiring a series of painful and, in a couple of cases, botched surgeries. This, in addition to the terrible condition of his teeth (all of which needed to be extracted in 1950), only compounded his failing eyesight.⁹³ Partly as a result of his intense distrust of physicians following four shaky bladder operations and the inaccurate diagnoses of his eyes, Lewis decided to forego eye surgery, following his gut and the suggestion of his current ophthalmologist. He feared that the required operation would kill him or leave him instead with what doctors today shorthand as NLP (no light perception), the rarest form of blindness: “I am informed by the eye doctors that death, total blindness, paralysis or insanity probably await me as a result of that operation” (Lewis, *Letters* 526). We will return to NLP and the fears it tends to embody for those with full sight with Jean Toomer

⁹³ The poverty which had been nipping at his heels for decades no doubt played a major role in Lewis’s poor health. For example, Lewis wore the same eyeglasses for two decades and never visited the dentist, writing in a letter to a friend in 1941: “When I tell you that I have not been to a dentist since the last war [WWI], you will see that my teeth are not unlikely to rank as a septic centre of the first order.... *Teeth* [instead of paying for a voyage home to England from Canada] is the only expense I *could* aspire to” (Lewis, *Letters* 300-01, emphasis in original).

in Chapter IV. Remaining true to his singular biting humor in the face of adversity, Lewis added to his diagnosis: “it is after all the kind of thing one has to expect if one allows oneself to be born. Had I been a suitably obstreperous foetus all this could have been avoided” (Ibid.). “If my eyes go, I go too. Loathsome as the world is, I do like to *see* it. *That* sort of blackout I could not live in” (qtd. in Meyers 301, emphasis in original).

And yet Lewis did learn to live in the world, however loathsome he had always found it, as a blind man. In 1951 he penned *The Sea-Mists of Winter*, a beautifully stylized public announcement in *The Listener* that his blindness, a condition few knew of at the time, had progressed to such an extent that it demanded his resignation as the magazine’s chief visual art critic. “[M]y articles on contemporary art exhibitions,” he tersely concludes, “necessarily end, for I can no longer see a picture” (13).⁹⁴ Overall gentler and humbler without forsaking his capacity to sink his teeth in at unguarded moments, the Lewis of *Sea-Mists* exposes yet another contradictory persona to which surprisingly few Lewis scholars attend, but which we have already witnessed. By extending the sea-mist both as a visual metaphor and as a description of his embodied experience of blindness, Lewis reveals a willingness to open himself up to a moment of vulnerability unique within his *oeuvre*. This coming from the man who gleefully self-appointed himself the Enemy of British culture for most of his life, and who remained intensely private and guarded over any personal matters which risked undermining his

⁹⁴ Printed as a 176-numbered limited-run New Year’s Greeting for “the friends of Black Sparrow Press,” the bound reprint of *The Sea-Mists of Winter* does not include page numbers. I have begun pagination, of course, where the text begins, and I am including in my pagination count the Lewis drawings included on every other page. By my count the text is 13 pages long. This was originally published in *The Listener* 10 May 1951. My sincere thanks to Paul Peppis for providing me with this rare piece of Lewis memorabilia.

cutting public personas.⁹⁵ The sea-mist comes to express not only his visual disability, but more philosophically the gradual shift in how he perceives and interfaces with the world. It also instances him slowly coming to terms with the reality of his disability, and the gravity of his initial denials of it:

The truth is that there was *no* mist. The mist was in my eyes: there was no sea-mist in nature. In spite of conditions which, one would have supposed, would have made it quite clear what these atmospheric opacities were, it took me considerable time to understand. It was not, you see, like this that I had imagined my sight would finally fade out.... I had imagined that I should go on going blind for a long time yet: just gradually losing the power of vision. I had never visualized mentally, a sea-mist. (2, emphasis in original)

The bitter irritation one anticipates from Lewis instead gives way in *Sea-Mist* almost entirely to an unexpected modernist revelry in self fragmentation and defamiliarization.⁹⁶ The numbers on his telephone become for Lewis letters to be memorized, “[t]hus seven is P.R.S. and five is J.K.L. I know what letters the half-circle contain [*sic*], and what the figures are as well” (5). Though eventually he finds the sea-mist “too pretty a name for it,” his increasing blindness reorients him toward inanimate objects, but also his friends, granting profound focus to otherwise insignificant details about them, banal fragments that Lewis finds suddenly to be characteristic of their entire being. Describing his visits with friends, he writes he can

⁹⁵ The most telling example of which is the fact that even Lewis’s closest friends knew very little about his longtime partner and wife, Gladys “Froanna” Anne Hoskins. When the two were married in 1930 after living together for about ten years, Lewis took pains to make it an exceptionally private ceremony, “deliberately falsify[ing] nearly all the details of the marriage certificate,” including changing the spelling of his wife’s name, his age, and his father’s vocation (Meyers 186-87).

⁹⁶ In a typical Marxist critique of modernism that stretches back at least as far as the Lukács and Adorno debates about artistic autonomy and commitment in the thirties, Jameson writes that “[Lewis’s] violent critique and repudiation of all of the hegemonic ideologies of the parliamentary bourgeois state may be taken as a figure for the crisis and fragmentation of the subject itself” (*Fables* 18).

see them after a fashion, but fragmentarily, obliquely, and spasmodically. I can see no one immediately in front of me.... It is rather like telephone conversations, where the voice is the main thing.... [As] one turns one's head hither and thither, glimpses constantly recur, delivering to one's fading eye-sight a piece of old so-and-so's waistcoat or bald head, or dear Janet's protruding nose. These token odds and ends of personality are really just as good as seeing them whole, and their voices have added significance. (8)

Perhaps because these small moments burst forth with rich “added significance,” Lewis finds that the disability he feared would be overwhelmingly depressing—a black “night” he could not “keep at bay” (10)—instead puts his perspective under re-view, both literally and symbolically. In humbling him to some degree, blindness ironically affords Lewis a valuable new mode of vision, among the chief goals of the Vorticism of his youth, even as it diminishes the powers of his full sight in his older age.

Such a shift underscores yet again the need to remember that Lewis both resists easy strawman calcifications, and continually escapes them through contradiction to an indeterminant neither/nor space of identity. Nor can his decades-long career be reduced to a consistent investment in the same pursuits and perspectives. I would briefly suggest that Lewis's career can be helpfully, if somewhat superficially, divided into at least three principal moments: early, mid, and late. The early Lewis of the *Blast* days, which we considered at length in section one, shows a highly troubling though dynamic writer and painter entrenched in the warfare of both Europe and the British “sex war.”⁹⁷ Lewis promised Vorticism to be a cultural antidote to what he and so many of his peers viewed as an overly effeminate masculinity by remodulating the technological aggressivity of

⁹⁷ Vincent Sherry aptly captures the ironic meeting place of war and art in Lewis, writing: “Like Gertrude Stein, Lewis must also see the design of the European trench system as a gruesome parody of artistic—cubist or Vorticist—form” (96-97).

Marinetti and the poetic “hardness” of T. E. Hulme.⁹⁸ As Lewis wrote in a letter to publisher Leonard Amster: “I started life as what is called a ‘revolutionary’ (in art and letters): a man of the *tabula rasa*. I thought everything could be wiped out in a day, and rebuilt nearer to the hearts [*sic*] desire” (*Letters* 274). The late Lewis, beginning roughly with *The Revenge for Love* (1938) and including *Sea-Mists* and the aptly titled *Self-Condemned* (1954), gleams a soon-to-be blind man struggling to redeem a turbulent career that left him insecure, mostly alone on an isolated island of his own making, and at times bankrupt financially, politically, and in his relationships. “It is though,” Jameson helpfully pens, this late Lewis “were smothered beneath the variety of his accomplishments and had in addition triumphantly succeeded in his effort to antagonize you by way of his aggressive persona as the Enemy” (“Wyndham” 16). Yet it is the middle Lewis, stranded somewhere between his early antihumanism and what one critic humorously labels the “reluctant humanism” of his later days, that produces in fiction his most generative exploration of a disabled masculinity (Symons, “Thirties” 48). This even as it finds him at his most politically problematic in adjacent discourses.⁹⁹

With Lewis in view, we have examined how the opening decades of the century in Britain witnessed a complex revision of the gendered rhetoric of disability. Heteromasculinity deployed these revised rhetorics in contradictory ways and for competing purposes, focusing on impotence in the teens and the prosthesis largely in the

⁹⁸ As Mark Antliff and Scott W. Klein point out in the introduction to their 2013 edited collection on Vorticism, Hulme died during World War I, but not before famously “correlating Vorticist aesthetics with anti-humanism” and, arguably, fascistic philosophers as well (2).

⁹⁹ We ought to be highly critical of Lewis’s homophobia during what I have labeled the early- and mid-Lewis eras. In this arena there is no argument to be had here, only sustained critique and rejection. For a thorough poststructural critique of Lewis’s homophobia, see especially Andrew Hewitt’s *Political Inversions: Homosexuality, Fascism, and the Modernist Imaginary* (1996), especially regarding Lewis’s trip to a Berlin club from which he reported on transvestism (174).

twenties. Yet by the early thirties, public support for re-membering maimed British ex-servicemen waned. Such physically disabled soldiers found themselves the all too familiar objects of pity without the economic means or political agency to bring themselves back unaided into the fold of a quickly industrializing society. The stigmas of “invalidity” returned. These men had been symbolically and literally stripped of their autonomy, so central to the privileges of hegemonic masculinity, without anything to augment or replace it.

With the historical foundation of our first two sections we can begin to approach the unexpected offerings of *Snooty Baronet*. To return to the final facet of my central argument with the first two sections now in tow: Lewis, I want to suggest in what remains of this chapter, finds in the prosthesis the effective means to imagine a radically denaturalized “modern” masculinity, identifiable in part through disability, that seeks to reclaim individual autonomy for itself.¹⁰⁰ The Lewisian prizing of those with this exceptional capacity to remake themselves can look to the uncritical eye dangerously close to a fascistic will to power. Yet I would stress that the true strength of Lewis’s gender politics, particularly as they confront disability in his mid and late career, does not embrace but actually seeks to explode notions of stable identities rooted in myth: “Never fall into the vulgarity,” he wrote, “of assuming yourself to be one ego. Each trench must have another one behind it. Each single self—that you manage to be at any given time—must have five at least indifferent to it. You must have a power of indifference of five to one” (qtd. in Bailey, “Wyndham” 20). Lewis expressed similar sentiments elsewhere with

¹⁰⁰ Ayers helpfully calls into question the status or even need in Lewis for this stable identity, averring that “Lewis’ crisis is exactly that he relinquished notions of the stable ego before he began to suspect that anyone wanted to take it away from him, and all of his defenses of the personality are staged around an empty, though heavily bolted, stable” (14).

his suggestion to “Contradict yourself. In order to live, you must remain broken up.” Often evoking the trench warfare that he experienced at the front, Lewis’s tenuous conception of a deliberately “broken up” identity comes to reject any ideological system that claims to essentialize embodiment as a predictable automaton—a highly charged term when applied during Lewis’s time to a person with a prosthetic appendage.

Detailing that prostheses of course do not make machines of men, Lewis more meaningfully imagines through the prosthesis a masculinity freed of any logic (behaviorism, ableism) which would essentialize it, a surprising advocacy nearly a half century ahead of its time.¹⁰¹ The prosthesis helps liberate a new conception of masculinity, for Lewis, by underscoring the artificiality—the social constructedness—always undergirding identity, whether disabled or otherwise. None of which absolves Lewis of his extensive historical failings. His turn to a masculinity denaturalized through the prosthesis in fact exposes his highly suspicious need to grant such an avant-garde vision of identity only to a recognizable Lewisian mock-hero figure, here the titular snooty baronet who stands, as he says, as the “One over against the Many” (*Snooty* 63). Lewis locates in his disabled protagonist his conviction that only a man like himself stands outside the “English herd” (*Snooty* 40) of the past and present, and into a future rich with opportunities for (a vorticist) artist to rewrite the world in his image.

Jumping back briefly again to 1951, *Sea-Mists* divulges Lewis coming to identify himself more fully with disability by describing his difficult, if humorous, experience trying to hail and step into a taxi as noisy blurs speed before his failing eyes. The scene attempts to perform through the act of reading the same out of body defamiliarization for

¹⁰¹ “We can aim at no universality of forms,” wrote Lewis, “for what we see is not the reality” (qtd. in Edwards, “False Bottoms” 100n5).

the reader that Lewis notes experiencing himself. “I will stand upon the edge of the pavement, calling impetuously, ‘Are you *free*?’ to owner-drivers... I signal small-vans, I peer hopelessly at baby-trucks. At length I get a response. It *is* a taxi! But I assure you,” Lewis says, “that it is one thing to hail a taxi-cab, another to get into it. This is quite extraordinarily difficult... It is with a sigh of relief that I at last find my way in, after vainly assaulting the stationary vehicle in two or three places” (6, emphasis in original; 8). Like Eliot’s insistence that our readings of the present revise how we read the past, I suggest that this “late” Lewis, the one defamiliarizing previous versions of himself through disability by rewriting those personas on the spot (and in the street), helps us reread the “middle” Lewis as well.¹⁰²

This little-known taxi scene from *Sea-Mists* in fact takes as its palimpsest the oft-cited opening of *Snooty Baronet*, as though Lewis were revising himself in his late age with his earlier disabled protagonist in mind as his own disability became real. Sir Michael Kell-Imrie, the titular baronet of exceptional snootiness, introduces himself (and the novel) this way: “Not a bad face, flat and white, broad and weighty...[with] the left eye somewhat closed up—this was a sullen eye” (15). Continuing in the third person, the snooty Kell-Imrie says that “the taxi stopped. The face drew back. The door opened. Grasping the forward jamb, a large man thrust out one leg, which was straight and stiff. Pointing the rigid leg downwards, implacably on to the sidewalk, the big man swung outward, until the leg hit terra-firma” (15). Like Lewis performing his confusion over his

¹⁰² To recall Eliot’s familiar assertion: “[W]hat happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them... [F]or order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered” (“Tradition” 37, emphasis in original).

own new out of body experience with blindness, Snooty disjoints us suddenly from third into first person: “The face was mine,” he reveals. “I must apologize for arriving as it were incognito upon the scene” (15). Snooty claims his dizzying introduction could not be helped because “my very infirmity suggested such a method. I could hardly say: ‘The taxi stopped. I crawled out. I have a wooden leg!’ Tactically, that would be hopelessly bad. You would simply say to yourself, ‘This must be a dull book. The hero has a wooden leg. Is the War not over yet?’ and throw the thing down in a very bad temper, cursing your Lending Library” (15).

Yet in many ways the war is *not* over, at least not for Snooty, a conflict in which he, like Lewis, fought, and which left him needing not only a Standard Wooden prosthetic leg, but also a metal plate in his skull.¹⁰³ Detaching himself into the third person once again as though he were removing his “mechanical limb” for us (48), Snooty covertly reveals his second disability to be “that part of his skull where there was a silver plate” (49).¹⁰⁴ And “because this is a Lewis novel” (68), as Jessica Burstein quips, his plate causes him to be violently ill “at the moment of climax” (*Snooty* 50). Snooty’s unpleasant experiences with the plate near the back of his head also affect his vision, giving trouble to the same eye that Lewis struggled with for most of his life. The plate in Snooty’s skull also helps situate his nihilistic and often absurd actions, suggesting he, too, suffers from the enduring traumas of shell shock. Disabilities visible and invisible mark

¹⁰³ Lewis does not confirm that Snooty was issued the Standard Wooden (Anglesey-style) Leg along with his small war pension, but given how he describes it, and based on its proliferation, it is statistically likely that Kell-Imrie has this prosthesis from section two.

¹⁰⁴ In a letter to Pound sent from the trenches of France, Lewis describes being constantly shelled in similar ways that led to Snooty’s disability: “The other side of the road is the weird desert alright. Shells rain on it all day. As you know, a shell is most dangerous when it falls on top of your head. It is next most dangerous at 200 to 400 or 500 yards — a big one, that is. We get nothing but big ones” (qtd. in Materer 96).

much of the narrative, including even the outlandish gossip novels Snooty's some-time girlfriend Val writes to humiliate her other suitor, Mort, whom she fictionalizes as yet another—surprise—“impotent” man (36).

The most conspicuous presence of disability though is what Kell-Imrie calls his “clockwork limb” (22), an extended, full-leg prosthesis he distinguishes from his “pre-war leg” (46). It stretches from “mechanical thigh” (26) and knee down to an “artificial foot” (27), and its joints creak “like watches and clocks” (48) if left unoiled. Replacing a limb lost in a massacre at Étapes, his prosthesis takes on competing significance relative to those with whom Snooty interfaces, ranging from “one-legged blarney” (76) to an “aristocratic embellishment” that risks rendering his writing career a “harmless joke” to his able-bodied authorial competitors (69). “The War,” he characteristically confesses, “accustomed me to death too much — that may be it.... I had seen too many bodies lying in that strange and rather irritating repose, mutilated but peaceful — the debris of attacks. Or I was too brutally indifferent *to myself*. Which?” (181, emphasis in original). Kell-Imrie's posttraumatic discourse raises numerous questions about how Lewis constructs disabled masculinity within the traumatic register of postwar shell shock, bridging the inside and outside of the body just as we will see fellow vorticist Rebecca West do in Chapter V. Worth repeating is that Lewis was the only “man of 1914” who saw active service, being assigned as an artillery officer during the war.¹⁰⁵ While Lewis comes to denaturalize masculinity primarily through the prosthesis, the traumas of postwar shell shock extensively bear on that process as well. Being gassed, surrounded by the corpses of no man's land, and living through the horrors of the trenches further contribute to

¹⁰⁵ As Paul Edwards reminds us, of all the “major modernist[s]” who served, only poet David Jones and Lewis lived through the war (“British” 30).

Snooty's deconstruction of masculinity and embodiment, impacting the narrative's reconstruction of each, once shed of essentialist prewar foundations.

In a memory which involves his now-literary agent Humph, Snooty remembers of his wounding: "Humph and I fought for Scotland during the Great War.... We both were gassed at the same moment and lay side by side more or less at Etaples. After that I lost sight of him. By pulling wires he got some job at the base, whereas I went back to my regiment, to be wounded two dozen times at least. I lost my leg happily, and got a beauty in my head" (60). As a consequence of his client's head trauma—Kell-Imrie's "beauty in [the] head"—Snooty's lawyer has had to defend the occasional absurd outburst which presumably results from his client's traumatic brain injury, particularly Kell-Imrie's latent, if rare, propensity for violence. This propensity proves key to any interpretation of the baffling, absurd conclusion, during which Snooty—again "because this is a Lewis novel"—kills his literary agent (potentially out of resentment) on a whim by shooting him not once, but twice in the back. The second shot, which Snooty insists he "knew all about" (235) and which he praises as "*a beauty!*" (240, emphasis in original), produces an interpretive Gordian Knot over the possibility or impossibility of agency within the bizarre behaviorist world of Lewis's satirical novel. So too does his shot historicize the behaviorist discourse over automatons and autonomy, which we considered in section one, beyond mere psychology. The result, in part, is a savage satire of dehumanization's psychological effects on soldiers, but also of the war's lasting effects on physically disabled masculinities.

In addition to his military pension, miniscule enough by the early thirties that it reflects the same history traced in our last section, Kell-Imrie makes a living largely as a

hack author of popular science books that follow the shallow marketing advice of Humph to capitalize on flash literary fads. Insisting he was not “born with a silver spoon in [his] mouth,” but that he has “a silver plate on [his] head,” he mocks his meager subsistence pension, but admits “[m]y pen makes me a little too” (22). After the early modest success of his “fish book” (64), a naturalist view of “animal psychology” (60) presumably entitled *Big Game of the Great Deeps*, Kell-Imrie enjoys minor fame with his surprise smash hit, *People Behaving*, a study, according to its author, of “Man upon exactly the same footing as ape or insect” (64). While he admits the “regular anthropologist” has already done this “with a ‘backward’ race, or an ‘inferior’ class,” Snooty (in true Lewis form) “makes no distinctions” (64). He instead ridicules the self-importance of what he calls his human “victims”: largely those “who are ‘progressive,’ popular, even ‘fashionable’ persons, of topdog race and showy class” (64). To those in the Lewis know, *People Behaving* in many ways sounds suspiciously like *The Apes of God* (1930), released two years prior to *Snooty*, Lewis’s contemptuous satire of bourgeois London society aimed at the likes of the Bloomsbury Group whom he famously loved to loathe. Kell-Imrie believes his second book, which one “cheerful ruffian” critic re-titles “People Misbehaving” (65), proves that his subjects “are only lifeless puppets” who “have no significance at all” (64).

Adding enough meta and intertextual layers to make even Borges or Nabokov jealous, Lewis further complicates his self-referential literary conceit by having the book which his readers now hold in their hands be the same as Kell-Imrie’s manuscript for “Snooty Baronet.” This will become Kell-Imrie’s third book of the same title, the anticipated follow-up to *People Behaving*. Boasting that he has “invented a new literary

technique” out of necessity for his “mock-researches,” Snooty classifies his work as a “fictionist essay of BEHAVIOR” (251, caps in original), and as a “scrupulous analysis” rendered into a “narrative” by “myth-maker[s]” (16) like himself and his “chief master,” John B. Watson (38). “I do not simply measure, catalogue and plot out graphs and statistics,” he insists, but “show my exhibit *in action*” by viewing “my” behaviorist “specimen[s]” as “a sort of disciple of Watson” (64-65, emphasis in original). Lewis’s bitter cheekiness ensures that the publication of “Snooty Baronet” (in the novel) finds it even more of a hit than its prequel, being selected as a Book of the Month publication mostly because of the superficial gossip his readers assume it reveals about passé socialite wannabes like Val.¹⁰⁶ Far more than reporting his “field-work” (43), though, Kell-Imrie intends his book by the end to mock and satirize behaviorism as nearing the madness of the mad hatter, a role he eventually comes to play with gleeful abandon (251).

Hilariously, Kell-Imrie wants “Snooty Baronet” to prove not his innocence but his guilt after his inexplicable murder of Humph during a botched ransom publicity stunt intended to drive up book sales that involves Persian kidnappers supposedly in cahoots with his agent. Val insists to the public in the aftermath that Snooty “never shot Humph at all” but “invented that” as the ravings of a lying madman (251), presumably to save him from prosecution. Snooty instead says he has written his “human document” to account for his murder, and appears finally to repudiate his earlier behaviorist persona, or at least to admit to its absurdity, concluding the novel with an uppercut to the jaws of his

¹⁰⁶ In reality the opposite was true, as Lewis was nearly bankrupt by the time of *Snooty*’s publication. Being sued for libel by Richard Grayson (whom Humph was supposedly based on) and seeing most libraries refusing to shelve much of his recent work for similar libel suits, Lewis largely had to abandon any hopes of *Snooty* succeeding in the literary marketplace.

fellow behaviorists: “Put that in your pipe and smoke it, all you professors of this implacable doctrine!” (252). As a testimony to Kell-Imrie’s ability to willfully take a self-aware action, *Snooty Baronet* thus seeks through oblique parody and satire to invalidate the principles of behaviorism. These principles, to recall section one, contend that human behavior is observably mechanistic, and that environmental stimuli responses passively control one mass herd of automaton puppets that presume to call themselves autonomous humans. It does not take long before *Snooty*—or perhaps more accurately, before *being* snooty—absurdly complicates things.

The behaviorist world that *Snooty* attempts to describe reduces each character to simply one of many roles “acted out,” as Kell-Imrie loves to say, by puppets devoid of agency and who inhabit highly mechanistic bodies that fall into predictable patterns that none consciously realize. Unless, of course, one possesses perhaps the rarest and most valued of all strengths in Lewis, self-awareness, something with which it appears only *Snooty*, as Lewisian mock-hero, is blessed. From the early thirties onward, Lewis to many scholars began splitting his “cultural model” into “a simple, two-part construction which divides humanity into a small class of intellects who are capable of individual thought and the unthinking masses who wish for nothing better than to be ruled” (Pawlowski 45). In introducing her intentionally oxymoronic term “personified detachment,” Heather Arvidson helps us better consider not only how Lewis was “impersonality’s reverse engineer,” but also our error in assuming that because he “stages, in his words, an ‘all-puppet cast,’ he endorses the vision of an all-puppet world” (792-93). Lewis ironizes easy readings of the prosthesis as emblemizing a mechanical man in a mechanical world by rendering instead the *able-bodied* as nothing more than

talking automatons. Despite all his prosthetic appendages and metal plates and shell shock, only Snooty approaches something like a “real” flesh and blood human whose cognitive and physical soundness far exceeds his able-bodied friends. “These other people,” he rails, “I regarded as pure automatons” whose “chattering” machines “could not be turned off” (91). The worst of it, to Snooty, is that they believe they have the autonomy to take actions based on their desires and intentions, whereas Kell-Imrie insists through almost the entire narrative that none, including him, have any real agency. He spends most of his time instead yawning and deferring answers to people’s direct requests which would require an equally direct, willful action on his part were he to respond.

Snooty separates himself from his “subjects” nonetheless by pridefully underscoring the training of his most recent scientific writing method: “I am not a brute. I am *conscious* of my actions. In a word, I am a Behaviorist” (155, emphasis in original). Not until Snooty reaches the end of his mock-research project does he perhaps break himself free of the totalizing logic of behaviorism by redirecting the self-awareness he so prizes into what looks to be a willful action brought about by embracing absurd happenstance while further enunciating his posttraumatic shell shock. He swings, in short, from merely acting (or behaving) to *taking action*, from an automaton to having autonomy, something his behaviorist ideology disallows him:

I cannot tell you upon what impulse I acted, but lifting my rifle I brought it down till it was trained just short of the rim of [Humph’s] white puggaree, and fired.... Then I fired a second shot, and you may believe me or not, but of all the shots I have ever fired...I don’t believe any shot ever gave me so much pleasure as that second one.... (The first was not great fun—it was almost automatic. I scarcely knew I was doing it. *But I knew all about the second.*) (235, emphasis added)

Through this swing *Snooty Baronet* ultimately locates in Kell-Imrie's prosthesis the symbolic means to separate the titular mock-hero from the able-bodied automatons that surround him. His prosthesis and his self-aware snootiness do not only come to dispel the ableist assumptions which would trap Snooty as an "invalid" man dependent on other people or forces to take action for him. They also aid in eventually disavowing behaviorism, which would strip all autonomy from him in a similar, if more emphatic, way. As we have seen in the first two sections and can bring to *Snooty Baronet*, disability took on an important rhetorical role in the era's reactionary discussions over the crisis of masculinity, a discussion Lewis brings to behaviorism as well. In underscoring a denaturalized sense of embodiment which takes the prosthesis as its literalized symbol, Lewis finds an effective means to resist ableist and behaviorist views of masculinity predicated on universalisms whose centers cannot hold when placed under (savagely satirical) critique.

In coming "unhinged," as he says at the end, "as if [he] were a door" (252), Kell-Imrie returns us to Lewis's rhetoric of a mechanistic world that seeks to reject all interiority and even human embodiment. Yet Snooty's prosthesis and metal plate curiously come to set him apart from his subjects in underscoring the artificiality undergirding this "natural" behaviorist universe, rather than standing in for it. Kell-Imrie takes nothing for granted, especially notions of an essentialist "internal" embodiment. His disability contributes to his gradually "unhinged" understanding that what all of his automaton subjects take to be natural and "real"—their cohesive internal identities, and their sense of self and embodiment—are in fact entirely constructed, just as artificial as his "mechanical" leg. In a series of reversals, Snooty's prosthesis and metal plate, as well

as his personal investment in impersonality, attempt to make him ironically the only “real” flesh and blood person in London. “The behavior of people” in *Snooty*, claims Julian Symons, “in fact is unreal (it is a Lewisian joke to make the hero a behaviourist), and at the same time people are ‘natural’, which means that they are clumsy puppets at best” (“Thirties” 43). Lewis, in other words, disembodies the flesh and blood of his able-bodied characters to critique a behaviorist logic which mechanizes and dehumanizes in ways he found deeply troubling, and which align in part with ableist understandings of prostheses.

A feigned impersonality rests in a related way near the center of *Snooty*’s ironic mode, one implicated in further stripping away “natural” identities, particularly those of a so-called stable (hetero)masculinity on which this chapter has largely focused. Lewis floods *Snooty* with images of the human turned inhuman, first to critique and then to reconceive. In *Snooty*’s eye, for example, we are told “numbers clicked-up in its counting box, back of the retina, in a vigesimal check-off” (15); and his training tells him to view his mind, recalling Hausmann’s *Mechanical Head*, as nothing more than a “memory system” he puts “into operation” (52). According to Kell-Imrie, “we all have the minds of Income Tax Inspectors these days” (22), particularly because “the present age” (again recalling Hausmann) is “the age of Numbers,” an era when individuals do not exist—“an age of battalions, not of single spies” (38). Speaking like the disabled veteran he is, *Snooty* says these battalions and especially industrial modernity more broadly have filled the hospitals “full of smashed bodies from the machine-ridden streets” (132). Even the temerity or skill of one’s sexual prowess becomes classified by an impersonal scale of military fitness, with particular anxiety on *Snooty*’s part over what Val calls “a C.3

lover,” indicating literally a soldier unfit to serve, but by implication yet another heteromascuine fear of impotence (34). Tongues become “pens” or “Unruly Members” (37), and Snooty complains he has “to bore holes in [his] head before [he] can get an idea into it” (65-66), further evoking shell shock.

Yet no character presents a more horrifyingly comical view of detached disembodiment than Humph, the chief target of the “destructive wit” of Snooty’s behaviorist contempt (Pritchard 110). Rendered as “all chin” (59), which Snooty takes to be a “strong box,” Humph reads to Kell-Imrie as an all-consuming mechanical being locatable in his agent’s jaw: “If you opened it up (touching a spring, and removing the lower jaw, with its snow-white, well-stocked dentistry and well-upholstered coral gums) you would detect that the spacious cavity did not represent all of the chin. The box would not be as deep as you had expected” (59). As his name indicates, Humph becomes the site of merciless mirth as a modern Humpty Dumpty, here made of so many pieces of inanimate wood, “exactly like a big carnival doll,” and with a “portentous wooden head-piece” (59). Unlike Snooty, Captain Humphrey Cooper Carter never shed his military tractability, an inexcusable crime to a thinker like Lewis: “Standing at attention, he stares out blankly at you: to command or receive orders.... If faces were made of wood,” Kell-Imrie silently observes, “then the spring-worked *cache* at the bottom would be used by this idiot for carrying dispatches” (59). As a wooden toy, Humph identifies with a vacuous “natural” masculinity devoid of any autonomy, and he is unaware, as Lewis satirizes, of the prescribed normative gender roles he plays, primarily by acting like the clichéd characters of the pulpy books he helps publish. Humph overall signifies for Snooty a “[l]ousy little automaton” who “looks at you as if to say – ‘Yes, I know I am not

real!’ Of course he is not. HUMPH is not real. I may not myself be very real (I have been told I am not)...but Humph is twice as bad.... This man is a puppet” (60).

Snooty does not exempt himself from puppetry, at least not arguably until he shoots Humph a second time in the back, a liberating moment whose “pleasant feeling of immediate satisfaction” he says he “shall never lose” (240). The difference is, Kell-Imrie *knows* he performs his affectatious snooty “personality,” picking it up and putting it on like his prosthesis and calling attention at the same time to a (disabled) masculinity yearning to detach itself into a denaturalized performance rid of the stigmas which had attended it for decades. So too does he know that his identity, though fundamentally “unreal” in its artificiality, takes on reality through his detached self-awareness; a sense of embodiment, in short, which allows one to construct and reconstruct one’s self based on the role one performs.¹⁰⁷

It does not follow, though, as Snooty claims he understands, that he gets to step completely outside the puppetry Humph or Val mime, regardless of his novel insight, his satirical distance, and his self-reflexivity. His embrace of a denaturalized series of roles suited to him separates like a fault line the difference between the autonomous performance of coded-masculine vitality, and the mindless automation of the “English herds” Snooty studies and mocks. One must be careful though not to conflate notions of autonomy with the principles of Individualism common at the time: self-aware

¹⁰⁷ The debate between personality and impersonality in Lewis has never been settled, in part because Lewis, I would argue, here too exposes contradictory positions at different times. Lewis unquestionably lampoons countless figures, real and imagined, who believe they are “autonomous beings capable of independent action and personal liberation” (Peppis, *Literature* 141). At the same time Lewis consistently sets himself outside, or exempts himself through satire from, such critique, “thrusting” as he says, himself into his art at every turn. As he once famously told Ford Madox Ford: “You and Conrad had the idea of concealing yourself when you wrote. I display myself all over the page. In every word. I...I...I...” (qtd. in Saunders 269).

performativity and the satirical mode often depend on the former but do not need the latter.¹⁰⁸ I suggest that *Snooty* enacts a shift, in short, through which the “authentic self,” as Peppis calls it, is displaced “with that of the theatrical self” (“Anti-Individualism” 241).¹⁰⁹ Modernity, precipitated for Lewis in the horrors of the First World War but also suggested in the transatlantic rise of sciences like behaviorism, shifted individuals into the same herds Lewis abhorred. As Kell-Imrie puts it in a slightly different register, modernity had begun reordering the masses of Europe in such a way that the liberal individual had become “only one cell among many in a contagion of sacrifice” (42). Yet whereas Snooty knowingly performs his own snootiness as disabled behavioral psychologist, he assumes he can predict how Val and Humph unwittingly play out the prescribed gender roles and types they believe adhere inherently within their “personality.”

Humph, for example, continually “jackintheboxe[s] off his chair” (78) and “acts somebody” from the “dime-novel[s]” he publishes (70). When Humph pushes forward the “wooden” chin Snooty finds so repulsive, the literary agent becomes ““the Englishman’ of popular american myth” to such an extent that Kell-Imrie thinks Humph would be “incessantly taken for a walking cartoon by the Newyorker” (76). Snooty determines Val too to be “a giggling fantoche,” the French noun for puppet, whose “telephone-voice was that of a stage-impersonation of telephoning, with a dummy-

¹⁰⁸ Peppis and, more recently, Arvidson offer two views of Individualism and the im/personality debate in Lewis. See “Anti-Individualism and the Fictions of National Character in Wyndham Lewis’s *Tarr*” and “Personality, Impersonality, and the Personified Detachment of Wyndham Lewis,” respectively.

¹⁰⁹ Though Peppis is analyzing Lewis’s critique of Individualism in *Tarr*, his suggestion here about the role of performativity has proved illuminating for both Arvidson and myself in applying it to *Snooty*, if in ways, I’m suggesting, that recuperate some aspects of autonomy opened up through Lewis’s satirical “personified detachment.”

telephone” (24). Though Val is “at the top of her telephone-form” (24), her “debutante false decorum” (41) rings hollow in her desire to climb the social ladder to “gossip-column-class” and to be as “near the ideal of Leisure” as possible (42). Putting on what Snooty calls her “manikin-parade of all her poshist social attitudes” (47), Val reveals herself to be invested in what she takes to be her “natural” gender role as the “so-much-sought-after-girl-of-fashion” (25). The trouble is, with her “petty station,” “slender powers,” and “slight beauty” (37) she fails to realize her days as a young debutante have passed, and that socialites see through her mismatched performance.

Lewis’s exploration of the performativity of identity, including gender but also disability, comes to a philosophical head during what Snooty later calls the “turning point” which “unhinged” him “as if [he] were a door” (251; 252). Seizing the rhetoric of inhuman mechanics that Snooty sets in distinction to that of prostheses, Kell-Imrie happens to pass a shop window on his way to lunch and sees a “Hatter’s Automaton,” a moving mechanical mannikin advertising straw hats for sale. The mannikin immediately calls Humph and his “wooden” chin to Snooty’s mind. Fearful that his agent’s publicity stunts will permanently fix the roles Snooty can perform by trapping him within his public persona as the Baronet, Snooty finds himself in the middle of an existential crisis of pure exteriority from which he never fully recovers. Snooty’s “existentialist questionings in front of the hatter’s dummy,” reminds Pritchard, are “very unbehavioristic” (113). Railing against the “puppets” Humph and Val, it occurs to him surreptitiously that they “desired me to be their automaton!” (131) in an ironic reversal. Staring in fascination, Snooty thinks it is “impossible as one watched [the Hatter’s Automaton] not to feel that he was in some real sense *alive*. At certain moments of course

the imperfections of the apparatus would betray him. But is not this the case,” he asks, “with the best of us?” (133, emphasis in original). In an equally performative way, Snooty reveals that as “I shifted uneasily up and down upon my real leg and my false leg — I had become almost as much a fixture before the Hatter’s window as the puppet inside. The puppet had begun to notice me” (136). The “imperfections” of the automaton which betray his reality as mechanical then mimic for Kell-Imrie, if momentarily, his prosthesis:

As for the puppet, he went through his evolutions over and over again.... I had replaced my hat — I again removed it, as it happened it was just as he was taking off his. The fellow who was standing at my elbow had been watching me in the plate-glass window I think.... He had I suppose remarked that I was *partly* mechanical myself. My leg had not escaped his attention.... He was looking *at me*, instead of at the puppet. (135, emphasis in original)

In this moment reality, in following the mad hatter down the rabbit hole, turns upside-down—and it will remain at least aslant, if not inverted, from Snooty’s crisis onward.¹¹⁰ In an instant, the automaton denaturalizes Kell-Imrie’s sense of human embodiment as a series of performances, as “theatrical selves.” He perhaps breaks here, too, from the tractability of his days as a soldier, which demanded of men a degree of the unthinking automation Lewis loathed. While this sense of theatricality first shocks and fascinates him, Snooty ultimately redirects his revelation in ways that prove generative in his revision of a de-essentialized view of his own disabled masculinity—and the autonomy inherent in the willful performance of identity roles.

¹¹⁰ As Edwards points out, the sensation of absurd inversion in *Snooty* has remained of interest since Kenner blasted it in the fifties. As “an expression of a genuinely threatening absurdism where everything is turned into its opposite,” and where “[e]verything is doubled,” *Snooty* is “a looking-glass world, as the novel’s references to Lewis Carroll help us realize” (*Wyndham* 434).

The cracking of reality for Snooty precipitates the dissolution of all naturalized views of human embodiment. “To me,” he summarizes, “*nothing* seemed natural. . . . Everything that passed as natural with [the automaton], looked exceedingly odd to me. The most customary things in the world struck me continually as particularly ludicrous” (136). Thinking again of Humph, but now wrestling with the suggestion that his prosthesis makes him perhaps “mechanical” as well, Snooty notes that the automaton in the window “turned to me, bowed from the waist, and, raising his hat, smiled in the most formal and agreeable way possible. *The fellow was playacting*” (135, emphasis added). When another passerby approaches, Kell-Imrie begins extending this absurd disreality outward: “Was not perhaps this fellow who had come up beside me a puppet too? [. . .] *but equally so am I!*” (135; 136, emphasis in original). If the automaton “was on show,” Snooty contends that the passersby mistakenly believes “we were not. There was something absolute in this distinction, recognized by everybody there excepting myself. I alone did not see it” (136, emphasis in original).

The episode with the Hatter’s Automaton affords at least two competing responses to which we ought to attend in thinking about disabling modernism. As with McCullers, important to remember here is that this remarkably contemporary, even postmodern, scene was far ahead of its time in being imagined in the early 1930s. One can witness in such scenes Lewis’s eagerness to denaturalize embodiment, as well as his captivation with the possibilities opened up by replacing performativity for essentialist views of identity, particularly through a disabled masculinity. Snooty offers far more than the mere genial “conviction of the absurdity of the body” (Kenner 141). Instead, as Michael Levenson puts it: “For Lewis the body is not a source of value but a rebuttal to

very moral valuation; it confronts luminous morality with opaque matter; it is *absurd*" (244-45, emphasis in original). The body, as Lewis emphasizes with Snooty's disabilities, can never be wholly reduced to ideology. An inherent resistance resides in such a realization.

One can and should look to this modernist literary history without condoning its extensive failings in other regards. The two are not mutually exclusive. *Snooty Baronet*, when set within its broader historical context, details a text departing from the era's violent, often contradictory cultural understandings of the disabled male body. Lewis helps expose how and why impotence was deprecated and vilified by homophobic and ableist fears, hailed in short as a "crisis of masculinity" coded in almost entirely heteronormative ways. *Blast* consistently engages such troubling heteronormative ideology, especially as Lewis formulated in its pages Vorticism's political aesthetic as a reaction, in part, to impotence, effeminacy, and a eugenic fear of national or "racial" degeneration.

The prosthesis paradoxically found itself reclaimed by some within this same coterie, immediately following the war and into the twenties, as a marker not of a weakened and fragmented masculinity, but one refortified and promised to be made whole in part through modern prosthetic technology. Unwilling to capitulate to a prevalent discourse of pity or "invalidity," Lewis presents a far more nuanced view of disabled embodiment than many would likely expect, opening critical avenues for re-examination. In the prosthesis Lewis ultimately finds the effective means to imagine a radically denaturalized "modern" masculinity, identifiable in part through disability, that reclaims individual autonomy for itself. If approached skeptically, we can find more

meaningful ways to combine disability in Lewis with the important feminist work on gender begun by Carlston and others, detailing in the process a richer picture of modernism's fraught but dynamic relationship with disability. The same goes for their inseparability.

Yet neither can we overlook the fact that Lewis achieves his denaturalization of embodiment by abusing the well-known narrative prosthesis trope. Lewis sets Snooty apart, grants him a self-awareness that allows him "alone" "to see" what others cannot, and whose prosthesis literally gives him, as Kell-Imrie says in a bad pun, "a leg up" over others (61). Snooty may still arguably be stuck in the behaviorist mode by the conclusion. Andrew Gaedtke suggests of this thorny endpoint that Lewis's satire serves to prove that "extricating oneself from [behaviorism's] mechanizing understanding of being is not possible through mere disavowal" (63). And still Snooty appears to fill the mock Lewisian hero role nonetheless by conforming to Lewis's misanthropic elitism in ways that offer modernist and disability studies little to nothing. His anxiety over being fixed in place and held firm by culture or ideology surely contribute to his insightful revising of how his culture had largely calcified its view of masculinity and disability, particularly that of fellow veterans. But this same propensity risks overwhelming yet another Lewis narrative in hypermasculine toxicity. In approaching the pedestrians before the Hatter's Automaton, the same "unhinge[d]" moment which denaturalizes his reality, Snooty reveals his most repugnant Lewisian sentiment: "I seldom see a crowd without firmly pushing into it (if only to break it up — nothing gives me so much pleasure as to disintegrate a crowd)" (132). Such sentiments make it hard not to conjecture that Lewis read and was influenced by texts like Wilfred Trotter's *Instincts of the Herd in Peace and*

War which placed along a continuum animal herds and human masses. Recalling the early Lewis of the *Blast* days, obsessed with a masculine vitality registered at times through a rhetoric of misogynist and ableist discursive violence, Snooty says of the crowd: “I drive my bulk which is considerable into the thick of it and once there am at no pains to keep still — in a crowd I am a *ferment*” (132, emphasis in original).

This is the Lewis that still needs resisting but not ignoring, both in modernist and disability studies. Even in the wake of *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist*, whose title alone launched a thousand modernist ships to war, it is still Jameson who best captures Lewis, and who can help us in closing further call into question the symbolic role played by Kell-Imrie’s prosthesis. Lewis’s view of the artist-hero, Jameson writes, recalling both Lewis and Snooty, is “neither herd nor *fuehrer*, he withdraws from these conflicts and struggles and paints them from the outside” (“Wyndham” 23). Yet “we must not imagine,” he continues, “that for all that he is an elitist or an authoritarian.... Lewis does not aspire to join this necessary elite; *he wishes to stand outside of it all*, and to observe it: as an artist, his fundamental position is that of aesthetic observer, and therefore, inevitably, once the tragic spectacle of violence and cruelty wears off, as a satirist and misanthrope” (“Wyndham” 21, emphasis added). Snooty, too, flirts with thinking he has the autonomy and vision to step outside the frame of history beyond those automatons still attached to naturalized views of embodiment. With his wooden prosthesis to support him in his denouncement of the mechanical, if able-bodied, herd, Snooty takes one step forward for disabled masculinities, but he often falters in taking at least two steps back.

CHAPTER IV

BLINDNESS, BLACKNESS, AND THE RACIAL POLITICS OF VISION:

JEAN TOOMER

“Mrs. Dalton was blind; yes, blind in more ways than one.”
— Richard Wright, *Native Son*

“Tiresias, although a mere spectator and not indeed a ‘character,’ is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest... What Tiresias *sees*, in fact, is the substance of the poem.” — T. S. Eliot, “Notes on ‘The Waste Land’”

In sifting through scholarship on Jean Toomer, we confront contradictions large and small. Some query Toomer’s internal conflict over his interstitial racial position, particularly as it vied with his lifelong pursuit to reconcile the great theoretical gap between sameness and difference, the one and the many.¹¹¹ Others expose a masculinity at violent odds with itself, both unsettled and unsettling: here delicate and attentive, now entrenching an unmistakable misogyny.¹¹² We say Toomer is at once strikingly postmodern and embarrassingly romantic; a prophet grasping at the heavens and a poet drinking from the deep-rooted cane of the earth. While for many biographical fallacy debates have been laid to rest for over half a century, exceptionally few scholars find they can engage meaningfully with Toomer’s fiction without some recourse to Toomer the

¹¹¹ No scholar has been more important in situating Toomer’s interstitial racial position than George Hutchinson. In “Identity in Motion,” to take one example, he writes: “Key to the unusual features and effectiveness of *Cane* was the fact that its author was in rapid transition...between identities” (39).

¹¹² Feminist readers largely since Susan Blake have been highly critical of the silencing and objectification of women in Toomer, particularly in Part One of *Cane*. Mark Whalan has also expanded how we understand Toomer’s investment in his own masculine self-fashioning through intense exercise programs and body-building, through which “building the body built the man” (598). See “The Spectatorial Artist and the Structure of *Cane*” and “‘Taking Myself in Hand,’” respectively, for these different views of gender in Toomer.

man.¹¹³ None of these contradictions should cause surprise. *Cane* (1923) renders a world as opaque and oblique as its author's biography (to say nothing of Toomer's many aborted autobiographies). Yet as any reader of *Cane* knows, oracular moments of startling beauty and insight burst through and suddenly clarify its densely mired haze.

Back in the reams of scholarship, familiar narratives about Toomer eventually start to emerge. Historically, *Cane* became a palimpsest for a century of Black American fiction.¹¹⁴ As with the work of W. E. B. Du Bois, it set forth a series of patterns that left an indelible mark on Black literature, even if Toomer's politics proved at times too much or too little for the era.¹¹⁵ Henry Louis Gates recognized the longevity of *Cane*'s cyclical style decades ago, commenting that its resurrection in the sixties "turned largely on [its] themes of the return" (221). From the return voyage from North to South, to the old generation confronting the new; the symbolic movement backward in time to the antebellum land of slavery, to the racial observations of a detached speaker; the elevation of what Du Bois famously called the "sorrow songs of black folk," to encountering past horrors as embodied in the present: with its inception, *Cane* marked each trope as recognizable, each a powerful coupling of history and voice. Yet to this we should add

¹¹³ Scholars since the revival and recovery of Toomer's hybrid text during the Black Arts Movement in the 60s and 70s have largely followed Darwin Turner's lead in this regard. Hence, Turner's introduction to the 1975 edition of *Cane* boldly posits that "to see *Cane* clearly, one needs first to look at its author" (qtd. in *Cane* 123, emphasis added).

¹¹⁴ Langston Hughes's seminal "Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926) concretized Toomer's reputation from the beginning, famously declaring in the first artistic manifesto of the New Negro Renaissance: "(excepting the work of Du Bois) *Cane* contains the finest prose written by a Negro in America. And like the singing of [Paul] Robeson, it is truly racial" (94).

¹¹⁵ Intellectual heavyweights Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Alice Walker have weighed in on the debate to "keep" or "reject" Toomer in the Black American literary tradition. Curiously, Walker uses the figure of *blindness* as key to her rejection, claiming that Toomer suffered from a "deliberate blindness" to a racist America which "he simply refused to see" (62). As such, Toomer, she claims, does not warrant the respect his reputation has received. Gates, on the other hand, insists that there is an ineradicable "trace" of blackness central to *Cane* that cannot be denied, even as Toomer himself denied his own blackness (202).

another core theme in *Cane*, one that perpetually gets over-looked: the racial politics of vision, of seeing and being seen, particularly as extensions of the living history of slavery and blackness in America.¹¹⁶ For all of our insights, as the poststructural axiom goes, we have brought with them spaces of epistemological blindness, spaces in *Cane* ironically about blindness itself.

This chapter identifies the racialized social and symbolic roles visuality plays in *Cane*, arguing that it explores its complex sense of blackness and Black heritage in part through the figure of blindness. *Cane* indexes myriad literary sites that visualize a cultural memory marked by beauty and strength, but also terror and trauma. In exploring Black blindness, *Cane* does much more than fall into the familiar trappings of “ocularcentrism” which conflate seeing with knowing.¹¹⁷ It instead foregrounds racial performativity, making the distinction between the spectator and the spectacle hypervisible, reorienting some of the performative work Wyndham Lewis captured in the previous chapter. As with Carson McCullers and Lewis, the spectatorial distinction Toomer paints admittedly finds its rhetorical power in walking the dangerous path between a productive use and a violent abuse of representational disabilities. We feel such figurative power in the swing between these poles. *Cane* invests itself in deconstructing racial spectacle, coming to a dramatic head in the final section, “Kabnis,”

¹¹⁶ Though purely speculative, I wonder about the possibility of the historical emergence of texts like *Native Son* (1940) and *Invisible Man* (1952), to take two obvious examples, without Wright and Ellison expanding the tropes *Cane* helped establish. All three tellingly deal with blindness: two in a literal sense, and one, as Ellison’s title suggests, metaphorically. See Josep M. Armengol for an analysis of blindness as “racial biases” in Ellison (36).

¹¹⁷ David Bolt argues in *The Metanarrative of Blindness*: “the use of visual terms to make epistemological points invokes the notion that seeing is synonymous with knowing, that visual perception is necessarily the normal way of gathering knowledge.... The result is a positive perpetuation of ocularcentrism that I deem ocularnormative” (18).

in which the presence of the blind and seemingly deaf old Father John not only estranges spectators from each routine action in the *mise-en-scène*. He also ultimately overpowers the stage and arguably the hybrid text as a whole, driving characters and narratives to their conclusive endpoints. As Michael Davidson has written, “[T]he blind have a great deal to teach the sighted not only about blindness but about seeing and about the assumptions that sighted persons bring to the larger cultural field” (*Concerto* 143). One could unequivocally charge *Cane* with exploiting the image of blindness for its rich symbolic resonance, particularly as a traditional literary trope linked to mystical prophets and the double entendre of their “vision.” Father John’s blindness promises to be an oracular conduit through which all will be revealed, and spectators within and beyond the drama await a bestowal of its significance. But revelation never comes. Toomer, crucially, refuses this gesture. While he repeatedly casts the lure of metaphorical disabilities, his engagement with the politics of racial visibility (including its absence) proves far more complex when placed under an uncomfortably close reading seeking to disable modernism.

As a literary trope and a representation of visual impairment, “blindness” demands a discursive distance and rigorous skepticism because of its incredible metaphoric ubiquity. Taken for granted and at times abused for its figurative power, “blindness” in language rarely signifies the material conditions of the visually impaired. It almost always instead *radiates* outward—as such an implicated verb reveals—beyond the realm of the literal into that of the symbolic, of the metaphorical. Naomi Schor has gone to great lengths to illuminate this perpetual snare and the ethics which adhere to it, parsing the inextricability of the conceptual from the purely material in encountering the

word *blind*. She writes: “What makes some of these metaphors so difficult to extirpate is that these metaphors are catachreses, that is they belong to that peculiar and little understood category of figures that signifies...a necessary trope, an obligatory metaphor, to which *language offers no alternative*” (77, emphasis added). Offering the catachrestic examples of the “leg” of the table and the “arm” of the windmill, Schor makes plain the immense difficulty of approaching blindness discursively without bringing along with it a vast sum of related philosophical, conceptual, and figurative meanings.¹¹⁸ David Bolt, a scholar of blindness and a blind individual himself, summarizes Schor’s query when he remarks: “the dictionary offers thirteen definitions for the adjective blind, but twelve are negative, and only one pertains to visual impairment” (20).¹¹⁹

To complicate this situation even further, the rhetoric and politics of visibility, particularly in relation to knowledge and differentiation, seem so extensively embedded in language as to be permanent. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson and other foundational disability scholars have grappled with from the emergence of the field, the “Western tradition posits the visible world as the index of a coherent and just invisible world, encouraging us to read the body as a sign invested with transcendent meaning. In interpreting the material world, literature tends to imbue any visual differences with significance that obscures the complexity of their bearers” (*Extraordinary* 11). Yet even a careful thinker like Garland-Thomson cannot express the key “difference” of disabled bodies in the minds of what she influentially calls “normate” society as other than

¹¹⁸ Poststructuralism was especially attentive to the intractability of the linguistic sign when it comes to epistemological insight and blindness-as-metaphor. For more, see Jacques Derrida’s *Memoirs of the Blind* and Paul de Man’s *Blindness and Insight* especially.

¹¹⁹ Bolt describes himself as “blind”; I am not imposing this word, instead of the generally more accepted term (at least in the US) “person with a visual impairment.”

visually marked and embedded linguistically. As she writes, the project of denaturalizing representations of disability happens by better understanding how such “bodies carry social meaning,” deconstructing to empty them of their power (*Extraordinary* 15).

Literary and scholastic engagements with the politics of disabled representations cannot mean a clean break from the symbolic for the purely material, no matter how well-intended, the implications of which our next chapter on West will conclude by considering. *Cane* makes real our inability to detangle the material reality of blindness from its discursive and often racialized excesses. Embodiment, as I argued with McCullers, conjoins the two.

Each section of this chapter thus oscillates between the discursive and material implications of blindness and blackness, both in *Cane* and its contexts. While the first section traces the interwoven histories of literary blindness, religion, and oppression as they contribute to blindness’ *symbolic* apparatus, the second section then recovers the *materiality* of eugenics, miscegenation, and what I call fear of the “genetic other.” These first two sections build toward the concluding reading of *Cane* by detailing how Toomer historicizes and mobilizes an oracular vision linked in the text to various affinities and disavowals of blackness. This final section asks us to re-view the visuality of *Cane*’s many portraits to recover their roots and histories, their tokens of character and heritage. Though the focus remains predominantly on the experimental drama “Kabnis” of Part Three, I also invoke *Cane*’s prior two parts as intertextual dialogues that Toomer laces throughout his hybrid text, both in section two and three.¹²⁰ In defining *Cane*’s hybrid

¹²⁰ Fittingly for a figure like Toomer who despised being trapped within isolated categories, *Cane*’s literary genre has never definitively been classified. Some have called it a short story cycle, others a novel, and others still a prose poem. As Rudolph Byrd reminds us: “Nowhere did Toomer refer to his first book as a

form, Joel Peckham has helped further establish its intertextuality, such as this chapter draws together: “Toomer attempts to enact a disruption of social boundaries through literary form by exploding the genre borders of fiction, lyric poetry, and drama. By forcibly bringing together the disparate elements of the text, Toomer exposes false dichotomies and separations that are both literary and social. The form of the text thus becomes its central metaphor” (275). The gaze of racial visibility lurks behind perhaps every line, a trope whose politics exceeds its form. This racial visibility most powerfully and directly bursts forth in “Kabnis,” compelling a more sustained and uncomfortably close reading than its precedent sections. As *Cane* articulates, an uncomfortable and productive engagement with blindness and race necessitates a keen awareness of how tropes cannot be neatly placed along a simplistic ethical or unethical axis. Toomer instead ensnares us within a literary net which ultimately brings blindness together with miscegenation, articulating in eugenic thought the fear of the genetic other, and speaking to the terrors of America’s racist history.

“When they made th Bible lie”: Literary Blindness, Religion, and Oppression

This section braids together the interwoven histories of blindness as a literary, religious, and oppressed figure. It traces how these overlapping histories contribute to the symbolic apparatus of Black blindness conjured and commanded by Toomer. Father John’s blindness, what follows suggests, triangulates a vortex of images central to “Kabnis.” These images constellate around salvation, oppression, and slavery, each considered in turn, indicating their shared heritage and racialized function within

novel” (12). I’ve settled in what follows on the somewhat unwieldy “hybrid text,” as it seems most accurate.

“Kabnis.” Toomer ultimately underscores Christianity’s bastardization in serving as a defense of the American slave system, best captured in Father John’s only complete utterance: “O th sin that white folks ‘mitted when they made th Bible lie” (117). This section thus details how Toomer fuses the dynamic role blindness plays in literature and Judeo-Christianity in order to realize the relationship between oppression and Father John’s revelation within “Kabnis.”

On 26 April 1922, in one of his first letters to his friend and burgeoning mentor Waldo Frank, Toomer responded to some of Frank’s earliest criticism of the young writer’s work-in-progress, addressing his initial decision to give “the Ancient” blind Father John more dialogue in the developing experimental drama that would conclude *Cane*. Toomer writes: “I say, ‘Kabnis,’ nothing inside of me says ‘complete, finished.’ By this I know that I shall go over it . . . Those Ancients have a peculiar attraction for me. I am very apt to let them say too much” (*Letters* 36, ellipsis in original). As Frank had expressed earlier: “I felt that the speech of the Ancient at the end was a sudden drop into particulars failing to take along and light with itself the general atmosphere you had built” (qtd. in *Cane* 158). Generally, Toomer talks elsewhere of the “Ancients” in the same terms as “the Negro of the folk song [that have] all but passed away,” a people for whom he famously desired *Cane* to be a memorial “swan-song” (*Letters* 115). But he linked the Ancients in “Kabnis” to the figure of Father John, a stand-in for a generation he saw as rapidly passing into history’s oblivion as the onset of the twentieth century ground it underfoot.¹²¹

¹²¹ Werner Sollors has written about this historical meeting point in *Cane*, arguing that its “very form is an attempt at finding a literary equivalent for the dislocations that modernity had wrought by moving people from soil to pavements, making them ashamed of their traditional folk culture” (20).

Yet the Ancients did more than enthrall Toomer. He also recognized his tendency to lend their voices too much credence, to grant them a romantic wisdom overfilled with too much hind- and foresight. Given that we wait in suspense for Father John to utter anything at all in “Kabnis,” Toomer’s comment to Frank comes as another surprising textual contradiction. Admitting his initial tendency to allow the Ancients to “say too much” exposes Toomer’s effaced re-visionary process of Father John. His re-vision moved toward not only “empty” silence through deafness. It also located blackness-as-absence through blindness, a racialized dark void eerily similar to the one many sighted people inaccurately imagine all “blindness” comprises.¹²²

Toomer’s concern over the symbolic weight of Father John’s speech sets the “Ancient” within a literary tradition of blind prophets and poets as old as Homer. Even after Toomer excised almost all words from Father John’s lips in the published version, the old blind man still serves as a would-be prophet, as his introduction in the stage directions makes clear: “To the left, sitting in a high-backed chair which stands upon a low platform, the old man. He is like a bust in black walnut. Gray-bearded. Gray-haired. Prophetic. Immobile” (106). Raised above the others upon a mock regal throne, wizened in body and mind to the point of recalling the bust of an ancient philosopher-king, the old man embodies the blind “prophetic” figure of literary traditions past. So too does he tellingly threaten to stain everything black like hulled black walnut shells.¹²³ Toomer’s description primes us for a rehearsed scene seen too many times, one in which the

¹²² Mark Paterson reminds us that visual impairments exist on a large spectrum, with only “Approximately 10 per cent of those deemed legally blind, by any measure, hav[ing] no vision. The rest have some vision... According to various governmental and institutional scales there are few cases of NLP [no light perception], and most of those classified as blind have measurably severe forms of vision impairment” (12).

¹²³ My thanks to Betsy Wheeler for informing me of the black stains that come from hulled black walnuts.

prophet's acolytes receive his wisdom or else endlessly await the speech of revelation.

Well before he has gouged out his own eyes, in perhaps the most famous literary example, Oedipus asks the blind "seer" to save Thebes by revealing who has killed King

Laius:

Teiresias, you are versed in everything,
things teachable and things not to be spoken,
things of the heaven and earth-creeping things.
You have no eyes but in your mind you know...
(Sophocles 22)

Like Oedipus standing before the blind Teiresias, we silently await Father John's judgement of Kabnis, to profess how the northern "blue-blood" might set himself right with the past and his mixed racial heritage which he views at times as both fated and fatal (*Cane* 108).

As Toomer perhaps indulges, blindness brings with it a set of socially imagined "compensatory gifts" which, for the sighted onlooker, "make up for" the supposed lacks those with severe vision impairments suffer. These compensatory gifts are sometimes referred to as the vicarate of the senses, fictions in this case about vision impairment such as gaining nearly superhuman hearing. Such pervasive fictions bolster the ocularnormatism Bolt and others have diagnosed as harmfully internalized by sighted society.¹²⁴ Because the thought of a significant vision impairment proves too horrifying for many sighted people, so the story goes, many assume there must be some kind of compensation, "or existence without sight would be absolutely impossible" (Monbeck

¹²⁴ Frances A. Koestler's *The Unseen Minority*, for example, critiques Shakespeare's abuse of this idea in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, adding: "Scientific experiments have demonstrated that blind people do not hear better than others, they merely learn to pay more attention to the auditory cues that sighted people can afford to ignore" (4). See also Terry Rowden (37).

16). While in our secular age these compensations signify a drastic boost to the other senses (so-called increased touch and hearing abilities being the most common), for the ancients these gifts included not only soothsaying and transcendental insight, but also other magical powers, such as curing the sick and having incredibly good luck.¹²⁵ In ancient China as well the blind were thought to be free from worldly distractions, “enabling their minds to ponder the mysteries of the world,” with some also becoming clairvoyants, as in the West (Dobree and Boutler 116). As Bolt summarizes: “because touch, smell, taste, and hearing can all bridge the dream and waking states, while sight apparently cannot, people who have visual impairments are beyond reality. That is to say, in the cultural imagination the blind seem closer to the dream state than are their sighted counterparts” (72). Of all the extraordinary bodies, to take from Garland-Thomson, those labeled *blind* particularly captivate and terrify the able-bodied imagination.

If the ancients looked at blindness at times as a holy blessing leading to prophetic pronouncements, they paradoxically considered it at other times the mark of social pariahs and the profane. Toomer locates both meanings within Father John as a blind Black ex-slave. Able-bodied understandings of blindness, both historical and contemporary, pivot effortlessly between the superhuman and the subhuman (Bolt 72). The same swing perniciously attends deafness from a hearing perspective, as we saw in McCullers, and, to a lesser extent, describes the competing ways prostheses and impotence marked disabled masculinities in Lewis. In Sparta and Athens, communities ruthlessly scrutinized the bodies of children with disabilities to determine whether their “defects” warranted their execution through formal ritual. Many commonly condemned

¹²⁵ See Nicole Kelley’s “Deformity and Disability in Ancient Greece and Rome” for a detailed account of various compensatory gifts in Sophocles’s time. See also Monbeck (19-28).

blind children to death, garnering support from both the state and moral philosophers as illustrious as Plato and Aristotle (Dobree and Boutler 115). In the latter's *Politics*, for example, we find in no uncertain terms: "As to the exposure and rearing of children, let there be a law that no deformed child shall live" (7.16). Plato echoes the same in the *Theaetetus* (160C-161A).¹²⁶ Roman blind children were likewise thrown in the Tiber river to drown, while some parents legally sold them into slavery or sex work (Koestler 2; Dobree and Boutler 116).

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, blindness has also taken on paradoxical meanings significant to *Cane*. Jews historically linked blindness directly to sin and death, and at other times more indirectly to spiritual darkness, with the Talmud even referring to those with severe vision impairments as "the living dead" (Koestler 3). As Henri-Jacques Stiker summarizes: "the blind were looked on as persons who had died" (24). Michael Monbeck adds that even today the blind "are sometimes thought to be in a state closely related to that of the dead, one which, of course, is fraught with mystery and powerful emotional associations" (20). In the final two acts of "Kabnis," while finally alone in the tomb-like underground "Hole" with Father John, Kabnis violently "gush[es]" words at the blind old man, over whose presence he has obsessed. After hearing (or imagining he heard) Father John "murmur in that devilish word" *sin* at him all night, Kabnis can no longer contain himself: "Father John. Father of Satan, more likely. What does it mean t you? Youre dead already. Death. What does it mean t you? To you who died way back there in th 'sixties" (114). If Kabnis speaks figuratively about Father John's emancipation in the mid-1860s

¹²⁶ See Cynthia Patterson's "'Not Worth the Rearing': The Causes of Infant Exposure in Ancient Greece," pp. 113-14, for a nuanced examination of the politics of "exposure" in Greece when it came to "deformed" children.

as a living death, a social death, he does so by sending back the old man's charge of sin, rejecting his racial heritage in the process and denying the prophet his ability to "see" the present accurately. "Kabnis is the very definition of sin," William Goede writes, "since the whole world has discovered its guilt in him. It is, after all, the only word the old man has ever been heard to utter; Kabnis believes that, when the old man uses the word, history defines him" (374). Kabnis seeks to empty Father John's blindness of its mystical significance while emptying himself of his connection to his slave past, finding in each, as section three traces, an unbearable and inherited racial living death.

Yet Toomer also playfully confuses the referent of "it" in Kabnis's repeated question to Father John, "What does it mean t you?" He does so by introducing "Death" into their conversation. While the first rhetorical question more obviously queries the old man's past sins, especially their resonance with his blindness, the introduction of death as their shared subject leaves the second question ambiguous. By placing death between his declarative statement—"Youre dead already"—and his repeated question about the significance of his claim, Kabnis reverses Father John's curse of sin away from himself by naming the blind old man, as did the ancient Jews, as the living dead: "Youre [Death]. What does [*that*] mean t you?" Whether Kabnis labels Father John "Death" or "dead" equates largely to the same difference. Kabnis's defensive charge says more about his own fears of approximating Father John than about his connection to the past from which he supposedly extirpates himself. Of this scene Yumi Pak convincingly adds: "It is through his encounter with Father John that Kabnis's brokenness is truly brought to the forefront of the text; it is the apex of Kabnis's 'transformative recognition' of an undead past and his alignment with the living dead. As Kabnis berates Father John, one cannot

help but question whether his comments are addressed to the blind old man or to himself” (191).

Toomer’s double play takes on further weight after Kabnis revises the old man’s title from Father John to Father of Satan, keeping in line, if through a Christian inflection, with the Talmud’s binding of blindness to sin and death. Kabnis fears and rejects his shared history with Father John, leading him to rechristen the prophet as the Father of Satan, again linking the latter’s blindness to sin and living death. Because many believed (and some continue to believe) that blindness marked “a punishment for some past sin, a sign of some moral failing” (Monbeck 11), the disability became tethered to a sense of heritage, to an inherited social and physical contagion. Rather than upholding the allusion to John the Baptist whose clarion call would lead to salvation, Kabnis fears he inherits from the old blind man not only blood and history but a living death in a racist 1920s America riddled with recent lynchings.¹²⁷

Kabnis and Lewis, the northern-born reporter and co-protagonist, play out the interplay between these mystical and religious understandings of blindness and blackness. The former, for example, says Father John rules over “Th smoke an fire of the forge.” The latter rejects labelling him a “Black Vulcan,” claiming the blind prophet instead as a “mute John the Baptist of a new religion—or a tongue-tied shadow of an old” (106). The shop-owner Halsey tells Lewis they simply call him Father because none

¹²⁷ As Barbara Foley has convincingly demonstrated, Toomer was well-aware of the rapid increase in lynchings and other racial violence in Georgia, particularly the year of his brief stay in the state. The year Toomer visited Sparta (late September 1921) was “a year when more lynchings occurred throughout the South than in any previous year other than 1909” (158). More so, Foley details how Mame Lamkins’s murder in *Cane* “differs only slightly from NAACP investigator Walter White’s account of the May 1918 killing of Mary Turner.” White, many speculate, was used as a possible model for the character Lewis in “Kabnis.” As Foley writes, the “account would have resonated with anyone familiar with the NAACP’s widely disseminated official account of the Turner killings” (160). See pp. 158-162 of *Jean Toomer: Race, Repression, and Revolution*.

know his given name. When Lewis asks him, “Father of what?,” Kabnis quickly swings back to sin: “Father of hell.” Here Lewis christens him by tethering his earlier allusion to John the Baptist with the name Father: “Father John it is from now on...” (106).¹²⁸ Lewis sees the blind prophet “as symbol, flesh, and spirit of the past” (108), whereas Kabnis mocks that he is “[j]ust like any done-up preacher is what he looks t me. Jam some false teeth in his mouth and crank him, and youd have God Almighty spit in torrents all around th floor” (108).

Christianity’s revision of the Tanakh reverses social views of blindness in antiquity and can also helpfully extend to the figure of Father John. Stiker’s classic, *A History of Disability*, considers the social and religious transformation of the visually disabled. Initially, according to Stiker, “Defect is linked to sin—directly, for the Jewish religious conscious of the time. This is illustrated in the Pharisees’ questions to Jesus concerning a blind man: ‘Who sinned? Was it he or his family?’” (27). Stiker refers to the story of Christ healing a congenitally blind man in the Gospel of John, adding yet another allusive layer to Father John’s character and name. Upon being questioned by the Pharisees, Christ replies by outright rejecting the Tanakh’s conflation of blindness with living death and inherited sin: ““Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.... As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world”” (*NRSV* John 9.3-5). Investigating the blind man, the Pharisees deny the validity of the miracle, as Christ performed it on the sabbath. Divided, they ask the blind man: ““What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened,”” to which the man replies, ““He is a prophet”” (*Ibid.* 9.17). In naming himself the “light of the world”

¹²⁸ Benjamin F. McKeever argues that Father John represents “the link between Kabnis and Lewis” as an absent father figure (456).

for the first time, Christ introduces into the Christian lexicon his charged metaphorical title equating (en)lightened vision with salvation, one in which God grants grace perpetually by bestowing his followers with symbolic and literal light.

Toomer plays most pertinently with the image of redemptive light in the contentiously “optimistic” closing scene of “Kabnis,” in which darkness enshrouds the titular character as he carries upstairs a bucket of dead coals.¹²⁹ The closing scene juxtaposes the darkness surrounding Kabnis with the “[l]ight streaks through the iron-barred cellar window” which leave “[w]ithin its soft circle [] the figures of Carrie [his caregiver] and Father John” muttering ““Jesus, come”” (117). Most take the story of Christ’s miracle as one small part of an entire overturning of Old Testament law, including the social views of blindness it encouraged. This overturning comes to a head when Christ tells the blind man: ““I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind”” (*NRSV* John 3.39). Recalling our earlier discussion of sight as knowledge, the biblical narrative introduces the ironic reversal of Judaism that those with blindness may recognize the messiah while the sighted cannot “see” him (Joshua 120), providing the well-known Christian proverb ““whereas I was blind, now I can see.””

Captured and disseminated in “Amazing Grace,” probably the most recognizable hymn in America, Christ’s miracle encapsulates the paradoxical instruction in which “blind faith” and often literal blindness lead to salvific insight. Echoing Father John’s

¹²⁹ Andrew B. Leiter serves as a fruitful example of this scholastic strand of optimism: “The promise of new beginnings is ambiguous [at the end of “Kabnis”] and unrealized within the context of the work, but in *Cane*’s hybrid-world, so marred by disunion and strife, this conclusion suggests ascension beyond the individual and racial divisions” (82). See also Catherine L. Innes’s “The Unity of Jean Toomer’s *Cane*” (pp. 163-64).

character, Terry Rowden has shown how “spirituality and blindness have always seemed fundamentally related” (65). Yet in historically resituating blind Black American singers from postbellum to contemporary America, Rowden complicates “Amazing Grace” by emphasizing the slippage, so consistent in analyses of disability, between the literal and symbolic registers of blindness. To recall the familiar hymn:

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me,
I once was lost, but now I’m found,
Was blind, but now I see.

(qtd. in Rowden 67)

Written by a former British captain of a slave ship, the hymn was composed by John Newton after he had converted to Christianity and committed himself to abolitionism— a competing history that has since called the hymn’s “white” or “black” racial status into question.¹³⁰ Even as the verse harks back to the scene of literal salvific blindness in the parable from John, it buttresses against its symbolic reproduction in song, one in which blindness once again becomes cast as sin, as lapsarian and unsaved. Rowden rightly glosses the hymn’s “casual referencing of blindness as a state of sin” (67), not as a given state of salvation. The tension arises from the repeated emphasis in both iterations of the Christian proverb on the metaphorical and actual recovery of sight on the way to communion. Both the parable and the hymn indicate as much in the tense shift from a past blindness to present (in)sight: literally and metaphorically, in entering into God’s light we must supposedly leave our blindness behind with our sin and its deathly shackles in darkness.

¹³⁰ My thanks to Betsy Wheeler for pointing this historical curiosity out to me.

As living reminders of the shackles of American slavery in the dialogic present, Father John's blindness oscillates between sin and the possibility of absolution, between the profane and the prophetic. "The ease," Rowden writes, "with which blindness could be brought into the matrix of sin and redemption that grounds Christian thought made disability and especially blindness too obvious a symbolic reference point for hymnists to fail to take advantage of them" (67). But it also indirectly couples with *oppression*, as embodied in Father John, a coupling Toomer sketches generally as religious, but particularly as racialized. The same gospels, in other words, which ponder the symbolic richness of blindness and salvation often do so through the figure of oppression, a richness which Toomer ultimately redirected toward the contemporary oppression he witnessed in the American South. Black blind singers in the first half of the twentieth century were often trained to sing hymns and other forms of gospel music in institutions like the Piney Wood School for the Blind and the Talladega School for the Negro Deaf and Blind (Rowden, 82-83). Many of these communities sought to "wrench Christian scripture and hymnody from their usual contexts and make them serve the singer's more specialized purposes," effectively conjoining issues of race, blindness, and Christianity through song, a key facet of *Cane* (Rowden 66).

The intimate link between biblical and racial oppression also emerges within Kabnis's bitter disavowal of Christianity's power to unshackle southern Blacks from the terrors of Jim Crow. The most succinct account of the biblical coupling of blindness and oppression that Toomer takes up comes in Luke:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives

and recovery of sight to the blind,
and let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

(NSRV Luke 4:18-19)

Similar to the parable in John, the blind figure in Luke serves as a substitute for the oppressed, those unsaved souls who lack spiritual and sometimes also political freedom. Toomer localizes this lineage of blindness and oppression directly onto Father John's body, a convergence where another narrative contradiction emerges. The old slave's blindness as a parishioner should indicate his salvation, his release from captivity. And yet, as Kabnis and Lewis take pains to indicate, oppression continues to pummel Father John's life. Here more than anywhere in *Cane* Toomer risks irreparably abusing the allegorical significance of blindness, nearly losing all sight of its material and embodied reality. In the eyes of Kabnis, Father John's religious faith has "blinded" him not only to political oppression, but, as we will see, also to how Christianity has perpetuated that oppression against Black Americans.

As some have noted, both Kabnis and Lewis reject Christianity as a viable source for Black political progress or even fruitful community in the American South, finding instead further oppression where others, like Father John, seem to find redemption.¹³¹ "Christianity," Mark Whalan aptly avers, "is portrayed as false consciousness and nothing else, an opiate with a unidirectionally oppressive effect" (*Race* 165). In an uncanny allusion to James Joyce (who himself later went blind), Kabnis calls God "a

¹³¹ As Turner puts it: "Weak, debauched, impotent, betrayed by his faith in education and in religion, Kabnis awaits a message from Father John, symbol of the Afro-American ancestor, the maker of spirituals, the voice of the past" (*In a Minor Chord* 24). Likewise, George Hutchinson writes of the final scene: "It is a serene scene, but, I would argue, one representing the past, a confinement in an oppressive racial (and religious) discourse from which Kabnis has collected his dead coals. Given the attitude to Christianity (even black American Christianity) throughout the story, how can we now believe that Carrie and Father John represent the future?" ("Jean Toomer" 243).

profligate red-nosed man about town,” labelling himself a bastard deserving the “right to curse his maker” (85).¹³² For Kabnis, “God, he doesn’t exist, but nevertheless He is ugly. Hence, what comes from Him is ugly. Lynchers and business men, and that cockroach Hanby, especially.... God and Hanby, they belong together. Two god-dam moral-spouters” (85).

God and Hanby: the two ideological figureheads Kabnis and Lewis accuse of stymieing justice and progress in the Black community, figures whose ties to oppressive systems of white power go unseen and who, for them, only fester perpetual oppression. Bitterly railing against his fate, Kabnis says “God’s handiwork” has “driven” him to teach in a school in which Hanby “gets to be principal” (85), remarking of his predicament that “[t]his loneliness, dumbness, awful, intangible oppression is enough to drive a man insane” (85). The free indirect discourse of the narration cleverly slips between pronoun antecedents, further distancing God from the lives of the town, opining: “Christ, how cut off from everything he is” (86). The “he” as easily takes Kabnis as its referent as it does Christ, further bringing into relief his disbelief in the so-called “blind” religious subservience of those like Father John, as Kabnis never shies from vocalizing.

The tension in which “blind faith” signifies turning a “blind eye” to the unearthing work of those like Lewis is not the only time Toomer used blindness metaphorically in such a register. When *Theater Arts Magazine* editor Kenneth MacGowan declined to publish “Kabnis,” he explained his decision to Toomer. After

¹³² Werner Sollors has also suggested that “Kabnis” was “Partly inspired by Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*” (24). As echoes of the zeitgeist, perhaps, the parallels between Stephen Dedalus and Kabnis are curiously aligned on this religious front, both in form and content. While Kabnis charges God with being a drunken man about town, Dedalus famously places him in a similarly banal urban milieu, one where God is but a “shout in the street” (Joyce 2.386).

reading the play out loud to what he called his wife's "Negro maid" to get "authentic" feedback, MacGowan told Toomer: "Her understanding and her reaction were most interesting. She thought the thing so very true, and said that the race papers and critics wouldn't like it at all. *They demand optimism and blindness*" (*Letters* 174, emphasis added). Blindness here comes to figure metaphorically as a naïve and total commitment to the inevitability of racial progress, "blindly" following, as Toomer saw it, without skepticism or critique. Already feeling the pressure to conform to racial traditions which he would so infamously disavow in the aftermath of *Cane*, Toomer, as early as September 1923, troublingly cast blindness as untenable social optimism and as indicative of upholding the racial expectations he rejected so fervently. MacGowan admitted he "agree[s] with Waldo" about the failings of "Kabnis," particularly its lack of a "general, dramatic design" (174). Enraged by what he described as MacGowan's "infantile" remarks, Toomer shot back by defending the "central physical and psychological progression" of Ralph Kabnis, implicitly referencing Frank's disagreement with what he saw as the drama's pessimistic and anti-climactic conclusion (175). Most interestingly, in the same letter Toomer appropriated the curious observation of MacGowan's maid about how Black critics would likely respond negatively to "Kabnis." He charged Frank (and by extension MacGowan) with her same language of blind optimism when expressing the situation to Margaret Naumburg, Frank's wife and Toomer's lover at the time. "All along," he wrote to her, "Waldo's *blind spot* concerning this play has surprised me" (175, emphasis added). The implication here falls on Frank's whiteness as contributing to what Toomer saw as his sometime mentor's "blind spot" concerning matters of race.

If, for Father John, Toomer places his blindness within a Christian tradition which registered it as spiritually absolved oppression, he re-placed it for Kabnis as a symbolic marker of politically *unabsolved* oppression. Hanby proves as complicit as the Christian God in their shared ties to systems of white power that go unseen. As Kabnis tells Lewis, the pious Father John “reminds me of that black cockroach,” Hanby, further aligning the two Black figureheads of leadership with the whitewashed light of Christianity (108). An obvious caricature of Booker T. Washington and Tuskegee University, Hanby and his school come to represent a system which promises racial uplift to the unsuspecting, like Father John, but in fact betrays its adherents by effacing its subservience to existing systems of white power.¹³³

A begrudging teacher at Hanby’s school, Kabnis bemoans the preponderance of Christianity as a false mode of salvation that fails to set right the lived oppressions of Jim Crow. To make matters worse, both Kabnis and Lewis recognize their powerlessness to unshackle their Georgian communities from the trappings of the church and from Hanby’s instruction, whose “purpose is to teach our youth to live better, cleaner, more noble lives. To prove to the world that the Negro race can be just like any other race. It hopes to attain this aim partly by the salutary examples set by its instructors” (95).¹³⁴

¹³³ Karl Precoda and P. S. Polanah have traced a similar vein between metaphorical blindness and systemic racism in Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, another text heavily influenced by *Cane*. See “In the Vortex of Modernity: Writing Blackness, Blindness and Insight,” p. 37.

¹³⁴ Toomer had read Du Bois’s *Souls* before taking his own intellectual and personal voyage from North to South. The educational tensions between Kabnis and Hanby in many ways retrace those between Du Bois and Washington, particularly in the uneasy relationship between the teacher and the preacher in the South. Paul Gilroy glosses this tension: “[Du Bois] encounters rural black folk and wants to celebrate and affirm their ‘dull and humdrum’ rhythms of life, so very different from his own upbringing. Their indifference to the education he offered them emerged as a key problem.... Their religious appetites also divided them from Du Bois, fragmenting the fragile unity of preacher and teacher who, he tells us, together ‘embodied once the ideals of this people’” (128-29).

Demanding that Kabnis fit into the priestly-teacher model Hanby believes he himself embodies, the principal dons a sanctimonious affectation that the stage directions indicate to be repugnant and troublesome:

He is a well-dressed, smooth, rich, black-skinned Negro who thinks there is no one quite so suave and polished as himself. To members of his own race, he affects the manners of a wealthy white planter. Or, when he is up North, he lets it be known that his ideas are those of the best New England tradition. To white men he bows... He delivers his words with a full consciousness of moral superiority. (95)

Kabnis audaciously likens Hanby to “[l]ynchers” and “wealthy white planter[s].” Seeking to emulate white American society, Hanby’s school flirts with a so-called “color blind” education which, in reality, only erases the markers of blackness by replacing them with those of whiteness. Such an education promises that through assimilation and the successful emulation of whiteness, society would not be able to see—would be blind to—one’s blackness. Similar “color blind” logics as Hanby’s in fact continue to hold cultural weight in contemporary rhetorics of a “post-racial” America.

Toomer juxtaposes Hanby’s enforcement of “virtuous” behavior, such as abstaining from cursing, licentiousness, and libations, with the brutal reality of mob violence, as though the former could possibly fend off the latter. Halsey has to remind Hanby, a paying customer of his, that he “aint no slick an span slave youve hired, an dont y think it for a minute” (96), underscoring Hanby’s duplicitousness and further aligning him with recent slave owners. While Hanby’s school purports to supply uplift and instruction befitting of a “free” post-emancipation world, its pretensions to rise above (and utter failings to reckon with) contemporary oppression clash with the lived reality of the town. As Layman warns Kabnis: “Nigger’s a nigger down this away, Professor. An

only two dividins: good an bad. An even they aint permanent categories. They sometimes mixes um up when it comes t lynchin. I've seen um do it" (89). Hanby, like the church, refuses to see the horrors which plainly face him, demanding instead that Black southerners "walk th chalk-line" (91) after he has "bullied enough about this town" (96).

Through God and Hanby, and then Father John's final denouncement, Toomer takes his secular deconstruction of blindness, religion, and oppression to its historical conclusion by placing it within the legacy of slavery. Alone with Father John in the Hole beneath Halsey's workshop after a night of debauchery, Kabnis begins free associating with the old man's murmurs heard in the night, whether real or imagined, of "Sin an Death." He links Father John's blindness again with death and the Hole, musing: "Death...these clammy floors...just like th place they used t stow away th worn-out, no-count niggers in th days of slavery...that was a long time ago; not so long ago" (114, ellipses in text).

Space, after all, starts dissolving when they "descend into the Hole." It seems both claustrophobically womb-like and as "huge, limitless" as a tomb. Time, too, collapses in the Hole. The slave past, as Kabnis notes, becomes almost unbearably present. Upon "re-see[ing] the old man," Kabnis wonders: "What do I care whether you can see or hear? You know what hell is cause youve been there" (114). Whalan helpfully glosses this space as the symbolic "hold of slave ships, the slave 'underground,' and the buried past." He adds that the "'black' hole centers around Father John; the architectural space is determined by the space of the body, as the hole's symbolic and economic function was literally constructed around the enslaved labor of the black body" (*Race* 187). Returning to his earlier rechristening from Father John to Father of Satan, Kabnis denies the blind

old man his salvation, provocatively diagnosing a permanent stain on his soul which ultimately brings the vortex of images to its endpoint. “Your soul,” Kabnis jests, “Ha. Nigger soul. A gin soul that gets drunk on a preacher’s words.” He continues his brutal monologue:

You aint got no sight.... Your eyes are dull and watery, like fish eyes. Fish eyes are dead eyes. Youre an old man, a dead fish man, an black at that. Theyve put y here to die, damn fool y are not t know it. Do y know how many feet youre under ground? I’ll tell y. Twenty. And do y think you’ll ever see th light of day again, even if you wasnt blind? Do y think youre out of slavery? Huh? Youre where they used t throw th worked-out, no-count slaves. (115)

Kabnis localizes his negative onslaught of religion and oppression directly onto this image of blindness, thereby collapsing the past and present, the dead and the living, the saved and the damned, the free and the enslaved.¹³⁵ As Kabnis looks upon Father John, he can neither literally nor symbolically conjoin these sets of dyads. Neither man can fully recognize being in the sight of the other, nor can we discern to which side each character belongs. Toomer performatively “blinds” us to the answers we expect Father John will reveal to Kabnis.

Father John’s blindness rises to the level of an impossibly meaningful symbol for Kabnis, as well as many readers. It comes to indicate a profoundly absent space and an “empty” silence, each intimately related to the toil within Kabnis’s own soul—as well as the paradoxical conundrum of his mixed-race identity. Kabnis rejects Father John as a prophet of emancipation, denying him his ability to provide the necessary bridgework to mend and fuse the embodied traumas of the past in the present. He questions whether

¹³⁵ Victor Kramer has contributed to the swing between these binary poles, arguing that Kabnis must reckon with being “suspended between the dignity of the past and the promise of the future” (129).

Father John has not entered neocolonial slavery by a different name. As Toomer wrote elsewhere: “The effects of the Civil War upon the Negro and the Negro problem are as yet to be accurately known.... It freed the Negro nominally; it increased the Negro’s bondage to white resentment and white fear (and, in a large measure added political exploitation to the already existent forms, while doing but little more than modifying these forms)” (“The Negro Emergent” 49). For the lead character, Father John can never “see” Kabnis’s soul as having been inherited from the old man; a soul torn asunder, lost, homeless, and without either salvation, a cohesive identity, or racial vision. Sollors has influentially claimed that “the interrelatedness of fragmentation and quest for wholeness,” especially “the wholeness of a polyvocal America,” “structures *Cane*” (*Ethnic* 105). But Kabnis also believes the old man lives in a false halo of visionary light, the same halo Toomer dangles before audiences in the closing scene, promising the ex-slave eternal justice. In rejecting Father John as ignorant of the present, Kabnis presumes to drown what remains of his own hope that he “came to the South to face it” (83). He condemns the ancient prophet as an unrisen false Christ, as a living dead “fish man” twenty feet underground, not only Black, but “blind” to his own oppressed reality. Denying that Father John will ever “see th light of day again, even if [he] wasnt blind,” Kabnis presumes in the closing scene to close himself permanently to the past.

By explicitly naming the legacy of slavery for the first and only time in the drama, and by asking Father John as much as himself whether they think they have escaped it, Kabnis catapults the deaf-blind prophet into miraculous speech. If *Cane* brings together the unseen and entwined symbolic histories of blindness, religion, and oppression through Father John, this history reaches its apex in Kabnis’s closing meditation on

slavery. Disavowing that Father John has been truly released from captivity, Kabnis implicitly alludes to his non-congenital disability by reminding him that the Hole served as a place for “worked-out, no-count slaves,” underscoring a shift away from metaphorical toward literally embodied blindness. Father John’s unexpected speech, however, suspends all movement in the play, whether symbolic or physical. Kabnis’s verbal abuse and confused conflation of himself with Father John set the “mute” old man’s speech into dramatic action. Prompted again by Father John’s ghastly whisper of “sin,” Kabnis takes the old man’s meaning to indicate his mixed-race heritage as a “bastard” child, as he calls himself, both of miscegenation and possibly rape. A godless child of an impossible subject position, Kabnis laments to the caregiver Carrie K. in the sight of the old man: “I’m th victim of [America’s] sin. I’m what sin is. Does he look like me? Have you ever heard him say th things youve heard me say? He couldnt if he had th Holy Ghost t help him” (116). In misinterpreting Father John’s first attempt to speak his historical wisdom, Kabnis again conflates his own past “sin” with that to which the blind man refers: “Suppose youre talkin about that bastard race thats roamin round th country. It looks like sin, if thats what y mean. Give us somethin new an up t date” (116).

While Father John’s belated speech—a speech which gave Toomer much anxiety while revising “Kabnis”—refuses modernism’s call for something new, it gestures meaningfully toward something ancient yet lived in the present. Father John’s grand revelation, partially contradicted by both Kabnis and “Kabnis,” brings the braided histories of blindness, religion, and oppression together through the legacy of slavery: “O th sin that white folks ‘mitted when they made th Bible lie” (117). While the Bible, as we have seen, historically promised freedom from oppression by restoring the vision of the

literally and symbolically blind, Toomer inverts and denies this release from bondage by underscoring Christianity's bastardization in serving as a defense of the American slave system—a system, in turn, which left countless slaves abused, branded, and blind.

Eugenics, Miscegenation, and the Fear of the Genetic Other

Whereas we have just considered the symbolic apparatus of blindness that Toomer deploys, arriving at his denouncement of Black Christianity with Father John's revelation, this second section sets this work within the historical materiality out of which *Cane* emerged. Toomer, we will witness, ensnares us within a literary net which ultimately brings blindness together with miscegenation, articulating in eugenic thought the fear of what I will call the "genetic other." To the complexities of Father John's blindness we will now add Kabnis's status as a mixed-race son of miscegenation, as it was then known. By drawing together the connection between blindness and miscegenation within the era's eugenic ideology, as this section does, one can then diagnose the titular character's attraction to and repulsion from the ex-slave, as the concluding section will detail.

Kabnis's fear of his racial heritage—captured best in the blind, Black, and mute ex-slave Father John—as well as his parallel anxieties over miscegenation will be central to our concluding reading of *Cane*, especially as a literary dwelling with racial violence and the terrors of American history. To do so, though, we will first focus on the historical roles played by eugenics and Black southern poverty in supporting this history. Such poverty surprisingly dovetails not only with schools for the blind in the late-nineteenth century but is also bound to the eugenic theories of the early twentieth. We will likewise

consider how eugenicists brought blindness and the genetic “impurities” of mixed-race individuals together in a coercive, if unexpected, way, chiefly through a public rhetoric of hereditary fear and economic conservatism. This history helps bear out a reconsideration of “Kabnis” it contains within it, linking the titular character with Father John. It also helps historically place the politics of *Cane*’s complex explorations of racial heritage. This section overall diagnoses America’s fear of the genetic other: an imaginary, often racialized figure that brings together race, disability, and hybridity. As Toomer himself understood in his infamous decision to racially pass, these three terms threatened (and for many continue to threaten) how effectively able-bodied whiteness can police its mutable boundaries.¹³⁶

In a commonly reprinted letter to Kenneth MacGowan six months before he rejected “Kabnis” for publication, Toomer summarized his avant-garde play to his prospective editor as a “drama of Negro life” (*Letters* 141). “Kabnis,” he wrote,

is really the story of my own real or imaginary experiences in Georgia. The central figure reacts with a certain intensity to the beauty and ugliness of southern life. His energy, dispersed and unchanneled, cannot push him through its crude mass. Hence the mass, with friction and heat and sparks, crushes him. (141)

Within the impressive body of Toomer scholarship, an overwhelming majority focuses on the “intensity” of *Cane*’s beauty, hailing and detailing the elegant artistry present even in its “crude mass.” Despite Toomer characteristically juxtaposing beauty with ugliness,

¹³⁶ Toomer’s decision to racially pass as white, and to presume to bypass or even to “transcend” definitive racial categorization altogether, has made him a very contentious figure for scholars of Black American literature in determining whether he ought to be included or turned away. Rudolph Byrd’s 1985 *Callaloo* article captures the volatile tone which Toomer’s disavowal often engenders: “It seems to me that one of the criteria for being identified as an Afro-American writer is that a writer be able to declare, without equivocation and qualifiers, that he is black, Negro, or Afro-American” (310). Byrd’s insistence speaks volumes about the continued importance of racial categorization in America.

kinetic energy with an unmovable crude mass, it has taken nearly a century before scholars have begun seriously investigating the material politics behind *Cane*'s stunning aesthetic.¹³⁷ Even non-formalist engagements, rather than seeking out *Cane*'s historical and social milieu, tend to contribute instead biographical criticism that at times approaches the cult of the author. Yet some key recent shifts have been instrumental in redirecting our turning toward, rather than away from, the often "ugly" and "crude" contexts out of which "Kabnis," if not Kabnis, emerges.¹³⁸

As Toomer later recalled, his brief trip to the South proved formative to both his art and politics. His southern voyage, he admitted to the *Liberator*, "was the starting point of almost everything of worth I have done," adding it "stimulated and fertilized whatever creative talent I may contain within me" (*Letters* 70). *Cane* vocalizes Toomer's transformative experience in reminding that "Things are so immediate in Georgia" (86). While Georgia's beauty at times overwhelms *Cane*, it also risks obscuring its crude, ugly counterparts, threatening, as Kabnis knows too well, to crush whoever bears witness to it. Surrounded by the "[d]ust of slavefields, dried, [and] scattered" where so "many dead things mov[e] in silence," "Kabnis" captures highly poetic images which only thinly conceal the terrors of American history (84; 86).

The weighty presence of actual lynchings like that of Mame Lamkins and her unborn child closes in from all directions, exacerbating Kabnis's instability. Yet while we can more immediately feel its dramatic pulses of violence, *Cane* also reflects Toomer's

¹³⁷ Frederik Rusch: "The theme of *Cane*—the essence of creative tension—is the explosion which occurs when black and white and North and South are juxtaposed" (24).

¹³⁸ Foley, Hutchinson, Sollors, and Whalan and have been among the most important in spearheading the shift toward better understanding what Foley calls Toomer's "highly contradictory ideological matrix—at once evolutionist and revolutionist, idealist and materialist, nationalist and internationalist" (3).

confrontation with Black southern poverty, drawing together their interrelation. The “‘grotesqueness’ of Father John,” Whalan points out, “is reliant on being brutally ‘spiked’ into a system where antiblack violence serves to continually debase Black bodies, and thus legitimate further violence and oppression against them because of their debased condition” (“Jean” 467). Impoverished conditions plague Kabnis and his hosts, from Halsey’s dilapidated and outdated wagonshop filled with “parts of wheels, broken shafts, and wooden litter” (99), to those “down by th branch chasin rabbits an atreein possums” to stave off hunger (94). The rural poor Georgia that Toomer found was a far cry from the middle-class streets of the Washington, D.C. of his youth.¹³⁹ Such poverty surprisingly dovetails not only with schools for the blind in the late-nineteenth century, but also evolves into an intertwined history bound together by the era’s eugenic theories. The eugenic drive to eliminate blindness and its rhetoric against racial hybridity and “miscegenation” will ultimately bring Father John together with Kabnis. Each comes to embody an interrelated hereditary fear. For white eugenicists, both blindness and miscegenation signified a genetic other historically marked as disabled, disabling, and in need of eradication.

Eugenic legislation was instrumental in the structural enforcement of Black poverty throughout the South and much of the remaining country. So, too, did such systemic poverty engender the conditions in which non-congenital, preventable cases of blindness could thrive. Kabnis quietly alludes to the most important shift in Black poverty while discussing the need for passive submission to minimize Jim Crow acts of terrorism against the local Black community. He does so by invoking peonage, then on

¹³⁹ See Toomer’s “The Early Days,” collected in *The Wayward and the Seeking*, for his autobiographical accounts of his childhood (pp. 28-83).

the rise in the South, in which plantation owners purchased the freedom of Black laborers convicted of petty crimes, positioning such men within a debt system that few could escape. He naïvely inquires of Layman: “Things are better now though since that stir about those peonage cases, arent they?” (89). When he asks whether something can be done, Layman reminds Kabnis of the story of Sam Raymon, an escaped peonage worker whom white mobsters trapped on a nearby bridge after they had “brained” two other workers, as he says, “with an axe” (90).

Toomer’s obscure reference to peonage cases, according to Barbara Foley, would have been familiar to his 1923 Black readers in particular. In 1921, less than a year before Toomer’s southern sojourn and only thirty miles from Sparta where he taught, Federal District Attorney Hooper Alexander began investigating the killing of eleven debt peons connected to what became known as the Jasper County “death farm” (Foley 162). Clyde Manning, a lead Black foreman of “death farm” owner John S. Williams, slayed the farm’s peonage workers under threat that Williams would take Manning’s life if he did not carry out his demand. Williams extorted Manning into committing the murders to stop the peonage workers from revealing “to investigators their conditions of servitude” (Ibid. 162). Toomer undeniably read the news story, fictionalizing parts of Manning’s public testimony directly into Layman’s account to Kabnis. The court sentenced Williams to life, remaining “the only southern white to be convicted of killing a Black man, it would turn out, between Reconstruction and 1966” (Ibid. 163). In garnering extensive media attention, the case propelled the brutal realities of debt peonage into the national spotlight. Under the system, plantation owners would regularly sweep through jails, bailing out local Blacks booked for vagrancy or petty crimes. Paying a price “far lower

than had been paid for a laborer under slavery,” white southern peonage owners ensured long-term forced Black labor by keeping peon workers perpetually in their debt (Ibid. 165). Workers could be indebted to their “owners” for years, being locked in their domiciles at night and laboring under conditions horrific enough that their possible exposure to the public led some overseers like Williams to murder. The Jim Crow South of the twenties had made debt peonage the “new slavery,” and it enforced its systems of racial impoverishment through familiar threats of violence and terror.

Though he never formerly radicalized on the communist Left like fellow Black modernists and New Negro Renaissance writers Claude McKay and Langston Hughes, Toomer wrote extensively on the reciprocal relationship between systemic racism and systemic poverty. 1929’s “Race Problems and Modern Society,” for example, finds Toomer seeking the nature of this relationship. “[In] our South,” he writes, “there are lynchings, peonage, false legal trials, and no court procedure at all, political disenfranchisement, segregation, and, on the social level, a rigid maintenance of caste distinctions” (69). Expanding the centrality of these “castes,” he argues:

Just as race problems are closely associated with our economic and political systems, so are they with one of the main outgrowths of these systems—our social scheme of caste distinctions. No small measure of racial animosity is due to this scheme. This scheme is crystallizing. The economic and political systems are increasing.... Certain factors of American race problems...were modified by the Civil War.... They have grown up, so to speak, with the growth of our economic, political, and social systems. (68)

Toomer cautions against making another scapegoat of the South in this regard, however, maintaining that the imagined whole of what goes by the name of America in fact sustains racial injustice *because of* economic disenfranchisement. Following the election

of Herbert Hoover, Toomer lamented that “America is now a country of business, and we are a country of businessmen” (“Letter” 84). As he humorously quipped, because “Henry Ford has become a philosopher,” “the increased support that the political and legal systems give to the dominant economic practices” parallel “all the forms of life that are at all connected with these systems” (61-62). Poverty begets more poverty. As we will see, the South’s economic systems of slavery, both old and new, perpetuated a racial poverty rife with opportunities, it turned out, for blindness and white supremacy to flourish.

For an impoverished character remarkably embedded in the terrors of American history, Father John resists being neatly placed in either time or space. This perhaps followed from Toomer’s revisions to counteract his tendency to let the “Ancients” say too much. The cryptic figure that emerges at publication instead appears “mute,” lacking voice, age, or even a name. As such, Toomer never definitively reveals what precipitated the old blind prophet’s visual impairment. Yet “Kabnis” gestures toward at least two plausible explanations. Without doubt Father John’s disability develops adventitiously, not congenitally. He will leave the world blind, but he did not enter it that way. Like Carson McCullers, Toomer effaces nearly all history from his disabled character, granting only fleeting insights into his past, and occasionally contradicting them. Breaking the dialogue after Lewis names him Father John, the stage direction interjects with a “voice” of its own, oscillating like an ancient Greek drama between an objective voice pulling strings behind the curtain and that of an unseen chorus offstage. The most illuminous of these scant moments indicate Father John’s earlier sight and deserves full quotation:

Slave boy whom some Christian mistress taught to read the Bible. Black man who saw Jesus in the ricefields, and began preaching to his people.

Moses- and Christ-words used for songs. Dead blind father of a muted folk who feel their way upward to a life that crushes or absorbs them. (Speak, Father!) Suppose your eyes could see, old man. (The years hold hands. O Sing!) Suppose your lips... (106, ellipsis in original)

Pairing ocular vision again with religious insight, the eruptive memory stages the pain of Father John's slave past as it contends paradoxically with the moment of his salvific revelation. Like the blind man of the Gospel of John, he literally sees Christ before him, becoming afterward a prophetic disciple for his people. Speaking back to *Cane*'s earlier poem "Harvest Song" from Part Two, the scene performs the same call and response dialogue of the slave canefields ("Speak, Father!"—"Eoho, my brothers!"). Some have recognized Toomer's dialogue between these two texts in *Cane*, suggesting that "Harvest Song" "can be read as a prelude to 'Kabnis'" (Fabre 111). Toomer considered the poem the terminus of *Cane*, the place to which "all paths" lead (Davis, "Jean" 197).

From either perspective "Kabnis" converts Father John's words into hymnal song, suggesting there the first of two possible origin points for the slave's blindness. The intertextual dialogue between Father John and "Harvest Song" provides the first, if more tenuous, explanation of his blindness: that it resulted out of his enslavement. Taking the voice of an unnamed slave, Toomer writes in "Harvest Song":

My eyes are caked with dust of oatfields at harvest-time.
I am a blind man who stares across the hills, seeking stack'd fields of
other harvesters.

It would be good to see them ... crook'd, split, and iron-ring'd handles
of the scythes ... It would be good to see them, dust-caked and
blind. I hunger. [...]

My ears are caked with dust of oatfields at harvest-time.
I am a deaf man who strains to hear the calls of other harvests whose
throats are also dry. (71, ellipses in original)

The songs of blind slaves in both “Harvest Song” and “Kabnis” serve as collective talismans, spiritual and social shields in times of great need. Recalling not only Toomer’s summary to MacGowan but also Kabnis’s own monologues, the speaker returns to a “crush[ing]” pain, aligning it with Father John’s blindness and deafness as, in part, a living death begot from enduring slavery. By placing the Black crop-reaper of “Harvest Song” in the fields like Father John, the speaker suggests his blindness cannot be separated from the toil in the dusty oat- and canefields which cake his eyes. Kabnis bitterly adds to this possibility by reminding the old blind man that he has been relegated to the Hole “where they used t throw th worked-out, no-count slaves” (115). Obscured in the diegetic present by a silent and unknowable past, *Cane* in part indicates a possible causal relationship between slavery and Father John’s blindness.

On the other hand, his blindness more demonstrably resulted from the impoverished conditions which surround him. Blindness has historically kept close cultural and political proximity to poverty in popular discourse. The “blind beggar” persists, even today, as perhaps the most pervasive image of the visually disabled. Not unrelated to Father John, the public imaginary of sighted people consistently conjures its image of such beggars as both singers and wisemen. Rarely are these figures women, though one of the seminal photographs of modernism, Paul Strand’s “Blind Woman, New York” from 1916 (Figure 10), notably breaks these expectations. Strand’s photograph “functions as an abstract, moral discourse” in which “the woman represents the modernist quandary as to the nature of perception, but it is the photographer who has the key to representation rather than the figure within the image.... None the less,” Nicholas Mirzoeff claims, “the history of the blind, as opposed to the abstract idea of blindness, is



Figure 10: Paul Strand's famous modernist photograph, "Blind Woman, New York" 1916, Photogravure, 22.4 x 16.7 cm.

present in this photograph" (393-94). The impoverished blind likewise weave closely with the church, a connection stretching back half a millennium.¹⁴⁰ Within Toomer's time, however, Jim Crow Reconstruction saw a complete dearth of health care in the poor rural Black South, leading Helen Keller to publicly refer to the Black blind as "the

¹⁴⁰ See Paterson's introduction to *Seeing with the Hands* for more on this history.

hardest pressed and the least cared-for among my blind fellows” (qtd. in Rowden 4). Many have shown the appalling absence of medical access for black southerners in the early twentieth century, a moment which saw a dramatic increase in fatality rates of treatable illnesses and in disabilities like blindness.¹⁴¹ Rowden, for example, has detailed the rapid rise of congenital blindness in the early century: “Because professional health care was almost completely unavailable to African Americans in the South and their living conditions were usually cramped, a single case of syphilis or gonorrhea could quickly lead to the infection of an entire family and thereby to an epidemic of congenital syphilis and high levels of both blindness and early mortality” (48). But even apart from such contracted and inherited cases of visual impairments, the lack of health care for poor southern Blacks meant that mild retina damage or routine cases of cataracts could spell a permanent loss of sight when left medically unattended.¹⁴²

At the same time that poor Georgian Blacks lacked consistent medical access, the early century in the “Empire State of the South” saw an unprecedented investment in institutions for the disabled, as Toomer likely recognized, if not encountered. Many have questioned in retrospect the virtuous intentions of these institutional spaces. Some condemn such investments with a latent desire to track and contain people with disabilities, hiding them where possible from public view.¹⁴³ This of course included

¹⁴¹ See Rowden (pp. 1-15) for an overview of this increase.

¹⁴² Today, cataracts are the world’s leading cause of blindness, according to the National Institute of Health and the World Health Organization, being responsible for “51 per cent of the world’s blind population.” By the age of 80, “more than half of all people in the United States either will have a cataract or have had cataract surgery” (qtd. in Rowden 13).

¹⁴³ See, for example, Susan Burch’s work on the “dislocated histories” of the asylum, as well as Heidi Krumland, among others.

those labeled *blind*. Like the Georgia State Lunatic, Idiot, and Epileptic Asylum for the deaf, the largest such institution in the world during Toomer's visit, Macon's Georgia Academy for the Blind signified the growing emergence of schools for the disabled across states on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line. Here, too, the contexts of McCullers and Toomer converge in unexpected ways.

Only an hour from Sparta where Toomer fictionally set both bookends of *Cane*, the Georgian Academy inherited a European system of blind education over a century and a half in the making. Following the lead of the Abbé Charles-Michel de l'Épée's first school for the deaf in Paris in 1755, Valentin Haüy opened the Royal School for the Blind in 1760. Both de l'Épée and Haüy operated under the assumption that the body's senses served as "parallel conduits through which knowledge entered the soul, and therefore that sensory impairments were simply the lack of one conduit among other, equally capable, senses" (Paterson 141). For educators of the blind and deaf this meant that the impaired senses of sight or hearing could be substituted with those that remained unimpaired. Haüy thus turned to kinesthetic touch, first begun by Barbier's *écriture nocturne* and perfected by Louis Braille in 1824, as a viable means of literacy for those without or with very limited sight. Economically, Haüy hoped schools for the blind could provide an escape, as he put it, from "impecuniousness and the indignity of begging" (143).¹⁴⁴

From Haüy's school to Georgia's, the social significance and economic status of blindness could never be disentangled from state investments in institutional support.

¹⁴⁴ See chapter 23 of Koestler's *Unseen Minority* and chapter 6 of Paterson's *Seeing with the Hands* for two fascinating potted histories of the inception of Haüy's deaf school, as well as overviews of tactile reading systems such as Barbier's and Braille's.

Monbeck, for example, argues that the first European and American schools for the blind “were supported partly because they were an expression of Christian charity, but also because they took at least a few blind children out of public view and off the street” (44). As Haüy’s school model spread across the Continent in mid-nineteenth-century Europe, publicly funded education not only ensured the blind (like the deaf in Chapter II) could receive sacrament, but also tried to fold them back into the capitalist mode of production (like the maimed in Chapter III). For the visually impaired, the schools would “render,” as Haüy wrote, “useful to society their hands” (qtd. in Paterson 144). From blind education would emerge out of darkness what he called “fully formed rational beings into the light,” a formative education which for Enlightenment scientists and philosophers signaled the humanist experiment *par excellence* (140).

Overlapping considerably with Gallaudet’s transatlantic journey to establish the American Asylum for the Deaf, Samuel Howe’s voyage likewise sent him first to Paris to return with Haüy’s fully realized institutional system for the blind. In 1829 he opened the New England Asylum for the Blind, later to become the world-famous Perkins Institute, where he helped support the development of the American Braille system in 1868. The late-nineteenth century in America, however, also brought with it a nefarious reframing of Enlightenment perfectibility as it coupled with an economic concern over people with disabilities. The two enmeshed, in part, with blindness. The result helped culminate a rampant eugenics movement by the *fin de siècle*.¹⁴⁵ In part founded in resistance to the threat of eugenics, the American Foundation for the Blind came into being the same year as Toomer’s 1921 visit to Georgia. Yet while the Foundation assumed a key role in

¹⁴⁵ See Donald Childs’s *Modernism and Eugenics: Woolf, Eliot, Yeats, and the Culture of Degeneration* (2001) for a thorough study of this topic. See also Wendy Kline’s *Building a Better Race* (2001).

political representation for the visually impaired, it faced in eugenic thought a fierce and considerable opponent. Each vied to sway public and political responses to blindness.

The opening decades of the twentieth century saw blindness unexpectedly become a contested legislative issue of national American politics. Nothing captured this contention more than the sudden attention the visual disability received within eugenics circles. As Edwin Black explains, eugenicist in the 1920s placed an intensified emphasis on blindness because they had

carefully added a key adjective to their cause: *hereditary*. Therefore, their drive was not to reduce blindness arising from accident or illness, but to prevent the far less common problem of “hereditary blindness.” How? By banning marriages for individuals who were blind, or anyone with even a single case of blindness in his or her family. According to the plan, such individuals could also be forcibly sterilized and segregated—even if they were already married. (145, emphasis in original)

As Toomer put to work in fiction, the vested interest of eugenicists in blindness corresponded in part with an ulterior motive to link disabilities like those of the visually impaired with mixed-race and other “aberrant” individuals like Kabnis. If American eugenicists could pressure legislators at both the state and federal level to deny marriages on the basis of congenital blindness, they could then, through a shared logic of “unfit” heredity, expand that legislation beyond disability into race and other “undesirable” categories.¹⁴⁶ If the anti-blindness proposals of eugenicists passed on the basis of heredity, in other words, marriages could then later be denied “to a wide group of

¹⁴⁶ Jennifer James and Cynthia Wu expanded this point in their special issue of *MELUS* on “Race, Ethnicity, Disability and Literature.” Discussing Margaret Sanger’s popular tract *The Pivot of Civilization* from 1922, they write: “For African Americans, Sanger’s views on sterilization came dangerously close to advocating the eradication of races and ethnicities too frequently thought of as ‘biological and racial mistakes’”(4).

undesirables, from the feeble-minded and epileptic to paupers and the socially inadequate” (Black 145). Heredity could be expanded from specific concerns to general populations.

In a surprising and unassuming historical overlap, blindness and race thus found themselves bound together within the crosshairs of eugenic scientists, politicians, and physicians, a binding Toomer plays out with Kabnis and Father John. Above all other eugenicists, esteemed ophthalmologist and president of the Eugenics Research Association Lucien Howe “led the charge to segregate, sterilize and ban marriages of blind people and their relatives as a prelude to similar measures for people suspected of other illnesses and handicaps” (Ibid. 146).¹⁴⁷ His legislative push sought to develop alongside the existent marriage ban throughout the South, West, and, indeed, some of the North between whites and anyone with any trace of African ancestry. So too did similar census efforts to record and surveil racial histories occur within familial histories of blindness.

After bringing the American Medical Association (AMA) together with the Eugenics Record Office (ERO), Howe began a concerted effort to convince physicians and, later, politicians, of his plan to eliminate public tax support of people with vision impairments. He argued: “A large part, if not all, of this misery and expense could be gradually eradicated by sequestration or by sterilization, if the transmitter of the defect preferred the latter” (Howe 381). Through a rhetoric of economic conservatism, Howe attempted to convince congressmen to deny marriages to those with any sign of hereditary blindness, masking his larger genetic paranoia in the abstracted language of

¹⁴⁷ Despite the unlikely overlap of family name, Samuel and Lucien Howe were not related, though both specialized in ophthalmology, and were both members of the American Unitarian Association. To this day, the American Ophthalmological Society awards the Lucien Howe Medal for “service to the profession and mankind” (qtd. in Black 158).

tax inflation. Eugenicians like Prescott Hall and Robert DeCourcy Ward eventually helped shift the movement away from economics over time by making race and racial mixing chief concerns. Ward believed, for example, that by focusing so extensively at first on the economic risks “posed by defective immigrants” they lost sight of “the long-term genetic fitness of the nation” (qtd. in Baynton, *Defectives* 26). Howe, on the other hand, sought the support of doctors sympathetic to the eugenic cause through a familiar rhetoric that passed under the guise of medical “care” in which their “humane” ends often justified terrifyingly inhumane means.

The joint AMA and ERO draft law, 1921’s “An Act for the Partial Prevention of Hereditary Blindness,” laid the foundation upon which many eugenicians believed they could then significantly expand, halting marriages well beyond the visually impaired to include those of “degenerate” immigrants of mixed-race backgrounds. The carefully crafted ambiguity of the drafted law exposed the greater implications beyond hereditary blindness, placing its emphasis on visible difference which could later be detailed at will: “When a man and woman contemplate marriage, if *a visual defect* in one or both of the contracting parties, or in the family of either, so apparent that any taxpayer fears that the children of such a union are liable to become public charges, for which that taxpayer would probably be assessed, then such taxpayer...may apply to the County Judge for an injunction against such a marriage” (qtd. in Black 150). Fortunately, despite some state senates, including New York, introducing the legislation in 1921 while Toomer taught in the South, it failed to pass. The Census Bureau also rejected Howe’s sensationalist rhetoric and blatantly fabricated statistics when he reported that over 90 percent of those known to be blind in America had blind relatives (Eugenical 43). While no eugenicist,

Kabnis exposes a similar sense of irrational fearmongering when contending with his anxiety over his heredity, at its peak notably when he confronts his own blackness within (and even as) Father John's blindness.

In the following year, committed to redrafting the bill for its success, Howe revealed his eugenic intentions beyond blindness by expanding the failed proposal to include anyone deemed "unfit." Howe proposed that "unfit" applicants who fell under the deliberately vague category must deposit a significant cash bond—over \$130,000 today—to ensure the economic "protection" of taxpayers in the event of any "defective children." In doing so Howe tried to ensure the financial impossibility of marriages between, and unwanted offspring of, the so-called degenerate and unfit, both of which were heavily racialized by implication. Harry Laughlin, Superintendent of the ERO and a major force in compulsory sterilization legislation efforts, championed Howe's bonding proposal. He wrote as much to Howe, expressing that his efforts were "[p]erhaps the greatest single amendment which can be made to the present marriage laws for the prevention of the production of degenerates. If you can develop the principle and secure its adoption, you will have deserved the honor of the eugenical world" (qtd. in Black 155). As Laughlin's letter articulated, eugenicists in the years leading up to *Cane* began expanding their scope from the congenitally blind to all undesirables, bodies consistently marked as not only disabled or disabling, but also highly racialized. Howe's marriage bonding principle, once again being lobbied to see state, if not federal, legislative floors, intended, Laughlin wrote, "in reference not only to the blind, but also to all other types of social inadequacy (and this is the goal sought)... If this principle were firmly established it would doubtless become the most powerful force directed against the production of

defectives and inadequates” (qtd. in Black 156). Through a public rhetoric of hereditary fear and economic conservatism, eugenicists had brought blindness and the genetic “impurities” of mixed-race individuals together in an unexpected but coercive way. This history bears a reconsideration of “Kabis” within it, linking the titular character with Father John, and it helps historically place the politics of *Cane*’s complex explorations of racial heritage.

Hindsight has dramatically clarified the often *implicit* racialized rhetoric of eugenics. Yet we easily forget in the wake of the Second World War that, categorically at least, race played a relatively small role in *explicit* eugenic discourse. Because race supposedly constituted an entire global category of people or nations, eugenicists generally saw this “genetic” marker as too generalized and abstract to fit within their existing pseudoscientific paradigms. Douglas C. Baynton, for example, proposes that it “was not this imagined category [of race] that finally held promise or danger, but rather the actual fit or defective individuals who composed it.” Instead, eugenicist arguments “more or less consistently emphasized individual defect over race” (*Defectives* 27-28). Even a cursory examination of eugenicists’ successful efforts to curb American immigration in the early century, however, demonstrates how quickly their “color blind” logics fell back upon an unbridled racism smuggled in through the “apolitical” guise of “science” and statistics. Eugenicists generally viewed the supposed defects of the mind, body, and “moral sense” as inseparably interconnected. While Baynton’s nuanced caution about race should not go unheeded, eugenicists’ consistent conflation of race and disability cannot be easily reasoned away as unrelated or anachronistic either. Eugenicists indeed maintained their concern of individual over categorical defect, as Baynton

suggests. At the same time, the eugenic discourse of anti-immigration legislation exposed how quickly the able-bodied fear of the disabled “genetic other” slipped back from individual to categorical “defect,” and to the consistently racialized language which accompanied it. So, too, did it galvanize an expansion of what today would be called ethnicity by enforcing a more limited definition of “true” whiteness. One can see Kabnis partially taking part in such galvanized policing in his rejection of any shared genetic heritage between himself and Father John, including the stigmas of blackness and disability.

Howe’s close colleague Laughlin offers an illuminous example of the eugenic sway between individual and categorical defect. Appointed the Expert Eugenics Agent to the House of Representatives Committee on Immigration in 1920, Laughlin beseeched members of Congress to impose quotas on those who could enter the country and, by implication, its genetic pool. The “character of a nation,” he argued, “is determined primarily by its racial qualities; that is, by the hereditary physical, mental, and moral or temperamental traits of its people” (qtd. in Baynton, *Defectives* 42). Baynton correctly reminds us that such logics as Laughlin’s rationalized themselves through concern over individual defect over those of an entire racial category. Yet its racist implications emerge just the same through a different name, namely through what Laughlin called “social inadequates.”

These included the “defective, dependent, and delinquent classes,” such as the insane, the blind, the deaf, and the deformed, once again ensuring the proximity of disability and poverty in the eyes of the able-bodied citizenry. Eugenicists “engaged in a shared campaign of biological targeting that addressed deviance as a scourge to be

banished from a transatlantic hereditary pool” (Snyder and Mitchell 103). Most importantly, Laughlin maintained that the “lower or less progressive *races*” supplied “a greater percentage of defectives” (Baynton, *Defectives* 43, emphasis added). Despite shifting his rhetorical key in general from entire races and ethnicities to the supposedly neutral statistics of individual and familial defect, Laughlin invalidated his “color blind” eugenic distinction by insisting that the nation’s genetic purity could only be preserved by significantly limiting its mixture with the world’s “lower or less progressive races.” Claiming eugenics as a de-racialized ideology does not simply make it so. In Laughlin’s case, it ends up drawing all the more attention to itself because of its pretensions to be just this.

As the rhetoric of Laughlin and Howe proposed, the mixture of (white, able-bodied) American genes with the “lower and less progressive races” engendered “a greater percentage of defectives.” Politicians consistently emphasized such defectives as economically dependent and genetically malignant. By emphasizing blindness in the eugenic agenda in the 1920s, the social and pseudoscientific movement capitalized on a formidable hereditarian fear, one which crystallized around the genetic “impurities” of often racialized impairments. The US led the world at this time in laws restricting marriages based on “age, kinship, race and health,” including the well-known criminalization throughout the South, West, and some of the North of marriage between “whites and persons of African ancestry” (Black 146). In a dual-pronged approach, eugenicists attempted to persuade sympathetic politicians to deny marriages among, and the immigration of, those with any connection to blindness, making extensive use of racialized ableist discourse. Eugenicists thus heightened in the public imaginary a shared

fear of a genetic other, marching closer with each political foray into a drive to eliminate the visually impaired and racially impure. Finding a legislatable vehicle in denying marriages if not in forced sterilization, eugenicists sought to add blindness to existing bans in numerous states against the matrimony of anyone white with traceable African ancestry. If their campaign succeeded, their legislative efforts could be expanded and intertwined with existing marriage bans between mixed-race individuals and other “undesirables.” In an unexpected and erratic historical dance, eugenic theories brought together blindness and the “mulatto” in their desire to eliminate both.

The beginning of the New Negro Renaissance coincided in 1920 with the last year the US Census recognized “mulatto” as a racial category, the significance of which for Toomer Hutchinson has shown (“Jean” 229; “American Identity”). After Laughlin’s appointment as “special agent of the Bureau of the Census,” he began placing considerable pressure on the Bureau to recategorize the defective, the dependent, and the delinquent instead as the *socially inadequate*, a catch-all term which could expand outward in explicitly linking disabilities with racial “impurities.” Abhorred by the “mongrelization” of race in Virginia, Laughlin’s colleague Walter Plecker took it upon himself to achieve the first statewide eugenic registry of the socially inadequate. His efforts resulted in the successful passage of Senate Bill #219 and House Bill #311, Virginia’s infamous “Act to Preserve Racial Integrity.” The Act demanded all Virginians “register their race and defined whites as those with ‘no trace whatsoever of any blood other than Caucasian’” (Black 166). As a result, “pure” whites could only marry other “pure” whites.

Far less noted in the Racial Integrity Act is that it “was the same 1924 session of the legislature that had enacted the law for mandatory sterilization of mental defectives” as applied to Carrie Buck (Ibid. 167). Sollors, despite his usually careful language, slips in summarizing Toomer’s reaction toward the Act, writing: “What could a writer do to fight such *racial blindness* and ridiculousness as was prominent, for example, in the Virginia legislature, [...] defining any person ‘in whom there is ascertainable any Negro blood’ a colored person?” (“Jean” 30, emphasis added). Echoing the eugenic rhetoric which surrounded him, Toomer wrote that “there are some whites who would like to see the darker peoples, particularly the Negroes, either deported, or sterilized, or swept off by a pestilence” (“Race Problems” 71). “These discussions,” he added, “are frequently reducible to the question of interbreeding—of intermarriage. Sometimes they get entangled in arguments about heredity and environment, about superiority and inferiority” (66). Yet Toomer himself sometimes frustratingly falls inside the same eugenic drives which he seems elsewhere to reject, reducing the “race problem” to a question, as he wrote, of “how to bring about a selective fusion of the racial and cultural factors of America, in order that the best possible stock and culture may be produced” (74).¹⁴⁸ Even more damning, Toomer once called social Darwinist Herbert Spencer “one of my Gods” (qtd. in Williams 190).

Scholars like Diana Williams have questioned the eugenic implications of Toomer’s yearning for racial hybridity. Approximating cognitive and physical ability

¹⁴⁸ To further complicate this dangerously eugenic view, Toomer elsewhere makes the distinction between “genetic” race (which he, even in the 1920s, rejected as a fallacious “science”) and its social factors, arguing that “so-called race problems are not due to biological causes, but to the superimposed forms and controversies of our social *milieu*.” For Toomer, “There are no such things as innate racial antipathies. We are not born with them. Either we acquire them from our environment, or else we do not have them at all. So that, paradoxical as it may sound, the fact is that race, as such, does not give rise to race problems” (“Race Problems” 64-65).

with white genes, the bombastic rhetoric of eugenics in the mid-twenties evolved to bring racial impurity into the explicit foreground. Toomer remarked that the internalized result of this shift for mixed-race individuals brought with it “a great psychic strain and a constant feeling of insecurity,” clearly calling figures like Kabnis to mind. As Charles Larsen has asked in terms of Toomer’s own mixed-racial heritage: if Toomer “didn’t consider himself a black person” (201), then by what logic do we assume he conceived of himself as passing? At the same time, Toomer clearly understood the concept, claiming of mixed-race individuals: “He may marry within the white group, have white children, etc. But as long as he lives, there is...the fear lest he be found out, lest something of his past life come up to betray him, lest he suddenly be ‘disgraced’ and overturned and outcast by the discovery that he has or was reputed to have a strain of Negro blood” (“The Crock” 57). The disgrace, terror, and insecurity felt by mixed-race individuals for Toomer result in part from eugenic thought.

The *Richmond Times-Dispatch* of 18 February 1924, for example, underscored the genetic fear of the racially disabled other which supported Plecker and Laughlin’s position. It did so through a familiar hierarchy which equated “lower and less progressive races” with “a greater percentage of defectives” upon a “mongrel scale.” The paper emphasized racial “amalgamation” as when

one race will absorb the other. And history shows that the more highly developed strain always is the one to go. America is headed toward mongrelism; only...measures to retain racial integrity can stop the country from becoming negroid in population.... Thousands of men and women who pass for white persons in this state have in their veins negro blood... [It] will sound the death knell of the white man. Once a drop of inferior blood gets in his veins, he descends lower and lower in the mongrel scale. (qtd. in Black 167)

Plecker turned to the Eugenics Record Office's Carnegie Institution to help bolster faux scientific support for the Act and its aftermath. The Carnegie report, 1926's *Mongrel Virginians*, made explicit the racialized and ableist logic which two decades of eugenic rhetoric had implicitly built both up and toward. According to the Institution's publication, the "intellectual levels of the negro and the Indian race as now found is below the average for the white race." As such, the Racial Impurity Act and the forced sterilization of defectives presumed to avoid being "presented not as a theory or as representing a prejudiced point of view, but as a careful summary of the facts of history," according to the ERO (180). What started as the denial of marriages involving any hereditary markers of blindness expanded outward to support continuing to bar the genetic mixture of miscegenation, a term over which the anxiety of Toomer—and Kabnis—cannot be overstressed. The largely imaginary figure of the blind and the racially-mixed captured together the eugenic fear of the genetic other, marked on the body and increasingly on the census as Black and disabled—as both genetically diluting and disabling. And in *Cane*, as our final section will address, Toomer confronts this historical coupling primarily through Kabnis's anxiety and resistance to being likened to Father John.

*

“Do I look like him?”: The Terrors of History and the Racial Politics of Vision

Kabnis internalizes his mixed-race identity—uprooted, homeless, “raceless,” shameful—as a “sinful” heritage he sees as “branded on m soul” (111), a genetic and social inheritance that flows back from the mythic body of Father John. “Th form thats burned int my soul,” he confesses, “is some twisted awful thing that crept in from a dream, a godam nightmare, an wont stay still unless I feed it” (111). In what could be a summation of the form of *Cane*, he adds that the awful unrest in his soul “lives on words. Not beautiful words. God Almighty no. Misshapen, split-gut, tortured, twisted words.... White folks feed it cause their looks are evil. Niggers, black niggers feed it cause theyre evil an their looks are words.... This whole damn bloated purple country feeds it cause its goin down t hell in a holy avalanche of words” (111). Again returning to the horrifying image of Mame Lamkins, Kabnis concludes of his precarious and mixed soul: “I wish t God some lynchin white man ud stick his knife through it an pin it to a tree” (111). Karen Ford has aptly argued of this monologue that “Kabnis’s ugly words articulate violation and atrocious violence, the deformation of beauty, the destruction of promise, and the negation of renewal.... Here is the emblem of defeated aspirations in *Cane*, the explanation for why so many would-be messiahs fail: racism destroys them before they even begin” (124-25). Yet Kabnis unconsciously demonstrates that racism operates as insidiously through physical violence as it can through internalized self-hatred. Kabnis’s vision, how he sees his precarious mixed-race identity, bears witness to *Cane*’s larger rhetorical tethering of blackness to the terrors of America’s racist history.

Cane, as this section will show, thus contains a racial politic, one which locates blackness within a sense of social and symbolic visuality, the same as those our first two

sections detailed. Toomer saturates *Cane* with resplendent visual spectacles in which staring becomes the thing stared *at*, bringing into sharp relief the distance between subject and object, gazing spectator and gazed upon performer. Toomer perhaps traffics in narrative prosthesis in ironizing the fact that many sighted people conceive of blindness as synonymous with blackness (as in an absence of light).¹⁴⁹ Yet that charged blackness pulls double duty with race as well. Toomer locates in blindness an allegory for mixed-race “New Negroes” like Kabnis distressed by their relationship to the living legacy of slavery. In her work on staring, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson reminds us that faces “often reveal our roots and histories” (*Staring* 98), expressing a key motif that *Cane* develops. Our impulse to stare, “to search the countenance for revelation,” whether at our reflection or at those before our eyes, reveals our desire to recognize on the body and especially in a face the “tokens of our character or heritage” (98-99). “The intense visual work of staring at faces,” she determines, “is then both a cognitive and an epistemological undertaking” (101). This section asks us to re-view the visuality of *Cane*’s many portraits to recover their roots and histories, their tokens of character and heritage.

In *Cane*’s many visual scenes in which we are positioned to stare, Toomer lays bare the violence wrought upon racialized bodies—as well as in their consumption as textually dehistoricized objects. “Portrait in Georgia,” for example, positions us such that we cannot look away from its violent visualization of Black bodies:

Hair—braided chestnut,
 coiled like a lyncher’s rope,
Eyes—fagots,
Lips—old scars, or the first red blisters,

¹⁴⁹ See Chapter II, note 22 for a definition of narrative prosthesis.

Breath—the last sweet scent of cane,
And her slim body, white as the ash
of black flesh after flame.

(*Cane* 29)

If history writes race, like gender, upon the body, the “souls of slavery” at which *Cane* enchants us to stare bear upon them the marks of toil, pain, and despair (*Cane* 14), a mode of vision which consistently marks the subjectivities of its many characters as well. Blackness cannot be severed from the body, nor how such bodies signify visually in history and culture. Jennifer M. Wilks helpfully posits that in “Portrait” the “physical inventory doubl[es] as the anatomy of a lynching, the benign, almost banal features on the left becom[ing], in the move from one side of the dash to the other, ominous signs of racial and sexual oppression.” She adds that “the woman’s white(ned) body becomes a means of expressing the inexpressible: the torture of African American bodies” (113). Surely Toomer’s visual turn to the overdetermined “scene of subjection” to which “Portrait in Georgia” commits itself would cause disquiet to a thinker like Saidiya Hartman. “What does it mean,” Hartman asks, “that the violence of slavery or the pained existence of the enslaved, if discernible, is only so in the most heinous and grotesque examples and not in the quotidian routines of slavery?” (21). Yet while *Cane* visually demands that we stare at the tortured bodies of what “Song of the Son” calls a “song-lit race of slaves” (14), its gaze lingers far longer upon bodies in quotidian scenes like town gatherings, walking the streets of Chicago, and practicing dance rehearsals.

Toomer visualizes his racial politic on the Black body. Hence, the body in *Cane* “does not sing; [the] body *is* a song” (*Cane* 12, emphasis added).¹⁵⁰ These marks of

¹⁵⁰ Janet Whyde has expanded this notion specifically to the story of “Carma,” writing that the titular character’s “body becomes, in fact, the site of the conflict of slavery redux, where sexual conflict is

embodied musical notation, to follow the logic of “Carma,” also at times conspicuously conceal their own legibility, as though the swing between the visibility and invisibility of racialized bodies could simply appear in our unblinking stare. “Face,” counterpiece to “Portrait in Georgia,” adds to *Cane*’s visual emphasis that bodies, faces, and eyes reveal our “roots and histories”:

Hair—
silver-grey
like streams of stars,
Brows—
recurved canoes
quivered by the ripples blown by pain,
Her eyes—
mist of tears
condensing on the flesh below
And her channeled muscles
are cluster grapes of sorrow
purple in the evening sun
nearly ripe for worms.

(10)

The surveyed face of the woman, recalling another silent “Ancient” from Toomer’s letters, redoubles her lived history, transfusing a literal embodiment of the past through metaphors made visible in the present. If “Portrait in Georgia” becomes “the face of African-American history that pursues Kabnis” (Scruggs and VanDemarr 189), “Face” only compounds this history, locating blackness in and as the body. Moving downward from the crown of a head greyed with time and toil, her quivering canoe-eyebrows overhang her teary eyes, threatening to drown her in a time-river of experiential pain. As

transmuted into historical conflict by the hermeneutical usurpation of her body” (46). Something similar, I would add, occurs with Father John’s body, though without the sexual components of Whyde’s claim.

with Father John, her ancient body sits “nearly ripe for worms,” as though she were also being likened to the walking dead.

Like an extended remediation of an earlier form, “Fern” redirects the reader’s gaze upon the eyes of a highly embodied Black woman such as that in “Face.” Presented as “a transparent eyeball,” the portrait of Fern prefigures the mystical transfiguration of the old blind man in “Kabnis” (Nicholls 160). Toomer in fact wrote “Fern” “immediately and almost without revision” after finishing “Kabnis” (Kerman and Eldridge 85-86). The narrator first breathes life into “Fern” by echoing in prose what has come before in the free verse of “Face,” a visual motif which weaves through *Cane* and rests, finally, in Father John’s blind eyes: “Face flowed into her eyes... They were strange eyes. In this, that they sought nothing—that is, nothing that was obvious and tangible and that one could see, and they gave the impression that nothing was to be denied... Men saw her eyes and fooled themselves” (16). While far from blind, Fern’s eyes, like Father John’s, magnetize toward them the searching gazes of those surrounding her as they each scan her “countenance for [a] revelation” that never comes. In positioning us so that we too try to interpret Fern’s eyes, Toomer prepares us for a similar hermeneutic in Kabnis’s gaze. We await the “revelation” within her eyes, in which seem to rest an oracular vision of Black history.

If beauty is in the eye of the beholder, Fern’s eyes transform her in the view of her male pursuers into something divine, mysterious, unknowable. Her eyes indeed hold even “God” transfixed (19). The narrator claims that God “flowed” into her eyes “as I’ve seen the countryside flow in” (19). Hutchinson suggests we identify in “Fern” Toomer’s consistent river motif, “signifying the dissolution of the ‘old’ races into the ‘New World

soul” (*Harlem* 407). Her embodiment, captured principally in her eyes, signifies to her gazing male audience far beyond the literal and earthly. “As you know,” confesses the narrator of “Fern,” “men are apt to idolize or fear that which they cannot understand, especially if it be a woman. She did not deny them, yet the fact was that they were denied. A sort of superstition crept into their consciousness of her being somehow above them. Being above them meant that she was not to be approached by anyone” (16). Fern, too, anticipates Kabnis’s encounter in the Hole with Father John set upon his mock regal throne.

If Father John’s eyes help rename him as a John the Baptist who would herald a Black messiah, Fern’s eyes turn her for the town into a Black Virgin Mary. Though not a virgin, Fern “became a virgin” in her onlookers’ gaze (16). Wherever Fern’s eyes looked, “you’d follow them and then waver back. Like her face, the whole countryside seemed to flow into her eyes. Flowed into them with the soft listless cadence of Georgia’s South” (17). As an impossibly potent symbol of an entire history and race, as well as a male-projected mother-to-be of Black futurity, Fern must first be emptied of her literal embodiment to take on her sacredness, as with Father John.

Her eyes as visual symbols signify in such excess that they raise her body “above” and beyond those who look to her for answers, threatening to burst with an overripened and capacious set of signifieds. Holding Fern in his arms, the narrator, perhaps Lewis from “Kabnis,” has what he tellingly calls a “vision” while meditating about visibility at dusk, a time of course which fuses (white) day with (black) night:

I tried to tell her with my eyes.... The thing from her that made my throat catch, vanished. Its passing left her visible in a way I’d thought, but never seen.... Dusk, suggesting the almost imperceptible procession of giant trees, settled with a purple haze about the cane.... I felt that things unseen

to men were tangibly immediate. It would not have surprised me had I had a vision. When one is on the soil of one's ancestors, most anything can come to one. (18-19)

The narrator expels a rapid release of visual figures—at least five within these short lines—trying to capture, as all metaphors do, the elusive but palpable similitude in difference. While his staring at Fern transforms how he perceives her, so too do her eyes redirect how he views himself: eyes as not just windows to the soul but mirrors of the self who looks.¹⁵¹ He tries here to express the uncanny transformation Fern undergoes in his gaze, first from an object of lust, then to one of displaced and deferred passion, and finally into a paradoxically overflowing and empty figure in whose presence he experiences a vision of “one's ancestors.”

If we await a judgement or prophetic revelation from Father John that never comes, Fern, into whose eyes the entire Black history of the South flows, falls into this promised epiphanic vision. As in the Hole of Halsey's workshop, “[t]ime and space have no meaning in a canefield” (13). Fern “[f]ell to her knees, and began swaying, swaying. Her body was tortured with something it could not let out. Like boiling sap it flooded her arms and fingers till she shook them... It found her throat, and spattered inarticulately in plaintive, convulsive sounds, mingled with calls to Christ Jesus” (19). Toomer envisions Fern as like the Oracle at Delphi—is this an epiphany or an epileptic fit of disability?—though he once again denies us access to her utterances. He instead conducts Fern within a rich intertextual choir stretching beyond the canefield and out into *Cane's* dusky three parts. Vocalizing another call and response slave song, Fern as “cantor,” as the narrator

¹⁵¹ Patricia Chase argues that a similar mirrored effect exists in “Kabnis.” For her, Father John “is the container and the reflector of the black experience for which Kabnis searches” (401).

calls her, begins singing “brokenly” words we do not or cannot hear. Unifying her voice with the “vision” of her eyes, Fern calls out in either a “child’s voice, uncertain, *or an old man’s*,” intertextually harmonizing her cantor’s voice with the would-be prophet Father John (19, emphasis added). Because we see her through the narrator’s limited perspective, Fern primes us to survey the many faces and eyes of *Cane*, and to find the embodied racial heritage contained within them. They promise to sing for us an oracular song through which we might re-view the history of slavery and blackness in America.

And yet as a cantor calling out and awaiting the response of the holy choir, a cantor whose eyes and “vision” couple with those of the ancient slave of “Kabnis,” the absent response of the mute Father John cannot be overlooked. The intertextual dialogue of “Fern” finds instead its first primary interlocutor in “Box Seat.” Set around the spectacle of boxing dwarves, a prevalent American “freakshow” with which disability scholars of the modernist era are well-acquainted, the story vocalizes Dan Moore’s angst over the “respectability” of both Black and white bourgeois society. His angst spills over into violence, heightened by the boxing spectacle behind him, when he feels the surveilled performativity of his blackness come into unendurable relief. Toomer renders all of this perceptible by again returning to a racial politics of vision, to the stakes of seeing and being seen. Trapped in the middle of *Cane*, Dan connects his “song” to that of Fern, Kabnis, and Father John. “I was born in a canefield,” he says (59). “The hands of Jesus touched me,” as they did the old blind slave in the ricefields (59). The vision in Dan’s eyes contain multitudes, often expressible through fits of rage not unlike the “splattered,” “convulsive sounds” of Fern’s visionary “fit.” And like Kabnis, Dan rails in vain against the limits of his own body. He seeks to forge as though through sheer will an

identity that will release him from performing his blackness before and beyond the gaze of others.

Dan internalizes his self-image as that which Anglo-America externally envisions for him. Like with an optometrist's phoropter, numerous layers of different visionary lenses are placed before the reader's eyes in "Box Seat," perhaps best captured in Dan's out of body perspective. He views himself how he thinks Black and white onlookers must see him. Rather than clarifying how we see him, Dan's self-perspective only confuses our view of him further. He takes an unhealthy satisfaction at times in fulfilling those racist molds into which white Americans continue to cast Blacks; at other times he wants to burn them to the ground by burning out his eyes, another visual symbol of an angst-filled racial politic. Dan's eyes notate the fury of his embittered song: "And then she caught my eyes. Dont know what my eyes had in them. Yes I do. God, dont I though! Sometimes I think, Dan Moore, that your eyes could burn clean...burn clean...BURN CLEAN!" (67, ellipses and caps in text).¹⁵² Yet again prefiguring Kabnis, Dan cannot escape what he views as the vicious circle of his Black heritage, exasperated by an inability to escape the perpetual gaze of others. Toomer thus introduces us to Dan by underscoring his "liberation" fantasy from white power systems through performing a violent animalism that would destroy these oppressive forces: "I'll show em. Grab an ax and brain em. Cut em up. Jack the Ripper. Baboon from the zoo" (59). While Kabnis awaits the Black messiah of a fallen and enslaved world, Dan fancies to fill this role himself through apocalyptic violence, if necessary: "I am come to a sick world to heal it" (59). While

¹⁵² More than one critic, curiously, has compared Dan to the biblical figure of Samson in their bouts of vengeful rage. Samson, interestingly, of course stands as another classic figure of blindness. See Diana Williams, 195.

being restrained in his mind from slaughtering those who gawk at his blackness, Dan insists that his white captors (and onlooking readers) “[l]ook into [his] eyes” before casting judgement upon his vengeance, setting off the centrality of race to his vision as the title of “Box Seat” suggests (59).

Dan envisions himself set upon a “brass box seat” being scrutinized and submitted into bourgeois Black conventions inherited from white America. While his love interest, Muriel, a mixed-race and “refined” young woman, watches the performance which precedes the dwarf boxing match, Dan sees his genteel courting of her as a new kind of slavery: “Muriel—bored. Must be. But she’ll smile and she’ll clap. Do what youre bid, you she-slave. Look at her.... Clap, smile, fawn, clap. Do what youre bid. Drag me in with you. Dirty me. Prop me in your brass box seat. I’m there, am I not? because of you. He-slave. Slave of a woman who is slave. I’m a damned sight worse than you are” (66). His inflection recalls Kabnis’s “do you think youre out of slavery?” diatribe to Father John. In each Toomer sets modern Black heritage and embodiment upon a lit stage—as indeed unable to detach itself from the stage. Kabnis and Dan feel enslaved to having to perpetually perform one’s own race and gender, oscillating between gazing spectator and absurdly gazed at spectacle.

Dan’s angst reaches a breaking point when he catches sight of an old man in the audience who bears a striking resemblance to Father John.¹⁵³ With the spectacle of violence in the background, and with Dan’s eyes open “mechanically” as the “dwarfs

¹⁵³ Melvin Dixon has also recognized the parallels between “Box Seat” and “Kabnis,” including the resemblance between the old men of each text. He suggests that the underground “rumble” Dan imagines he hears beneath his feet in fact comes intertextually from the Hole of Halsey’s workshop (39).

pound and bruise and bleed each other[] on his eyeballs” (66), the ex-slave comes into sharp focus:

Strange I never really noticed him before. Been sitting there for years.
Born a slave. Slavery not so long ago. He’ll die in his chair.... Oh, come
along, Moses, you’ll get lost; stretch out your rod and come across. LET
MY PEOPLE GO! Old man.... I did see his eyes. Never miss eyes. But they
were bloodshot and watery. It hurt to look at them. It hurts to look in most
people’s eyes. He saw Grant and Lincoln. He saw Walt—old man, did you
see Walt Whitman? Strange force that drew me to him. (67-68, caps in
text)

Dan’s visual metaphors—seeing the past embodied in the present; rendering empathetic pain through a transhistorical vision of the enslaved—crescendo toward apprehensive sympathy. Two figures of irony contribute to the unexpectedness of the scene: that a static but living figure of Dan’s heritage has gone unnoticed by him for years, and that the strange force which draws him to the old man could be moving multidirectionally. Within an “ancient” man Toomer again envisions a hazy past obscured by an anachronistic present; yet through Dan the present must also be re-viewed to see that past. In their exchanged glance, pain bridges but also mars the two. The old man’s eyes hold Dan captive as the young man recognizes their mutual love of Grant, Lincoln, and Whitman. Such allusions furthermore “link individual characters to a shared history” (Battenfeld 1240). Kabnis presumes he can reject the past in the sight of Father John. Dan instead feels compelled to face the history written in the old man’s eyes as they “look to the heavens” (*Cane* 68). What Kabnis perceives in the ex-slave as the fatal embrace of heredity, a living social death in the now, Dan sees as a fated recognition, a seeing of the other in the self as well as the self in the other.

Yet Toomer also unsettles Dan's recognition of himself in and as the old man with ambiguity, indifference, and a return to violence. The chair in which the old man has been consigned to die, according to Dan, suspiciously mirrors the "bronze box seat" in which Dan feels he has been made a "he-slave" to sit, a figure which paradoxically distances and magnetizes them, as with Kabnis and Father John. In recasting the old man as Moses leading the Israelites out of bondage, Dan commands the prophet's famous proverbial words to let his people go through free indirect discourse. It remains unclear though whether Dan imagines the old man denouncing slavery, or whether, like Kabnis, Dan redirects the words of the ex-slave back at him. In other words, Dan could be focalizing, on the one hand, through the old man's perspective and recounting with pride Moses's decree for liberty, thus rewriting the ex-slave's history as a prophet of freedom. He could, however, also be fantasizing about *talking back* to the old slave in the same way Kabnis curses Father John as so much "sin." Falling into a vocal tone remarkably akin to Kabnis's, Dan could be demanding to be released—"let my people go"—from his slave past, with the "my" referring not to all Black Americans, but "New Negroes" seeking detachment or distance from the traumatic history marked upon the body of the ex-slave. Dan could be swinging here between love and hate for a past which enforces the racial performativity against which he has raged.

Like Kabnis, Dan seeks to be released from a heritage marked excessively by pain, a heritage outside of which he fantasizes about miraculously stepping. Dan's decree uncannily recalls Alice Walker's about releasing Toomer from his tortured relationship with his own blackness: "*Cane* then," she writes, "is a parting gift, and no less precious because of that. I think Jean Toomer would want us to keep its beauty, but *let him go*"

(65, emphasis added). Regardless of these inter- and cross-textual overlaps, no amount of similarity between “Box Seat” and “Kabnis” can overlook that the unnamed ex-slave has his sight, while the blind Father John does not. The racial politics of *Cane*’s visuality exceed its representation of blindness.

In talking about blindness and blackness together, we cannot fall prey to a privileged term. We need to think of them as constitutive. Race cannot be conceived of as “like” disability, nor disability as “like” race. Disability has always been racialized, gendered, and classed; so too have queer sexualities been cast historically as aberrant disabilities.¹⁵⁴ With Father John Toomer audaciously fixes our gaze into the blind eyes of an impoverished and “mute” ex-slave who silently stares back. While we look to the old man to “reveal our [American] roots and histories,” Kabnis stares at blindness in terror “for revelation” about his disowned Black heritage (Garland-Thompson 98).¹⁵⁵ He does not like what he sees. In her work on visualizing slavery, Cassandra Jackson offers a theoretical framework that ought to be heeded in our staring at Father John. Though she examines disabled Black subjects in photographs like “The Scourged Back” (Figure 11), perhaps the “most widely viewed and circulated” image of a slave, her approach nests seamlessly within the racial politics of *Cane*’s vision, as we have been examining (31).

The highly symbolic photograph details Gordon, a runaway slave whose scarred back bears the brutal whip-marks of his prior subjugation. Invoking Lennard Jackson,

¹⁵⁴ See James and Wu’s introduction to their special issue of *MELUS* for more on theorizing the intersections of race, ethnicity, and disability (pp. 4-8). Robert McRuer’s *Crip Theory* (2006) likewise continues to be a key text in queering disability studies. For a critique of “the whiteness at the heart of Disability Studies,” see Christopher Bell (3).

¹⁵⁵ Kerman and Eldridge have detailed the centrality of “roots” and soil in “Kabnis.” See *The Lives of Jean Toomer: A Search for Wholeness* (342).

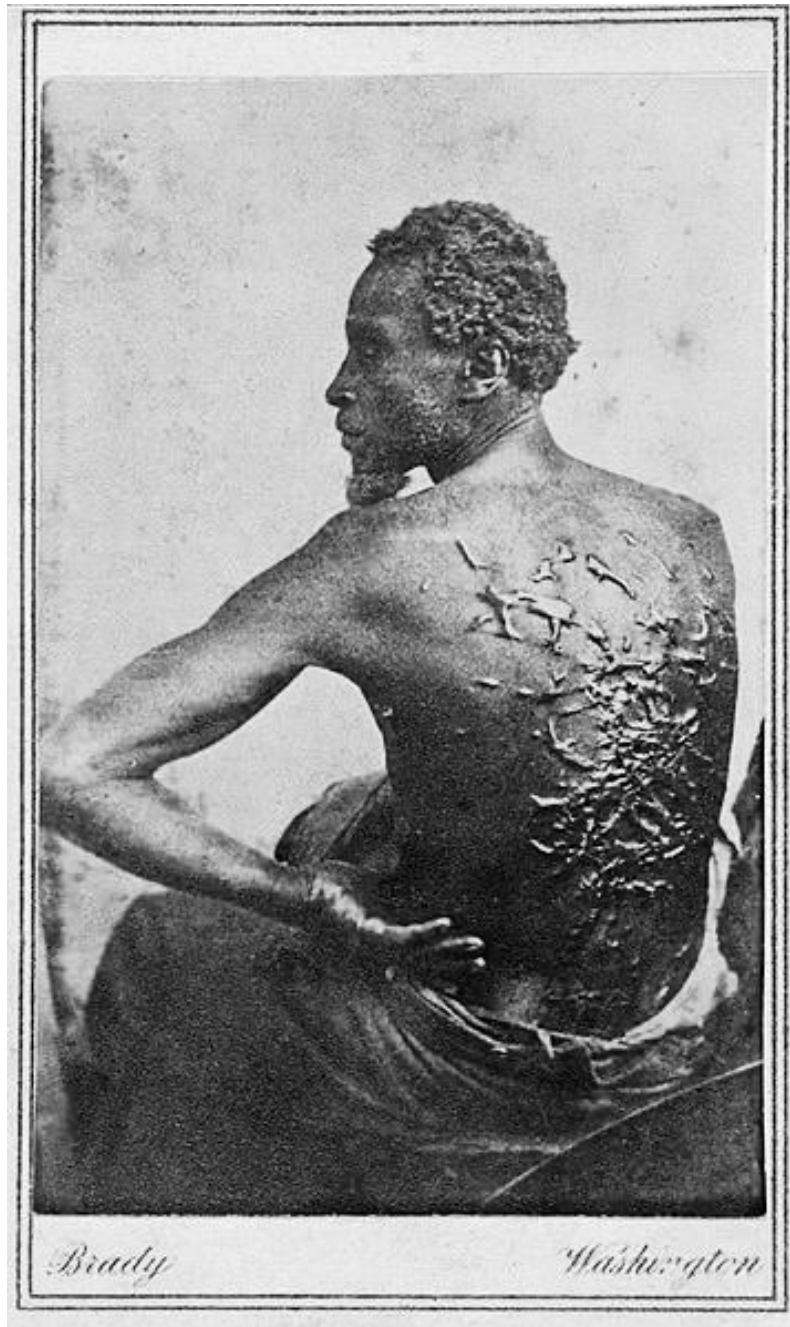


Figure 11. William D. McPherson & Oliver, *The Scourged Back*, circa 1863, Albumen silver print from glass negative

Jackson reminds us that putting disability on display engages a “specular moment” in which the spectator’s gaze can “control, limit, or patrol” disabled and Black bodies (32).

Of “The Scourged Back,” she writes:

In the case of the black wounded body, the[] issues of the power of the gaze and the reductiveness of narrative are magnified. Because the black body is never individual, but instead is always the representative of the collective other, the image of the disabled black body extends beyond the singular to become emblematic. What is being monitored and storied is *not a single body, but a collective body*. Thus, the meaning of disability...is indelibly entangled with the meaning of blackness, both its ideological meaning and the ways in which it manifest[s] materially... (33, emphasis added)

Gordon has his sight, but he has been faced away from his photographer, William McPherson. "The Scourged Back" ekphrastically freezes Gordon's position in space and time as permanently looking away from those millions who voyeuristically viewed (and continue to view) this specular moment. Through visual irony, the photograph exposes viewers to the scars that Gordon cannot see. As with "Portrait in Georgia," the portrayal risks fetishizing a tortured and disabled Black body in its visual imagery, making "plain the short distance between the auction block and the posing stand" (Jackson 35). bell hooks can fruitfully extend Jackson's suggestions, reminding us that portraits of Black bodies like McPherson's and Toomer's demand our skepticism. We need to rigorously question the power dynamics operative within images of Black Americans, in the distinction between seeing and being seen as racialized spectacles for spectators, such as this chapter has considered. "From slavery on," hooks writes, "white supremacists have recognized that control over images is central to the maintenance of any system of racial domination" (2). Because Gordon's image privileges the viewer as the interpreter of what Hortense Spillers aptly calls "the hieroglyphics of the flesh," Gordon's literal body

becomes analogous with the collective body of slavery.¹⁵⁶ Such a substitution reduces the many into the one: a symbolic body overburdened with history.

This is the circle from which Kabnis fears he cannot escape: he experiences the old man's silence and blindness as inexpressible and unperceivable historical terror. Father John signals a "single defining narrative" of slavery from which Kabnis presumes he can escape through denial and rejection of his blackness. "In striving for an integration of his personality and an adequate expression of his sense of the world," in other words, "Kabnis is caught between violently antagonistic racial identities, [and] victimized by a history of racial oppression and hatred, a world divided." Kabnis therefore "physically and culturally embodies the transgression of that division" (Hutchinson, "Jean" 240). Yet Toomer also disallows the easy historical break his lead character believes he can make: the more Kabnis insists he can separate himself from Father John, the more interchangeable the two paradoxically become. The two are bound together as America's genetic others, both Black and disabled.

As Toomer's "swan song" for what he called "the souls of slavery," *Cane*, too, risks substituting singular Black embodiments with the collective legacy of slavery. He consistently locates this literary vision and the racial politics which attend it in the eyes of his characters. Such a substitution can be seen most emphatically with Father John, but also with figures like Fern, Dan, Carma, Lewis, and even Kabnis. To this effect the mixed-race Kabnis faces and then effaces his own Black heritage after gazing upon his "father." Like Gordon, Father John remains "blind" to the lived realities which "New Negroes" like Kabnis "see." This is especially true for Kabnis, who internalizes himself

¹⁵⁶ Quoted in Jackson, 35. See Spillers's "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book."

as the child of America's "miscegenated sin." Not only does the "mute testimony" of Gordon mirror that of Father John, but their specular staging before staring viewers renders both of their voices suspiciously "superfluous, unnecessary" (Jackson 35). Their reproduction into artistic commodification not only over-embodies them, as Jackson puts it, but overdetermines them as figures of the traumatic memory of slavery, a trauma from which Kabnis is trying to escape through disavowal. As "visual echoes," the static, unspeaking, unmoving images of Gordon and Father John collapse the past and the present. They thus transform into sites of a "critical encounter that theorizes the *visuality* of cultural memory" (Ibid. 41, emphasis added). As visual echoes of traumatic memory, the overdetermined images of Gordon and Father John compress their individuality into "a chronological narrative explanation" that strips each of their agency and voice. They function, in short, both synecdochally and allegorically. In such compression we therefore transfigure "the history of slavery into a single defining narrative"—one marked on the body permanently and visibly as traumatized, dehumanized, and even disabled (Ibid. 33).

As we have seen, *Cane* places blackness within a social and symbolic sense of visuality, locating it primarily on the Black body. It sings an oracular song through which we might re-view the history of slavery and blackness in America. In visualizing an index of blackness, its myriad literary sites witness a cultural memory marked by beauty and strength, but also terror and trauma, and its sense of visuality exceeds its representation of blindness. Those like Kabnis and Dan feel enslaved to having to perpetually perform their blackness, oscillating between spectators and spectacles. Toomer's hybrid text swings, furthermore, between the concomitant stakes for Black Americans of what it means to see

racial difference everywhere and yet to struggle to be seen as fully human all the same, “seek[ing] to destroy the shame of an undignified past and reveal the humanity that undergirds the strength and survival of black Americans” (McKay 169).

Like all prophets of the heavens and poets of the earth, Toomer commits us perhaps to an impossibility: that we reconcile the irreconcilable, confronting a Black heritage far more nebulous and uncertain than history—even the most modern or postmodern—wants to deliver. In the highly charged and ironic concluding scene, as though unable to perceive the dual meaning of his words, Kabnis asks Carrie K. of Father John: “Does he look like me? Have you ever heard him say th things youve heard me say?” (116). Like any good rhetorical question, it does not need an answer: Father John dissolves into Kabnis when we re-view their history as shared, seeing finally the embodied blackness of blindness.

CHAPTER V

SHELL SHOCK, INDISCRIMINATE IDENTIFICATION, AND THE CRISIS OF REPRESENTATION: REBECCA WEST

“Worshipping proportion, Sir William not only prospered himself but made England prosper, secluded her lunatics, forbade childbirth, penalised despair, made it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views until they, too, shared his sense of proportion...”
—Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*

The mind can still reel with shock when considering that Rebecca West was all of twenty-three when she first completed the typescript of *The Return of the Soldier* (1918), the same improbable age as Carson McCullers upon *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*'s publication two decades later. Unlike the southern American, though, West's literary debut launched an exceptionally expansive career that stretched far enough to witness the election of Margaret Thatcher, an equally perplexing temporal fact to square. How otherworldly the reflections of her final finished work, a memoir turned historical account boldly titled *1900*, must have seemed to her in 1982 amidst the decades-long gridlock of the Cold War, the introduction of mobile phones, and the spacecraft Columbia sending dozens of astronauts beyond the limits of the earth. Fittingly of its author's career, West's first novel stages from the first a narrative both deeply embedded in time and paradoxically disjointed from it. Though set in wartime March 1916, much of the novella dwells in the mid-Edwardian period of peace a decade earlier. Largely dismissed for nearly a century as the underdeveloped romance of a talented writer still too inexperienced to have mastered her craft, West's slim novella has only recently been reconsidered following the work of feminist and modernist scholars in the new

century.¹⁵⁷ Temporal disjunctures of all kinds mark themselves, in other words, throughout *The Return of the Soldier*'s history, disrupting not only the fragmented narrative and how it has been understood, but the contextual ruptures beyond which informed it as well.

None of which ought to cause surprise given *The Return*'s central ruminations on shell shock, the "invisible" psychosomatic disability which manifests as a supposedly unbridgeable rift between the lived present and a traumatic past from which the latter struggles to extirpate itself. West's text, the first in English that attempted to portray shell shock, helped define for better or worse the initial terms and tenor of transatlantic public discourse over the disability before the medical community had even understood it.¹⁵⁸ "The First World War," historian Jay Winter reminds, "was the moment when the category of shell shock, or psychological injury, came into public view in many parts of the world, and when it received grudging but undeniable public recognition" ("Shell Shock" 332). Drawing inspiration not from the earliest English translations of Freudian psychoanalysis in Britain, as West adamantly insisted in her open letter to *The Listener* in 1928, but from reading about "one of the first cases of amnesia the war produced" (West, "On" 67), she seemed determined to shroud her production history in ways that curiously

¹⁵⁷ Peter Wolfe was among the most influential in dismissing *The Return* in such fashion, bashing the conclusion in particular and accusing West's early fiction of being within a "muzzy [Henry] Jamesian register" (30). In 1994 Margaret Stetz claimed that West had moved "[f]rom her original position at the center of modernism...not merely to the margin, but off the map" ("Rebecca West's" 42), laying most of the blame on male editors of anthologies within the academy. For important initial feminist recuperations, see Stetz, Claire Tylee and Laura Cowan, among others. Of reconsiderations from a modernist perspective, see Maren Linett, Debra Rae Cohen, Marina MacKay, and Paul Peppis, among others.

¹⁵⁸ Though she does not give much space to discussing *The Return*, Elaine Showalter claims in *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980* that West had written "the first English novel about shell shock" (190). Also important to note is that *The Return* was first published in America by The Century Company, a subsidiary at the time of Scribner's, which was of course among the most important publishers of American modernist literature.

align with the effects of her shell-shocked style. Both psychological and physiological, romantic and realist, *The Return* drifts between its fragmented and cohesive poles, moving in dreamlike fashion between the inside and outside of its stabilized constructions.

Yet so too does ableism haunt the tale as an unpardonable crutch on which its narrative closure seems dependent. The “return” of the soldier necessitates “curing” him—involuntarily—of his shell shock, a narrative “overcoming” upsettingly approximate to the medical model of impairment.¹⁵⁹ At the same time this so-called cure ironically returns him to the war front, and with the implication being to his likely death. Maren Linett, the only scholar who has yet offered a disability studies reading of the novella, contends that in the end “ableism overrides” West’s otherwise productive critique of gender and class (n.p.). “Even though [protagonist] Chris’s ‘madness,’” she writes, “is described as ‘genius’ and ‘reality’ as a ‘cup of lies,’ and even though his memory loss is protecting his very life, the characters, the critics, and the author are so inculcated in ableist norms that they cannot follow the novel’s thread, in which Chris’s genius frees him from the classist, sexist, over-controlled atmosphere of Baldry Court, to its logical conclusion” (n.p.).

While what follows pushes on some of the same troubling suggestions that Linett effectively takes to task, it returns to reconsider these illuminative “thread[s]” West seems unable to sustain to think through the difficulties they present for disabling modernism. West poses at least three necessarily uncomfortable problems for disability studies. Rather than reject Linett’s incisive critique, this chapter again refuses a dyadic

¹⁵⁹ See Chapter II, note 15 for the distinction between the social and medical models.

mode which would keep or reject troubling historical texts as sanctified or damnable objects of study. It returns instead to an historical moment undergoing upheaval and rapid change as it began to lay the messy early grounding of “modern” visions of embodiment, especially those marked as disabled, such as we have witnessed in each of the preceding chapters. While casting *The Return* with Linett’s heavy curse of ableism may provide temporary relief from discomfort, it also risks obfuscating in the process a hefty set of issues which disability studies has yet to fully confront. Anxiety or discomfort understandably arise in returning to historical moments that fall far short of a just, equitable world. Yet so too can such a reaction reveal an unattended for disruption in the present, a vulnerable internal lack or absence.

This chapter argues that *The Return of the Soldier* exposes three key problems disability studies continues to struggle with, and at times turn from its view. These three sets of problems situate the chapter’s two sections. The first section focuses on the often-gendered ethics of care and “cure,” and what I will call the indiscriminate identification of the able-bodied with people with disabilities. The second then reconsiders the status of traumas like shell shock within disability studies, including the theoretical and aesthetic complications they pose as literary representations. West’s novella threatens like a ghost to return our present moment to that which has refused to settle. It raises critical, if disrupting, questions through its pliant maneuvering between discrete categories.

The first problem questions how to determine a viable ethics of care concerning people with disabilities, especially if able-bodied caregivers, most often women, advocate for “curing” the disabled loved ones they view as being unable to make that decision for themselves. West’s ironic novella in many ways plays out the current and ongoing

tension, in this regard, between disability scholars (most of whom advocate for the inviolable rights and sanctity of all disabled bodies) and familial caregivers (many of whom are able-bodied mothers or wives with competing demands). How do we square an ethics of care, which continues to be overwhelmingly gendered feminine in theory and praxis, with a seemingly related impulse to “cure” or “overcome,” particularly when regarding the non-congenital disabilities of loved ones? Well ahead of her time, West initiated a public dialogue before the war had even concluded over how to begin addressing not just the shell shock of the war front, but in fact the related traumas it brought to the home front as well. West thus asks us to reconsider the gender of wartime trauma, re-gendering the shocks of the home front and adding them to public discussions over how an entire shell-shocked culture might approach an ethics of care.

The second problem, also addressed in the first section, concerns the embodied limits of empathy and the indiscriminate identification of the able-bodied with people with disabilities. Such issues remain highly germane and even emblematic of literary reading experiences as they traditionally have been understood. *The Return* reveals what has remained at stake for a century when the able-bodied—either at the level of character, narrator, author, or that of many readers—seek to understand and empathize with those with disabilities, demonstrating in the process the risks of an indiscriminate identification born through a desire to know, transgress, or “transcend” bodily difference in fiction. This concern in fact brings us full circle to our earliest questions with McCullers over delimiting appropriation and, to a lesser extent, our inescapable judgment regarding good faith in such determinations. The status and role of the able-bodied in relation to disability, whether as ally or constitutive “other,” remains entrenched in uncertainty and

contention. The perilous choice to write disability from a limited able-bodied perspective, one which describes both that of *The Return*'s narrator Jenny and West herself, brings with it a host of heavy questions, each seeming to lead to one greater in magnitude. Can all able-bodied representations of disability be uniformly levelled as suspect at best, and appropriate and offensive at worst? What if that portrayal, as with West, never unmoors its gaze from that of the able-bodied, as though acknowledging and respecting an impasse in embodiment it rejects it thus can short circuit or transcend through artistic license or form?

West, like McCullers, not only respects the limited perspective of the able-bodied as necessary in her formal undertaking. She also complicates further by thinking through the risks of treating disability as something like a narrative absent-center rife for hermeneutical abstraction. These two writers refuse to grant ontological access to disabled interiorities they cannot claim for themselves. At the same time their respective narratives throw into sharp relief the considerable risks for people with disabilities that follow from an able-bodied desire to fill, speak for, or possess that same absent-center. This risk rests at the heart of indiscriminate identification. West compounds these concerns in ways that continue to raise difficult questions by attaching such an able-bodied desire specifically to women who care for a person with a disability. Linett rightfully reproaches the ableism which "overrides" the conclusion in the involuntary "cure" of the shell-shocked protagonist. But to what extent might we understand this uncomfortable and deeply unsatisfying ending alongside West's larger textual condemnation of the social enforcement of "normalcy," whether in terms of gender, class, ability, or, of course, their triangulation? How, in other words, does West implicate

her able-bodied characters—the three women who love and care for Chris—in this act of erasure? How does their ability status affect their decision, and how might this critique indicate part of what a critical able-bodied offering to disability studies might provide?

The third and final problem poses questions over how disability studies can best approach shell shock on its own terms as an invisible or psychosomatic disability without bringing with it a host of issues from trauma studies. Shell shock, which many today would more generally label trauma or in some instances post-traumatic stress disorder, manifests both physically and psychologically, often confusing the so-called inside with the outside of the body. It thus pushes on boundaries large and small. Furthermore, attempts to write shell shock “function as sites of memory and mourning, and point to blurred distinctions between body and mind, inside and outside, past and present that accompany the crippling return of shell shock and trauma” (Dodman 10). Even setting aside the troubling description of psychological trauma as “crippling,” shell shock offers an obvious but key instance of the continued need for more capacious theories of embodiment, emerging in part from Tobin Siebers’s *complex embodiment* in years past, but more recently finding its articulation in both Emily Russell’s *embodied citizenship* and Margaret Price’s influential reconceptualization of the *bodymind*.¹⁶⁰

Seeking to approach and confront shell shock from the perspective of disability equally necessitates attending to a related methodological lack: how does one accomplish such a task without capitulating to much of trauma theory, something which—as the last section shows—many in disability studies have resisted for foundational reasons, and

¹⁶⁰ See Siebers (*Disability Theory* 25), Russell (4), and Price (269) for their respective definitions.

which many continue to describe as an irreconcilable academic opposite?¹⁶¹ Yet as Alison Kafer has recently suggested: “[O]ur failure to engage with the traumatic effects of disability...constricts both our theories and our politics. We must do more than simply reject the registers of loss, trauma, and tragedy as ableist framings of disability” (“Un/Safe” 4). Despite the continued importance of resisting most trauma studies approaches when considering disability, shell shock brings the two fields uncomfortably close in its formidable resistance to representation, even at times suggesting the limits of linguistic expression entirely.

We could say that while the first three chapters of this study expose and explore scenes of literary, historical, and theoretical discomfort for both the able-bodied and people with disabilities in their co-mingling, this final chapter turns the discomfort of art’s cracked mirror back onto the fields of disability and modernist studies. How to materially navigate or analyze a disability that perpetually risks abstracting itself away from the body as arguably unspeakable, unknowable, unrepresentable? What would doing so from within disability studies look like? The concluding section thus meditates on and theorizes the dividing lines that often displace traumas like shell shock into the periphery of disability studies in unsustainable, unhelpful ways, and reflects on our continued need for more capacious understandings of embodiment. Much in the spirit of Kafer’s “reimagined futures,” this final meditation concludes by significantly opening up, rather than closing down, the unfinished, if at times uncomfortable, project of disabling

¹⁶¹ For the contentious overlap between the two fields, see Morrison and Casper, as well as Ionescu and Callus. Building on Price, Alison Kafer’s work has been perhaps the most important within disability studies in highlighting the need to incorporate some trauma studies elements in a cross-disciplinary way, emphasizing pain and trauma as valid expressions of one’s disabled embodiment within certain contexts.

modernism, thinking further about the stakes of determining who may or may not engage with disability studies.

Enforcing Normalcy: The Ethics of Care and Indiscriminate Identification

Among the most important historical revisions of World War One at its centenary has been continuing to unveil the considerable roles women played in it. This has meant in part reexamining the contributions of nurses stationed around the limits of no man's land, those who tended to the putrid trenches like beacons of hope against a throttling sense of terror. It has also brought with it a recovery of the literary work of women who helped write the war, adding missing primary colors to an otherwise patchy canvas. Though Samuel Hynes misleads in proclaiming the Great War to be "the first war that women *could* imagine, and so it was the first that a woman [West] could write into a novel" (xi, emphasis in original), his broader turn to women's expanded public involvement in the teens, both in art and in service, holds true. "Even as the unprecedented involvement of civilians in the war prompted the coining of the term 'home front,'" writes Cohen, "the line between home front and battle front became, as Susan Grayzel argues, 'porous.' Women went to the front as nurses or observers; men came home on leave" (*Remapping* 3). Of the roughly three million British women employed in factories aiding the war effort, many of whom associated themselves with the suffrage movement, nearly a third found work in munitions factories (Buck 85). The Volunteer Aid Detachment units, for example, "drew women who would be identified as the first generation of 'feminists' and many of whom had participated in the suffragette movement" (Das 186). An additional two million "worked in the First Aid Nursing

Yeomanry, the Women's Land Army, the [V.A.D.], and other paramilitary organizations” (Buck 85). The efforts and sacrifices of British women during the war years cannot be misprized.

While it remains customary to read the trench poetry of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, much less commonly do we turn to the first-person accounts of those like Vera Brittain in *Testament of Youth* (1933) or to the American Mary Borden in *The Forbidden Zone* (1929). Both served at the front and produced experimental, uncannily poetic memoirs which recount their experiences with vivid horror and harrowing intimacy. Away from the front, many women writers “faced the additional task of inserting the woman's story into an increasingly uniform story of war experience as combatant experience” (Buck 105). Beyond Brittain and Borden, other women detailed their encounters alongside soldiers, not only as nurses but also ambulance drivers who became, as Jane Marcus palpably captures it, “experts at the geography of hell” (244). While the image of WWI ambulance drivers still calls to mind Hemingway, Cummings, and John Dos Passos in texts like *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), *The Enormous Room* (1922), and *One Man's Initiation—1917* (1920), so too should it include the likes of Helen Zenna Smith and her *Not So Quiet...* (1930, ellipsis in title), published in America as *Stepdaughters of War*, a reframing (and regendering) of the classic *All Quiet on the Western Front* from the prior year.

In texts like Smith's, the figuratively cartographical work of women volunteers remapped both the war front and the war-maimed body. “They wrote the body of war,” Marcus continues, “the wounded soldier's body and their own newly sexualized (only to be numbed) bodies as well as the effect of war on the body politic. Their textual

fragmentation marks the pages of their books as the forbidden zone of writing what hasn't been written before, and their books look like battlefields" (249). In addition to written accounts of women nurses and ambulance drivers, so too does the body of women's writing away from the battlefield complicate hegemonic notions of a singular war experience. It witnesses how the war traumatized more than the soldiers who fought, rendering a cultural shock poised to long outlast Armistice Day on 11 November 1918.

As West wrote in a 1917 letter, *The Return* underwent its revisions for publication amid the *Luftstreitkräfte's* air raids: "[O]n Saturday [the air raids] lasted from 8 o'clock till one and we were narrowly missed by an aerial torpedo, and on Sunday they dropped incendiary bombs in the bay, and I suddenly found that though I had never been consciously afraid I was simply gibbering" (West, *Selected* 28). Indeed, West writes that the family cat, named Lieutenant Robinson after "the V.C. who brought down the first [German] Zeppelin," was killed during an air raid, and by 1917 "there was a naval gun put onto the cliff in front of our house" (*Letters* 372). Away from the trenches, the modernist outpourings of those like May Sinclair, Elizabeth Bowen, Katherine Mansfield, and Virginia Woolf, among others writing in England, brought attention less to the shell-shocked soldier or his "unspeakable" war experience than to the unexpected, often unsettlingly quiet domestic spaces the war had equally torn asunder. "Female modernist novels," Suzette Hanke describes, "exhibit the powerful influence of post-traumatic testimony in works that attempt to represent a range of quotidian traumas suffered not only by soldiers in battle and war veterans haunted by military flashbacks, but by noncombatants who...endure an overwhelming sense of loss, bereavement, anxiety, and emotional rupture" (161). Fittingly, then, it was Rebecca West rather than a

returned ex-serviceman who in 1918 wrote the first English novel rendering shell shock intelligible, giving to the formless a shape and to the unspeakable a voice.

A century's distance has helped clarify the importance of West's contribution, as well as the critical issues she raises for disability studies in particular. Like those of McCullers and Toomer, her narrative dwells with disability from a limited able-bodied position, one which takes shape from the perspective of three women tasked with providing care for a shell-shocked soldier they love. As has irritated or baffled critics since its publication, *The Return* importantly upsets the gendered expectations of genre by stranding the tale in an unlocatable middle space somewhere between a war novel and a romance. Her displaced effect thus results from the immense roles gender plays in appeasing and subverting the expected forms and content of genre. That hers is not a man's, but three women's, story of war's shell shock is paramount, as are the questionable ethics of care these women in turn display. West pulls apart, deconstructs, the gendered meaning of shell shock, expanding from the first who can and cannot lay claim to it. By emphasizing the differences but also similarities between the traumas of the war front and those of the home front, she calls into question the gendered assumptions a term like shell shock smuggles in, locating an attendant sense of trauma in women and even an entire culture affected by war. Yet if trench soldiers who endured the psychological horrors of war could be refused pensions, accused, as we will see, of faking an ailment "unproven" and even rejected by doctors, how could those on the home front possibly reveal the larger gravity of shell shock?

As West details, the task of caring for disabled soldiers, including those with shell shock, did not only fall on nurses. Many home front women shared with war front nurses

a sense of being witnesses to and participants in caring for disabled male bodies. “The shattered male body is a central concern during and after the war years. What differing claims,” Santanu Das asks in his magisterial *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature*, “do the women make upon this body and how do they write it—with their own bodies responding, recoiling or rarefied—in their texts?” (178). The larger context of able-bodied women loved ones who care for disabled family members, some of whom encounter the same reactions as Das outlines for trench nurses, has been a longstanding contention within disability studies. Like the women who care for Chris in *The Return*, many mothers and spouses continue to advocate for the need to cure or overcome the disabilities that their loved ones experience. Such responses appear more likely if the disability of their family member emerges non-congenitally, like those experienced by soldiers. The advocacy of some women caregivers comes under exceptional scrutiny if in the process they speak *for* a loved one whom they believe cannot make the decision themselves. *The Return* in many ways draws out the consequences of this substitution from the perspective of three able-bodied women who must tend to Chris’s disability, nursing him back to “normal.” At the same time, West offers a complex, more sympathetic view of trauma that expands from individual soldiers at the war front to include the gendered feminine home front and, indeed, an entire culture struggling with immense loss.

Most disability scholars condemn such actions, questioning, at its core, the bad faith intentions within what feminist scholars have called the ethics of care. As Sara Ruddick helped establish in decades past, “Many women and some men express maternal thinking in various kinds of working and caring for others” (346). For Ruddick and others

who have followed, the gendered ethics of care participates in something like a “discipline”—or what Joan Tronto calls a “practice”—one which “consists in establishing criteria for determining [a loved one’s] failure and success, in setting the priorities, and in identifying the virtues and liabilities which the criteria presume” (347). At the same time, maternal thinking unintentionally errs when women reinforce “the values of the dominate culture” in those for whom they care (354). Ruddick separates a woman’s nurturing of humility—which she considers a virtue—from obedience—which she labels humility’s “degenerative form.” In doing so she emphasizes that a mother’s misplaced ethic of care “may train her daughters for powerlessness, [or] her sons for war” (355). Such an effect further enforces damaging, heteronormative gender roles, and ultimately “betrays the very life she has preserved” (355). In shifting from mother to spouse, we will see the consequences of such a misplaced ethic of care with the enforcement of normalcy within *The Return*.

While philosophizing about such ethics of care almost always takes place within a context of motherhood, it can be extended more broadly to those like West to include myriad women caregivers, taking on new ranges of meaning when introducing disability into the ethical discussion. Building on Ruddick, for example, Tronto serves as a bridge between the social and gender components within motherly thinking and a disabled ethics of care. “Semantically,” she writes, “care derives from an association with the notion of burden” (103). It “involves the recognition that one can act to address [a loved one’s] unmet needs,” “tak[ing] the concerns and needs of the other as the basis for action (105-06). Beyond just her emphasis on the “burden” of care, Tronto hails the disapproval of many disability scholars when she suggests: “Protection presumes the bad intentions and

harm that the other is likely to bring to bear against the self or group, and to require a response to that potential harm” (105). In ways that West will bear out, Tronto goes on:

There is always implicit in care the danger that those who receive care will lose their autonomy and their sense of independence. Similarly, the question of whether the temporary absence of equality and autonomy translate into a permanent state of dependency on the one hand and a condition of privilege on the other, or of denying some the ability to make decisions for themselves, is a moral question that is always implicit in the provision of care. (146)

Such an ethics of care comes under scrutiny when it “pursue[s] paternalistic approaches to care, such as guardianship, supervision, and imposed treatment” (Carey, Block, and Scotch 4). Throughout the first half of the century especially, the rhetoric of physicians, of course gendered highly masculine, influenced how women who cared for disabled loved ones positioned themselves socially, as well as how they internalized their gendered position. The result was often that “bad” mothers and spouses “created and perpetuated disability,” whereas “good” ones “strove to erase disability through a commitment to the regimes of science” (Ibid. 8).

Though it has only recently been added to theoretical discussions of disability, the ethics of care has been engaged by those like Eva Kittay and Alison Kafer. “We are well advised to consider,” Kittay writes, “why it has taken so long to think deeply about disability and caregiving” (“Love’s” 239). Linking the ethics of care to a destigmatized notion of human dependency and shared interconnectedness, Kittay has championed what she deems the “demanding nature of the principle of care”: that women tasked with caring not only ensure disabled individuals “survive but also thrive” (Ibid. 241). The problem here, to return to Ruddick, is demarcating the point at which a caregiver stops helping their disabled loved one thrive and instead starts silencing and speaking for them,

further enforcing (wittingly or unwittingly) ableist norms of wholeness, beauty, and health. Indeed, any system of dependency makes it difficult to remove conceptions of infantilization, raising difficult questions about unequal relationships within any ethic of care, regardless of gender. And like any virtue (according to Aristotelian logic), care instead ought to be approached as a mean between two extremes: over-solicitude and a self-minded paternalistic imposition (Kittay, *Learning* 171). Through such extremes, however, West exposes the misidentified violent logics lingering within the women who care for Chris. If read somewhat against the grain, *The Return* can ultimately offer a critique of how each woman who cares for Chris internalizes her erasure of his disability, ironically, as an act of “love” set within a misguided, gendered “ethic” of care. The characters Kitty, Margaret, and Jenny in fact reveal the questionable ethics supporting such erasure in their respective unreliable narrations.

Along with the experiments in narrative voice by Henry James, Joseph Conrad, and Ford Madox Ford, West stands as a progenitor of many of the formal markings which later became shorthanded as literary modernism.¹⁶² While still too early to employ a stream-of-consciousness method, West’s early forays into fiction nonetheless emphasized a style which underscored perspectivism, relativism, ironic distance, fragmentation, and above all unreliable narration. Though Dorothy Richardson had already published *Pointed Roofs* in 1915, from which May Sinclair famously described Richardson’s new stylistic approach to interior monologues, the stream-of-consciousness technique was still

¹⁶² That West’s first full-length published text was a study of Henry James (1916) has consistently affected critical reception of *The Return of the Soldier*. Its earliest reviewers and critics took West’s professed admiration for James as justification to largely dismiss her first novel as derivative. Ford’s *The Good Soldier* (1915) almost certainly influenced West’s unreliable narration. Ford and West curiously found themselves briefly taken in by Wyndham Lewis as vorticists, but neither remained in this avant-garde coterie for long.

far from commonplace. Told from the claustrophobic first-person vantage of Jenny, cousin and childhood playmate of Chris Baldry, West layers her prose with so much inflection and indirection that it becomes as much about Jenny's telling as the tale itself. "Exploring overlapping structures," as Cohen has argued, "of containment—by architecture, by class, by ideology, by patriarchy, by imaginative failure, by narrative, and even by genre—[West] yielded a densely conceived and palimpsestic structure with a surface of deceptive limpidity" (*Remapping* 66). The significance of West's paradoxically abstruse yet plain style justifies itself beyond formal experiment, however, once Jenny's unreliability exposes her suppressed love of and desire for Chris, silently acknowledging in the process the veneer which has colored everything.

Set on an idyllic English estate seemingly untouched by the ongoing First World War, the story describes the sudden return of Chris to his country manor from the Western Front unable to recall the last fifteen years of his life. His shell-shocked experiences from "[s]omewhere in France" (3), which everyone struggles to name or describe, have induced amnesia. Chris believes himself still to be in love with Margaret Grey (née Allington), *premier amour* of his later youth and the homely daughter of an innkeeper, with whom he was involved before his marriage to Kitty. Adding a touch of melodrama, Kitty did not know of her husband's romantic past and, in line with her snobbish classism, initially suspects Margaret of a con scheme. Kitty harbors resentment over both Margaret's passion and the threat Kitty fears her competitor represents to her matriarchal class station. Margaret in short "is a walking symbol of the instability of the Baldry Court 'empire'" who "shakes the foundation of [Kitty's] claims to property, legitimacy, and citizenship" (Cohen, *Remapping* 74). Kitty nonetheless eventually allows

Chris to see Margaret (platonically) when her husband makes it clear he believes keeping his illness and even death at bay depend upon it.

With the arrival of the psychoanalyst Dr. Anderson, he and the three women who care for Chris eventually agree that in order to “cure” Chris, the returned soldier must confront the fact that in years past he and Kitty lost their son, Oliver, to illness as a small child. It conveniently turns out the same trauma also befell Margaret and her current husband, who throughout remains off stage. Margaret and Jenny initially reject the normalizing logics which insist Chris must be returned to reality for the greater good, especially that which toes the line of the larger social demands the war has placed on British men and women of all class positions. But as Jenny eventually comes to express, for her, Margaret, or Chris to continue propping up a fantasy world of past possibilities would equate to Chris “not be[ing] quite a man” (88). Determining finally that it would debase her maternal love of Chris were she to perpetuate his amnesia any longer, Margaret takes it upon herself to show the soldier young Oliver’s ball and jersey to reverse shock him back to “reality,” despite knowing that in doing so she must sacrifice their love for one another and their shared happiness in supposedly ignorant bliss. Some concurrently view the sacrifice as belonging instead to Chris, whose “reward” for being returned to the battlefield “will be a tragic re-enactment of the age-old story of aristocratic and patriotic self-sacrifice for the sake of the British Empire” (Henke 162).

While the Cinderellaesque story first offers up the possibility of transcending class, gender, and ability norms through love, the grim conclusion seems to insist on this impossibility as a mere illusory fantasy—at least during the crisis of wartime. “Curing” Chris of his psychosomatic disability in the end means reinforcing hegemonic normalcy,

not to mention condemning him to return to the war and, with it, to the heavy implication of his death. West thus concludes on a deeply ambiguous, perhaps even ethically ambivalent, note, one which continues to provoke strong, uncomfortable reactions. These typically range from an irritated rejection of an all too convenient literary device, to a much less common interpretation of the ending as a highly ironic mock resolution meant to undercut the motivations for returning Chris to “sanity” after all.¹⁶³

As the synopsis indicates, Jenny plays a minor role in the events which unfold, operating instead as silent observer and critical reflector. Always “liminal,” she hovers “on the margins looking in or looking out” (Cohen, *Remapping* 69). Jenny also seems to float through walls and even into interior minds like a ghost unburdened by either time or the barriers, whether physical or psychological, that stand as limits for those around her. Though invested in an unreliable narration far quieter than those typically explored in the decades which followed, every word houses Jenny’s latent moods, projections, biases, fears, and desires. Even dialogue, as Jenny’s pointed verbs and adjectives remind, is technically second-hand, over-heard, re-presented.

The opening serves as fruitful an example of Jenny’s unusual narrative presence as any: “‘Ah, don’t begin to fuss!’ wailed Kitty.... We were sitting in the nursery. I had not meant to enter it again after the child’s death, but I had come suddenly on Kitty as she slipped the key into the lock and had lingered to look in at the high room,” a room which she admits they have “kept in all respects as though there were still a child in the house”

¹⁶³ For the former, see Linett (“Involuntary” n.p.), Wolfe (34), Orel (124-25), and Glenhill (184), among others. For the latter, see Peppis (*Sciences* 225), Debra Rae Cohen (83), Pinkerton (2), and Pulsifer (53), among others. The many trauma studies readings of West rarely engage with the conclusion in such ironic terms, tending instead to think about it in relation to a repressed and unspeakable past experience rather than as undercut.

(3). Jenny distances herself from Kitty from the first by reproaching her as a wailing woman, staging the familiar terms of female hysteria that will soon undergo a gender inversion and be displaced onto Chris's shell-shocked mind. Many early physicians in fact had begun approaching shell shock as a "male version" of the familiar female hysteria of late nineteenth-century medical science. Wyatt Bonikowski points out that the initial medical descriptions of shell shock emphasized how the condition in many ways resembled hysteria ("The Return" 525). It did not take long, however, before the British crisis of masculinity, which we explored at length in Chapter III, found its way into the cultural stigma over the proximity between the two terms. As Misha Kavka has argued: "[O]ne could say that masculinity was differentiated from femininity along the demarcating line of psychological illness, and particularly hysteria. When, in the conditions of new war technology, trauma and hysteria become inextricably associated with masculinity, then the naturalizing mainstay of the construct implodes and 'shell'-shock names its remainder" (155). If in attaching Jenny's curiously loud verb to Kitty she gestures toward the later gender inversion of (male) hysteria by another name, her description of the nursery likewise offers up an inversion in which the ghost of Oliver weirdly parallels Jenny's own ghostly presence in the house. Jenny after all finds herself unintentionally in the nursery by silently following Kitty from afar, something she does with everyone. Most revealingly, she indicates that her lingering in the nursery is nothing new by admitting she "had not meant to enter it *again*" (emphasis added).

The doors of the Baldry Estate first open with a scene in which we voyeuristically participate in holding onto an absent child and by thematic implication to childish things, each emblematic of a dead future which the war has made impossible. Yet those doors

close upon the conclusion with the importance of letting such “childish” things go. How we come to pass from one to the other says much about Jenny’s role and position in the story, particularly as an expression of her able-bodied desire to know, possess, and eventually help her beloved “overcome” his disability. It seems in the end that romance or nostalgia, as critics have never shied from moralizing, must finally yield to the realism or “reality” demanded by the war. “It is a harsh moral lesson,” Hynes wrote in his oft-quoted 1998 introduction, “that this novel teaches. It says that Reality is the highest human value—higher than love, higher than happiness, and that not to accept and honor that value is to be less than human” (xvi).¹⁶⁴

In making such a bold, troubling (and ableist) pronouncement, Hynes falls victim to the same narrative trap which has plagued much of *The Return*’s critical history, including Linett’s otherwise keen and persuasive reading. Falling for the lure to rationalize the conclusion as necessarily positive or morally endorsed, rather than the possibility of it being undercut and ironized, results from the consistent conflation of Jenny with West as though the two were one. Hynes in fact lifts his troubling phrase directly from Jenny, who comes in the closing pages to insist that “there is a draught we must drink or not be fully human” because “one must know the truth” (87). Historically, the fallacy to read Jenny as West has proved too tempting to resist for many largely because of speculation about the autobiographical details West may have laced in concerning her affair and subsequent child with H. G. Wells at the time of composition.

Salacious as these indulgences in literary gossip promise to be, they unfortunately compound unproductive (and sexist) readings of the novel by losing sight of the ironic

¹⁶⁴ For a related but more nuanced look at the novel’s exploration of truth values and the role of “reality” in it, see Jeffrey Hershfield.

detachment at the core of unreliable narration. This includes not only the gap between narrator and narrated, but often more importantly between author and narrator.¹⁶⁵ Though they share some talking points, these are not the same distinctions as the familiar discussion over whether or not we can divorce artists from their art. One *can* denote the narrative traces of West. Yet we cannot approach such traces by simply reading Jenny as her mouthpiece, and then treating her text as an allegorical novel of ideas, whether in the noble service of a disability reading or not. Even with the archival fact that West sometimes fell into the ableist norms which surrounded her despite her critique of them, it simply does not follow that she and Jenny can or should be collapsed.¹⁶⁶ There are risks in doing so which largely track with one of *The Return*'s key offerings to disability studies, regardless of our assumptions over intentionality: the stakes of an able-bodied narrator-character identifying and empathizing with disability. West in fact details how easily the enforcement of “normalcy” can follow, especially for able-bodied women caregivers of a disabled loved one.

As women caring for a newly disabled veteran, Margaret, Kitty, and Jenny collectively offer a cautionary tale of sorts in which the misjudgments of love and the desire for the beloved's wellbeing instead serve (ironically) as normalizing forces. Margaret and Kitty represent competing manifestations of this love and desire for wellbeing. While Margaret takes on a maternalism rendered through Marian imagery,

¹⁶⁵ The hermeneutics of detachment and avoiding the intentional fallacy have, curiously, been reconsidered over the last decade in literary studies, particularly in “post-theory” approaches to the field. Perhaps the most telling example in recent memory concerns Junot Díaz and Yunior, the narrator of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, particularly in the weeks following #MeToo accusations of sexual assault and misogyny against Díaz by Zinzi Clemmons and others.

¹⁶⁶ West's most damning comment indicating the “overriding ableism” of her conclusion comes from her letter to *The Observer*. Discussing her ending, she writes of Margaret's sacrificial love for Chris: “one does not want one's loved one to live in a land of illusion and *infirmity*” (West, “On” 68, emphasis added).

Kitty stands as a calculating matriarch attempting to fill the patriarchal absence she fears Chris's shell shock will precipitate. Turning to the language of Mariolatry, Jenny writes of Margaret: "I perceived clearly that that ecstatic woman lifting her eyes and hands to the benediction of love was Margaret as she existed in eternity" (48), and that "with characteristic gravity she had accepted it as her mission to keep loveliness and excitement alive in [Chris's] life" (47).

Jenny describes Kitty, on the other hand, in mostly stately and stoical terms, as a woman of stature who talks "as though she were speaking with someone behind a shut door" (25), and "with the hardness of a woman who sees before her the curse of women's lives" (11). A few, however, see Kitty more positively as a "chilly and loveless feminine ideal" (Stetz, "Rebecca West" 162). Kitty's cold detachment from people at the same time contributes to her distasteful materialism: Jenny memorably likens her to "a girl on a magazine cover [on which] one expected to find a large '7d.' somewhere attached to her person" (4). These two women who compete to care for Chris nearly foil one another: Margaret demonstrates a selfless devotion shed of all material concerns; Kitty, a "realist" position determined to maintain the class status her husband has achieved through his foreign industrial exploits.¹⁶⁷ One seeks to preserve the integrity of the beloved's heart and the innocence of their youthful romance; the other, his legacy and the cold, unyielding socioeconomic demands of adulthood.

Yet, as becomes increasingly obvious, Jenny too commits herself to caring for Chris in another way, and in doing so divulges a third type of love and desire for the beloved's wellbeing. Jenny harbors an aforementioned suppressed passion for Chris. She

¹⁶⁷ Chris, we're told obliquely at one point, traveled to Mexico to put down an uprising in a mining operation—"to keep the mines going through the revolution" (53)—to which his family business is tied.

hopes Chris, in a word, will finally see her as she desires being seen, the lack of which has been something of a trauma for herself. Being seen forever as she puts it as “Jenny the girl who had been his [childhood] friend and not Jenny the woman” (29), she remembers well her “surprise” when Chris “passed me without seeing me” (53). Jenny then “perceive[s] for the first time that he had never seen me except in the most cursory fashion; on the eye of his mind, I realized thenceforward, I hardly impinged” (53). This unspoken pang of unrequited passion comes to protect her hope that if the past can be regained and reconstructed, as Chris’s amnesia suggests, she may be able to initiate an eventual future in which her love for her cousin can be explored with the possible undoing of his marriage to Kitty.

Such suppressed desires overwhelm Jenny’s language of competition and co-possession concerning Chris and his wellbeing, first with Kitty, but eventually with Margaret as well. As she details in the titular passage:

That day [the Baldry Estate’s] beauty was an affront to me, because like most Englishwomen of my time I was wishing for the return of a soldier. Disregarding the national interest and everything except the keen prehensile gesture of our hearts towards him, I wanted to snatch my cousin Christopher from the wars and seal him in this green pleasantness his wife and I now looked upon. (5)

Speaking as though or else *for* his wife, Jenny repeatedly positions herself in such a way that her presence impinges on the narration itself in moments where one expects to find only Chris and Kitty or, later, Margaret. “This house,” she adds, “this life with *us*, was the core of his heart” (7, emphasis added). She wishes for the return of her soldier, but obscures Kitty from center to margin. Jenny also consistently weaves into her descriptions the maternal but also sexual imagery of seals, metaphorizing it first as the safety of Baldry Court, but eventually as the bound amnesiac past into which she

suspiciously places not just Chris and Margaret, but herself as well. Her “snatch[ing]” of Chris goes far beyond her desire to protect him from the horrors of war. It gestures toward her suppressed need to narrate herself into the new blank spaces of Chris’s life, those the war seems to have blasted into absent nothingness. As Trevor Dodman has articulated: “Men with shell shock, in effect, go ‘missing’; like phantom limbs, they maintain an absent presence in the lives of those intent on their recuperation” (9). So too does Jenny’s desire to snatch and protect indicate her presumption that through her “selfless” love and care she can come to know and even share her beloved’s disability—if it helps materialize her own unconscious desire and mitigate her own sense of trauma.

A similar disquieting pattern follows for Kitty and Margaret in relation to Chris’s amnesia. How they each understand and narrate Chris’s disability reflects their own subject positions far more than his. That with which Chris’s three women caregivers fill the “empty” space of amnesia exposes the selfish motivations latent within their outwardly *selfless* desire to care for him, albeit in competing, if not contradictory, ways. Rather than endorsing one of these three iterations of love as necessary to “overcome” the central thematic conflict, this “solution” and its troubling suggestions fall firmly within the crosshairs of West’s ironic conceit. Regardless of their good intentions, or perhaps more impactfully because of them, love and the related desire of possession offer a highly disturbing situation in which those who care for Chris eventually succumb to enforcing normalcy by speaking for—and ultimately erasing—disability with an antecedent sense of ability.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁸ In using “enforcing normalcy” I am of course alluding to, and riffing on, Lennard Davis’s monograph of the same name, in which he first suggested that “a disability studies consciousness can alter the way we see not just novels that have main characters who are disabled but any novel” (*Enforcing* 43). The “hegemony

In returning him to what they think of as his “normal” self, each woman attempts to re-mold him into a shape fitting of their respective needs, needs which help them deal with their own traumas. For Kitty, Chris’s return will re-fortify his station as British patriarch, ensuring a continuation of her privileged pre-war class status that pre-dates the death of their son. For Margaret, returning Chris to “normal” preserves and honors her idealization of their youthful romance, the necessary fairy tale to stave off the futility of a working-class woman who knows she cannot supersede class boundaries, especially not in the middle of the war’s rupture. We do not need to condemn or condone West in order to see the important problems *The Return* poses in these regards. In coming to speak for his amnesia, Kitty, Margaret, and eventually Jenny reveal their shared desire to possess Chris as *their* beloved through a presumption that they know the “real” significance of his psychosomatic disability and the proper way to understand and position it. If we pivot our perspective away from only chiding what looks to be its ableist conclusion and ask instead what bigger problematic boxes the tale rends open, we can see how West’s ironic detachment may *separate* her through critique from the three women who care for Chris. Whether West’s novella functions because of its ableist conclusion or not, it more meaningfully positions us in such a way that it foregrounds the myriad problems of able-bodied characters seeking to know disability, however well intended their care or compassion may be. These insights prove more productive and dynamic than a neat, circumscribed prescription of an ableist narrative prosthesis, *even as it exists*. *The Return* offers more than yet another text to be added to the “do not bother” list. Paradoxical though it sounds, its historical failings and the disrupting questions it poses are among its

of normalcy,” Davis reminds, “must constantly be enforced... must always be creating, constructing, deconstructing images of normalcy and the abnormal” (*Enforcing* 44).

most important offerings in revealing to the present what remains inconclusive and obscured from view due to discomfort.

As an able-bodied woman caring for Chris, Kitty fears his disability indicates that she does not fully know her husband, that he is not wholly hers. More tragically than critics often contend with, so too does his memory gap double for her own un-narrated trauma in the wake of young Oliver's sudden death, a gravitational absent-presence she either cannot or will not articulate. In public spaces away from country estates a similar situation arose. An incredible number of bodies were never found, and those that were remained largely hidden from public view, following the 1914 Defense of the Realm Act which banned photographs of them, and the British refusal to repatriate the remains of soldiers.¹⁶⁹ After Margaret pierces the "green pleasantness" of Baldry Court with news of Chris's impairment—"a term which she had long brooded over without arriving at comprehension" (12)—Jenny says her presence at first became "a spreading stain on the fabric of our life" (16). So too do some view the occasion of Chris's sudden return as mimicking a "domestic trauma, a shattering of the domestic space comparable to the shattering of a soldier's mind" (Bonikowski, "Death Brings" 515). Shocked, confused, and hurt that Chris would send a telegram to Margaret about his wounding without supplying her with the same revelation, Kitty feels Margaret has also pierced her security, especially relating to her economic station. As Kitty asks Jenny: "What can [his shell shock] mean...which isn't detestable!" (16). When Jenny fails to respond beyond simply pronouncing it "a mystery" (17), Kitty supplements her answer with an abstracted rejoinder which speaks volumes about how she approaches her husband's sudden

¹⁶⁹ My thanks to Mark Whalan for informing me of this point.

disability: “you’re so slow, you don’t see what it means. Either it means that he’s mad, our Chris, our splendid sane Chris, all broken and queer, not knowing us.... [Or it] shows there are bits of him we don’t know. Things may be awfully wrong. It’s all such a breach of trust. I resent it.... If he could send that telegram,” she resolves, “he isn’t ours any longer” (17). As with that of Jenny and Margaret, Kitty’s language consistently turns toward the possessive when confronted with the urge to explain Chris’s shell shock, not just in the emphatic turn to the first-person plural, but in the way his disability presents to her the body of a lover which she cannot fully access or claim. For a wife providing care who seeks to understand a loved one’s impairment, a disability like shell shock thrusts forward the material fact that “there are bits of [embodiment] we [read: the able-bodied] don’t know”—and that “we” necessarily *can’t*.

Margaret, on the other hand, finds in Chris’s amnesia the rare socially sanctioned excuse at the *début de siècle* to cross class boundaries and to escape her dreary, passionless life in the wake of her failed relationship with Chris nearly a decade prior. His disability becomes the occasion for a second chance beyond Chris’s initial desertion of her when it turns out he had succumbed to the normalizing class demands of heteromascularity. These include his marriage of convenience to Kitty, their rearing a child together, and the economic responsibility to provide for both and for his estate, all of which West puts under intense feminist scrutiny. When it becomes known that Margaret also lost a child in the same manner as Chris, the suggestion further emerges that she and Chris were meant to bear a child together, something his amnesia again offers up, if momentarily, as a possible concluding contingency that the narrative ultimately discards. As she remarks of their two respectively dead children: “‘It’s—it’s as

if,' she stammered, 'they each had half a life...'" (77). Chris's amnesia presents Margaret with the opportunity to shore up the fragmented ruins of their traumatic past with the possibility to make the future whole again. Her romantic visions of a future set anachronistically back before the war come at the expense of romanticizing or disregarding the material conditions of Chris's disability. But so too is it, paradoxically, the condition to conjure a fantasy-world in which the normalizing pressures of class, gender, and ability can be reimagined and perhaps re-written into existence. Beyond the three critical problems it poses for a disabled modernism, *The Return's* most beneficial offering comes perhaps from Margaret and Jenny's initial rejection of the pressures to enforce normalcy, in their almost militant resistance to returning Chris to "normal" at all. The question becomes how to square these initial musings with the "overriding ableism" with which their story then closes.

While these risks of speaking for or presuming to know the absent center of Chris's disability align in many ways with those already explored in McCullers in Chapter II, Jenny moves us into new territory. She brings with her a host of difficult questions regarding empathy and identification between the able-bodied and disabled: here in literature, but by implication beyond it as well. Unlike those who believe they alone know the "real" John Singer, the character whose abstracted deafness comes to signify in metaphysical ways, Jenny believes she can identify with her cousin through empathy, specifically an empathy that outwardly masks her passion and desire to heal her own trauma. Some scholars have argued that West sought to "prevent the appropriation of [a trauma patient's] memories" (Covington 64) by staging her narrative as a fictional case history. According to this view, West "protects Chris Baldry from outsiders,

including medical professionals, her audience, and even—surprisingly—the narrator, who acts as an amateur case historian” (Ibid.). While Sara Covington correctly points out that West denies and even “protects” Chris from outsiders accessing his interiority, or more precisely his disabled embodiment, her claim missteps in overlooking the important fact that this does not stop the women who care for him from narrating or speaking for this blank space nonetheless, nor effectively encouraging readers to follow suit. Perhaps the biggest shift West offers compared to McCullers comes from the appropriative risks not of an able-bodied author attempting to (re)present disability through literary form, but in a first-person narrator presuming to identify with and access that same “transcended” space of embodied difference. Not only does McCullers write in the third person, but more importantly, her refusal to write from the intimate perspective of Singer (through free indirect discourse) stands as an ethical obligation suggestive of a literary impasse. West achieves a similar critique in refusing to narrate the interiority of Chris’s psychosomatic disability, but she also allows it to arise through the ironic distance between herself and her highly unreliable narrator, Jenny, who *does* attempt this troubling undertaking.

Though scholars have yet to navigate between the Scylla and Charybdis of Jenny’s transcorporeal identification with amnesia and traumatic shock, a few have turned their attention to a similar pattern directed at her identification with Margaret. Mara Scanlon has persuasively argued that Jenny may best be understood not just as an unreliable narrator, but as “a reader herself, the consciousness that receives and interprets the novel’s romantic plot” (68). She thus places Jenny “in a role shown to be simultaneously powerful and vulnerable—that is, not only as narrator for the implied

reader, but also as internal reader and interpreter of the ‘texts’ that surround her: the landscape, the love story, the plot of Chris’s illness and return. Her encounter in those texts,” she avers, “necessarily changes her in profound ways” (69). Drawing on Susan David Bernstein’s concept of “promiscuous identification,” Scanlon helpfully traces how Jenny identifies with and even pictures herself as Margaret. This allows her to set herself vicariously into the role of Chris’s potential paramour (a roleplaying exercise, it is worth mentioning, that returns Jenny to a past not long after she felt her first unrequited pangs of love). According to Bernstein, promiscuous identification entails a ““conundrum in which imagining oneself as the other blurs into assimilating the other into one’s own place,”” an ““unreflective assimilation of the read subject into an untroubled unitary reading self”” (qtd. in Scanlon 73). As should perhaps be obvious, such an act of readerly identification not only “obscures the difference between actual historical trauma and its textual record,” but is also plainly “appropriative and imperialistic” (73).

In letting her desire override any philosophical musings, Jenny’s empathetic attempt to imagine herself as both Chris’s partner tasked with caring for him and at times as himself cleverly reflects the same position in which West places her readers who witness the narrative through Jenny’s perspective. As Jenny imagines herself as others, so do we. Without needing to overstress its modernistic meta-fictive components, *The Return* positions readers to view through Jenny’s eyes as Jenny then performatively attempts to imagine the perspectives of Kitty and Margaret. Like a Matryoshka doll, West nests the reader’s perspective within at least two other pairs of eyes, leaving us three times removed and caught within a phenomenological trap from which it becomes difficult to be freed. While empathetic identification remains a consistent, if traditional,

approach to the act of reading, especially fiction, West's novella questions its limits and, at times, ethicality. Given the centrality of Jenny's suppressed desire to the narrative's claustrophobic vantage, Scanlon's suggestions of Jenny-as-Margaret come with little critical resistance. Imagining disability—here traumatic shock—as if it were one's own from an able-bodied perspective, however, quickly complicates matters.

Despite its palpable insights, the promiscuous identification Scanlon presents fixes its gendered approach in such a way that it curtails its consideration of Jenny in relation to other women. Scanlon helps us think through Jenny's empathetic identification with the two competing caregivers against whom she meekly vies for Chris's love. Yet this concept can be expanded further if we reconceive it to include disability and even gender crossing. Beyond just Kitty and Margaret, Jenny in fact tries to imagine a similar vicarious identification with Chris to seek an understanding of his traumatic shock *as though it were her own*. Almost needless to say, this exercise of empathetic imagination presents formidable challenges to the literary study of disability, especially considering how overwhelmingly such disabilities have been written from the perspective of the able-bodied, often as onlooking voyeurs or philosophical *flâneurs*. And though World War One fiction penned by women stands as a general exception to the rule, rarely does Anglophone literature linger with the perspectives and experiences of caregivers, let alone those of people with disabilities.

Whether from the perspective of an able-bodied character, or potentially from that of an able-bodied reader, Jenny's provocative presumption, born through a well-intended empathetic identification with the beloved, hails a critical engagement from us that has yet to be fully undertaken. With Bernstein's promiscuous identification in mind we can

modify her concept to critically examine Jenny's empathetic desire to know, feel, and render intelligible Chris's shell shock. In deploying the provisional term *indiscriminate identification*, we can shift away from the mental fantasies of sexual and romantic desire suggested by promiscuity toward a different kind of "reader," as Scanlon defines Jenny: one seeking to cross, understand, and access bodily difference, here in terms of both gender and, most importantly, the so-called ability/disability divide.

Examining Jenny's indiscriminate identification with her cousin requires temporarily setting aside the conclusion's overriding ableism, though its consequences must eventually be brought to bear alongside the related problems *The Return* poses. The indiscriminate identification Jenny perpetuates may ultimately indicate a level of ableism an order of magnitude *greater* than that which has already been identified. But so too might it present an important theoretical opening in approaching disability from the bound and limited perspective of the able-bodied. Before her baffling turn to the logic of sanism in the closing moments, Jenny resists that Chris needs to be cured. She imagines herself instead as "safeguarding the dignity of the beloved" (86), a dignity that the women who care for Chris consistently redefine, often in opposition to one another. Some have concluded that Jenny comes to see happiness as "an obstacle to higher ideals" like "'truth' and 'dignity'" (Stetz, "Drinking" 73). Even more than this, by attempting to dwell with his amnesia, imagining it critically in its social and material context, Jenny begins theorizing about flipping the ability binary so as to normalize shock and even psychological disability, to position it as "saner than sanity" (65), as she puts it.

Though her critique is short lived, Jenny comes to question the standards on which her "normalcy" have been constructed only when she puts them in distinction to

Chris's shell shock as she can apprehend it. Her indiscriminate identification, her empathetic attempt to imagine Chris's embodiment, spawns a surprising reconsideration for her of the line demarcating sanity from its outer limit, questioning if it even exists. Beyond flipping the binary, Jenny nearly levels human embodiment and "ability" to an immense relative spectrum, rather than an either/or category. As though addressing the reader directly, Jenny says to herself:

You may think we were attaching an altogether fictitious importance to what was merely the delusions of a madman. But...it became plain that if madness means liability to wild error about the world, Chris was not mad. It was our peculiar shame that he had rejected us when he had attained to something saner than sanity. His very loss of memory was a triumph over the limitations of language which prevent the mass of men from making explicit statements about their spiritual relationships. (65)

Though fraught with the ableist pitfalls which surround her meditation, Jenny performs a tight-rope walk in which imagining Chris's psychosomatic disability erases her comforting myths that define sanity against either its own terms of madness or the abject terrors of absolute alterity. While she flirts with fetishizing Chris's traumatized mind, her thinking through it also initiates for her a far more radical conception of embodiment with which she then must contend. This conception redirects her attention not just to Chris, but to her own ontology. In yet another textual inversion, Jenny's musings about Chris's subject position suggest to her that madness has nothing to do with Chris's disability and everything to do with the way ability constructs itself in a false oppositional way. She paradoxically denaturalizes sanity and ability while "naturalizing" madness as a relative or perhaps even empty placeholder that either everyone or else no one can claim.

Jenny comes to view Chris's rejection of normalizing social impulses as an "act of genius," calculating that "his determined dwelling in the time of his first love" reveals "him [to be] so much saner than the rest of us, who take life as it comes, loaded with the inessential and the irritating" (65). Chris has not been made unreachable by his disability. For Jenny, it allows her (she believes) to once again access the "real" him, returning him (and her) to his "essential" self, which she casts in the language of his soul in communion with his body. "[I]n Kitty," she dictates, "he had turned from the type of woman that makes the body conqueror of the soul and in me from the type that mediates between the soul and the body... [Instead, he] had given himself to a woman whose bleak habit it was to champion the soul against the body" (66). Chris's disability sends Jenny into a fruitful crisis over "natural" embodiment. Yet her identification with the non-normative unfortunately begins to abstract him to such an extent that the body all but disappears in the "englobed" "crystal sphere" (70) into which she places Chris and Margaret (and herself), a space which only the spell of amnesia apparently protects.

Jenny's empathetic identification with a saner-than-sane "madness" allows her to question the social foundations which in short interpellate subjects into "normalcy." Though unspoken, this of course includes Jenny's taboo attraction to her cousin. The women who care for Chris wittingly or unwittingly come to enforce normalcy in their respective desires to return Chris to his pre-war self. They share in this regard much with the struggles of war front nurses who attempt to "surmount[] an ontological impossibility: to participate in another's physical pain... [T]he readers' empathy," as Das details, "is largely contingent on the writer's effortless empathy, even identification, with the tragedy

of the protagonist... [E]mpathy becomes a yoke of conscience: we are made to feel the burden of the nurse-narrator” (189).

But what do we do when the empathetic identification of able-bodied nurses and women tasked with caring for a loved one’s disability compels one toward an ableist impulse to “cure”? Ironically, it is the psychoanalyst Dr. Anderson who vocalizes most ardently the vacuity of the three women’s enterprise. “[M]adness,” he tells them, recalling the soldier’s “act of genius,” “is an indictment not of the people one lives with, only of the high gods” (80). When Margaret suggests doctors “can’t cure him,” that “[a]ll you can do is make him ordinary,” Anderson admits this plainly, and then indirectly questions their motivations for doing so in the first place: “that’s all I do.... It’s my profession to bring people back from various outlying districts of the mind to the normal. There seems to be *a general feeling* it’s the place *where they ought to be*. Sometimes I don’t see the urgency myself” (81, emphasis added). Anderson has largely assumed the same skeptical position at which Jenny had arrived earlier about the need to bring Chris back from his “outlying district[] of the mind.” Yet the fruits of her initial empathetic identification give way instead to the overwhelming ableism which comes to override her insights.

Curiously, though Linett admits that Jenny “shows that to be human is to be imperfect and that disability is often socially constructed—in this case by class,” she suggests that Jenny does so “*inadvertently*” (n.p., emphasis added), as though by chance or even mistake on perhaps West’s part. To the contrary, such “inadvertent” slippages not only consistently shine through the cracks, further evidencing the need to resist conflating West with her narrator so neatly. They also reveal how such inadvertent slippages disrupt

what too many take to be an overly tidy, pat conclusion unequivocally endorsing involuntary cures and the erasure of disability. In such a move we again mistakenly identify West with or even as Jenny. Most importantly in this regard, any interpretation of the conclusion remains woefully incomplete that fails to acknowledge or contend with its basic contradiction: that “curing” Chris in the final seconds means returning him to everything West has patiently critiqued. The cure is, in short, “at best nostalgic and at worst death-dealing” (Kavka 162).

Turning suddenly from the romantic and realistic to the gothic and then apocalyptic, West’s narrative “cure” sends Chris not back to his pre-war life but to his *death*—literally, at the Front, but symbolically in a thematic host of attendant ways. Socially, his cure will return him to his loveless union to Kitty and their failed, bourgeois marriage of convenience; economically, to the exploitative capitalism of his industrialist employment; politically, to the sacrificial war he must fight to save the empire from its own excesses; medically, to a categorizable “illness” which dehumanizes him; personally, to his misguided past rejection of Margaret; and even sexually, to a heteronormative masculinity of which his youthful, “essential” sensitivity flies in the face. The ironies are too loud to be earnest. Though surprisingly few reckon with the conclusion’s brutal irony, Peppis has keenly suggested: “by the novel’s deeply ironic final words—“He’s cured!” (90)—[Margaret’s] motto [“The truth’s the truth”] has been exposed, undeniably, irredeemably, as a destructive and unjust deception, implying instead the corrosive modernist credo, ‘the truth’s a lie’” (*Sciences* 225). If the ending seems all too convenient, it reveals our bafflement over its scorching irony. The

convenience is in maintaining that at the narrative's eleventh-hour West would circle back on herself to endorse all that she sought to call into question.

Ableism undeniably overrides the conclusion. What remains unclear is by what reasoning we can unequivocally deduce that West supports, rather than critiques, the same normalizing forces those who care for Chris ultimately reinforce. West is undeniably far from a paragon of ethical representation. The goal, however, is not to exonerate West but to dwell at an uncomfortably close distance with that which challenges expectations, upsets theoretical models, provokes uneasy questions, refuses unburdened answers, and hurls insults at the lies it seeks to unmask. Our gaze should not turn to that which rationalizes or apologizes. It should instead re-view how *The Return* can simultaneously reveal the possibilities for change and allyship within an able-bodied desire to understand disability, *and* the immense risks latent within that same possibility to further enforce normalcy. How can Jenny's indiscriminate identification with disability allow her both to recognize the arbitrary artificiality of social embodiment and then pivot back to endorsing an involuntary cure against that which she first saw as "genius"?

Such questions remind us of irony's simplest instantiation, its most basic function: to offer or present the opposite of the expected. Perhaps West's biggest contribution to disabling modernism is more than an indictment of the impulses of normate society, and other than a cold endorsement of sanism brought on by the madness of war and to be rejected outright.¹⁷⁰ Perhaps it rests in her exploration of the limits of the body, real and imagined, physical and psychological, or (we might say advisedly) natural and

¹⁷⁰ I mean normate in the same influential sense first established by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, who defines it as "the mutually constitutive figure" of disability, or "the constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them" (8).

constructed. Whether in terms of love's embrace, or in drawing a line between sanity and its supposed outside, she insistently draws attention to the stakes of determining where one person ends and another begins, and where ability might dissolve in its confrontation with disability. Taken from the lofty philosophical mountain and brought to bear on the materiality of our daily lives, this means West puts in motion the precarious risks of imagining across and even "beyond" difference, whether as gender, class, ability, or their mutuality. Her offering bares fruit, but not without reminding of its nefarious possibilities. "By the novel's end," Peppis aptly offers, "it is not just the sanity/insanity divide that has been blurred and denaturalized but the *status quo ante* itself, exposing all the class disparities, sexual dysfunctions, gender injustices, and complicities with the misery and violence of war that the *status quo* denies. On this reading," he concludes, "the novel becomes most radical, most modernist in its social critique and form precisely when it appears most normalizing and conventional" (*Sciences* 225). Empathy, forever it seems underpinning the assumed meeting place of similitude despite difference much like metaphor, can work in competing directions: it can contain answers even while it compounds the gravity of our questions.

In considering the ongoing risks of able-bodied attempts to understand, approach, or "view" disability, Jenny provides a telling example of a misguided ethics of some able-bodied caregivers, as well as the risks of an indiscriminate identification taken too far. Though Jenny's desire to know and possess Chris as her own, to close the unspoken and unspeakable gap between them, precipitates her early insights that discredit a normate society passing as natural, the same empathetic capacity misleads her back to the suffering of Kitty, and with it, to Chris's "cure." "[W]hy did Kitty," she asks, "who was

the falsest thing on earth, who was in tune with every kind of falsity, by merely suffering somehow remind us of reality? Why did *her tears* reveal to me what I had learned long ago, but had forgotten in my frenzied love [?]" (87, emphasis added). With her empathetic identification with Kitty and her sudden insistence on involuntary cure, Jenny utters *The Return's* most damnable speech:

I knew quite well that when one is adult one must raise to one's lips the wine of truth...and celebrate communion with reality, or else walk for ever queer and small like a dwarf.... We had been utterly negligent of his future... For if we left him in his magic circle there would come a time when his delusion turned to a senile idiocy; when his joy at the sight of Margaret disgusted the flesh, because his smiling mouth was slack with age... He who was as a flag flying from our tower would become a queer-shaped patch of eccentricity on the countryside... He would not be quite a man. (87-88)

The imagined "future burden" of Chris "justifies" his treatment, a treatment which reveals the unjust logics of his caregivers to "return" him to "normal." This burden takes on its ableist language when attached to a sense of heteromascularity. Like the narrative as a whole, Jenny presents Chris's amnesia as functionally placing him out of time, displacing him into what Kafer has suggested as an unsustainable "asynchrony between mind and body [which] would only grow wider" (*Feminist* 48). Chris's caregivers present the need for treatment, for an involuntary cure, as necessary not just to his "quality of life," but to regain his able-bodied heteromascularity. Such a treatment intervenes based on a logic which will "protect [Chris] from future harms," imagined here as his own disablement (Ibid. 63). The need to avoid his becoming a "queer-shaped patch of eccentricity" is by necessity future-oriented, "preventing [him] from falling further out of time" by breaking "expected patterns of [male] development and aging" (Ibid. 66). After all, "[h]e would not," Jenny insists, "be quite a man." Of equal significance is that the

child Chris and Kitty traumatically lost was a boy, the heir apparent not just to Baldry Court, but symbolically to the post-war continuation of British hegemony. As Alison Kafer has written of a similar context, we ought to question, however, as Jenny first does, how such a treatment forecloses some of the ways Chris and others “experience, understand, or interact with [his] own body” (65).¹⁷¹ Jenny’s earlier suggestion that Chris may in fact be “saner than sanity” asks us, if only for a moment, how we “might imagine futures that hold space and possibility for those who communicate in ways we do not yet recognize as communication, let alone understand” (Ibid. 67). In this sense the possibilities of a reimagined future given a voice “in ways we do not yet recognize” extends Jenny’s suggestion that Chris’s disability “was a triumph over the limitations of language.” His involuntary cure, however, forecloses such futures. The impulse to “return” Chris to “normal,” to protect him from a future marked by a queered disabled masculinity, the markers of which flood the language of his “cure,” indeed overrides the conclusion.

Troubling as this ending may be, as it sharpens the edge of its rhetorical blade with homophobia and a physiological and psychological ableism, it returns us to the contested role, status, opportunities, and perils operative in any able-bodied approach to disability. In tracking her desire to know, care for, and empathize with her beloved, Jenny evinces both the possibilities and the risks opened up through indiscriminate identification. The desire to transgress or transcend bodily difference, so typical of

¹⁷¹ Important to note contextually is that Kafer is discussing the intensely debated case of “Ashley X,” a severely impaired, nonspeaking patient whose caregiving parents decided, at the suggestion of Ashley’s doctor, that they would medically cease her body’s development forever to make caring for her easier in the future. Kafer’s ideas share much with West in how gender and being “out of time” influences caregivers who act on behalf of nonspeaking people with severe disabilities. So too do her suggestions about the need to reimagine what futures such treatments foreclose lend themselves to our analysis of West.

normative images of romantic union, implicates in turn each of the women surrounding Chris as they come to place his “damaged” embodiment under erasure, a sacrifice made all the more horrifying, ironically, because of their professed love for the beloved’s wellbeing. Those tasked with the ethics of care do not cure Chris, they curse him; do not save him, but damn him. And when the Cinderella tale turns gothic and finally apocalyptic in the end, they offer Chris’s disabled body up as yet another sacrifice in the name of enforcing normalcy.

Shell Shock, Incommensurable Alterity, and the Crisis of Representation

In our last section, West exposed the violent, ableist heteronormative logics lingering within the women who care for Chris. We questioned the consequences of such ethics of care, primarily through isolating the stakes of able-bodied caregivers’ indiscriminate identification with disability. Read against the grain, *The Return* ultimately offered us a critique of how Chris’s three caregivers internalized their erasure of his disability, ironically, as an act of “love” set within a misguided, gendered “ethic” of care. As this section details, a similar disquieting historical response operated in British medical, governmental, and even cultural responses to shell shock. At the war front, the medical community fiercely resisted legitimating the reality of shell shock as a psychosomatic condition. Sharing similar rhetorics as Kitty, Margaret, and Jenny, the gendering of shell shock, especially as a “male version” of hysteria, brought it into related dialogues we first began in Chapters III and IV over the crisis of masculinity. Yet, even more so than the maimed veterans in need of a prosthesis that would help return their sense of wholeness and livelihood to them, shell-shocked soldiers were

overwhelmingly denied pensions and medical care, and were often accused of being malingerers and deserters.

Governmental institutions like the Ministry of Pensions, as well as the medical profession, consistently questioned and even disavowed the reality of shell shock, often emasculating or accusing traumatized servicemen of being malingerers and deserters. This treatment continued even in the wake of the war. By resisting and even denying the emergent, misunderstood medical term, such institutions helped ensure the return of shell-shocked soldiers like Chris to their “duties” in the trenches and to the empire. The physicalist approach to shell shock, as we will see, likewise sought to locate the origins of shell shock not in the horrors of war, but in some past experience of the patient, effectively displacing responsibility onto individuals by blaming prior traumas like the death of Chris’s son as the “true” cause of their impairment. The severity of shell shock, then as now, continues to be under-acknowledged. Many still doubt or question trauma’s overlapping somatic and psychological conditions, as well as its status as a “legitimate” disability. Its uncertain status holds true culturally, and to some extent within disability studies and even the medical profession.

This section—and indeed this study—thus concludes with a theoretical meditation on the dividing lines that tend to displace traumas like shell shock into the periphery of disability studies in unsustainable, unhelpful ways. It asks instead that we reconceive some disciplinary assumptions about the politics of literary representation. Like our explorations in each prior chapter, this final meditation reflects on our ongoing need for more capacious understandings of embodiment, both in modernist and disability studies, one that captures it as an inseverable conjunction that binds materiality to its discursive

excess. Much in the spirit of Kafer's reimagined futures, this final meditation concludes by significantly opening up, rather than closing down, the unfinished, if at times uncomfortable, project of disabling modernism.

But first, we will return to the theater of war out of which the competing definitions of shell shock historically emerged. Whether viewed as a core term within literary modernism or beyond it in British culture broadly conceived, "shell shock" was diffracted in definition and conception from the first. As early as 1913 Sinclair, like her friend West, became interested in psychoanalysis, helping economically support the establishment of London's Medico-Psychological Clinic and donating to its "Fund for Nerve-Shocked Soldiers" the following year (Bowler). From the beginning shell shock was overburdened and overdetermined, meaning coterminously "a contagious disease, a genetic disorder, an inevitable by-product of industrial warfare, a collection of physical ailments, a purely psychological matter, an index of moral weakness, a lack of courage, a wound that would heal, a scar that would remain, an excuse, an accusation, a mystery" (Dodman 6). In 1915 the term entered the medical lexicon via physician, anthropologist, and psychologist C. S. Myers, whom the Director-General of Medical Services of the British Armies in the Field called upon and stationed in Boulogne. It took two years before Myers's coinage caught full traction in public discourse and popular media (Covington 61). Yet before the war had even concluded "the shell-shocked soldier had become a virtual cliché in the English press" (Jones 129). Though Myers admitted that he had overheard "shell shock" first used by soldiers talking amongst themselves after a battle, he deployed the term to describe the unusual symptoms with which he had recently witnessed two privates and one corporal struggle.

The irregular symptoms to which Myers brought the medical community's attention defied discrete categorization between the mind and the body, suggesting not just a psychological but physical breakdown. For a so-called invisible disability, it continually expressed itself in physical, and thus visible, ways. While shell shock is psychosomatic, a balance captured linguistically in this compound expression between mind and body, its physical manifestations specifically say much about British social interactions with post-war history. It is unruly in its triumph over categorization. It resisted (and continues to resist) staying "within" the body. In other words, shell shock "convert[s]," as Winter helps us perceive, "emotional states to physical ones." It does so through what he calls "embodied memory" (*Remembering* 55):

It is written on the men who fought, or inscribed in them in a way which is not subject to their direct or premeditated control. In all instances, images and memories seem to live both imbedded in these people and curiously detached from them; memory itself, or images of overwhelming events, appear to be free-floating powerful agents which somehow control the jaw of a man, or his leg, or all his movements.

In effect, these men's bodies perform something about their war experience.... [S]hell shock is a theater of memory out of control. *The bodies of these soldiers hold traces of memory*; they are speaking to us, though not in a way which we usually encounter. *Here stories become flesh...* (*Remembering* 56-57, emphasis added)

One can witness how shell shock, much like distinctly physical disabilities, became a nexus of cultural, political, and historical anxiety that revealed much about normative constructions of wholeness, health, integrity, and normalcy. We have seen as much with deafness, impotence, prostheses, and blindness in our prior three chapters. Shell shock manifested differently for different people, causing myriad medical, social, and military responses to it. These ranged from disbelief and denial of the new term's veracity to scientific bafflement over "the hydra-headed malady" (Dodman 5). As Charlotte Jones

outlines, “there was no coherent or unanimous understanding of what the condition actually was; no two experiences were the same and symptoms could range from fatigue, depression, [and] paralysis, [to] recurring nightmares, convulsions or trembling of the limbs, amnesia, dissociation and many more, in any combination” (129). Somatic symptoms also included stupors, tremors, and nervous collapse, paralysis and even rare accounts of temporary blindness, deafness, and mutism. With the war’s shell shock the “inside” of embodiment had apparently flipped outward, redirecting the psychological into the physical.

Myers’s article, published in the highly regarded British medical journal *The Lancet* in 1915, set the debate amongst physicians aflame. As the three soldiers Myers examined bore no physical wounds, many assumed some undiagnosed or unrecognized psychological disorder had triggered their inexplicable condition, much like Jenny and Kitty fear in *The Return*. Myers suggested hysteria, at the time signifying “a physical expression of an emotional state”; or, in the case of shell shock, “physical disabilities the origins of which were primarily emotional in character” (Winter, “Shell Shock” 316). Like West’s Dr. Anderson, Myers hypothesized that these symptoms “were the unconscious expressions of a repressed traumatic neurosis,” and believed that hypnosis held the best chance of improving and perhaps curing patients (Jones and Wessely 19). British neurologist and psychiatrist W. H. R. Rivers equally emphasized the role repression perhaps played in those experiencing shell shock (Bonikowski, *Shell Shock* 2). Transatlantically, the director of the United States Army Neuropsychiatric Training School, E. E. Southard, similarly argued that shell shock “reflects the inability of a person’s mind to integrate into his life story the sense experience of combat. This

disorientation, which may have physical causes too, converts shell shock from an event which happened into a condition” (qtd. in Winter, *Remembering* 68). Psychologists, according to Southard, needed to reverse this process so as to “turn a condition into an event which could then be aligned with other events in a person’s life” (Ibid.). Both Myers and Southard considered the disabilities soldiers exemplified to be fundamentally psychogenetic in character and in need of a psychologist’s deft hand, much like Dr. Anderson’s treatment of Chris.

Neurologists, on the other hand, many of whom the British army turned to for scientific justification to deny pensions to discharged soldiers experiencing shell shock, maintained a much more skeptical position.¹⁷² They wanted demonstrable physical evidence of war-induced injuries consistently locatable on the body. This kept shell shock from the existent “moral scale” upon which servicemen’s disability claims were scrutinized, an impairment scale which in many symbolic ways calculated the extent to which one’s “manliness” had been damaged or stolen. As we learned in Chapter III, “Each part of men’s bodies was allocated [by the Ministry of Pensions] a moral weighting based on the degree to which it incapacitated a man from ‘being’ a man, rather than ‘acting’ like one. Thus, men who had lost two or more limbs or suffered severe facial disfigurement were said to have 100 per cent disability (with a pension 27*s.* 6*d.*) while men who had lost two fingers of either hand were said to have a 20 per cent disability (worth 5*s.* 6*d.*)” (Bourke 65). Unlike maimed limbs, however, shell shock did not entitle servicemen to medical or financial support. Its demonstrable status as a

¹⁷² As Miley and Read have shown, pensions were much more likely to be awarded to those with “physical” disabilities, despite the Ministry of Pensions by 1917-1918 “attempt[ing] to defray the escalating cost of war pensions by shifting the burden back onto the public” (15).

legitimate disability remained medically invalidated. Like many within the upper military ranks, neurologists tended to believe men claiming to have been disabled without a physical trace of a wound to be malingerers, some going so far as to dismiss psychogenetic disability as a whole as fraudulent. Soldiers supplying shell shock as grounds for dismissal from duty could be tried as deserters who “face[d] court-martial and execution. Clarifying the meaning of shell shock,” reminds Winter, “therefore was a life and death matter, in more than one sense” (“Shell Shock” 321).

Opposed to Myers’s psychological approach to neuropathy, physicians like F. W. Mott espoused instead a “physicalist” methodology to shell shock. Something of a misnomer, physicalists invested themselves not so much in the somatic responses of shell-shocked soldiers as in locating a pre-war origin for their symptoms. Such a comprehensive culprit would explain away (or, more accurately, legally dismiss) the validity of servicemen’s disability claims, something highly resonant with current US healthcare debates over preexisting conditions. Physicalists thus pursued a pre-war cause that could shift the origin of a soldier’s inexplicable psychosomatic symptoms to the “result of a concussion or a pre-existing ‘neurotic predisposition’ or ‘disease or aberrant behaviour,’” including epilepsy and syphilis (qtd. in Winter, “Shell Shock” 320). Hence, Dr. Anderson suggests in *The Return* that Chris’s shell shock can be cured not by processing his experiences in the trenches but being made to confront and come to terms with the traumatic death of his young son *before* the war.

The public perception of shell shock “hinged on an understanding of [it] as a physical ailment,” and many doctors took pains to demonstrate that it affected the soldier’s physical condition even at the level of his nerves being literally “bruised or

frayed” (Dodman 8-9). As an irony almost too great to believe, the celebrated Austrian physician Julius Wagner-Jauregg (whom the Nobel committee would award its 1927 prize in medicine) convinced some that electroconvulsive shock treatment was the best means to treat shell-shocked patients. Many physicalists sought anything, in short, that would disqualify soldiers claiming disability and return them to the front, a fate Chris Baldry unfortunately shares. Such an approach placed the familiar burden of impairment onto individuals, rather than Britain’s industrial military complex. It was citizens who supposedly needed to overcome their impairment through willpower, if medical technologies could not help them.

The dissensus within the medical community over defining shell shock stretched outward and replicated itself in both the military and public sphere. The cultural aftershocks of its capaciousness were considerable. When the debate began to get out of hand, Myers even tried to jettison the term entirely, arguing “shell shock” to be “singularly ill-chosen” and “singularly harmful” (qtd. in Cuddy-Keane, et al. 217). Myers (correctly) determined that his flippant term failed because it suggested that only those who had endured an overwhelming shelling offensive had a valid claim to war’s psychological trauma. West of course diagnoses a home front and even entire culture experiencing the traumas of shell shock. If it were true that only those narrowly escaping death at the hands of modern weaponry were affected, how could one make sense of the large cohort of soldiers displaying such physical and psychological symptoms without an identifiable encounter with near-death shelling? Though unfortunately no statistics exist from the time, some historians estimate that by 1917 perhaps twenty to twenty-five percent of those within the British forces “were unfit because of psychological stress of

one kind or another” (Winter, *Remembering* 53). American psychiatrist John T. MacCurdy, who traveled to England when the US entered the war and soon after published his successful *War Neuroses* (1918), concurred with Myers’s efforts to shift the term and tried to pluralize and broaden its etiology. For those who had endured a major attack Myers offered military leaders “shell concussion,” but it was too late: the term had germinated and rapidly taken on a dynamic, often contradictory, life of its own.

Distressed over the military’s inability to determine accurately and precisely the strange malady which soldiers reported experiencing *en masse*, the Director-General of Medical Services decided to differentiate between what became labelled “shell shock W” and “shell shock S,” meaning wound class and sick class, respectively. Myers objected to the distinction, however, on grounds that it “discriminated against the soldier exhausted by prolonged exposure to battle,” and requested that “nervous shock” be added as a recognized diagnosis (Jones and Wessely 20). The military denied this request as well, and in 1916 added “shell shock (sick)” to indicate symptoms deemed unrelated to the cannonading of armed service. Those granted the “W” stripe, which could more positively be ascribed to an identifiable battle encounter, stood a greater, though far from certain, chance of having their pension appeals granted. The same cannot be said of the “sick class” whose requests overwhelmingly failed.

By 1922, *The Report of the War Office Committee Enquiry into “Shell-Shock”* further distanced the military from the disability. It proclaimed that the term “has been a gross and costly misnomer,” essentially dismissing shell shock because its symptoms could not be disentangled or distinguished from non-war-related “forms of neuroses” (Cuddy-Keane, et al. 218). As with those in need of a prosthesis (see Chapter III), the

Ministry of Pensions regularly put the nation's purse before the needs and wellbeing of its shell-shocked veterans, denying appeals and placing the economic responsibility on its disenfranchised ex-servicemen, as well as their often-women caregivers. The stigmas of psychological impairment, fiercer in many ways than those which adhered (and continue to adhere) to physical disabilities, only compounded the socioeconomic plight of struggling veterans. "Those whose disabilities are invisible," writes philosopher N. Ann Davis, "may also have to convince other people that they really are *disabled*, not seeking some special—unfair—advantage: thus, what they must do is meet a burden of proof" (154, emphasis in original). Gender and the ongoing crisis of masculinity, too, worked against returned veterans whose shell shock could wear down one's emotional resolve in unpredictable and trenchant ways.¹⁷³

If medically shell shock transgressed the body's interior and exterior boundaries as a psychosomatic enigma, culturally the term proved remarkably adept at trespassing on the border between materiality and metaphor. While its linguistic Continental counterparts in France, the Weimar Republic, and Italy had their own loose equivalents of the term, none neared the metaphorical or metonymical valence of its English articulation.¹⁷⁴ It swiftly became a far-reaching signifier for both individual experiences of modern warfare and "the terrible newness of the war as a whole," "escaping," as Winter has it, "from medical discourse to become a metaphor for the damage the war inflicted *tout court*" ("Shell Shock" 317; 311). Aware of its far-reaching significance,

¹⁷³ For more on the gender components of post-war psychological instability, see Showalter, who remains among the most influential in exposing the post-war cultural link between psychological disorders or breakdowns and effeminacy.

¹⁷⁴ These were *choc traumatique*, *Kriegsneurose*, and *psicosi traumatica*, respectively.

West makes plain not only that Chris Baldry returns home “shell-shock[ed]” from a “shell burst” (12), but that Jenny must “prepare Kitty” for her own “terrible shock” as well (22).

In her own life, too, West expressed witnessing a post-war type of shell shock in her son, Anthony, whom ultimately West writes spent “six months in a sanatorium” (West, *Selected* 212). Carrying guilt over how her tumultuous relationship with Wells had impacted Anthony, West admits: “I had no money, no friends, and was in wretched health. I had to send Anthony to school in order to get on with my work.... [A]t school he heard two teachers saying that I had obviously sent him there because I did not love him. My life,” she continues, “was full of horrors, and he felt, quite wrongly, that I could not be bothered with him.... For years I did not dare to discipline him, because H. G. was always at hand to say I was wrong. And it is the worse story, because H. G. and I really loved one another, and in a sense still do. But it was not good training for Anthony, and you must reckon him as shell-shocked” (212-13). In such letters one can observe how the term expanded beyond the battlefield into the post-war cultural realm as well, exploding notions that only veterans experienced what had become known more generally as shell shock, as *The Return* so vividly imagines.

As scholars of the period have long recognized, “shock” entrenched itself as a signal “byword of the modernist period” (Cuddy-Keane, et al. 214). Indeed, much like “stream-of-consciousness,” itself an import from psychology à la William James, shell shock has remained a fixture, if not a symbol, of British modernist culture, something the war’s recent centenary only put into further relief. The term located itself culturally as, among other things, a marketing strategy for fashion, a euphemism for sexual depravity,

and what Walter Benjamin once called modern art's "shock effect" (Ibid. 215) on bystanders, referring to dadaist paintings like *Pragerstrasse* (see Figure 7). One also recalls the "puce monster" cover of *Blast*, as Wyndham Lewis memorably described the first issue (which, incidentally, featured West's first published story, "Indissoluble Matrimony").¹⁷⁵ This cover has nearly been as zealously analyzed by vorticists and modernists as the pages within its "shocking" pink binding (Hickman 32). Yet, as has been said of disability to similar rhetorical effect, if everything is shocked or shocking in post-war Britain, then nothing is.¹⁷⁶ The imagist poet Richard Aldington once said: "We talk of shell-shock, but who wasn't shell-shocked, more or less?" (qtd. in Jones 127). As shock and shell shock became increasingly abused in public parlance as an empty placeholder for violent upheaval or traumas of all kinds, it came over time to signify everything and yet nothing, neutered paradoxically by its extreme ubiquity.¹⁷⁷

Whether because of its transgressive nature, through which the invisible or psychological renders itself as the visible or physical, or its propensity to trespass on the borderline between the material and metaphoric, shell shock poses problems for the current critical apparatus around disability, something *The Return of the Soldier* helps illuminate. Perhaps because of the close attention psychoanalysts paid to shell shock from

¹⁷⁵ West was uneasy about being associated with Lewis and Vorticism. "I have just seen about *Blast*," she wrote to her friend Carrie Townshend, "in the *Times Literary Supplement*. It is described as a Manifesto of the Vorticists. Am I a Vorticist? I am sure it can't be good for Anthony if I am" (*Letters* 23).

¹⁷⁶ Rebecca Sanchez has written that "If all bodies are disabled, then none are" (7). See the introduction to her *Deafening Modernism* for more on the theoretical impact this paradoxical everything-and-nothing effect can have on views of disability.

¹⁷⁷ More recently, the same has been levied at contemporary notions of trauma which can seemingly be applied to everything and everyone, captured in the pejorative term "the trauma industry." Bonikowski, for example, wonders whether "'trauma' [note his quotation marks] may become as banalized through repetition as 'shell shock'" (*Shell Shock* 1).

the beginning as a novel form of “hysteria,” one inextricably bound to modernity itself as Freud noted in his early investigations, it comes as no surprise that its critical shelf life has been extended primarily by way of trauma studies.¹⁷⁸ The latter can be visualized for the unfamiliar as a Venn diagram in which psychoanalysis and poststructuralism overlap with trauma studies in the (absent) center.

Literary scholarship on shell shock tends most often to think through it analogously with and as trauma—rarely as a disability, invisible or otherwise, in its own right. This trauma studies perspective generally takes as a given a few methodological assumptions which most in disability studies view as anathema. The problematic nature of some of trauma studies’ methods for disability scholars holds especially true for those working within either the social model of disability or the well-tilled fields which identify narrative prostheses in literature and culture.¹⁷⁹ For one, as a traumatic event shell shock for many trauma theorists constitutes a moment which would utterly overwhelm sense experience to such an extent that it cannot be fully represented figuratively or linguistically, taking on cabalistic, mystical, or apocalyptic qualities. It is, from such a view, by necessity supersensory, metaphysical, disembodied. Within this influential theorization of trauma, the moment of shell shock as a traumatic event defies comprehension, with our scant apprehension of it taking shape only belatedly and in fits and starts. Attempts to fully narrate or express its origins ostensibly fail, with trauma

¹⁷⁸ See, especially, Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*: “After severe shock of a mechanical nature, railway collision or other accident in which danger to life is involved, a condition may arise which has long been recognised and to which the name ‘traumatic neurosis’ is attached. The terrible war that is just over has been responsible for an immense number of such maladies and at least has put an end to the inclination to explain them on the basis of organic injury to the nervous system due to the operation of mechanical force” (8).

¹⁷⁹ See Chapter II, note 15 for a definition of this social model. See Chapter II, note 22 for a definition of narrative prosthesis.

itself presenting the “collapse of signification” (Berger, “Trauma” 566). This perspective locates its theoretical origins in foundational psychoanalysts like Freud and Lacan (a tradition continued today by Žižek), as well as in poststructuralists like Derrida and de Man. Key trauma studies figures like Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Dori Laub, among others, have been primarily responsible for popularizing this style of trauma studies within the academy, often by linking it to Holocaust studies. However, some trauma theorists like Lawrence Langer, Ruth Leys, and Dominick LaCapra share with scholars of disability a rejection of the assumption that the embodied experience of lived trauma cannot be expressed, and that our understanding of it must necessarily be disembodied.¹⁸⁰

In response to such collapse of signification, the oblique indirection of metaphor for many *does* become key to articulating traumas like shell shock, however incompletely. As trauma theorist and, more recently, disability scholar James Berger helpfully glosses: “As a theory of metaphor whose goal is to express what cannot be recalled or known directly, trauma theory becomes also a vehicle for catachresis, for saying the unsayable, or saying that for which no terms exist. Thus, in sometimes problematic ways, trauma studies merges with discourses of the sublime, the sacred, the abject, and, of course, the apocalyptic” (“Trauma” 567).¹⁸¹ At its core, then, many in

¹⁸⁰ Langer’s concept of “deep memory,” which he places in distinction to “common memory,” served as an important early rejection of trauma’s unspeakability. “Deep memory,” he writes, “tries to recall the Auschwitz self as it was then; common memory had a dual function: it restores the self to its normal pre- and postcamp routines but also offers detached portraits, from the vantage of today, of what it must have been like then” (6).

¹⁸¹ It is the catachrestic character of trauma, and its related attachment to “discourses of the sublime, the sacred, the abject, and...the apocalyptic” which link it most emphatically to the poststructuralism of Paul de Man. For an overview of de Man’s theorization of the sublime and catachrestic quality of language as ideology, see especially *Aesthetic Ideology* (pp. 40-44).

trauma studies view shell-shocked bodies and minds in terms of incommensurable alterity, unable to be fully expressed, and marked by an unconquerable and ceaseless moment of originating pain through which one suffers and endures. One can find, for example, more than a half dozen such trauma readings of shell shock in *The Return* which go back decades, but only a single recent disability perspective.¹⁸²

The problem of pain, the disembodiment of metaphor, fetishized notions of incommensurability, suggestions of representational crisis, the metaphysical eclipse of materiality: each instance major points of contention and some even offense within disability studies.¹⁸³ But each also prove strikingly difficult, some perhaps impossible, to detach from shell shock. The issue is not that shell shock as a disability cannot be articulated. Rather, it is in part that its lived embodiment is excessively marked by pain, and that it resists affirmation and celebration. Most importantly, its literary expression often takes form in nonmaterial, highly metaphorical ways that risk perpetually abstracting the body away, suggesting, though not always confirming, a sense of disabled alterity and a representational crisis, all of which the field repeatedly seeks to critique.

Shell shock thus resists being easily incorporated into disability studies. If such disquieting qualities remain perhaps intractable from shell shock—pain, abstracted (dis)embodiment, an alterity risking literary fetishization, “unrepresentability”—can

¹⁸² Be this as it may, it is worth underscoring the praise and relative influence of Linett’s article, which *Disability Studies Quarterly* awarded its Tyler Riggs Prize for best literary article published in 2013. Trauma readings include Bonikowski, Hanke, Kavka, Pinkerton, and Pulsifer. See also Borille, Pividori, and Rizzuto (not examined in this chapter).

¹⁸³ Pain, as Elaine Scarry’s influential account detailed in decades past, has long proved a puzzle too baffling to be contained or theorized with/in language, “for physical pain—unlike any other state of consciousness—has no referential content. It is not *of* or *for* anything. It is precisely because it takes no object that it, more than any other phenomenon, resists objectification in language” (5, emphasis in original).

disability studies recuperate it without first reexamining itself and the comfortable foundation on which the affirmative and social models rest? “Disability studies,” according to Berger, “seeks to critique and ultimately to reject the use of metaphor. It rejects the notion of disability as alterity, endorsing rather a continuum of abilities, limitations, and prostheses. The disabled, as conventionally understood, manifest differences, but they are in no way radically other” (“Trauma” 571). Part of the unmasking work the field values emerges, after all, from attending closely and skeptically to the *materiality* of difference, as well as a political praxis marked by a pragmatic and spirited pursuit of a more just social world.

Setting itself in opposition to disembodied, totalizing, and overly theoretical notions of being like those of trauma studies (among others), literary disability studies tasks itself with undoing harmful metaphorical constructions—those which attempt to naturalize disability as other, as abnormal, as grotesque. Yet as shell shock demonstrates, we extend to a near-breaking point in claiming that “every metaphor enforces norms of able-bodiedness” (Berger, “Trauma” 571). Disabilities can *only be* articulated through language, and language cannot be divorced from the metaphoric. Such a statement as Berger’s, nearly tautological, would contend that in attempting to articulate shell shock, a necessarily metaphoric undertaking, such a disabled person would enforce their own incommensurable alterity; such a sentiment only strengthens the ableist divide which dehumanizes them in bearing witness to their experience. By extension, any disabled person resorting to the metaphoric to render their embodiment legible would be self-imposing ableism, or at best able-bodied norms. Such theoretical assertions cannot hold water at scale. Despite the important rejoinders offered in the field’s criticism of

discursive violence, and its valuation of material embodiment, Berger's arraignment of metaphor fails in its totalizing impulse, a failure to which shell shock will return us.

Like the uncertain position the able-bodied occupy within the field, shell shock requires our willingness to confront and openly theorize, despite the uncomfortable pressures it places on existing models, how some experiences of impairment *do* resist representation. Some of course depend on metaphor to take shape, to be fixed in space or situated in time. Some struggle to name themselves, or to extricate themselves from the abstract or metaphysical, or to be placed within a "purely" materialist view. Shell shock suggests that the ontological experience of some people with disabilities may in fact be marked by pain, by tragedy, by terror, and even by a sense of alterity, whether incommensurable or one simply fetishized by normative society. "[W]e often cannot cleanly separate," Kafer finely puts it, "*being* disabled from *becoming* disabled" ("Un/Safe" 6). As such, we need more inclusive and capacious ways to think through the trauma, mourning, and loss which some non-congenital disabilities like shell shock so obviously exemplify.

Despite the need to resist much from trauma studies, disability studies benefits from continuing to appropriate and redeploy in its own terms some of the incongruities of traumatic shell shock and other invisible disabilities which trouble our theoretical grounding. It is no accident that Price and Kafer's recent turn toward the "possibilities of pain" and the need for renewed understandings of embodiment (such as that offered by the concept of the bodymind) have been lifted and reconceived from trauma studies.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸⁴ "*Bodymind*," Price notes, "is a term I picked up several years ago while reading in trauma studies (see Rothschild 2000). According to this approach, because mental and physical processes not only affect each other but also give rise to each other—that is, because they tend to act as one, even though they are conventionally understood as two—it makes more sense to refer to them together, in a single term" (269).

Like the position of the able-bodied within the field, shell shock presents both a critical problem, but also many opportunities. It asks us to rethink the trauma, loss, pain, and resistance to representation it often exemplifies, core terms with which the affirmative and social models of disability continue to struggle and which, for many, cause scholastic discomfort.

Shell shock's debatable claim as unrepresentable *does* risk fetishizing disability as abject terror, as incommensurable alterity, as a literary grotesque, and as a limit to materiality, representation, and empathetic imagination. When the able-bodied like Jenny, Kitty, and Margaret presume to know, speak for, or access disability, often through a misguided ethic of care borne through indiscriminate identification, they risk instigating a violent erasure of disabled bodies into normative constructions of being. So too does it remain debatable whether West ultimately indulges or ironizes this same suggestion in the end. In attempting to cross bodily divides and identify sameness in difference—especially when undertaken in the name of “selfless” love and care—disabled bodies may be unacceptably sacrificed or destroyed, both literally and symbolically, to enforce normalcy.

Yet such tense, uncomfortable encounters also harbor within them the possibility that the able-bodied might reconceive or denaturalize their own constructed embodiment. They may finally be made to see the limits and falsity of naturalized ontologies predicated on power differentiations which mark who may lay claim to being normal or “fully” human. Berger in this sense captures perfectly one of this study's main goals, particularly its emphasis on scenes of literary discomfort as potentially transformative for the able-bodied in particular because of “unsettling” encounters: “The confrontational

rhetoric sometimes used in disability studies,” he writes, “intends not to establish some unbreachable gap between the able and the disabled, but rather to force those who consider themselves ‘able’ to confront their own continuing relation with disability and no longer define themselves in distinction from it” (“Trauma” 570). Initiating such reckonings is certainly not the job of people with disabilities, nor that of literary representations of disability per se. But it is a latent possibility waiting to be further plumbed in the many nuanced, dynamic modernist literary encounters with disability. A disabled modernism such as that offered with this study thus reimagines and strives toward a perpetual crisis of normate embodiment through uncomfortable literary encounters.

Shell shock destabilizes the established dividing lines between interiority and exteriority, bodies and minds, sanity and insanity, the past and present, the normal and abnormal. In sacrificing Chris to enforce normalcy, the true narratological “return,” West’s blistering irony unveils the ableist sacrifice *qua* sacrifice; she makes visible not the cure, but the curse; not a condoning, but a condemning of the processes through which the able-bodied wittingly and unwittingly subsume the disabled. Such illuminative, uncomfortable encounters, prized and pursued within a disabled modernism, threaten to destroy all oppositional distinctions upon which such normate self-constructions depend. Perhaps forever eluding discrete categorization, psychosomatic disabilities like shell shock hold a hope that the able-bodied may be repositioned to confront the ceaseless transmutations of the “normal” body; that their dependence on normality itself might one day cease.

CHAPTER VI

CODA

“There is no escape from yesterday because yesterday has deformed us, or been deformed by us. The mood is of no importance. Deformation has taken place.”
— Samuel Beckett, *Proust*

One hundred odd years removed, and modernism continues to shock and provoke. It still unsettles and upends, just as it rearranges and redefines. The power of its lived history, even after the rise and so-called fall of a contested “post”-modernism, has endured and even grown in today’s globalized, postcolonial, neoliberal world. Many of modernism’s historical crises, too quickly presumed to have been overcome and banished to the past, have returned with a violent vengeance. “It is strange,” as Woolf helps remind us, “how the dead leap out on us at street corners, or in dreams” (*Waves* 155). Today, fascism, neo-eugenic ideologies, and a renewed crisis of white heteromascularity have once again reared their faces; these core concerns were spearheaded during the modernist era. Like the Janus head of yore, one still cannot sever *modernism*, it seems, from *modernity*.

In helping usher in the century-long exploration of a denaturalized body, modernism’s enduring power and presence can be located partially in and as what Mark Whalan has called the “cultural semiotics of the physiological” (*Race* 33), or what Hortense Spillers similarly classified as the “hieroglyphics of the flesh.” As this study has committed itself to, we need to continue to denaturalize metaphoric abuses of language which perpetuate disability both as linguistic and somatic other. Yet despite the discomfort it may instill in us, some scholars err in disavowing or ignoring poststructuralism’s biggest insight, that to which there is still no answer, no interminable

work-around, the chief critical conundrum left in the violent wake of its academic exile: that there is perhaps no “outside” to language. This fact may help us come to expand what David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder initially deemed *the materiality of metaphor* in their seminal groundwork on narrative prosthesis, the ability of disabilities to move “between the micro and macro levels of textual meaning” in figurative ways (57). As Michael Bérubé shrewdly notes, however, “It is altogether queer that disability studies might suggest that the literary representation of disability *not* be read as the site of the figural” (570, emphasis in original). Yet many disability studies scholars repeatedly do just this. Such arguments are inevitably bookended by identifying a problematic metaphor that is then used to “prove” or justify the need not just to rebuke but often dismiss or oust the able-bodied author as an object of study devoid of value. Such well-intended political ends limit our critical opportunities to interrogate, historicize, and deconstruct the semiotic cultural apparatus sustaining these literary artifacts, a perpetual process which strips them of their literal and symbolic power. So too do such narrow arguments obfuscate the constitutive structure of discursive meaning within embodiment and even material culture.

This study has obviously committed itself to the latter approach in resisting the impulse of the former, primarily in our valuation of discomfort as a critical tool. Hence, its four body chapters have deliberately asked us to dwell at an uncomfortably close distance with modernist writers, histories, and views of embodiment which may cause disquiet or even “aesthetic nervousness” in their failings within present day political paradigms. Yet, as I hope each chapter has demonstrated, there is much to be gained by leaning into our discomfort, resisting the dyadic impulse so pervasive today within and

beyond the academy for simply disavowing all that which offends or causes disagreement. These chapters have sought to model how the unseemly or misguided, especially concerning able-bodied engagements with disability, can offer generative critical revaluations and more dynamic historical views of disability's cultural semiotics within the messy archives of history. The powerful meanings of disability of course did not emerge in a vacuum. Returning to the past to trace and dwell with its shortcomings gives fuller insight into the present and can offer paths forward into better futures as well.

The reduction of bad metaphors, and indeed the question of what an ethical representation might look like, does *not* reside within narrative prosthesis *tout court*, a critical hermeneutic which remains highly useful, and to which nearly all current literary studies of disability are at least partially indebted. The issue instead is that to focus so extensively on identifying imperfect metaphors of disability as an end in itself limits the field's potential scope and impact moving forward. It is both a Sisyphean task and an eternal Gordian Knot. Indeed, much of the field's methodological foundation initiated this critical skepticism of metaphor, though with more nuance, by unveiling and approaching the figurative representation of disability with the consistent assumption that it perhaps always already constitutes a power imbalance nearing, if not reinforcing, ableism or a sociopolitical impoverishment.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁵ Because a full burden of proof for such a claim far exceeds the space of a chapter, I will give only examples from a handful of the most foundational, influential voices of literary disability studies, developing chronologically. There are countless others to be found.

Sontag (1978): "Any important disease whose causality is murky, and for which treatment is ineffectual, tends to be awash in significance. First, the subjects of deepest dread...are identified with the disease. *The disease itself becomes a metaphor*. Then, in the name of the disease (that is, using it as a metaphor), that horror is imposed on other things. The disease becomes adjectival..." (57, emphasis added).

Davis (1995): "[Conrad's] references [to disability] are almost like tics.... They tend...to use these metaphors to represent limitations on normal morals, ethics, and of course language.... *I would argue that*

Like James Berger's totalizing impulse at the conclusion of the last chapter, this assumption cannot hold water at scale, as the field has begun to recognize. Language is of course by definition a metaphoric substitution, a "false" equivalence for some "thing" "out there," the linguistic sign the (metaphoric) meeting place of word and thing, "disability" and its singular embodiments. The rise of so-called post-theory and its hyperattention to materiality, its attraction to various "somatic turns" (in race, gender, and sexuality studies, in addition to disability), asks us to acknowledge that there may in fact be "some physical reality beyond culture" (Jeffreys 34). Yet, regardless of the veracity of such possible imaginings, we cannot access this space linguistically; such a "physical reality" is only as real as its expressibility, its conceptualization, not just the word become flesh but our reverse attempts to make the flesh become word.

Unmasking the violent ideological misuses of language remains as important as ever, as does attending to materialist and historicized visions of embodiment. This study has emphasized their inextricability as revealed within a disabled modernism. We have thus reframed embodiment throughout as an inseverable conjunction between materialist

the very regularity of these occurrences speaks to a reflexive patrolling function" (Enforcing 45, emphasis added).

Garland-Thomson (1997): "[R]epresentation frequently obscures the[] complexities [of disability] in favor of the rhetorical or symbolic potential of the prototypical disabled figure... *I intend here to shift from this usual interpretive framework of aesthetics and metaphor to the critical arena of cultural studies to denaturalize such representations" (Extraordinary 15, emphasis added).*

Linton (1998): "[D]isability studies scholars have attended to...the vast realm of meaning-making that occurs in metaphoric and symbolic uses of disability. *These devices need to be analyzed in an array of cultural products to understand their meanings and functions, and to subvert their power... [and] unveil [ableist] attitudes toward disability" (125, emphasis added).*

Mitchell and Snyder (2000): "[D]isability has experienced a plethora of representations in visual and discursive works.... Curiously, a social erasure has been performed even as a representational repertoire has evolved.... [T]he prosthesizing of a body or a rhetorical figure carries within it ideological assumptions about what is aberrant.... The need to restore a disabled body to some semblance of an originary wholeness is the key to a false recognition" (6, emphasis added).

Siebers (2008): "My claim is that...*symbolism depends on aesthetic representations that require further clarification and critique, especially with respect to how individuals are disqualified, that is, how they are found lacking, inept, incompetent, inferior... Disability is the master trope of human disqualification" (Disability Aesthetics 22-23, 27, emphasis added).*

histories and their discursive—which is partially to say, their figurative—excess. Berger helps question the impossibility of proclaiming it “ethically and politically imperative that disability be presented without metaphor, as it is, in its own voice” (“Trauma” 571). This does not mean one ought to level all utterances as equal, the able and disabled alike, transcending (which is always code for erasing) human difference. When Helen Keller, herself of course a figure within the history of modernism, writes of blindness she unmistakably does so in her own voice, an indissoluble fact that demands respect and a privileged symbolic weight. But this does not mean she can liberate her expression from the metaphoric. All voices, regardless of one’s identity or subject position, remain mired in the limits of language, the pragmatic consequences of which complicate the dis/ability “divide” as well. Indeed, the shared limits of language may perhaps be one of the last remaining vestiges of the human(ist) condition, something no critical theory has (yet) successfully undone, as has similarly been said of the body’s materiality as it refutes its own theorization.¹⁸⁶ Keller’s embodiment entitles her to an intimate knowledge of disability that none can question or discard. But she cannot claim to express or possess “blindness” or “deafness” as *noumenons* in and of themselves. Such is the inextricability of language.

This inextricability raises difficult philosophical questions yet to be answered regarding the uncomfortable, contentious space the able-bodied may or may not be invited to occupy within critical disability studies in future days. The extent to which able-bodied scholars and artists can meaningfully contribute to the field continues to be

¹⁸⁶ Perhaps the most oft-cited emblem of the interest in a somatic turn is Judith Butler’s recollection in *Bodies That Matter* of a colleague who levied at her entirely performative sense of ontology the question: “But what about the materiality of the body, *Judy*?” This question, Butler says, recalled herself “to a bodily life that could not be theorized away” (ix, emphasis in original).

negotiated. Lingered questions about who may or may not speak “about” dis/ability may well be determined based on similar linguistic challenges as those the Keller example presents. Whom does “disability” hail? By what damaging privilege do the able-bodied get to remain “outside” the dialogue, to remain willfully ignorant or uncommitted to recognizing the shared, mutable spectrum of human embodiment? Who has the right to express their embodied relationship to, and critical awareness of, disability, whether physically, linguistically, artistically, or figuratively? Do able-bodied modernists like Toomer or West add value to disability studies, or should we instead critique their engagement as appropriative, as part of the problem? What is the meaning of the ability in disability, and what role or right do the able-bodied have (or not have) in entering such discussions? Who may answer such questions, and upon what assumed principles? And do we, lastly, risk returning ourselves to essentialist logics of authenticity in more conservatively policing the boundaries of whom may “really” speak about—or else to—disability? As this dissertation has traced with deafness, impotence, the prosthesis, blindness, and shell shock, able-bodied encounters with disability consistently serve as overdetermined sites of cultural, political, and historical anxiety. The symbolic or allegorical excess of somatic embodiment does not expose an inherent lack or absent quality locatable within disability. It reveals only the permanent precariousness of normate constructions of being and difference.

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