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Around Talk:
Affect, Triviality, and Possibility in Marcel Proust, Henry James, and Nella Larsen

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Declaration

This thesis is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. I further state that no substantial part of my thesis has already been submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for any such degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the relevant Degree Committee.

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This thesis proposes a new way to encounter the fiction of Marcel Proust, Henry James, and Nella Larsen through the lens of talk. I use the term 'talk' to define and theorize a liminal category of expression in these texts, vacillating between the elevated, ineffable significance associated with the art of conversation and the mere inconsequence of chatter, small talk, and gossip. I contend that in Proust, James, and Larsen's novels, this ambiguous distinction is constituted and contested in the surroundings of talk, in dynamic interactions of affect, temporality, plot, and form. My study of talk thus builds on and draws together diverse theoretical projects that foreground weak, incipient, and implicit forms of thought and feeling: the ordinary language philosophy of Stanley Cavell, the weak affect theories of Silvan Tomkins and Eve Sedgwick, the suspensive intimacies of Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips. In a series of case studies from my three authors, the chapters of this thesis explore the uncertain generativeness of trivial and minor forms of talk and seek to describe the textual forces that condition and constrain it. Throughout, I attend to the elusive capacity of talk in these novels to unsettle and speculatively revise the field of possibilities in the text.

My first chapter analyzes the frustrations of digressive talk in Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (1913-1927) alongside the pleasures of digressive narration, seeking points of convergence between the two modes. My second chapter examines a different aspect of the relation between talk and narration in the *Search*, using gossip as a tool with which to interrogate the limits of the narrator's expressivity. My third chapter turns to James, considering flirtation as a style of talk in James's *The Sacred Fount* (1901) and 'The Beast in the Jungle' (1903) that presses against formal and interpersonal closure. My fourth chapter draws from Nathalie Sarraute's concept of sub-conversation to test the capacity of James's heroines, Milly Theale of *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) and the unnamed telegraphist of *In the Cage* (1898), to shift the significance of transactional events through subtle acts of aesthetic interpretation. My fifth chapter, turning to Larsen, explores the nexus of talk, taste, and identity in *Quicksand* (1928). I argue that small talk in *Quicksand* is a mode of attritional suspension between identification and rejection, resembling a kind of aesthetic self-fashioning, but mortally precarious. The thesis concludes with a coda reflecting on the non-event, the occasion when 'nothing happened', as an alternative approach to the uncertain possibilities that this thesis perceives around talk.

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Introduction:
Talking Around Conversation

In the second volume of *In Search of Lost Time* (1919), Marcel Proust's narrator interrupts the young hero's ongoing misadventures with a strange reflection about talk:

> In a room full of other people we receive from the woman we love the answer, auspicious or fatal, which we have been awaiting for the last year. But we must go on talking, ideas come flocking one after another, unfolding a smooth surface which is pricked now and then at the very most by a dull throb from the memory, infinitely more profound but narrow, that misfortune has come upon us. If, instead of misfortune, it is happiness, it may be that not until many years have elapsed will we recall that the most important event in our emotional life occurred without our having time to give it any prolonged attention.[1]

What has happened in this passage? The narrator imagines a momentous event: an anxious lover receives news of a critical decision from the woman he loves. But something else disorients him from this significant message, which sinks below the surface of his conscious mind. Without quite understanding why, the imagined figure in this passage obeys an obscure imperative: 'we must go on talking'. While talking, he forgets or overlooks the very event for which he went to that room in the first place.

Talk, in this digression by Proust's narrator, has an ambiguous provenance as well as situation. The pronoun 'we' seems to position this passage as a general characterization—one of many reflections in the *Search* on human nature, the mind, the memory, desire—but the events it describes are oddly specific. The room, the significant woman, the strangely oblivious individual wrapped up in a fast-forming surface of talk: the scene has a singular quality despite being not quite locatable as an event in the text. In this unsituated room, the undetermined subject seems less an active participant in a conversation and more an unwitting passenger who finds himself on its smooth surface. A pivotal event looms close by, but its significance remains out of focus, unrealized, and not straightforwardly felt. The

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[1] 'Au milieu d'autres personnes, nous recevons de celle que nous aimons la réponse favorable ou mortelle que nous attendions depuis une année. Mais il faut continuer à causer, les idées s'ajoutent les unes aux autres, développant une surface sous laquelle c'est à peine si, de temps à autre, vient sourdement affleurer le souvenir, autrement profond mais fort étroit, que le malheur est venu pour nous. Si, au lieu du malheur, c'est le bonheur, il peut arriver que ce ne soit que plusieurs années après que nous nous rappelons que le plus grand événement de notre vie sentimentale s'est produit, sans que nous eussions le temps de lui accorder une longue attention' Proust, *Within a Budding Grove,* trans. by C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, rev. by D. J. Enright (London: Vintage, 2005), pp. 521-2 / Proust, *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 434. Hereafter the revised Moncrieff translation of Proust published by Vintage will be cited in the text with the volume in Roman numerals followed by the page number. French editions will be cited individually in footnotes.

English translation above evokes persistent but minor feelings with a 'prick' to the surface of talk, 'at the very most […] a dull throb' from the memory: low-grade, intermittent pains. In French, the presence of feeling is subtler still: there is no 'throb' or 'prick', only the phrase *à peine*, which translates to 'barely' or 'hardly', but contains the word *peine*, meaning sorrow. From time to time, the memory of one's misfortune scarcely, silently surfaces. If this registers as a feeling, it is only at the second order of meaning: the *peine* in *à peine*, the barest echo of heartache. Here, talk behaves like a slippery terrain on which subjectivity, plot, and feeling are suspended and dislocated.

Talk is not directly represented in this passage: there is no word or line of reported speech. Although 'we must go on talking', it remains unclear whether a word has been spoken at all. To unsettle matters further, the scene described in this passage closely resembles, but does not duplicate, a series of events that unfold around it in the text. Young Marcel, the novel's hero, arrives at a party where he will finally meet Albertine—an event he has been desiring for weeks. But finding himself presented with his host, with other guests, with a table of strawberry tarts, he feels his imminent introduction to Albertine diminish to become 'one among several such incidents' (II: 521). As he spends his attention gregariously on everyone except her, putting off their introduction to discuss 'old Norman fairs' with a new acquaintance, the narrator steps away from the scene to recount the passage above (II: 522). If young Marcel finds himself 'losing the plot', deferring and dismissing a highly significant event to talk with casual acquaintances about arbitrary things, then the narrator doubles this effect: he prolongs the introduction further by embedding a different room, an unspecified lover, another disorienting milieu of talk, into the party scene. The mis-en-scène of this passage reiterates and compounds its inner disarrangements, and this narrative embedding is part of its significance in the text—in Bakhtin's formulation from his essay about speech genres, part of the 'utterance' composed by 'the novel as a whole'.[2]

This thesis, entitled *Around Talk,* analyzes talk across novels and novellas by Proust, Henry James, and Nella Larsen: three authors whose works are preoccupied with enigmatic, stylized, lingering, and often disorienting scenes of talk. As this passage from Proust's *Search* demonstrates, talk is more than represented speech, more than a mere object of representation. It has strangely agential qualities, appearing as a compulsion that displaces

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[2] M.M. Bakhtin, 'The Problem of Speech Genres' in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. by Vern W. McGee, ed. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), pp. 60-102, p. 62.

intention and attention, a surface that buries or suspends feeling, a technique for narrative diversion and deferral—even, perhaps especially, when no one in particular is talking. Talk in these novels circulates around and beyond scenes of diegetic interaction, detaching in unexpected ways from feeling, willing, and speaking subjects. In the chapters that follow, I argue that unruly and unproductive forms of talk in Proust, James, and Larsen's novels mediate and contest fundamental categories of analysis therein: character, narration, plot, form, and tone. In the approach this thesis develops, idle and ineffectual forms of talk provide a lens onto the structures of feeling, compositions of character, and narrative organization of these texts. But talk also functions as an active, sometimes volatile determinant, capable of unsettling and reforming the world of the text in which the significance of a given utterance takes shape.

This introduction will situate my use of the term 'talk' within and against another expressive form: conversation. Conversation, like talk, is a broad, colloquial term with variable applications. But unlike talk, conversation enjoys a degree of philosophical prestige, appearing as a term of interest within and alongside projects in aesthetics, ethics, and political philosophy. It also carries associations of social elevation, evoking delicacy, refinement, and enclosed, exclusive settings.[3] Talk, in contrast, tends to be associated with more disreputable forms of spoken language: as S.I. Salamensky notes in his survey of the concept, it is coded as 'informal, close-at-hand, common, pedestrian, everyday', associated with conventionality and thoughtlessness.[4] In this thesis, I develop a concept of talk that invokes or pursues the forms of meaning associated with conversation but that cannot quite shake off the disrepute of chatter, babble, gossip, and idle talk. These para- or quasi-conversational forms of talk shed light on the narrow margin that distinguishes the virtues of conversation from the deficiencies of talk: through minor disturbances of form and feeling, what is pleasurable, sociable, and open-ended in conversation may appear aimless, inconsequential, and superfluous.

The first two sections of this introduction develop a conceptual framework for the distinction between conversation and talk and position my approach within a theoretical and critical landscape. The following conceptual outline draws from a range of

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[3] Peter Burke, 'Conversation' in *The Handbook of Communication History*, ed. by Peter Simonson, Janice Peck, Robert T. Craig, and John Jackson (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 122-132, p. 125.

[4] S.I. Salamensky, 'Dangerous Talk: Phenomenology, Performativity, Cultural Crisis' in *Talk Talk Talk: The Cultural Life of Everyday Conversation*, ed. by S.I. Salamensky (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 12-32, p. 16.

philosophical and theoretical perspectives, but centers on the writings of ordinary language philosopher Stanley Cavell, whose decades-long engagement with conversation combines aesthetics, phenomenology, and ordinary language philosophy. The third section considers the aesthetics of conversation as a social and historical phenomenon, and contextualizes Proust, James, and Larsen's novels in the vicinity of, but not quite belonging to, various exclusive, elite, and archaic conversational cultures. The concluding section of the introduction discusses existing scholarly characterizations of talk in the works of these authors, summarizing and situating the thesis chapters in this context.

1. Talk and Conversation: A Conceptual Framework

Let us begin with a relatively colloquial definition of conversation: a common word that retains a special aura of significance. In a footnoted paragraph, sociolinguist Erving Goffman endeavors to distinguish conversation, in the 'special sense' of the word, from talk more generally:

> conversation, restrictively defined, might be identified as the talk occurring when a small number of participants come together and settle into what they perceive to be a few moments cut off from (or carried on to the side of) instrumental tasks; a period of idling felt to be an end in itself, during which everyone is accorded the right to talk as well as to listen and without reference to a fixed schedule […] and no final agreement or synthesis is to be demanded, differences of opinion to be treated as unprejudicial to the continuing relationship of the participants.[5]

Goffman's criteria produce an optimistic picture of conversation, particularly regarding the equal 'rights' afforded to all participants and the assumption that differences that emerge in conversation cannot disturb or damage the relations between them. I want to draw attention specifically to the formal characteristics he highlights: 'a period of idling felt to be an end in itself […] without reference to a fixed schedule […] [where] no final agreement or synthesis is to be demanded'. In other words, conversation is unproductive and, in a way, unfinished talk: it does not accomplish tasks, nor does it arrive at conclusions. But these features are not experienced as shortcomings by the participants because conversation is *felt* to be an end in itself: an intrinsically rewarding, pleasurable social practice. The qualities he isolates, in this rather perfunctory reflection—conversation as non-instrumental, enjoyable, open-ended, keeping its own time—bring out associations between conversation and forms of aesthetic activity.

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[5] Erving Goffman, *Forms of Talk* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), p. 14.

In particular, the non-instrumentality of conversation evokes Immanuel Kant's aesthetic theory, and bears some similarities to Kant's own theoretical engagement with social conversation. In Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790), conversation is indeed an aesthetic art, but one that inhabits the lower tier of 'agreeable arts' and not the more elevated genre of 'fine arts'.[6] For Kant, the social arts that make one a good conversationalist have the ultimate purpose of enjoyment, whereas the fine arts exhibit the 'purposiveness without a purpose' of aesthetic form. Kant, too, emphasizes the unimportance of the *contents* of conversation against the primary importance of the enjoyment one takes in conversing: in the 'loose talk' of social conversation, 'no one wants to held responsible for what he says, because the whole point is the entertainment of the moment, not any material for future meditation'.[7] There is, in this description, an undercurrent of judgment for the frivolity of conversation as a form of discourse where pleasure takes precedence over meaning. In contrast, Kant's criterion for fine art is that it 'furthers, even without a purpose, the culture of our mental powers to [facilitate] social communication.'[8] This fine art, too, lacks a direct intellectual purpose—including, presumably, the purpose of providing 'material for future meditation'—but accomplishes a higher, more abstract goal of supporting 'social communication' in general. Kant thus confines conversation to the realm of the agreeable, separated from the fine art forms that enable communication to flourish. This reflects the status of conversation in the eighteenth century as a kind of middle discourse between 'the sensuous enjoyments of the table' and serious, learned study.[9]

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[6] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. by Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), pp. 172-3.

[7] Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, p. 173.

[8] Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, p. 173. Bracketed text in original.

[9] John J. Mee, *Conversable Worlds: Literature, Contention, and Community 1762 to 1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 19.

For Stanley Cavell, as for a number of twentieth-century philosophers, conversation takes on greater significance.[10] Cavell goes so far as to offer conversation as a model for the most profound and fulfilling forms of human relation.[11] His notion of conversation is rooted in the ordinary talk shared between friends and lovers, but it also instantiates an extremely demanding moral project that he calls 'perfectionism'. Moral perfectionism requires its adherents to radically confront and assess themselves and their ways of life, and Cavell argues that the medium in which one accomplishes this is conversation.[12] In his perfectionist framework, the importance of conversation has little to do with the judgments and decisions that specific parties reach in the course of conversation. The practice itself is the source of value, in its aspirational yet, for Cavell, intimately recognizable form of open-ended, sincere, collaborative talk. In this formulation, conversation is not exactly an end in itself, since it strives towards 'perfecting' oneself, one's relations, and even one's society, but neither is it directly instrumental.[13] In other words, it is something like a Kantian fine art, lacking an immediate purpose but invoking a higher one.[14]

If this sounds like an unrecognizably portentous application of the term, Cavell's repeated appeals to its ordinary uses mitigate and diffuse that impression:

> Conversations in which friends explore whether an act is indeed your duty, meaning any of your business, as well as meaning your inescapable business, and whether if it

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[10] In addition to Cavell, see John Dewey on conversation as 'the heart and final guarantee' of democracy and, famously, Jürgen Habermas on conversational coffee-house culture as the origins of a public sphere that makes liberalism possible. In a more abstract register, see Richard Rorty's depiction of philosophers as 'conversational partners' and philosophy as an ongoing conversation. John Dewey, 'Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us' in *America's Public Philosopher: Essays on Social Justic, Economics, Education, and the Future of Democracy*, ed. by Eric Thomas Weber (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), pp. 59-66; Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. by Thomas Burger and Kert Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989); Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature: Thirtieth Anniversary Edition* (Princeton, Princeton University Press: 2009).

[11] Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 87.

[12] Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 49.

[13] Cavell, *Cities of Words*, p. 155.

[14] Cavell engages substantively with Kant's aesthetics in his early work *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, originally published 1969), in which he argues that the subjective universality of Kantian aesthetic judgment resembles the claim, in ordinary language philosophy, of 'what we [should] say'. Further study could consider how this claim of Cavell's might lay the groundwork for a revision of Kant's judgment of conversation as a merely agreeable art.

> is, it is to be denied the name of doing your duty if you do it, for example, out of guilt, or remorse, or joy, seem to me to be of the essence of a moral life.[15]

This is Cavell's singular, hybrid style, which intermingles sonorous formulations from moral philosophy ('to be denied the name of doing your duty') with colloquial, even banal considerations like 'is it any of my business?' His writing thus embeds the difficulty, the unwieldiness, of the synthesis he aims to achieve: between the profound significance he wishes to attribute to conversation and his dedication to its real, specific, unremarkable forms. In order for conversation to perform its special functions—the actualization of the individual in relation to others, or even the flourishing of society at large—there must be a kind of ineffable gestalt in which uncertain, unresolved, perhaps desultory or truncated expressions cohere into 'a mode of association, a form of life': something 'more […] than just talk'.[16]

What precisely distinguishes these formulations of conversation from 'just talk'? In Kant's lower-stakes account, successful conversation hinges only on the presence of a feeling: its essential purpose is a collective experience of pleasure. But pleasure is a variable, ephemeral, and contingent experience: an unreliable conduit to connect idling forms of talk to abstract structures of value. Cavell's robust vision of conversation, in contrast, rests on a more complex and fundamental provision than the presence or absence of feeling in a given interaction. It is something like an underlying condition of alignment: so that even if 'not every moment, certainly not every assigned moment, is apt to create a good encounter with a stranger, not even with a friend', these possibilities for failure do not undermine conversation as a medium for realizing ourselves and our relations with the world.[17] Cavell's term for this elusive, essential condition is *voice* or *voicing*: to use one's voice, for Cavell, is to stake the claim of a shared and communicable world. In *Cities of Words* (2004), he theorizes voice together with conversation—'being in conversation' means 'demanding a voice in each other'[18]—but his formulation of the concept of voice extends over almost his entire body of work and draws from a number of different philosophical frameworks.[19] The term first appears in his writings on Kant's aesthetics: in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (1969),

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[15] Cavell, *Cities of Words*, pp. 133-4.

[16] Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, p. 87.

[17] Cavell, *Cities of Words*, p. 316.

[18] Cavell, *Cities of Words*, p. 68.

[19] For a full overview of Cavell's uses of voice, see Sandra Laugier, 'Voice as Form of Life and Life Form', *Nordic Wittgenstein Review* Special Issue: Wittgenstein and Forms of Life (2015), pp. 63-81.

Cavell uses the phrase 'universal voice' to elaborate the condition of subjective universality that, for Kant, grounds aesthetic judgments in something more secure than transient, contingent feelings.[20]

In *The Claim of Reason* (1979), Cavell applies the framework of voicing to the condition that Wittgenstein calls 'agreement': 'If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement [*Übereinstimmung*] not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgments'.[21] Cavell's version of agreement integrates the concept into a metaphorics of voice: 'The idea of agreement here is […] of being in harmony […] [t]hat a group of human beings *stimmen* in their language *überein* says, so to speak, that they are mutually voiced with respect to it, mutually *attuned* top to bottom'.[22] Here, Cavell puts forward a vision of collective linguistic life as a tonality or a composition: a harmony of voices in a shared tuning that sustains the possibility of communication—and its ideal form, conversation—through any given, local failure. His emphasis of the *stimmen* in *übereinstimmen* also invokes Heidegger's term for mood, *Stimmung* or attunement, which moves the discussion onto a slightly different terrain.[23] Where 'harmony', 'agreement', and Kant's subjective universalism evoke a compositional or formal condition of alignment, mood shifts the paradigm to describe a common, overarching structure of feeling. Heideggerean mood-as-attunement does not indicate an emotion as such—it is more like an atmosphere that determines 'Being-in-the-world', the totality formed by one's attachments and relations—but it describes an affective environment that enables or forecloses specific actions and feelings.[24] In the context of Cavell's theory of conversation, attunement signifies an encompassing structure of feeling that sustains the aspirational possibilities of conversation through specific interactions of varying success and significance.

Attunement, alignment, composition, harmony—this constellation of concepts forms the ground of Cavellian conversation. What would it look like for these impalpable

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[20] Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, p. 94.

[21] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen = Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (Chichester, West Sussex, U.K.: Wiley Blackwell, 2009), §241.

[22] Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 32.

[23] This is an intentional allusion. Later in *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell presents an explicit account of the relation between Heidegger's thought and Wittgenstein's (Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 241-2).

[24] 'The mood has already disclosed, in every case, Being-in-the-world as a whole, and makes it possible first of all to direct oneself towards something.' Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), p. 176.

conditions to break down, decomposing conversation into talk? To approach this question, I propose to connect Cavell's concept of voice with Sianne Ngai's formulation of literary tone. Ngai's body of work, though usually considered within theoretical traditions with which Cavell is not associated, such as affect theory and cultural theory, has a number of points of contact with Cavell's thought; Ngai studied with Cavell and has cited him as a profound influence.[25] For Ngai, tone is not so different from Heideggerean attunement: both terms refer to a 'global, hyper-relational concept of feeling'.[26] But the fact that tone is a feeling that *isn't felt* can create confusions within the text that it ostensibly organizes. Reading Melville's *The Confidence-Man* (1857), Ngai notes that confidence is not a feeling that anyone in the novel has, but it nonetheless 'holds or co-assembles all of [the novel's] elements together, and makes all of its internal exchanges possible'.[27] This kind of unifying, stabilizing atmosphere resembles Cavell's 'mutual voicing'; but whereas Cavell's confidence in the attunement of subjects in conversation does not seem to be shakeable, Ngai's formulation of tone is less secure. Her analysis brings out the tenuous status of a structural or atmospheric quality that cannot be realized or felt in any given interaction: 'whether the feeling is vested in abstract systems or in personal relationships, the world of the novel's story runs on a feeling that no one actually feels. More specifically, the world is run by a feeling (confidence, trust) that no one in the novel can verify or publicly prove he possesses'.[28] In this world, specific interactions feel uncomfortably detached from the underlying structure of feeling and belief that allegedly gives them meaning.

Ngai's analysis of *The Confidence-Man* offers a striking portrayal of what happens when the intangible, facilitatory foundation of communication is thrown into anxious uncertainty in a literary text. As the unverifiable status of confidence becomes increasingly urgent, the text undergoes 'a novel-wide "vibration" whose disruption of signifying communications at the local level is marked by the presence of 'hum' or 'bubble' in

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[25] Sianne Ngai, 'Mentors: Stanley Cavell', *Los Angeles Review of Books* (January 2012), <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/mentors-stanley-cavell/> [Accessed 22 April 2023].

[26] Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 43. Emphasis on 'feeling' removed.

[27] Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 76.

[28] Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 69. Cavell was keenly aware of the skeptical problems that threaten the ordinary language philosopher's trust in the ultimate sufficiency of ordinary language to externalize thoughts, produce knowledge, and enable connections between subjects. He writes on this topic at length in *The Claim of Reason* and throughout his body of work. I touch on Cavell's relationship to skepticism in the coda.

speech'.[29] Emphasizing the repetitive, redundant, and 'noisy' features of talk in *The Confidence-Man*, Ngai cites Alexander Gelley's characterization of speech in the novel as 'parasitic talk': 'a phrase that marries Heidegger's notion of "idle talk" with Michel Serres's concept of *parasites*, which in French "also means static, the noise or interference in an electronic transmission"'.[30] In other words, the breakdown of 'tone'—confidence in a structural alignment between words, feelings, and subjects—produces forms of talk that not only lack an immediate communicative function, but seem to operate as the stalling, disruption, or interruption of communication itself. These genres of talk are formally scattered, affectively detached, and appear only incidentally connected to the reasoning or volition of the speaker. Beyond specific scenes of talk, the 'vibration' of lost confidence spills out from the 'local level', producing an uncontrolled, proliferating range of disruptions across every register of the novel. Local disturbances of feeling correspond to a text-wide displacement of feeling: an 'atonal' tone.[31] Local deformations of talk accumulate to a total disarrangement of form: an 'echolalic' novel.[32] The whole composition of the novel—its organization of feeling, character, narrative—registers and reflects the lost ground of mutual attunement.

Around Talk navigates a different kind of communicative breakdown from the ones Ngai diagrams in her study. In *The Confidence-Man*, the devolution of talk is accelerated by the fact that the characters are trying to have functional, transactional exchanges in language: exchanges of currency for goods and, in the novel's speculative economy, currency for confidence. Thus the collapses of functionality into redundancy and analogy into repetition represent a clear failure of the transactional system and the confidence it relies upon. In contrast, this thesis examines forms of talk that invoke, approximate, or aspire to the practices of aesthetic 'idling' or ethical 'form of life' that belong to conversation. For these quasi-conversational practices of talk, the conditions for success or failure are not immediately evident—in fact, they reflexively refer back to the elusive grounds of agreement/attunement that are called into question by offbeat scenes of talk. What allows indirect, ineffectual, idling talk to register as significant rather than trivial, generative rather than wasteful, pleasurable rather than exasperating, essential rather than superfluous? In the

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[29] Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 67.

[30] Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 51.

[31] Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 51.

[32] Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 50.

chapters that follow, I argue that in Proust, James, and Larsen's novels, these distinctions are dynamically constituted and contested in the surroundings of talk. In Proust's *Search*, for instance, the hero experiences his own roundabout, digressive speech as an exasperating failure of articulation—but this assessment is not definitive, since the hero's feelings and judgments are regularly ironized, suspended, and ignored in the narrator's digressive narration. In James's late fiction, characters enjoy elongated, enigmatic conversations that evince singular, intimate relations, but the events of the plot threaten to reduce these subtleties to mere decorations. In Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928), the heroine's participation in aimless, directionless talk is interrupted by the disjunctive, episodic structure of the narrative. If 'alignment' describes Cavell's condition of unity in which talk with no direct purpose may hold another form of significance, these settings of talk are *askew*. The claim they make to constituting an aesthetic, ethical, or relational practice is a precarious and partial one: supported by some conditions in the text, blocked and suspended by others.

In *Around Talk*, I approach talk in these novels in light of its not-quite-realized possibilities. This angle of approach illuminates specific constraints that structure and regulate the text. But beyond this diagnostic aspect, this thesis attends to the curious capacity of wayward, inconsequential talk to circumvent and displace otherwise pervasive limitations: expressing rhythms of feeling, forms of narrative, practices of subjectivity, that are elsewhere foreclosed in the text. Consider the passage from Proust with which this introduction begins. It stages a series of failures—of action, attention, feeling—but from a slightly askew perspective, it also represents an achievement. A lover who has been fixated on the beloved for a year finds his attention suddenly, unaccountably ebb, freeing him for other forms of relation—perhaps trivial, perhaps glancing, but previously impossible for him. Whether we consider this a mere feint, a temporary compulsion, or a genuine reconfiguration of desire, it briefly enlivens the possibility of a profound change in one's organization of value and attention: a possibility that is opened in the unruly movement of talk. Perhaps this is a transformation that nobody inhabits, that cannot be actualized by a personage in the text. But perceiving it in this light allows us to recognize moments of distraction, digression, and absent-mindedness around talk in Proust's *Search* as potential reprieves from the hero's obsessive desires: the subject of Chapter 1.

Thus the tenuous status of talk in these texts—its proximity to the inconsequential and superfluous—corresponds to its capacity to evoke forms of life that are peripheral or

implausible therein. As Nathalie Sarraute vividly argues, inconsequentiality comes with certain affordances:

> [Words'] rapid, abundant flow, with its restless shimmer, allows the more imprudent of them to slip by, to let themselves be borne along and disappear at the slightest sign of danger. But they risk little danger. Their reputation for gratuitousness, lightness, inconsistency […] protects them from suspicion.[33]

Sarraute describes not just any talk in this passage but specifically idling, trivial talk: talk that lingers instead of progressing, obfuscates instead of disclosing, disperses feeling instead of directing it. For Sarraute, the weakness of this kind of talk positions it at the vanguard of the possible, marking out a zone of expression wherein forbidden or foreclosed alternatives may covertly reemerge. *Around Talk* thus addresses triviality in talk as a potential site of transformation or proto-transformation: one whose promise is tied to its precariousness.

2. Approaches

In this sense *Around Talk* is a Cavellian project, a project that draws from ordinary language philosophy. Cavell too views conversation as the expression of ordinary life and the medium through which that life may transform itself. But the method of this thesis departs significantly from Cavell's centering of the 'I', the one who speaks and takes responsibility for speech. Voice, for Cavell, is fundamentally 'my own voice' even as it aspires to connect with and speak for others.[34] This is what makes it a moral concept: it is identified with a moral subject. In this project, the concept of talk that interests me is not strictly identified with a speaking subject—and the significance of an instance, scene, or rhythm of talk in my readings is not determined by the experience of the speaker. Often, in fact, characters in the novels I study experience their inadvertent or indecisive talk as a failure of some kind: an avoidance of the true matter, a flirtation that goes on embarrassingly overlong. So the protagonist of Larsen's *Quicksand* keenly feels, 'underneath the exchange of small talk', 'another conversation' that is never specified and a 'strange ill-defined emotion' that accompanies it.[35] In scenes like this one, character and its associated forms of feeling are among the textual constructs that keep talk on the wrong side of conversation, where it fails to cohere into an aesthetic practice or a form of life that enacts its own fulfillment. To find the

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[33] Nathalie Sarraute, 'Conversation and Sub-Conversation' in *Tropisms and the Age of Suspicion*, trans. by Maria Jolas (London: John Calder, 1963), pp. 97-120, pp. 108-9.

[34] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 28.

[35] Nella Larsen, *Quicksand & Passing* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2014), p. 50. Hereafter *Quicksand* and *Passing* are referred to in text with abbreviations *Q* and *P* respectively, followed by the page number.

traces and trace the limits of these impeded possibilities, *Around Talk* examines places in the texts where characters lose themselves or the narrator loses track of them, where subjectivities lapse or multiply and feeling detaches from characters. Instead of Cavell's moral or ethical orientation, this analysis employs terms and schemas associated more with aesthetics: distributions of attention, forms and patterns of expression, structures and types of feeling, representations of taste. The chapters that follow deploy different frameworks, chiefly from affect theory and aesthetics, but drawing from queer theory and sociology as well, to analyze and contextualize specific categories or aspects of talk in novels by Proust, James, and Larsen. These categories are based on the largely implicit theories of talk developed in the novels themselves.

In the following chapters, I consider talk in multiple forms and registers of textual presence: rendered in direct discourse, described in indirect discourse, theorized as an object of reflection, composed in a pattern of relation. Thus, this thesis is not primarily a study of dialogue. *Around Talk* shares some materials of interest but not methods with a recent trend in literary scholarship that aims to foreground dialogue as an object of literary analysis.[36] In particular, Elizabeth Alsop's *Making Conversation in Modernist Fiction* (2019) interprets talk in Henry James's late fiction and, like this thesis, raises the possibility of a continuum between character speech and narration in modernist prose (although this observation applies to Faulkner, not James, in her analysis). Ultimately, though, Alsop takes dialogue as her primary object of analysis: building on the work of James Phelan, she is particularly interested in detecting an 'authorial' presence in dialogue, whereas I see authorial presence as merely one of many textual forces that may displace and redirect the significance of talk.

A closer companion to this work in terms of its broader, concept-driven theorization of talk, but not its materials, is Amy R. Wong's *Refiguring Speech: Late Victorian Fictions of Empire and the Poetics of Talk* (2023). Where this thesis considers talk as the failure of conversation, Wong's study conceptualizes talk as the failure of a different expressive ideal, speech. Although *Refiguring Speech* proceeds on different conceptual grounds and analyzes a

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[36] This work includes James Phelan, 'Conversational Disclosure and Authorial Disclosure in the Dialogue Novel: The Case of *The Friends of Eddie Coyle*' in *Narrative, Interrupted: The Plotless, the Disturbing and the Trivial*, ed. by Markku Lehtimäki, Laura Karttunen, and Maria Mäkelä (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), pp. 3-21; Phelan, 'Imagining a Sequel to Wayne C. Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction*—Or a Dialogue on Dialogue', *Comparative Critical Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (2010), pp. 243-255; Bronwen Thomas, *Fictional Dialogue: Speech and Conversation in the Modern and Postmodern Novel* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012); Elizabeth Alsop, *Making Conversation in Modernist Fiction* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2019).

different period of literature to this thesis, it offers another model for approaching talk in the novel as a force that impacts the surrounding textual architectures of narration, plot, and genre. Another companion text to *Around Talk* is Michael Lucey's *What Proust Heard: Novels and the Ethnography of Talk* (2022). Lucey's method, too, considers talk in the novel as a dynamic site of significance that is in some ways determined by and in other ways constitutive of its own interpretive context. But his conceptual frameworks are derived mostly from linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics, and the interpretive 'context' that interests him is specifically a social one. *What Proust Heard* focuses on the 'nonreferential, social indexical features of talk': the ways in which talk in Proust's novel reproduces, critiques, and acts upon an existing social order.[37] Although this sounds quite distinct from the conceptual framework that I have laid out in this introduction, the two projects intersect when Lucey considers talk in a broader sense, extending his analysis to the more figurative category of 'the narrator's speech'.[38] In these cases, the 'social order' he considers includes the complex relations between characters, narrator, author, and reader that make up the social world of the text—an analytic that overlaps substantially with my own.[39] *What Proust Heard* and *Around Talk* have fundamentally different orientations, though, with respect to the capacities of talk in Proust's novel and beyond, particularly regarding this thesis's investment in uncertain, provisional, and contested possibilities of significance. Lucey's focus on talk as a sociocultural medium emphasizes its active and productive qualities: he describes the site of his (and Proust's) interest in talk as 'the work that talk does'.[40] *Around Talk* instead seeks to describe the 'work' that talk does not quite do, the significance it does not quite attain or relation it does not definitively actualize—a speculative, subjunctive kind of activity that lingers in close proximity to idleness, suspension, inaction, and leisure.

This project's multidirectional approach to talk in the novel may suggest an affinity with Mikhail Bakhtin's influential account of the novel as a 'dialogic' form of literature. In Bakhtin's novel theory, the novel's characteristic form is one of 'heteroglossia': an assembly of competing voices and languages, which include the characters', narrator's, and author's.[41]

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[37] Michael Lucey, *What Proust Heard: Novels and the Ethnography of Talk* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022), p. 46.

[38] Lucey, *What Proust Heard*, p. 132.

[39] Lucey, *What Proust Heard*, p. 132.

[40] Lucey, *What Proust Heard*, p. 10.

[41] M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 263.

But while Bakhtin emphasizes the multiplicity and diversity of languages in the novel, he also insists that these elements each contribute to the 'higher unity of the work as a whole'.[42] The totality of differing, contesting voices are, for Bakhtin, 'artistically organized' into a synthesized composition, whereas my approach frames talk as an element of compositional disunity: a textual force capable of disturbing, or at least unsettling, the formal and affective arrangement of the novel and its corresponding field of possibilities.[43]

Around Talk approaches insubstantial, ineffectual, and undirected talk as a site of contested possibility, where any potential significance is both emergent from and qualified by its proximity to triviality. This poses something of a methodological challenge: namely, how to theorize modes of significance that are indelibly wedded to inconsequence, deriving both their scope and their limitations from this grounding condition. In the chapters that follow, I aim to identify and describe particular forces at work in each text that produce the uneven ground of possibility around talk, not to resolve this dynamic into a final order of interpretation. In this sense, *Around Talk* theorizes talk through enacting the qualities of plurality, deferral, and openness that it seeks to illuminate and describe. In particular, the approach I take to affect and triviality around talk is informed by Silvan Tomkins's gnomic, profound observation that an affect theory must be effective to be weak.[44] An affect theory, for Tomkins, designates an operative mode of organizing, interpreting, and responding to feelings and ideas. In order for a weak affect theory—a loose organization of beliefs and feelings which is not exhaustive and to which there are many exceptions—to stay weak, it must be working fairly well, protecting the individual from bad feelings and bad outcomes most of the time. But if a weak affect theory is ineffective, then the individual will seek out stronger defenses, deploying a system that deals in more assured, tangible forms of knowledge and security. Eve Sedgwick foregrounds this insight of Tomkins's in her highly influential essay 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading' (1997), but neither Sedgwick nor Tomkins dwell on the question: what allows a weak affect theory to be effective (and

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[42] Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 262.

[43] Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 262.

[44] Silvan S. Tomkins, *Affect Imagery Consciousness: The Complete Edition* (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2008), p. 460.

therefore remain weak)?[45] What pressures—libidinal, affective, relational, economic—force weakness to fortify itself?

Around Talk poses this question through the distinction between talk and conversation that I have theorized in this introduction. Both Cavell's vision of conversation and Ngai's analysis of tone rely on an unfelt, unverifiable, underlying condition of attunement; but whereas Cavell insists that this arrangement can *stay weak*, that it does not need the guarantee of a stronger theory in order to support meaningful conversation, Ngai presents a system that has become dissatisfied with its organizing weakness and therefore demands, futilely, a stronger kind of assurance. We might see Cavell's conversation as an 'effective weak theory of talk' and Ngai's 'hum' and 'bubble' as an ineffective one.[46] By examining the conditions in a text that render weak, inconclusive, unproductive forms of talk insufficient, and speculatively inquiring into the conditions that could allow them to stay weak, *Around Talk* seeks to better describe the question of what makes weak theories possible. The chapters that follow offer their own implicit, local answers to the more existential question of what weak theories are *for*: among them, grieving, flirting, staying alive.

3. Conversation in Context

In an address to the 1905 graduating class of Bryn Mawr College entitled 'The Question of Our Speech', Henry James confronts the graduates with an ominous warning. Announcing to his audience that he proposes to talk to them about 'speech', he anticipates an objection:

> 'Why, of course we speak in happy forms; we arrive here, arrive from our convenient homes, our wonderful schools, our growing cities, our great and glorious States, speaking in those happy forms in which people speak whose speech promotes the refinements (in a word the success) of intercourse, intellectual and social — not in any manner in which people speak whose speech frustrates, or hampers, or mocks at them. That conquest is behind us.'[47]

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[45] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading: or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You' in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 123-151. Originally published as an introduction to *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, ed. by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), pp. 1-37.

[46] Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 65.

[47] Henry James, *The question of our speech; The lesson of Balzac; two lectures* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1905), p. 7.

But James is not convinced that the conquest is indeed behind them: 'It is needless to make sure of the basis of the process of communication and intercourse when it is clear, when it is positive, that such a basis exists and flourishes; but that is a question as to which the slightest shade of doubt is disquieting, disconcerting—fatal indeed'.[48] It is this disquieting erosion—of the distinction between speech which promotes the refinements of intercourse and speech that frustrates or hampers it, or what we might call the slippage of conversation into talk—that *Around Talk* tracks and analyzes. The distinctly upper-class setting of James's warning, though, foregrounds a different operative distinction between the two terms: in Peter Burke's blunt summary, 'conversation is the domain of the elites, while the rest of us simply engage in talk.'[49] The factors James cites to the young women of Bryn Mawr for his concerns about the state of speech—the common school, mass circulation of print journalism, and increased immigration—depict a protected, exclusive conversational milieu that is existentially threatened by an emergent, indiscriminate mass culture. In this section, I will contextualize this thesis's conceptual approach to conversation within the social and historical formations of talk that Proust, James, and Larsen navigate.

In *The Chattering Mind: A Conceptual History of Everyday Talk* (2020), Samuel McCormick argues that the nineteenth century stages the devolution of conversation into another expressive form that he calls 'everyday talk'. McCormick's everyday talk is 'what became of conversation after the industrial revolution': where conversation is imagined as a personalized, intentional, and cultivated social art, everyday talk encompasses a set of depersonalized, involuntary, automated, and recursive expressive styles.[50] Heidegger's 'idle talk' is one of McCormick's case studies, alongside Kierkegaard's 'chatter' and Lacan's 'empty speech'. These repetitive, anonymous forms of everyday talk anticipate Maurice Blanchot's theorization of 'everyday speech' (1959), which Blanchot likens to a radio playing in another room: 'What is essential is not that one particular person speak and another hear, but that, with no one in particular speaking and no one in particular listening, there should nonetheless be speech […] the incessant coming and going of solitary words.'[51]

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[48] Henry James, *The question of our speech; The lesson of Balzac; two lectures*, pp. 8-9.

[49] Burke, 'Conversation', pp. 126-7.

[50] Samuel McCormick, *The Chattering Mind: A Conceptual History of Everyday Talk* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), p. 4.

[51] Maurice Blanchot, 'Everyday Speech', trans. by Susan Hanson, *Yale French Studies*, No. 73 (1987), pp. 12-20, p. 14.

Impersonality, contingency, and a meandering absence of goal, intention, or direction typify these kinds of talk; McCormick describes them as 'means without end'.[52]

With McCormick's intellectual history in mind, I refer to the spoken language of Proust, James, and Larsen's novels broadly as 'talk'. But these texts do not exactly exemplify what McCormick calls the 'flight from conversation' towards Blanchot's 'incessant coming and going of solitary words'. Such a description might be better applied to the more avant-garde prose of some of their contemporaries or to Blanchot's milieu, the mid-century writers of the *nouveaux romans*. In contrast, the forms of talk that interest Proust, James, and Larsen remain within the orbit of 'classical' conversation: the elite social art of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Indeed, James and Proust are perhaps the two modernist novelists whose intimate relation to and celebrated departure from the nineteenth-century novel have been most enshrined. Antoine Compagnon names Proust 'the last writer of the nineteenth century and the first writer of the twentieth'; in the Anglophone world, James was lauded by Woolf as 'the bridge upon which we cross from the classic novel [...] to the modern novel, the novel of the twentieth century'.[53] Nella Larsen is, of course, a more marginal figure in the history of literary modernism (although much studied today), as well as a decade further removed from the turn of the century. But prominent Americanists have connected Larsen to the Black American naturalist tradition that plays a crucial role in carrying the nineteenth-century American novel into the twentieth century, and recent scholarship has claimed Larsen's taut, mannered dramas as successors to Edith Wharton and James's American novel of manners.[54]

All three writers weathered accusations of obsolescence, elitism, and frivolity for their depictions of mannered, moneyed settings. V. L. Parrington's temporarily influential critique of James in 1927 targeted his '"dainty" nostalgia for the refinements of the Old

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[52] McCormick, *The Chattering Mind*, p. 5.

[53] Antoine Compagnon, trans. by Richard E. Goodkin, *Proust Between Two Centuries* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p. 15; Virginia Woolf quoted in Daniel Mark Fogel, *Covert Relations: James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Henry James* (Charlottesville, NC: University of Virginia Press, 1990), p. 114.

[54] Stacey Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminist Space* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), p. 123; Jennifer Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 252; Nicolas Krumholtz, 'Nella Larsen's Etiquette Lesson: Small Talk, Racial Passing, and the Novel of Manners', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (2018), pp. 1-16; Emily J. Orlando, 'Irreverent Intimacy: Nella Larsen's Revisions of Edith Wharton', *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (March 2015), pp. 32-62.

World […] "dominated by women"'.[55] When Proust was awarded the Prix Goncourt in 1914 for the second volume of the *Search*, he was criticized as a decadent snob whose aestheticist work had been hopelessly dated by the war (his competition for the prize was the war novel *Les Croix de bois*).[56] And Nella Larsen's obscurity up until the reclamation of her work by Black feminists in the 1980's is plausibly ascribed to the 'esoteric' and even 'spoiled' air surrounding her middle class heroines.[57] It is a small step further to connect these critiques to the highbrow and slightly antique conversational cultures these authors represent: in parlors, sitting-rooms, and the grounds of manors, Proust, James, and Larsen stage refined, exclusive scenes of talk. Proust's novel dwells at length on the latter days of the same eighteenth-century-style *salons* that the Goncourt brothers memorialized as 'center[s] of conversation', in their distinctly elitist and nostalgic sense of the word.[58] James favors the equally cliquish setting of weekend parties at stately manors, expounding on the special 'ease' and 'tolerance of talk' that seems to flow from that rarefied air.[59] And Larsen's novels linger in the 'New Negro salon culture' of Harlem, typified by the combined associations of an 'intellectual vanguard' and a stylish, judgmental cultural elite—although her novels regard the substance of their talk with a high degree of cynicism.[60] Across Proust, James, and Larsen's novels, well-spoken characters of elevated social class negotiate varyingly sophisticated etiquettes.

But in these texts, in different ways, talk repeatedly finds itself unhinged from purpose, intention, and desire. In the 'stylistic infectiousness' that makes James's characters so susceptible to a circuitous, involuted way of speaking; in the compulsive, disingenuous

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[55] V.L. Parrington quoted in Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity*, p. 14. As Fleissner discusses, James would be thoroughly resurrected and placed at the center of the American literary tradition by F. O. Mathiessen and Lionel Trilling in the following three decades.

[56] Compagnon, *Proust Between Two Centuries*, pp. 18-9. Proust was championed by Jacques Rivière, the director of *La Nouvella Revue Française*, among other prominent literary figures of the time.

[57] Mary Helen Washington, *Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women 1860-1960* (New York: Anchor Books by Doubleday, 1987), p. 159.

[58] Edmond de Goncourt and Jules de Goncourt, trans. by Jacques le Clercq and Ralph Roeder, *The Woman of the Eighteenth Century: Her Life, from Birth to Death, Her Love and Her Philosophy in the Worlds of Salon, Shop and Street* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 41. In the opinion of the Goncourt brothers, 'conversation was drowned in a din' when *salons* opened their doors to 'all comers' (p. 56).

[59] Henry James, *The Sacred Fount* (New York: New Directions, 1995), p. 73. Hereafter cited in the text with abbreviation *SF* followed by the page number.

[60] André M. Carrington, 'Salon Culture and Space of Culture Edification' in *A Companion to the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. by Cherene Sherrard-Johnson (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), pp. 251-266, p. 253.

utterances that Proust's characters find themselves emitting when snubbed, which his narrator terms 'purely conversational words' (III 261); in the generic, collage-like small talk in which Larsen's heroines are suspended, talk exerts its own curious subjectivity and volition (*Q*: 81).[61] Rather than McCormick's 'flight from conversation', these phenomena effect something more like a sidestep. Through subtle, minor, yet pervasive misalignments of feeling, intention, and expression, they throw conversation out of joint. Thus this introduction's title, 'Talking Around Conversation': it describes both the conceptual area of interest for this thesis and the culture of talk in the novels of Proust, James, and Larsen. The three authors each depict a fluent, affected, highbrow conversational milieu that has been, in various ways, defamiliarized, disorganized, or imperiled. This differentiates their writings from other modes of experimentation around talk in modernist novels. They do not, for instance, defamiliarize the representations of talk with unusual or unstable notation, like James Joyce's script-form interlude in *Ulysses* (1922) or Gertrude Stein's run-on sentences of overlapping voices.[62] Nor do they go so far as to make talk the dominant mode of the novel, like Ivy Compton-Burnett's 'closet dramas' or, in a more experimental register, Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (1931)—novels which are composed almost entirely of reported speech.[63] Proust, James, and Larsen's novels retain a robust surrounding architecture of setting, character, and narrative which the peculiarities of talk pressurize, displace, and deform without fully deconstructing.

As McCormick argues, the late nineteenth and early twentieth century mark out an era in which 'elites' perceived a proliferation of forms of talk that threatened their claim to the exclusive arts of conversation, as well as the forms of social, intellectual, and cultural flourishing associated with it. These anxieties are represented—more nervously and compulsively in James's case, more consciously and satirically by Proust and Larsen—across the texts analyzed in this thesis. New forms of technology, unleashing volatile possibilities of contact and transmission, disturb and defamiliarize the operation of talk. Proust represents the telephone as a rupturing, near-supernatural medium of communication across minds,

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[61] David Kurnick, 'What Does Jamesian Style Want?', *The Henry James Review*, Vol. 28 (2007), pp. 213-222, p. 219.

[62] See, for example, Stein's *Ida: A Novel* (New York: Vintage, 1941) or *Everybody's Autobiography* (New York: Vintage, 1973).

[63] Joyce Carol Oates, 'The English Secret Unveiled': Review of *The Life of I. Compton-Burnett* by Hilary Spurling (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), *The New York Times*, 9 December 1984, p. 7 < https://www.nytimes.com/1984/12/09/books/the-english-secret-unveiled.html> [Accessed 17 April 2023].

selves, and narrative registers (Chapter 1) and James depicts the telegraph office as a vaguely occult, frictional marketplace of words (Chapter 4). Both Proust and James's novels are situated in a shifting social landscape in which a lingering aristocracy gives way to an openly bourgeois cultural center, but they relate to this instability in different ways. Proust retains more of the sharp perspective of the satirist on the varying snobberies of these milieus. Benjamin delivers an influential defense of Proust's class politics: 'Hack critics were tempted to draw conclusions about the author from the snobbish milieu of his writings […] In the treasure of its prejudices and maxims there is not one that is not annihilated by a dangerous comic element.'[64]

Whether or not we entirely agree with Benjamin's full-throated vindication of Proust, by all accounts, James's perspective is less detached. As Jameson puts it, surprisingly mildly, 'He was not, I think, particularly perceptive (à la Proust, for example) of the fragile destiny of the limited society he moved in'.[65] As his Bryn Mawr address indicates, James actively wished to forestall the transformations to conversational and literary culture that the first decades of the twentieth century would bring. A decade later, he issues a call for an increased ratio of published criticism to novel-writing: 'the flood of "production" has so inordinately exceeded the activity of control,' he warns, 'that this latter anxious agent […] has been forced backward out of the gate'.[66] James's desire to introduce greater discrimination into the expanding genre of the novel echoes a movement in the late nineteenth century to regulate conversation: Amy R. Wong notes that a profusion of Anglophone conversation manuals in this period reflect an urgent effort, on the part of the upper classes, to increasingly codify and control their private form of talk.[67] There is an evident analogy between an elite-class fear of conversation's usurpation by everyday talk and James's fear that the cultural status of the novel—historically associated with conversation and conversability[68]—would becomes corrupted and degraded by an emerging

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[64] Walter Benjamin, 'The Image of Proust' in *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zohn, ed. by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), pp. 201-216, p. 206.

[65] Fredric Jameson, 'Remarks on Henry James', *The Henry James Review*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Fall 2015), pp. 296-306, p. 300.

[66] Henry James, 'The New Novel' in *Notes on Novelists With Some Other Notes* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1914), pp. 314-361, p. 315.

[67] Amy R. Wong, *Refiguring Speech: Late Victorian Fictions of Empire and the Poetics of Talk* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2023), p. 4.

[68] 'The novel […] not only affects a conversable style, but also attempts to model conversability.' Robin Valenza, *Language, Literature, and the Rise of the Intellectual Disciplines in Britain 1680-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 46.

mass print culture. I analyze the relationship between these two sets of concerns in Chapter 4.

Of the three authors, it is Larsen who most vividly inhabits and negotiates a precarious, emergent upper-class culture in her novels. Across the recently-formed Black bourgeoisie and the rising Black intelligentsia, Larsen's characters are constantly and visibly engaged in performative acts of class-making through perceptions and assertions of distinction.[69] Like James's readership, they negotiate an expanding mass culture—not just in print but in newer forms of mass media including cinema and radio, and, notably for Larsen's impeccably dressed heroines, through the availability of manufactured clothing and other consumer goods in department stores. Scholars of the Harlem Renaissance have argued that this mass culture pressurized the distinction between 'the thinking Negro' and 'a newly amalgamated black middle class'—or, in more snobbish terms, augmented the rise of a 'black middlebrow culture' against which an aspiring 'haute bourgeoisie' wished to distinguish themselves.[70] Such projects of distinction, while often operating through the minute, petty, or minor differences in taste that Proust and James also dwell upon, are freighted and deformed by their relationship to whiteness, white supremacy, and various ideals of racial authenticity. This nexus of contradictions is exemplified by the elegant, wealthy Anne Grey from Larsen's *Quicksand*, whose visceral hatred of white people and proclamation of 'the undiluted good of all things Negro' jar with her tastes: 'she aped their clothes, their manners, their gracious ways of living […] like the despised people of the white race, she preferred Pavlova to Florence Mills, John McCormach to Taylor Gordon, Walter Hampden to Paul Robeson' (*Q*: 48-9). Larsen's own writerly tastes favor elegant clothes and expensive settings, eschewing dialect in favor of the cultivated, smooth talk of Harlem salons[71]—talk that affirms, in Bourdieu's terms, 'the speaker's capacity to keep his distance from his or her own utterances'.[72] Her novels thus inhabit an uneasy critical intimacy with figures like Anne Grey on the fraught terrain of taste, talk, and racial identity.

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[69] Pamela Caughie, '"The best people": The Making of the Black Bourgeoisie in the Writings of the Negro Renaissance', *Modernism/modernity,* Vol. 20, Number 3 (September 2013), pp. 519-537, p. 520.

[70] Caughie, '"The best people"', p. 531; Meredith Goldsmith, 'Shopping to Pass, Passing to Shop: Consumer Self-Fashioning in the Fiction of Nella Larsen' in *Middlebrow Moderns: Popular American Women Writers of the 1920s* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003), pp. 263-290, p. 271.

[71] The exception to this rule is 'Sanctuary', the controversial short story that ended Larsen's career with a plagiarism scandal.

[72] Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, trans. by Gino Raymond, ed. by John Thompson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 85.

4. Mapping *Around Talk*

It is unsurprising that of the three authors interpreted in this thesis, Proust offers the most robust internal theorizations of talk. Lucey cites biographical evidence that Proust had a keen ear and memory for idiosyncrasies of expression, and was apparently a skilled mimic.[73] *In Search of Lost Time* exhibits a profound interest in talk, detailing hundreds of variations in inflection, vocabulary, syntax, and voice: Benjamin describes it as a 'physiology of chatter'.[74] In Gérard Genette's major study of talk in the *Search*, 'Proust and Indirect Language', he goes so far as to claim that conversational mannerisms in the novel are almost characters in their own right: 'certain individuals are represented almost entirely as stylistic models […] or as collections of linguistic accidents'.[75] Proust's diverse representations of talk are accompanied by reflections on the nature of talk itself, interweaving theories of talk into the novel's concomitant theories of art and desire. But it is important to note that the stances that characterize the narrator's theories are not always carried through into the details of specific interactions. For instance, as Hannah Freed-Thall notes in a recent study of inarticulacy in the *Search*, although the narrator explicitly dismisses the hero's unsophisticated expressions of aesthetic appreciation as a sign of immaturity—in one passage, young Marcel responds to a charming scene by exclaiming, 'Zut, zut, zut!'—instances of 'babble', 'blather', and 'song' recur throughout the *Search*, replacing articulations of aesthetic judgment. She reads this unsanctioned discourse as an alternative to the narrator's explicit aesthetic theory.[76]

Freed-Thall's general orientation towards the *Search*, in which apparently unimportant incidents from the novel compose a challenge to the explicit theories that emerge at narrative high points, is by now a well-established approach to Proust's novel. In one compelling account, Eve Sedgwick describes Proust's novel as an interplay of closed and open systems: totalizing, demanding theories alongside looser, more spontaneous and surprising forms of structure.[77] Christopher Prendergast uses recalcitrant material from the

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[73] Lucey, *What Proust Heard*, p. 7.

[74] Walter Benjamin, 'An Image of Proust', p. 206.

[75] Gérard Genette, *Figures of Literary Discourse*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 229.

[76] Hannah Freed-Thall, 'Babble' in *Spoiled Distinctions: Aesthetics and the Ordinary in French Modernism* (Oxford Scholarship Online: September 2015), p. 7.

[77] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Weather in Proust* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 3.

Search to unpick its strong stances on aesthetics, arguing that Proust should be read as a skeptic.[78] In a recent study, Dora Zhang draws from the tremendous volume of 'ordinary, passing' descriptions in Proust's novel to complicate the narrator's disavowal of description as a rhetorical form.[79] *Around Talk* carries out a similar kind of analysis through the lens of talk, pitching the novel's granular representations against its generalizing pronouncements. In particular, I take up the complex textual dynamic that is illuminated by Freed-Thall's argument: that there might be shifting interpretive credibility not only between the text's theory and its practice, or between the novel's narrator and its hero, but between narration and talk in the *Search*. The narrator assumes a position of knowledge and authority over the talk that the hero produces (finding nothing of value, for instance, in 'Zut, zut, zut') but we, the readers, might find insights in talk—the hero's and that of other characters—that the narrator seems unable to formulate otherwise. The first two chapters of this thesis are dedicated to this shifting dynamic in Proust's novel: between the affordances of narration and the capacities of talk.

Chapter 1 takes as its point of departure a remark from the narrator that claims talk between friends is a 'superficial digression', a repetitive and unproductive activity, in contrast to the solitary pursuit of artistic creation. Reading against the grain of the narrator's cursory dismissal, this chapter sustains the novel's proffered identification of the two terms: talk and digression. In particular, it develops an interpretation of narrative digressions in Proust's *Search* as a space of potential interaction between the novel's narrator and hero where they appear as overlapping yet distinct conversationalists. Of the five chapters of *Around Talk*, Chapter 1 relies the most on the primary text itself to supply and elaborate its terms of analysis. It argues that the intersections of narrative digressions with scenes of talk in Proust's *Search* serve as sites of convergence between the hero and the narrator—where, in particular, the hero's urgent feelings and single-minded attachments share space with the narrator's weaker, more distractive forms of attention.

Where Chapter 1 focuses on digression, a meandering, roundabout, prolix model of talk, Chapter 2 explores a category of talk that is typified in Proust's *Search* by unerring, sometimes unsettling concision and accuracy: gossip. Gossip represents a kind of unregulated channel of communication; it travels by unsanctioned, uncontrolled routes,

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[78] Christopher Prendergast, *Mirages and Mad Beliefs: Proust the Skeptic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

[79] Dora Zhang, *Strange Likeness: Description and the Modernist Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), p. 98.

likened in one passage of the *Search* to 'service stairways' (IV 518).[80] As a particularly contagious form of talk, it enjoys the unpredictable and expansive range afforded by what sociologist Mark Granovetter calls 'weak ties': moving between people who may be only weakly or contingently tied to one another, gossip can escape its original social setting and circulate back to its object.[81] In Chapter 2, I consider gossip alongside a phenomenon I call 'reserve': a tendency towards reticence around a particular set of strong ties, Marcel's relations with his mother and grandmother, that afflicts both the hero's talk and the narrator's exposition. As a reader, to speculate into the meaning of this reserve is to risk overwriting or betraying the text—in other words, to risk something like the frivolity and presumption of the gossip. Thus, Chapter 2 explores a critical position towards the *Search*'s reserve modeled on the peculiar form of insight Proust attributes to the stranger, the outsider, the passing acquaintance. Together, Chapters 1 and 2 present an account of talk in the *Search* as a medium for maneuvering between different subjectivities and subjective positions in Proust's novel. They use talk as a lens to uncover continuums between terms that the novel presents as disjunctive or incompatible: desire and fulfillment, grief and indifference, gossip and intimacy.

From Proust's subjunctive feelings and shifting subjectivities, I turn to James's intricate, artfully paired conversations. James does not offer the explicit in-text theorizations of talk that Proust does, but Jamesian talk is nonetheless a singular, complex, and heavily theorized phenomenon, which I will briefly introduce here—beginning with Fredric Jameson's famous criticism of James in *The Political Unconscious* (1981). In this passage, Jameson accuses James of transforming 'point of view' into 'the most fundamental of narrative categories', developing around it 'a whole aesthetic', and thus 'furnishing a powerful ideological instrument in the perpetuation of an increasingly subjectivized and psychologized world'; these few, damning lines are much cited.[82] But less well-remembered seems to be that Jameson chooses to illustrate this problem by way of Plato's *Phaedrus.* For Jameson, Henry James's style of perspectival narration is curiously associated with the

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[80] Silvia Federici has emphasized this aspect of gossip in her feminist history of the term in 'On the Meaning of "Gossip"' in *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2018), pp. 35-45.

[81] Mark Granovetter, 'The Strength of Weak Ties', *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 78, No. 6 (May 1973), pp. 1360-1380.

[82] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 221.

helpless, inferior condition of the written text that Socrates compares in *Phaedrus*, to its detriment, to speech:

> It is clear that to return from the primacy of the Jamesian narrative category of point of view to the older fiction of the storyteller and the storytelling situation is to express impatience with the objective yet ever intensifying alienation of the printed book, those bound and portable novels which 'when they have been written down […] are tumbled about anywhere among those who may or may not understand them, and know not to whom they should reply, to whom not: and, if they are maltreated or abused, they have no parent to protect them; and they cannot protect or defend themselves'.[83]

Despite this passage's authoritative opening, it is not quite clear what connects Henry James to the eccentric argument in *Phaedrus* for the primacy of speech over writing. As the passage progresses, and by way of a clarification, Jameson gives a fable-like account of the commodification of fiction—the printed book—as market forces overwhelm and fragment precapitalist social practices of storytelling. It is this book, this reified fiction, that for Jameson resembles Plato's strangely ventriloquized text.

In broad strokes one can follow the lines of his argument. The commodification of literary production has the effect of isolating the written text from a live social discourse that would produce its full significance. This process renders the alienated text, like Plato's scattered inscriptions, the only source of its meaning to an isolated reader. This change in literary culture produces changes in literary style; thus, Jameson succinctly argues, 'Jamesian point of view' takes shape as one of many 'desperate myths of the self' produced by a nineteenth-century bourgeoisie suffering from the depersonalizing effects of reification.[84] To this argument, though, *Phaedrus* is distinctly redundant. Despite being a strikingly ahistorical illustration of what is, for Jameson, an acutely historical point, its invocation goes unexplained and the strangeness of its enlivened texts goes unacknowledged. In so characterizing the Jamesian novel, Jameson imagines a vital, functional kind of discourse or dialogue surrounding the text (its 'social and communicational situation') replaced by an arrested, disaffected, and uncanny one. This latter defamiliarized version of conversation emanates from a speaker that *seems* intelligent, whose words have the form of meaning, but who belies or estranges its claim to meaning through repetitious and inscrutable forms of reply. In other words, this portrayal of 'writing' closely resembles the disreputable form of expression I have theorized as talk.

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[83] Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, p. 219.

[84] Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, p. 221.

Talk, then, emerges as kind of *supplement* to Jamesian 'point of view', which, in fact, has a destabilizing effect on Jameson's portrayal of James as a writer of sealed, subjective interiority.[85] The unusual qualities and functions of talk in James's novels make him appear instead as a writer of intense, changeable, transformative relations—in Dora Zhang's phrase, a writer primarily interested in depicting a 'relational nexus'.[86] For instance, Ruth Yeazell points out a tendency in James's characters to pronounce vague, exaggerated terms of admiration like 'beautiful' and 'prodigious'. She likens the effect of these repeated expressions to that of a 'secret code': 'an esoteric vocabulary understood only by members of a closed social world' to which the reader is never quite initiated.[87] Elizabeth Alsop notes that James's characters' speech has a high density of phrasal verbs—'bounced out', 'put in', 'put up'—whose compositional irregularity and dangling prepositions produce an ambiguous sense of something unfinished.[88] David Kurnick observes the shared habit across characters of rearranging an intuitive sentence into a slightly off-kilter one: 'Every Jamesian character seems to sense how idioms ("from top to bottom", "jumped at") are poeticized—ironized, given resonance, made strange—by being subject to predication, hesitation, or inversion of sequence.'[89] These irregularities of expression, vocabulary, and syntax contribute to the evocation of a meaning within the reader's reach but outside their grasp, an expressivity that moves across James's characters in odd iterations and coordinations. For Leo Bersani, the evasiveness of Jamesian talk allows for generative forms of surprise:

> the greatest Jamesian […] sophistication is to find a kind of sensual pleasure in following the ingenious evasions and indirections with which language deflects and serves insistent desires. James and Stendhal invite us to use those evasions as a source of entertainment rather than as a pretext for cynicism […] The surfaces of our

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[85] One might suspect an intention on Jameson's part to link the alienated condition of the book-commodity to deconstructive hermeneutics in an implicit reference to Derrida's transformative reading of *Phaedrus* in 'Plato's Pharmacy' (first published in 1968). Ironically, then, Derrida's interpretation of writing in *Phaedrus* as the destabilizing supplement to *logos* could direct our attention to the purely supplemental status of *Phaedrus* in Jameson's diagnosis of James. Following a Derridean drift, the repeated association between Henry James's novels and Plato's uncannily voluble text in *The Political Unconscious* might have very little to do with the 'doctrine of point of view', and may even move orthogonally to it. Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. by Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981.

[86] Zhang, *Strange Likeness*, p. 76. Sharon Cameron argues for a similar shift in *Thinking in Henry James* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), but she is interested in developing a concept of trans-subjective thought in James's fiction that is explicitly differentiated from talk.

[87] Ruth B. Yeazell, 'Talking in James', *PMLA*, Vol. 91, No. 1 (January 1976), pp. 66-77, p. 70.

[88] Alsop, *Making Conversation in Modernist Fiction*, p. 51.

[89] Kurnick, 'What Does Jamesian Style Want?', p. 216.

> thought and our speech don't merely cover up the depths behind thought and speech. They have appeals of their own, and as we compose our sublimations we can discover pleasures distinct from those for the sake of which we began to sublimate.[90]

Bersani sees the possibility of spontaneity, novelty, and even transformation in the indirect movements, the odd phrasings and phrasal verbs, the subtleties and ambiguities of talk in James's fiction. In Chapters 3 and 4 of this thesis, I measure this perceived creative power within talk against blunter forces: the requirements of plot and the laws of economic exchange.

Chapter 3 uses the term 'flirtation' to describe a pleasurable, non-teleological, suspensive form of talk in James's *The Sacred Fount* (1901) and 'The Beast in the Jungle' (1903). This concept takes shape in conversation with other writings by Bersani, including his engagements with sociologist Georg Simmel and psychoanalyst Adam Phillips. From Simmel, Bersani drwas the idea of 'sociability': a non-instrumental form of relation, dedicated only to its own prolongation, in which all personal motives are suspended.[91] He borrows Phillips's succinct description of the psychoanalytic scene as 'talk without sex' to interpret the central relation of 'The Beast in the Jungle'.[92] I situate 'flirtation' between these two concepts: the self-prolonging and suspensive character of sociability and the intimate talk of the analytic scene, which can't end in sex without changing the nature of the intimacy. Flirtation, I argue, is what emerges in James's fiction when the plot devices that serve as an alibi for talking to one another begin to wear thin and relation for its own sake emerges as a distinct desire in the text. Across both *The Sacred Fount* and 'The Beast in the Jungle', I find that flirtation is forced to compete with another form of relation: a powerful drive towards narrative and interpersonal closure that is represented by marriage.

Chapter 4 centers around a term from novelist and essayist Nathalie Sarraute, the *sub-conversation*: 'all those tiny actions that subtend and set the dialogue into motion, giving it its real meaning'.[93] In this chapter, I develop the idea of 'Jamesian sub-conversation', building on a later essay of Jameson's in which he applies Sarraute's concept to James's intricate, enigmatic style of writing talk.[94] Despite my departure from Jameson's

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[90] Leo Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), p. 129.

[91] Leo Bersani, 'Sociability and Cruising' in *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), pp. 124-170, p. 130.

[92] Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *Intimacies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 1.

[93] Sarraute, 'Conversation and Sub-Conversation', p. 113.

[94] Fredric Jameson, 'Remarks on James', *The Henry James Review*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Fall 2015), pp. 296-306.

interpretation of the late James from *The Political Unconscious*, my analysis of sub-conversational dynamics in Chapter 4 returns to the central idea of his earlier critique: that the formal innovations of James's late fiction are attempts to compensate for their reification by the market. In this chapter, I analyze the ways in which the heroines of *The Wings of the Dove* and *In the Cage* attempt to revise the significance of intractable, concrete events through sub-conversational maneuvers: delicate, minute efforts to rework the tone and tenor of their relations. Both characters seek to escape the operative logics of exploitation and exchange in which they are inescapably caught by way of these subtle interpretive efforts. In the awkward suspension between exchange value and the more elusive, obscure value evoked in the sub-conversation, they each reiterate the condition of the Jamesian high art novel as a commodity on the market—and the telegraphist in particular, as a disempowered word-worker, discloses the sharp material limits of James's sub-conversational literary aesthetics.

This leads us, finally, to Nella Larsen and the heroine of her novel *Quicksand*, Helga Crane. Helga, like the telegraphist, is a word-worker—she compiles and edits speeches for a professional 'race woman'—and an aesthete whose displays of taste interact awkwardly with her conditions of material constraint. But Larsen's writing of talk, unlike that of Proust and James, has not been much studied. References to Helga's style of talk in Larsen scholarship tend to occur in passing, if at all, in comments like this one:

> Even when Larsen wishes to explore her heroine Helga Crane's sexuality, she was compelled, in order to avoid primitivist stereotypes, to make Helga a model of chastity and education, a person who never uses dialect, who disapproves of nightclubs, dance, and promiscuity, and who finds it natural to use phrases such as 'Thanks awfully' to her fellow teacher in Naxos, Missisippi.[95]

This scholar presents a rather prim picture of Helga Crane as a heroine who is hemmed in by sexualized and exoticized stereotypes, and therefore forced to become the very model of bourgeois respectability. W.E.B. Du Bois's early review of *Quicksand*, which he set against Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem*, only served to underscore this 'respectable' reading; his praise of Helga stood in marked contrast to his distaste for the 'lascivious sexual promiscuity' of the latter novel.[96] The excerpt quoted above is a particularly reductive

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[95] Jeffrey Gray, 'Essence and the Mulatto Traveler: Europe as Embodiment in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*', *NOVEL: A Form on Fiction*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (Spring 1987), pp. 257-270, p. 257.

[96] W.E.B. Du Bois, *Book Reviews by W.E.B. Du Bois*, ed. by Herbert Aptheker (Millwood, New York: KTO Press, 1977), p. 114.

version of a common reading of *Quicksand*, which considers Helga's 'bourgeois ethos' as a symptom of her sexual repression, and her style of talk as a symptom of her bourgeoisness.[97]

> The surrounding context of Helga's 'Thanks awfully' paints a different picture:
>
> Seeing Helga still in night robe seated on the bedside in a mass of cushions, idly dangling a mule across bare toes like one with all the time in the world before her, [Margaret] exclaimed in dismay: 'Helga Crane, do you know what time it is? Why, it's long after half past seven […] I said I'd look in on you.'
>
> 'Thanks awfully,' Helga responded, indifferently. She was watching the sunlight dissolve from thick orange into pale yellow. Slowly it crept across the room, wiping out in its path the morning shadows. She wasn't interested in what the other was saying. (*Q*: 13)

In this scene, Helga does not exactly evoke the fastidious prude that Larsen was allegedly forced to write. She is more like a dissolute aristocrat or bohemian, with her mass of cushions and dangling mule; she has slept in, she has scandalized her colleague, she is about to quit her job at the school, and her ironical 'Thanks awfully' is a part of the character she inhabits here. But despite this convincing performance, Helga is in fact a working-class, mixed-race young woman without a support system, whose choice to sleep in may come at a high cost. I offer this reading not to negate the interpretation of Helga's style of talk as a marker of bourgeois respectability, but to emphasize that stylized talk is part of an aesthetic strategy for Helga that allows Larsen to disidentify her with her environment. Her 'disapproval' of nightclubs is, in fact, another variant of this strategy: extricating herself from the dance floor with a feeling of disgust, she tells herself 'she wasn't […] a jungle creature' (*Q*: 59). It is overly blunt to identify Helga's cultivated taste and sophisticated talk as compulsory forms of respectability, for she employs them indiscriminately against staid and provocative settings alike.

Stylized talk in *Quicksand* is interwoven with Helga's aesthetic sense; she deploys them together, with varying success, to detach and distinguish herself from her surrounds. In Chapter 5, I consider Helga's displays of taste alongside Larsen's representations of small talk in *Quicksand*, supplemented by analysis of small talk in her second novel, *Passing* (1929). Small talk, or what sociologist Bronislaw Malinowski theorized as 'phatic communication', is a curiously blank, thoughtless kind of talk:

> Inquiries about health, comments on weather, affirmations of some supremely obvious state of things—all such are exchanged, not in order to inform, not in this case to connect people in action, certainly not in order to express any thought. It

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[97] Cheryl A. Wall, 'Passing for What? Aspects of Identity in Nella Larsen's Novels', *Black American Literature Forum*, Vol. 20, No. 1-2 (Spring-Summer 1986), pp. 97-111, p. 97.

> would be even incorrect, I think, to say that such words serve the purpose of establishing a common sentiment, for this is usually absent from such current phrases of intercourse.[98]

These conventionalized, desultory remarks satisfy a formal requirement of conversation in occurring 'to the side' of instrumental tasks, but they do not resemble an aesthetic art—they produce no visceral enjoyment nor, in their neutral conventionality, do they demonstrate any marked social facility. Malinowski eventually concludes that phatic communication is not completely without value: its ultimate purpose is to facilitate social ties, serving the indirect social function of 'binding hearer to speaker by a tie of some social sentiment or other'.[99] But even this recuperative claim is undermined by his previous observation that 'common sentiment' is not a prominent feature of small talk, which is more likely to be accompanied by weak or inattentive feelings. Without fellow-feeling, small talk resembles a kind of social static, sustaining a given state of affairs without quite motivating it.

Thus small talk is an apt figure to represent Helga's askew relationship to her social worlds and, in particular, to her practices of taste and distinction. Small talk is already a diminished, conventionalized version of conversation, assembled from ready-made, widely circulating items. But despite its generic, monotonous, and depersonalized character, its social functionality nonetheless relies upon the same connection to feeling that renders conversation an aesthetic art. Helga's persistent disconnections of feeling, then, reflect in some way the inadequacy of her available materials. As an affected, unserious, rote practice of group talk, small talk is vulnerable to the same criticisms and diminutions as Helga's taste: it is anodyne, bourgeois, frivolous, an assemblage of conventions. Reading Helga's slanted relation to bourgeois aesthetics alongside her shifting orientation to small talk, I aim to recover the conditions in the text under which these slight, shallow forms could coordinate with feeling to sustain a practice of identity.

This thesis is preoccupied with practices of relation, feeling, identity, and expression that are suggested, even briefly enacted around talk, but for which the conditions of realization are not quite intact, not quite secure. In the coda of this thesis, I turn back to Cavell to reflect on the non-event, the occasion when 'nothing happened', as an alternative approach to the uncertain possibilities that this thesis perceives around talk.

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[98] Bronislaw Malinowski, 'The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages' in *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language Upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism*, C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1945), pp. 296-336, p. 313.

[99] Malinowski, 'The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages', p. 315.

Chapter 1
Talk and Digression in *In Search of Lost Time*

Talk among friends, Proust's narrator tells us, 'is a superficial digression which gives us nothing worth acquiring.'[1] He contrasts talk with solitary reflection:

> We may talk for a lifetime without doing more than indefinitely repeat the vacuity of a minute, whereas the march of thought in the solitary work of artistic creation proceeds in depth, in the only direction that is not closed to us, along which we are free to advance—though with more effort, it is true—towards a goal of truth. (II: 562)[2]

This passage is one of many across *In Search of Lost Time* that articulate a hierarchical aesthetic theory which strongly privileges certain terms over others: in this case, the solitary takes precedence over the social and thought takes precedence over talk. Yet the use of the term 'digression' (*divagation*) to characterize talk against 'artistic creation' lends a distinctly ironic air to this pronouncement: the *Search* is a novel of myriad digressions, including the very passage from which the above quotation is drawn. Proust's novel has a semblance of a linear plot, since Marcel is a child in 'Combray' and an aging adult in *Time Regained*; but the linear narrative is interrupted by what Christopher Prendergast calls 'a series of digressive, temporal swerves' so sustained and persistent that 'the novel threatens to become all digression'.[3] This formal tendency is reiterated stylistically at the level of the sentence: Proust's elongated, wandering sentences replicate the digressiveness of the novel at large, disorienting the reader across time and space before they reach their conclusions.[4] Within this formal context, the unsparing judgment that the narrator levels at talk—'superficial digression'—seems calibrated to prick the reader's suspicions. In the schematic sketched out in the opening passage, in which talk meanders and circles on a surface dimension and

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[1] Proust uses the term conversation here: 'Conversation (*la conversation*) […] is a superficial digression'. His use of the term *'causer*', to chat, in the following sentence (quoted above) to refer to the same activity exemplifies the slippage of conversation into talk that I discussed in the introduction. Hereafter the English editions will be cited in the text with the volume in Roman numerals followed by the page number. French editions will be cited individually in footnotes.

[2] 'Nous pouvons causer pendant toute une vie sans rien dire que répéter indéfiniment le vide d'une minute, tandis que la marche de la pensée dans le travail solitaire de la création artistique se fait dans le sens de la profondeur, la seule direction qui ne nous soit pas fermée, où nous puissions progresser, avec plus de peine il est vrai, pour un résultat de vérité' (Proust, *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, p. 468).

[3] Christopher Prendergast, *Mirages and Mad Beliefs*, p. 64.

[4] Pierre Bayard makes this observation in *Le hors-sujet: Proust et la digression* (Paris: Minuit, 1996), p. 181.

thought advances unidirectionally, it is the former and not the latter that resembles Proust's own mode of 'artistic creation'.

What, then, is the significance in Proust's *Search* of the linked terms: talk and digression? It cannot be denied that talk is an unwieldy instrument in the *Search*: sometimes exasperatingly obscure and avoidant, at other times inconveniently transparent and revealing, it almost never acts to advance the speaker's desires. In this chapter, I propose that the novel's theories of talk offer a framework in which to interpret its narrative digressions and the relations between the hero and narrator that emerge therein. In the first section, I discuss the forms and functions of Proustian talk that defer and facilitate contact between subjects in the *Search*. In the following two sections, I extend these reflections to what we might call the novel's intrapersonal dynamics: the changeable balance of intimacy and distance between the shifting perspectives of the text. In particular, I interpret how narrative digressions contrast with and inflect the scenes of communication—missed or otherwise —that they interleave.

This analysis is premised on the idea that in the *Search*, scenes of talk do not only mediate the relations between Marcel and other characters. By producing temporal displacements, internal confusions, and unexpected points of contact, they also negotiate the relationship between the hero and himself, or what we might call his 'other selves'. Gérard Genette has influentially described the perspectival arrangement of the *Search* as one of *polymodality*: in the polymodal framework, the hero, narrator, and even the author inhabit continuous, distinct, and overlapping perspectives throughout the novel. As Michael Lucey points out, we might even be inclined to distinguish between a number of different narrators ($narrator_1$, $narrator_2$,…).[5] I would go further still to argue that the hero himself, in his different iterations and arrangements of habit, attachment, and desire, also contains multiple subjects. This is how the novel itself theorizes Marcel's subjectivity: 'No matter at what moment we consider it, our total soul has only a more or less fictitious value, in spite of the rich inventory of its assets, for now some, now others are unrealisable' (IV: 180). In this chapter, I consider scenes of talk as negotiations between Marcel's distinct subjects, which include—ambiguously, at times speculatively—the digressive narrator.

[5] Lucey, *What Proust Heard*, p. 132.

1. Proust's Forms of Talk

In a passage full of archetypal longing, at the initiation of Marcel and Albertine's drawn-out and interrupted romance, Marcel finds himself unable to speak his mind:

> the things I said to her were connected with those I had said during the preceding hours, and were totally unconnected with what I was thinking about, what I desired from her, remaining obstinately parallel thereto. There is nothing like desire for preventing the things one says from bearing any resemblance to what one has in one's mind […] We go on chatting, whereas the sentence we should like to utter would have been accompanied by a gesture. (III: 407-8)[6]

This is Proustian talk at its most painfully evasive: recalling the surface of talk from the introduction, Marcel's words unfold on a different plane entirely from his desire and intentions. This passage expresses a longing for 'gesture', as if a bodily movement could overcome the avoidances built into talk.[7] But the longed-for gesture also manages to miss the mark: when Marcel succeeds in kissing Albertine's cheek, the result is pure bathos. Observing that the proximity required by the kiss destroys his poetic impressions of her cheeks (as geraniums, pink granite, waxy petals), the narrator relates that 'my eyes ceased to see, then my nose, crushed by the collision, no longer perceived any odour, and, without thereby gaining any clearer idea of the taste of the rose of my desire, I learned, from these obnoxious signs, that at last I was in the act of kissing Albertine's cheek' (III: 421). Mirroring the parallel realms of talk and desire, the mythologized cheek and the material one seem to exist on separate planes, the former remaining intrinsically untouchable. So the narrator laments the impossibility of both fulfilling and preserving one's desire: 'when reality folds back and overlays what we have long dreamed of, it completely hides it from us […] whereas, to give our happiness its full meaning, we would rather preserve for all those separate points of our desire […] the distinction of being intangible' (II: 127). In this way, the parallel planes of talk and desire represent a broader incommensurability in Proust's novel in which desire's fulfillment is always deferred, never achieved.

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[6] 'Les phrases que je lui disais se rattachaient à celles que je lui avais dites pendant les heures précédentes, et ne rejoignaient en rien ce à quoi je pensais, ce que je désirais, lui restaient indéfiniment parallèles. Il n'y a rien comme le désir pour empêcher les choses qu'on dit d'avoir aucune ressemblance avec ce qu'on a dans la pensée […] On cause, alors que la phrase qu'on voudrait prononcer serait déjà accompagnée d'un geste' (Marcel Proust, *Le Côté de Guermantes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 343.

[7] Genette argues along these lines that 'gestural expression' in Proust's novel cuts through the dissemblance of talk to betray what the speaker really means (Genette, 'Proust and Indirect Language', p. 267).

The fugitivity of desire in the *Search* is a much-discussed feature of the work: Jacques Lacan memorably named the futile pursuit of a phantasmic, intrinsically unattainable desire the 'myth of Albertine'.[8] But the role that talk plays in mediating and enacting the endless deferrals of desire is less frequently observed. In particular, scenes of talk in Proust's *Search* that are animated by the demands of desire are characterized by a pathological tendency towards mistiming. In Marcel's later paranoid obsession with Albertine, he desperately tries to uncover her secrets; ultimately, it is not his desperation that unlocks the truth about Albertine, but his indifference. After Albertine's death, and after Marcel's lingering attachment to her subsides, the truth effortlessly emerges:

> If I could have caused Albertine to live, I should at the same time have caused Andrée to reveal nothing. It is to some extent the same thing as the everlasting 'You'll see when I no longer love you,' which is so true and so absurd, since one would indeed elicit much if one no longer loved, but one would no longer be interested in eliciting it. (V: 690)[9]

Andrée's indiscretion does not give Marcel the insight he sought when Albertine was alive, just as the one who says 'You'll see when I no longer love you' does not survive the very transformation his words invoke. Repeatedly in the *Search*, a significant conversation, disclosure, or articulation only becomes possible after it has lost the meaning given to it by desire: the approach of the longed-for scene of talk 'is rendered slower still by our desire (which in seeking to accelerate only obstructs it) […] and comes to fruition only when we have ceased to desire, and sometimes ceased to live' (II: 48). These delayed, deferred, mistimed, and misjudged patterns of talk keep the lover in a holding pattern of unfulfilled longing and unenlightened jealousy, delaying the revelation he seeks or displacing the desired gesture.

But not all Proustian talk is so stubbornly ineffectual. In less freighted, less consequential scenes of talk, certain utterances unexpectedly produce instantaneous, visceral contact between two subjects. When Marcel's sensitive friend Bloch says, 'Not that it's of the

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[8] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Vol. 1. Freud's papers on technique. 1953–1954*, ed. J.A. Miller, trans J. Forrester (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 221. Other writings on the topic include Leo Bersani, who characterizes Proustian desire as 'an extravagant excess of desirous fantasy' that far exceeds the literal object, and René Girard, who suggests that Proustian desire has no object at all. Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 22; René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and the Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1965), p. 29).

[9] 'Si j'avais pu faire qu'Albertine vécût, du même coup j'eusse fait qu'Andrée ne m'eût rien révélé. C'est un peu la même chose que l'éternel : « Vous verrez quand je ne vous aimerai plus », qui est si vrai et si absurde, puisque en effet on obtiendrait beaucoup si on n'aimait plus, mais qu'on ne se soucierait pas d'obtenir' (Marcel Proust, *Albertine disparue* (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), p. 257).

slightest importance' after his English pronunciation is corrected, the narrator knows this phrase is 'like a reflex action […] betraying […] how important the thing in question seems to him' (II: 369). When the painter Elstir makes an excuse for not introducing Marcel to the girls he is keen to know, his uncharacteristically brusque words—'Why did you stand a mile away?'—are 'the instantaneous effect, the negative exposure of a reflex action', revealing to Marcel in this indirect but curiously lucid way that the girls had asked Elstir not to introduce them (II: 507). In contrast to the incorrigibly off-topic chat that conceals Marcel's desire from Albertine against his will, these compulsive, strangely conspicuous utterances are *too* communicative. Later in Marcel's acquaintance with the same girls, a particularly condensed instance of this hyper-communicativity occurs between Marcel and Andrée, hinging upon a single word ('*justement*'):

> when I spoke to [Andrée] of Albertine's family, it was in the most careless manner possible. Andrée's direct answers did not appear to throw any doubt on my sincerity. Why then did she blurt out suddenly one day: 'Oh, by the way, I happen to have seen Albertine's aunt' (*j'ai* justement *vu la tante à Albertine*)? It is true that she had not said in so many words: 'I could see through your casual remarks all right that the one thing you were really thinking of was how you could get to know Albertine's aunt.' But it was in fact the presence in Andrée's mind of just such an idea, which she found more polite to hide from me, that seemed to point to the words 'happen to have seen'. It was of a kind with certain glances, certain gestures which, although they have no logical rational form directly devised for the listener's intelligence, reach him nevertheless in their true meaning, just as human speech, converted into electricity in the telephone, is turned into speech again when it strikes the ear. (II: 587)[10]

The events relayed in the passage are the result of a curious mirroring between Marcel and Andrée. At this time, Marcel is in love with Albertine, but he 'makes a show' of preferring Andrée and affecting coldness towards Albertine. Andrée in turn 'makes a show' of believing in his indifference, and of desiring greater intimacy between him and Albertine (II: 586). This is not a scene of attempted demystification; it is a scene of coordination between two complementary deceits which allow the continuation of a mutual charade. Then, quite

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[10] 'Quand je lui parlais de la famille d'Albertine, c'était de l'air le plus inattentif. Les réponses explicites d'Andrée ne paraissaient pas mettre en doute ma sincérité. Pourquoi donc lui échappa-t-il un de ces jours-là de me dire: «J'ai *justement* vu la tante à Albertine»? Certes elle ne m'avait pas dit: «J'ai bien démêlé sous vos paroles jetées comme par hasard, que vous ne pensiez qu'à vous lier avec la tante d'Albertine.» Mais c'est bien à la présence, dans l'esprit d'Andrée, d'une telle idée qu'elle trouvait plus poli de me cacher, que semblait se rattacher le mot «justement». Il était de la famille de certains regards, de certains gestes, qui bien que n'ayant pas une forme logique, rationnelle, directement élaborée pour l'intelligence de celui qui écoute, lui parviennent cependant avec leur signification véritable, de même que la parole humaine, changée en électricité dans le téléphone, se refait parole pour être entendue' (Proust, *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, p. 488).

against their will and intention, something in Andrée's speech breaks through: the word '*justement*', obliquely and invisibly connected to certain truths she would rather not acknowledge, produces an instantaneous moment of direct understanding. This mode of disclosure occurs through a mysterious, almost miraculous detour, as if into electricity and back again; like a telephone call that collapses distance to permit contact, Andrée's '*justement*' cuts through the dissemblance of the speaker and the imperceptiveness of the listener alike.

Marcel, too, occasionally produces inadvertent, strangely reflexive utterances—usually in scenes of self-talk, when there are no other witnesses to his speech besides himself, the narrator, and the reader. These peculiar scenes of intrapersonal concourse bring the relation between the novel's hero and its narrator to the fore. In one such instance, when Marcel experiences the genius of the actress Berma, he finds himself internally parroting the phrases of others:

> I said to myself, as in the old days some of my schoolfellows used to say: 'Certainly I put Berma first,' not without a confused feeling that Berma's genius was not perhaps very accurately represented by this affirmation of my preference and this award to her of 'first' place, whatever the peace of mind that they might incidentally restore to me. (III: 52)[11]

Excited by an aesthetic experience, Marcel is moved to speak to himself—but the expression he finds is strangely displaced and anachronistic, a bit of schoolboy slang or jargon that jars with his sincerity of feeling. It resembles one of the moments of 'cliché' that Freed-Thall assembles, but it lacks the effervescent joy of 'Zut, zut, zut!'[12]—instead leaving Marcel with a 'confused feeling' that what he said was not, perhaps, what he meant. The narrator's presence in these lines is understated but sharp: he notes with an acuity that the hero seems to lack that his relative 'peace of mind' might be more a palliative than a sign of fulfillment.

The hero's bewilderment is magnified in a later encounter with the object of his infatuation, Mme de Guermantes. Feeling stung by the coldness of her greeting, he once again has recourse to self-talk: 'What a goose!' he remarks inwardly, observing with 'bitter satisfaction' her incomprehension of a Maeterlinck play. 'To think that's the woman I walk

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[11] 'Je me disais comme autrefois certain de mes camarades de collège: «C'est vraiment la Berma que je mets en premier», tout en sentant confusément que le génie de la Berma n'était peut-être pas traduit très exactement par cette affirmation de ma préférence et par cette place de «première» décernée, quelque calme d'ailleurs qu'elles m'apportassent' (Proust, *Le Côté de Guermantes*, p. 46).

[12] Hannah Freed-Thall, 'Babble', p. 13.

miles every morning to see. Really, I'm too kind. Well, it's my turn now to ignore her.' But the narrator adds:

> Those were the words I said to myself, but they were the opposite of what I thought; they were purely conversational words such as we say to ourselves at those moments when, too excited to remain quietly alone with ourselves, we feel the need, for want of another listener, to talk to ourselves, without meaning what we say, as we talk to a stranger. (III: 261)[13]

This private eruption of words is triggered almost involuntarily, as if governed by an autonomous mental apparatus with no connection to feeling and intention. Like the confused feeling of inauthenticity that lingers after 'Certainly I put Berma first,' this flurry of insincere talk leaves Marcel with a sense of self-estrangement. Our hero cannot account for the words he has inwardly spoken, nor can he observe the meanings that are transparent to the reader: that he feels hurt and wishes to conceal this, that his infatuation remains intact. Instead, we rely on the narrator to describe the muddled, obscure discrepancy that Marcel feels, but perhaps does not acknowledge or understand, between his private talk and what he 'really' means.

The narrator thus begins to emerge as a witness to talk, sometimes sharing the hero's perspective, sometimes observing from a different position altogether. At times this dual perspective seems to arise naturally from the narrative structure of retrospection, in which the narrator is ostensibly an older Marcel recollecting his younger years. When the clueless young hero presses the Baron de Charlus over a perceived misunderstanding, the narrator looks on as a seasoned socialite with a more sophisticated understanding of social codes; he warns the young hero that 'it is not by questioning him that one learns the truth of what another man has had in his mind' (II: 392). Of course, this insight is articulated in a dimension that the hero cannot hear and cannot benefit from. In Lucey's words, Proust's social world is full of potential moments of 'aesthetic, or affective understanding—which one might wish to realize in a shared moment of talk—often only be realized asynchronously.'[14] The untimeliness that keeps Albertine's secrets from Marcel until after her death is one version of this phenomenon; the discrepancy between the narrator's insight and the hero's naïveté is another axis of asynchronous communication in the *Search*.

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[13] 'Tels étaient les mots que je me disais; ils étaient le contraire de ma pensée; c'étaient de purs mots de conversation, comme nous nous en disons dans ces moments où trop agités pour rester seuls avec nous-même nous éprouvons le besoin, à défaut d'autre interlocuteur, de causer avec nous, sans sincérité, comme avec un étranger' (Proust, *Le Côté de Guermantes*, pp. 220-1).

[14] Lucey, *What Proust Heard*, p. 37.

Sometimes, though, the narrator seems to be actually 'in the room', observing scenes of talk from a different but simultaneous vantage point from the hero. This emerges in a particularly blatant form in the disjointed, paranoid, dissembling interactions that characterize Marcel's jealous attachment to Albertine. It is not only Albertine's thoughts that are rendered inaccessible by questioning her, but, bizarrely, her talk as well:

> I should have liked to recall exactly how the sentence had begun, in order to decide for myself, since she had broken off in the middle, what the conclusion would have been. But since I had been awaiting that conclusion, I found it hard to remember the beginning, from which perhaps my air of interest had made her deviate. (V: 167)[15]

This radically self-defeating intensity of focus is perhaps the most extreme example in the *Search* of the impossibility of communication around the fraught inquiries of jealous desire. Remarkably, then, although the hero is trapped in an obsessive forgetfulness around Albertine's talk, the narrator is not:

> Save in a few comparatively rare occurrences, it is only for narrative convenience that I have frequently in these pages confronted one of Albertine's false statements with her previous assertions on the same subject. The previous assertion, as often as not, since I could not read the future and did not guess what contradictory affirmation was to form a pendant to it, had slipped past unperceived, heard it is true by my ears, but without my isolating it from the continuous flow of Albertine's speech. (V: 168)[16]

The narrator intervenes explicitly in the dynamic of hyper-attention and forgetfulness he describes, effortlessly recovering utterances the character Marcel would never be able to unearth, not if he searched for a hundred years.[17] In this scene, the narrator rather casually discloses to the reader that he does not simply recollect, represent, and comment on the hero's affairs; he is actually a kind of conversationalist, participating (if only as a listener) in ways that the hero cannot. As a conversationalist of sorts, the narrator seems capable of

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[15] 'J'aurais voulu me rappeler exactement le commencement de la phrase pour conclure moi-même, puisqu'elle lâchait pied, à ce qu'en eût été la fin. Mais comme j'avais attendu cette fin, je me rappelais mal le commencement, que peut-être mon air d'intérêt lui avait fait dévier' (Marcel Proust, *La Prisonnière* (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), p. 181).

[16] 'Sauf des cas relativement assez rares, ce n'est guère que pour la commodité du récit que j'ai souvent opposé ici un dire mensonger d'Albertine avec (sur le même sujet) son assertion première. Cette assertion première, souvent, ne lisant pas dans l'avenir et ne devinant pas quelle affirmation contradictoire lui ferait pendant, elle s'était glissée inaperçue, entendue certes de mes oreilles, mais sans que je l'isolasse de la continuité des paroles d'Albertine' (Proust, *La Prisonnière*, p. 181). 'Was to form a pendant to it' is a mistranslation; this would be better translated as 'would correspond to it'.

[17] Proust uses this language to describe the miracle of involuntary memory: 'one has knocked on all the doors which lead nowhere, and then one stumbles without knowing it on the only door through which one can enter—which one might have sought in vain for a hundred years' (VI: 255).

circumventing the pathological mistiming that keeps Marcel from hearing Albertine's confessions.

'Narrative convenience' is a rather weak power to invoke for the retrieval of lost memories in the *Search*. The above passage is thus an example of what Christopher Prendergast calls a 'Proustian joke'. Citing the significant moment in *The Captive* in which the character, narrator, and author Marcel are thrown together—'[Albertine's] first words were "darling" or "my darling", followed by my Christian name, which, if we give the narrator the same name as the author of this book, would produce "darling Marcel", or "my darling Marcel"' (V: 77)—Prendergast claims, 'It's a send-up, a little exercise in knowing burlesque, its self-aware quality fundamental to its point.'[18] The defining feature of a Proustian joke is a mismatch of registers: when the important themes of the text are treated cavalierly by the narrator or other voices. For Prendergast, such ironies open the text and its author to humorous self-critique, evincing a skeptical attitude towards the eternal truths that the novel elsewhere pursues so earnestly. While I follow Prendergast in seeing humor and play in the narrator's casual retrieval of lost utterances, I do not necessarily take this lightness as a sign of inconsequence, signaling that there is nothing further to be 'puzzled' over. Instead, I simply want to observe that in certain passing moments in the *Search*, the narrator displays greater capacities to engage in talk than the hero—greater knowledge, more retentive forms of attention, perhaps even sharper ears—which permit him to reshape the form, flow, and content of talk in 'real time', as the scene of talk unfolds.[19] I will return to the apparent triviality of these scenes in the next section.

In this chapter section, I have reviewed two modes of Proustian talk: the deferred and mistimed talk of desire and an instantaneous, reflexive, communicative form of talk that inhabits certain offhand utterances. Self-talk in the *Search* turns out to be a strange version of the latter phenomenon, since the audience—the narrator—occupies an ambiguous position with respect to the speaker. The narrator's status as an independent listener in scenes of talk creates the possibility for talk to be both misheard and heard rightly, mistimed and timely, misunderstood and understood perfectly—a curious synthesis or simultaneity of two distinct patterns of Proustian talk. In the sections that follow, I turn to the novel's narrative

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[18] Prendergast, *Mirages and Mad Beliefs*, p. 35.

[19] Here I echo Ann Gaylin on the discrepancy between the narrator and the hero's auditory capacities, although I do not go so far as to attribute 'auditory omniscience' to the narrator (p. 161). Ann Gaylin, *Eavesdropping in the Novel from Austen to Proust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

digressions. In the blurred space of interaction between the hero and the narrator that forms within digressions, the same parallel rhythms of talk recur and collide.

2. The Telephone as '*Biais*'

At the end of 'Combray', the first section of *Swann's Way*, the narrator introduces the most extended, exaggerated narrative digression of the *Search*: the first volume's middle section, 'Swann in Love'. Abandoning the hero altogether, the lengthy second section of *Swann's Way* introduces a cast of characters, each of whom will figure in Marcel's social world, but who first appear in connection with Swann: his lover, then wife Odette, his friends Madame de Guermantes and the Baron de Charlus, his acquaintances Mme Verdurin and Dr. Cottard. To prepare the reader for this abrupt break in the narrative, the narrator explains that he learned of these affairs:

> with a precision of detail which it is often easier to obtain for the lives of people who have been dead for centuries than those of our most intimate friends, an accuracy which seems as impossible to attain as it seemed impossible to speak from one town to another, before we know of the contrivance by which that impossibility has been overcome. (I: 221)[20]

Insofar as this passage claims to explain how the narrator can proceed from 'Combray' to 'Swann in Love', it is laughably insufficient. As Claudia Brodsky observes, this brief and oblique acknowledgment of the impossible detail with which Swann's obsessive love is recorded—an account which, she notes, 'no one, not even Swann, could have told with such precision'—does not clarify the narrator's position in the least.[21] It does, however, recall more than one scene of talk discussed in this chapter. The narrator's implausible access to Swann's life is likened in the first part of the sentence to the ease of obtaining the secrets of the dead, in contrast to those kept by our closest living friends; the whole 'Swann in Love' digression, then, represents a similar untimely, unguarded disclosure to the detailed accounts of Albertine's affairs that Marcel learns from Andrée and others after her death. But in the second part of the sentence, the condition of possibility for 'Swann in Love' is compared to a technological device: the telephone, which makes it possible to speak from one town to another. Unlike the asynchronous reveal of the dead's secrets, the telephone

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[20] 'Avec cette précision dans les détails plus facile à obtenir quelquefois pour la vie de personnes mortes il y a des siècles que pour celle de nos meilleurs amis, et qui semble impossible comme semblait impossible de causer d'une ville à une autre—tant qu'on ignore le biais par lequel cette impossibilité a été tournée' (Marcel Proust, *Du côté de chez Swann* (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), p. 223).

[21] Claudia Brodsky, 'Remembering Swann', *MLN*, Vol. 102, No. 5, Comparative Literature (Dec 1987), pp. 1014-1042, p. 1026.

represents synchronic, simultaneous contact: in the transmission of Andrée's '*justement*', Proust's narrator uses the figure of the telephone to describe the possibility of unforeseen, instantaneous communication. It is through both these modes of talk, the delayed revelation and the instantaneous one, that Proust's narrator thematizes his longest digression.

What does it mean to understand Proustian narrative digressions through these two models of talk? It is relatively straightforward to connect the *Search*'s digressive form with the first, circuitous and asynchronous form of talk: in Proust's novel, narrative digressions continuously defer the progress of the linear narrative, moving backwards and forwards in time, unfolding as if on a different plane from the hero's thoughts and experiences. But the relation of digression to an immediate, simultaneous connection that permits 'talk between towns'—allowing talk to move seamlessly across space and between subjects—is less apparent. This analysis begins with the significant figure of the telephone. So far in this chapter, we have seen the telephone act as a figurative medium for unexpected, immediate contact in talk that is enigmatically tied to the novel's digressive narration. But there is also a literal telephone call in *The Guermantes Way* that effects a profound upheaval in Marcel's emotional life and a break in the novel's narrative, impelling the hero to cut short his visit to Doncières and his brief absorption in the social lives of military officers, returning him to Paris and, eventually, to his fascination with Mme de Guermantes.

At the time of the telephone call, Marcel is caught up in the excitements of Doncières: the friendship of Saint-Loup, the company of the young officers, the novelty of living alone. One day, at Saint-Loup's suggestion, he receives a telephone call from his grandmother. After a series of missed connections—the line is engaged, emitting a stream of 'gabblings' and 'chatter', then silenced—a voice emerges that is both intimately familiar to him and somehow altered (III: 149). Hearing it without the familiar guide of his grandmother's face, Marcel is struck by new impressions of sweetness, fragility, and sorrow in it. But it is not just the presence of a voice without a face, or a voice without a body, that characterizes this experience of remote speech:

> Was it, however, solely the voice that, because it was alone, gave me this new impression which tore my heart? Not at all; it was rather that this isolation of the voice was like a symbol, an evocation, a direct consequence of another isolation, that of my grandmother, for the first time separated from me. The commands or prohibitions which she constantly addressed to me in the ordinary course of life, the tedium of obedience or the fire of rebellion which neutralised the affection that I felt for her, were at this moment eliminated and indeed might be eliminated for ever (since my grandmother, no longer insisting on having me under her control, was in the act of expressing her hope that I would stay at Doncières altogether […]); and so,

> what I held compressed in this little bell at my ear was our mutual affection, freed from the conflicting pressures which had daily counteracted it, and henceforth irresistible, uplifting me entirely. (III: 149-50)[22]

We know from 'Combray' that commands and prohibitions are the measure of Marcel's grandmother's love for him; in contrast, his father's desultory harshness and lenience mark a lesser degree of understanding and care.[23] Thus, when Marcel describes a neutralization of affection through these interactions with his grandmother, he is not exactly describing the deadening of feeling by habit. It is a more difficult and equivocal observation: that love lived in its everydayness may not feel like love. Non-affectionate feelings, both mild and intense ('tedium' and 'fire'), attend the practices of love between Marcel and his grandmother, the behaviors that evidence and constitute it. The telephone allows intimacy without closeness, connection without conviviality: in its compression of affection, the structure becomes experienceable as feeling. It produces a vivid connection between Marcel and his grandmother which is simultaneously a reconnection of Marcel with himself: a lapsed self, a dormant structure of feeling awakened and distilled into an instant.

In the passage from 'Combray' in which the narrator compares the possibility of writing 'Swann in Love' to the 'contrivance' that permits talk between towns, the word translated as 'contrivance' is the unusual term '*biais*'. Lydia Davis translates *biais* as 'expedient' but, Brodsky tells us, the term is otherwise translatable as 'slant', 'angle', 'an oblique means of proceeding', 'a movement aside'.[24] Keeping this enigmatic term in the orbit of the telephone passage allows us to read it as a significant kind of reorientation. The

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[22] 'Était-ce d'ailleurs uniquement la voix qui, parce qu'elle était seule, me donnait cette impression nouvelle qui me déchirait ? Non pas; mais plutôt que cet isolement de la voix était comme un symbole, une évocation, un effet direct d'un autre isolement, celui de ma grand-mère, pour la première fois séparée de moi. Les commandements ou défenses qu'elle m'adressait à tout moment dans l'ordinaire de la vie, l'ennui de l'obéissance ou la fièvre de la rébellion qui neutralisaient la tendresse que j'avais pour elle, étaient supprimés en ce moment et même pouvaient l'être pour l'avenir (puisque ma grand-mère n'exigeait plus de m'avoir près d'elle sous sa loi, était en train de me dire son espoir que je resterais tout à fait à Doncières […]); aussi, ce que j'avais sous cette petite cloche approchée de mon oreille, c'était, débarrassée des pressions opposées qui chaque jour lui avaient fait contrepoids, et dès lors irrésistible, me soulevant tout entier, notre mutuelle tendresse' (Proust, *Le Côté de Guermantes*, pp. 127-8).

[23] This distinction is memorably demonstrated in *Swann's Way* when Marcel's father permits his mother to stay in his bedroom all night. Marcel connects this lenience with his father's ignorance of his emotional life: 'for his nature, which in some respects differs more than [my mother's or my grandmother's] from my own, had probably prevented him from realising until then how wretched I was every evening, something which my mother and grandmother knew well' (I: 44).

[24] Brodsky, 'Remembering Swann', p. 289; Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*, trans. by Lydia Davis (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), p. 190. The full phrase is: '*tant qu'on ignore le biais par lequel cette impossibilité a été tournée*'; see footnote 20 of this chapter.

telephone call is not disruptive because of the information it relays (as with Andrée's *justement*), nor because it resurrects the past (as in the novel's more famous revelations), but because it creates a new route into an ongoing state of affairs. What it reveals or releases, so unexpected that it brings Marcel up short, so familiar that it fills him with love, is an intimate relation that he witnessed and participated in, but through this very participation could not fully perceive. Wittgenstein's reflections on everydayness resonate here:

> The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity [*Alltäglichkeit*]. (One is unable to notice something — because it is always before one's eye.) […] And this means: we fail to be struck by what, once seen, is most striking and powerful.[25]

The first two sentences of this remark are almost platitudes; the last knots them into a paradox. Once this important ordinariness is seen, it is most striking and powerful—but, we fail to be struck by it.[26] If we aren't struck by it, how do we know that there is anything there to see? Conversely, if we know it is there, how can it remain hidden? The telephone offers an oblique angle of approach. It brings what is 'most important' out of inattention.

In Proust's *Search*, differences in habits, attachments, and distributions of attention are not just changes that a self undergoes; they demarcate different, discrete selves altogether. The telephone call, by invigorating a lost rhythm of affection, thus produces a significant displacement of Marcel's subjectivity—the sort of sudden reorganization that is chiefly reserved, in Proust's novel, for the miracle of involuntary memory. But in contrast to the expansive joy Marcel feels in the madeleine passage, the renewed experience of love for his grandmother that the telephone unlocks quickly becomes intolerable. As David Trotter observes, in literature of this era, 'even when [telephones] do work, they don't, because their working is itself an estrangement, a disconnection'.[27] '"Granny!" I cried to her, "Granny!" and I longed to kiss her, but I had beside me only the voice, a phantom as impalpable as the one that would perhaps come back to visit me when my grandmother was dead' (III: 150). The very telephonic contact which felt so vivid, transmitting the distilled essence of affection, suddenly seems empty and insubstantial. He resolves to travel home the next day: the separation that made this experience possible is rendered unbearable by it. His haste in

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[25] Translated as 'familiarity' in the fourth edition of *Philosophical Investigations*, the German *Alltäglichkeit* literally translates to 'everydayness' (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §129).

[26] In the German, this failure is further emphasized: the sentence ends on the negative main verb (*fällt uns nicht auf*).

[27] David Trotter, 'e-Modernism: telephony in British fiction 1925-1940', *Critical Quarterly*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (April 2009), p. 6.

returning home reflects the need to eradicate not only the physical distance between them, but the very idea of their separateness: 'I had to free myself at the first possible moment, in her arms, from the phantom, hitherto unsuspected and suddenly called into being by her voice, of a grandmother really separated from me' (III: 155).

But Marcel's rushed return does not deliver the reunion he desires. The very figure he flees from is waiting for him at home: 'Alas, it was this phantom that I saw when, entering the drawing-room before my grandmother had been told of my return, I found her there reading.' His jarred perception of his grandmother seems to emanate from the powerful sense of alienation that he experiences upon entering the room. 'Of myself […] there was present only the witness,' the narrator relates, 'the observer, in traveling coat and hat, the stranger who does not belong to the house' (III: 155). In a sudden, split perspective that recalls the alienation of compulsive self-talk, Marcel suffers another subjective displacement: this time, he finds himself in a state of detachment, observing himself, his home, and his grandmother from an alien, unfeeling perspective. In a visual inversion of the telephone passage, this reorganization of attention interrupts affection instead of intensifying it:

> So it is when some cruel trick of chance prevents our intelligent and pious tenderness from coming forward in time to hide from our eyes what they ought never to behold, when it is forestalled by our eyes, and they, arriving first in the field and having it to themselves, set to work mechanically, like films. (III: 156)[28]

The effect, which the narrator assures us lasts only for a moment, is that Marcel sees 'sitting on the sofa beneath the lamp, red-faced, heavy and vulgar, sick, day-dreaming, letting her slightly crazed eyes wander over a book, an overburdened old woman whom I did not know' (III: 157).

What has gone wrong? The narrator blames this experience on a 'cruel trick of chance'. As Michael Wood pointedly observes, '[i]n life, in Proust's and everyone else's, chance is what might not happen. In *A la recherche* it is what might not have happened but always does.'[29] For the reader, there is a certain air of inevitability to this failed reunion; as we observed in the previous section of this chapter, in Proust's novel, single-minded

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[28] 'Il en est de même quand quelque cruelle ruse du hasard empêche notre intelligente et pieuse tendresse d'accourir à temps pour cacher à nos regards ce qu'ils ne doivent jamais contempler, quand elle est devancée par eux qui, arrivés les premiers sur place et laissés à eux-mêmes fonctionnent mécaniquement à la façon de pellicules' (Proust, *Le Côté de Guermantes*, p. 133).

[29] Michael Wood, 'Other Eyes: Proust and the Myths of Photography' in *The Strange M. Proust*, ed. André Benhaïm (London: Legenda, 2009), pp. 101-111, p. 109.

urgency of feeling tends to displace and defer the very contact it desires. But Marcel's total sense of alienation on the doorstep of his home also hints at something misplaced or misunderstood from the initial experience of the telephone call. Namely, why was his telephonic encounter with their mutual affection so disastrous? The call places him in contact not only with his separateness from his grandmother but with their togetherness: something synchronic and simultaneous, 'compressed in this little bell at my ear', 'irresistible, uplifting me entirely', that in their ordinary interactions would be lost to inattention (III: 150). In Walter Benjamin's striking formulation:

> [Proust] is filled with the insight that none of us has time to live the true dramas of the life that we are destined for. This is what ages us—this and nothing else. The wrinkles and creases on our faces are the registration of great passions, vices, insights that called on us; but we, the masters, were not home.[30]

In the telephone passage, Marcel is given the rare gift of being 'at home' for the love between himself and his grandmother, of experiencing their habitual, durational affection in a moment of feeling—but only because he is away from home. It is an experience of intimacy enabled by distance, a synthesis of absence and presence. But Marcel cannot hold these antithetical terms together in feeling: seeking unmitigated intimacy and pure presence, he becomes an outsider at home and a stranger to himself.

For the most part, the sequence of events from the connected telephone call to Marcel's estranged return is related in an intense, uninterrupted stream of text that stays closely focalized to the hero. But there is one interruption, one narrative digression, which occurs on the morning that he leaves Doncières. In this scene, his distress over being separated from his grandmother is compounded by his misery at having failed to say goodbye to Saint-Loup. After he learns from a pair of troopers that he is too late to catch Saint-Loup, the narrator lingers on an ensuing interaction between the two soldiers that has nothing to do with Marcel:

> 'It isn't officer's cloth, it's just ordinary cloth.'
>
> 'Monsieur?' inquired the old soldier angrily.
>
> He was indignant that the young graduate should question his assertion that the breeches were made of officer's cloth, but, being a Breton, born in a village that went by the name of Penguern-Stereden, and having learned French with as much difficulty as if it had been English or German, whenever he felt himself overcome by

[30] Walter Benjamin, 'The Image of Proust', p. 213.

> emotion he would go on saying 'Monsieur?' to give himself time to find words. (III: 154)[31]

The hero is present for this interaction but he surely does not know the place of birth or the habits of speech of the man in front of him; it is also unlikely that he takes any interest in what the soldiers are saying, consumed as he is with guilt for having missed Saint-Loup. Thus, as the narrator dwells with humor and curiosity on the quirks of talk and relation between the two troopers, he shadows the hero's experiences but exhibits, in addition to his more expansive knowledge, a different form of attention and feeling.

This mode of digression is not analeptic, like 'Swann in Love', nor proleptic; it is *dilative*, expanding and lingering in a conversation that the hero initiates. In this more ambiguous digressive temporality, the narrator relates a scene of talk that Marcel evidently witnesses in real time, but in which he is not directly involved and to which his reactions are not recorded. Ingrid Wassenaar argues that the contents of Proust's digressions are rendered trivial because of their placement within a digression: 'asides carry the inbuilt proviso that their textual status as digression will allow them to pass unnoticed'.[32] I am inclined to invert this proposition, proposing instead that the triviality of the above scene—its irrelevance to the hero's urgent feelings and priorities—is what renders it digressive. This scene effects a sidestep from the hero's story *because* it dedicates attention to details he likely finds inconsequential—and further delays the event he urgently desires, his departure from Doncières and reunion with his grandmother. In this dilated present, the hero's perspective and the narrator's form a syncopated rhythm: overlapping in time but not quite aligned.

What is the significance—if any—of the brief interval between the telephone scene and Marcel's return, when the narrator turns his attention to an exchange of words between soldiers? I want to draw a connection between the affective and perspectival displacement that occurs in this digression and the reorganization of feeling and perception effected by the telephone call. Both phenomena, the telephone call and the soldiers' conversation, adjust the balance of attention and feeling in the text: they transform an unfolding scene by displacing

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[31] '«Ce drap d'officier, c'est du drap comme ça.
— Monsieur ? » demanda avec colère l' « ancien » qui avait parlé du falzar. Il était indigné que le jeune bachelier mît en doute que ce falzar fût en drap d'officier, mais, breton, né dans un village qui s'appelle Penguern-Stereden, ayant appris le français aussi difficilement que s'il eût été anglais ou allemand, quand il se sentait possédé par une émotion, il disait deux ou trois fois « Monsieur » pour se donner le temps de trouver ses paroles' (Proust, *Le Côté de Guermantes*, p. 131).

[32] Ingrid Wassenaar, 'Digressions and Self-Justification: Making the Perfect Fit' from *Proustian Passions: The Uses of Self-Justification for* À la recherche du temps perdu (Oxford Scholarship Online, October 2011), p. 11. Emphasis removed from the final clause.

the subject who perceives and participates in it. But whereas the telephone elicits powerful feelings of joy, anguish, loss, and need, impelling Marcel to his estranged reunion, the momentary displacement of the digression passes unnoticed by him. The relaxation the Breton soldier offers from the high pitch of Marcel's feelings, the lightness his 'Monsieur!' intersperses between Marcel's heavy moods, does not seem to be felt by the hero himself. When the narrator leaves the soldiers behind and resumes the account of Marcel's return, his thoughts and feelings do not register any interruption: 'I was wretched at having failed to say goodbye to Saint-Loup, but I went nevertheless, for my only concern was to return to my grandmother' (III: 155). For the reader, the soldiers' interaction temporarily loosens the grip of Marcel's angst, but if he too feels this relief—if he too finds himself distracted by the argument between a chastened young soldier and an indignant veteran—this leaves no sign in the text.

What if the hero could enter the narrator's dilated present and let his urgent feelings ebb, his intense focus scatter? This possibility would mark a different synchronic connection from the telephone call in *The Guermantes Way*, likewise transformative to subjectivity and feeling, but different in character: distractive rather than univocal, light rather than grave, curious rather than desperate. In the remaining section of this chapter, I pursue this potentiality: that the hero might participate in the narrator's digressive attention, allowing himself to become distracted and displaced from his organizing desires. My analysis focuses on Marcel's later, even more intense encounter with his grandmother's absence in the famous section from *Sodom and Gomorrah*, 'The Intermittencies of the Heart'. In digressive lapses and dispersals of focus, Marcel's grief after his grandmother's death enters into a rhythm of suspension and renewal—a looser form of feeling that, I will argue, permits the very simultaneity between absence and presence, intimacy and distance, that in *The Guermantes Way* Marcel finds intolerable. In this way, digressive narration might offer the hero a way to navigate between the volatile connectivity and the continuous deferrals that form the two poles of Proustian talk.

3. Digressions of the Heart

'The Intermittencies of the Heart', which Beckett distinguished as 'perhaps the greatest passage Proust ever wrote', depicts Marcel's delayed period of mourning for his grandmother, which is initiated by an experience of involuntary memory.[33] Months after his

[33] Samuel Beckett, *Proust* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1931), p. 25.

grandmother has died, Marcel visits the seaside hotel they once stayed in together. Bending down to take off his shoes, he finds himself overthrown:

> I had just perceived, in my memory, stooping over my fatigue, the tender, preoccupied, disappointed face of my grandmother, as she had been on that first evening of our arrival […] in my wild desire to fling myself into her arms, it was only at that moment—more than a year after her burial, because of the anachronism which so often prevents the calendar of facts from corresponding to the calendar of feelings—that I became conscious that she was dead. (IV: 180)[34]

Marcel's grief takes shape in the dizzying contradiction between the immediacy of her presence in his memory and the knowledge of her death. In Beckett's words, '[f]or the first time since her death he knows that she is dead, he knows *who* is dead.'[35] The fullness of this knowledge can only be contrasted with the flimsiness of whatever it has replaced: his 'forgetfulness', his 'barrenness of spirit', his false memory of his grandmother 'who had nothing in common with her save her name' (IV: 179-80, 184). 'Intermittencies' stages the senseless incommensurability between Marcel's overwhelming affection and his grandmother's absence: 'on the one hand an existence, a tenderness, surviving in me', on the other hand, 'annihilation' (IV: 182).

In an extended dream sequence, Marcel experiences his separation from his grandmother through a familiar kind of futile talk. In the dream, he beseeches his father, 'Quick, quick, her address, take me to her.' But his father delays and equivocates: 'Well… I don't know if you will be able to see her. Besides, you know, she's very frail now, very frail, she's not at all herself, I'm afraid you would find it very painful. And I can't remember the exact number of the avenue'. As heartlessly as any third party stymying Swann or Marcel's feverish investigations into their mistress' whereabouts, he deflects Marcel's urgent inquiry with flimsy excuses: 'I don't see what good you can do, and I don't suppose the nurse will allow you to see her' (IV: 186). Angela Moorjani describes Marcel's father as his 'guide or Virgil through the underworld', but in fact his role is to confound Marcel's supernatural

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[34] 'Je venais d'apercevoir, dans ma mémoire, penché sur ma fatigue, le visage tendre, préoccupé et déçu de ma grand-mère, telle qu'elle avait été ce premier soir d'arrivée […] dans un désir fou de me précipiter dans ses bras, ce n'était qu'à l'instant—plus d'une année après son enterrement, à cause de cet anachronisme qui empêche si souvent le calendrier des faits de coïncider avec celui des sentiments —que je venais d'apprendre qu'elle était morte' (Marcel Proust, *Sodome et Gomorrhe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 153).

[35] Beckett, *Proust*, *p.* 28.

encounter, demonstrating once more to his son that his anxious desire will elicit, instead of the communion he seeks, a series of empty deflections.[36]

Serge Doubrovsky suggests that the key function of involuntary memory is to return desire to the images of memory, to lend them 'affective thrust'.[37] The dramatic affectivity that follows from Marcel's memory-experience, in contrast to the comparatively inconsequential boredom and intrigue that occupies him before, supports this reading, and encourages the association of feeling with true memory. In his reading of 'Intermittencies', Adam Piette characterizes intermittence itself as 'the rhythm between full affect and affect denial', the totalizing and mutually exclusive extremes of grief and indifference.[38] In these dualistic formulations, we may detect the two extremes of absence and presence, love and estrangement, that organize Marcel's experiences around the telephone call. But 'Intermittencies' is not completely well-described by the affective rhythm Piette identifies—an alternation between full feeling and detached denial—because throughout the passage, the narrator regularly disengages from the hero's grief to pursue digressions. Dwelling on a number of incidental characters who populate the seaside town, all of these sketches are at least mildly absurd: from the generous Marquise de Cambremer, who feels compelled to attend every event a social climber invites her to, to the comical hotel director, who mispronounces a word every time he speaks. Such tonal relaxations from the grief-narrative disengage from Marcel's ongoing distress, meaning that while they are certainly not characterized by a strong affect, one could not really call them 'denial' either. Perhaps for this reason, they tend to drop out of the scholarship on this section. Moorjani, in her 'Cryptanalysis', condenses this material to an early footnote:

> The seriousness of 'Les Intermittences' is partially undercut by the humorous material Proust continued to insert into this highly charged text. The hotel director's numerous malapropisms, mispronunciations, and other gaffes serve to establish an ironic contrast with the narrator's discourse on mourning.[39]

But this material, in its humor and excess, is more than a footnote to 'The Intermittencies of the Heart'. If it seems to stymie or slow the reader in getting to the heart of the passage, this is a typically Proustian frustration. Benjamin reminds us:

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[36] Angela Moorjani, 'A Cryptanalysis of Proust's "Les Intermittences du coeur"', *MLN*, Vol. 105, No. 4 (Sept. 1990), pp. 875-888, p. 883.

[37] Serge Doubrovsky, 'The Place of the Madeleine: Writing and Phantasy in Proust', trans. Carol Bové, *boundary 2,* Vol. 4, No. 1 (Autumn 1975), pp. 107-134, p. 110.

[38] Adam Piette, 'Beckett, Affect and the Face', *Textual Practice*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (2011), pp. 281-295, p. 286.

[39] Moorjani, 'Cryptanalysis', p. 876.

> Proust was most resourceful in creating complications. Once, late at night, he dropped in on Princess Clermont-Tonnerre and made his staying dependent on someone bringing him his medicine from his house. He sent a valet for it, giving him a lengthy description of the neighborhood and of the house. Finally he said: "You cannot miss it. It is the only window on the Boulevard Haussman in which there still is a light burning!" Everything but the house number! Anyone who has tried to get the address of a brothel in a strange city and has received the most long-winded directions, everything but the name of the street and the house number, will understand what is meant here […] Is it not the quintessence of experience to find out how very difficult it is to learn many things which apparently could be told in very few words?[40]

In this passage from 'The Image of Proust', the humor, absurdity, and evident enjoyment in Proust's 'long-winded directions' intermingle with the frustrations of flouted desire. Contrasting affects and registers are braided together: the contingent and the essential, the superficial and the profound, the pleasures and the pains of deferred longing. The difficulty of learning 'many things which apparently could be told in very few words' is not simply a practical problem or a practical joke—the anxious lover's bad luck or the social naïf's confusion. In the world of Proust's *Search*, a concise statement—'my grandmother is dead'—may require many more words to be understood.

Marcel's grief is totally single-minded. Everything calls to mind his grandmother: the first involuntary memory of taking off his boots on their first visit to Balbec, the stretch of wall their rooms used to share, the photograph of her they staged together, the walks they took. In contrast, the many digressions bear no mention of her, nor convey any weightier emotion than amusement or annoyance. The hero suffers his loss, and the narrator's attention simply continues to wander, neither spurred nor chastened by the character's condition. His digressions enact an almost literal spatial wandering, departing from the grief-narrative and stepping back into it without difficulty—often, indeed, with humor. In one instance, the text's description of Marcel's mother's grief is curtailed by a description of Mme Poussin as she, in the narrative, is interrupted by Mme Poussin: this diversion begins, 'She had the misfortune, on one of these pilgrimages during which she did not like to be disturbed, to meet on the beach a lady from Combray, accompanied by her daughters' (IV: 197). The reader meets with the same fortune as Marcel's mother, and receives a detailed description of Mme Poussin's curious manners for a page or so. The next episode plays with a starker contrast. It begins with Marcel, grieving, compelled by his mother to leave his room. He observes a young page who doffs his cap expertly at everyone who arrives, and

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[40] Benjamin, 'The Image of Proust', p. 210.

remarks, 'This young man had no other occupation in life than to take off and put on his cap, and did it to perfection. Having realised that he was incapable of doing anything else but excelled in that, he practised it as many times a day as possible' (IV: 199). This young man inaugurates a particularly extravagant digression, in which the narrator discusses a range of peculiar characters and launches into a baroque description of the hotel as akin to a theatre. This includes the following excellent specimen of Proust's sentence construction, inspired by the hotel's servants:

> And so I could not help reciting to myself, when I saw them, not indeed the lines of Racine that had come into my head at the Princesse de Guermantes's while M. de Vaugoubert stood watching young embassy secretaries greet M. de Charlus, but other lines of Racine, taken this time not from *Esther* but from *Athalie*: for in the doorway of the hall, what in the seventeenth century was called the portico, 'a flourishing race' of young pages clustered, especially at tea-time, like the young Israelites of Racine's choruses. (IV: 200-1)[41]

The joke of this digression is that, after its almost self-parodic meanderings, the narrative of Marcel's grief resumes abruptly with the line: 'I went straight up to my room' (IV: 201).

This digression represents an elaborately detailed, indulgently dilated temporality that, as I discussed in the previous section, the hero does not exactly inhabit. But in the scene above, something strange occurs: in the midst of an extended digression that is embellished with details the hero could not possibly have known, Marcel suddenly speaks the very lines from Racine that the narrator's fanciful eye has brought to mind. When does this utterance occur? In the elongated description of the hotel denizens—a page, a visitor, a tennis-player—the present moment becomes ambiguously capacious, losing its anchoring in the moment that begins when a page doffs his cap to Marcel, but not straying too far: the passage travels with Marcel in space over the threshold of the hotel, lingering there, then returns to his room. The words Marcel speaks, then, are voiced in a slightly dislocated present, emerging in the narrator's expansive digressive temporality, but tied to the hero in the moment of utterance. In pronouncing these lines of Racine, does Marcel experience a moment of pleasure: a displacement of grief by aesthetic appreciation? The digression is bracketed by assertions that such an experience is impossible for him: before he leaves his hotel room, the narrator affirms that 'the rest of the world seemed scarcely real and my anguish poisoned

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[41] 'Aussi ne pouvais-je m'empêcher de me dire à moi-même, en les voyant, non certes les vers de Racine qui m'étaient venus à l'esprit chez la princesse de Guermantes tandis que M. de Vaugoubert regardait de jeunes secrétaires d'ambassade saluant M. de Charlus, mais d'autres vers de Racine, cette fois-ci non plus d'*Esther* mais d'*Athalie* : car dès le hall, ce qu'au XVII[e] siècle on appelait les portiques, «un peuple florissant» de jeunes chasseurs se tenait, surtout à l'heure du goûter, comme les jeunes Israélites des chœurs de Racine' (Proust, *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, p. 171).

everything in it', and after he returns, ''My thoughts kept constantly turning to the last days of my grandmother's illness' (IV: 198, 201). But in the pages that interpose these austere conditions, a half-space emerges that the narrator and hero share: a rare moment of simultaneity for the syncopated subjects of digression and talk.

It is common to approach Proustian intermittence as a teleological concept, and 'The Intermittencies of the Heart' as the documentation of Marcel's arrival at a telos. One scholar describes its ultimate end as death, which 'occurs only when the *intermittences du coeur* have finally accomplished their task and destroyed all residual memory of the individual.'[42] Piette similarly characterizes it as 'a systole and diastole which beats its way down to an ending and forgetting.'[43] The passage's digressions complicate this entropic account. Reflecting the narrator's freer, more light-hearted form of attention, they bear no direct connection to Marcel's remembrance or forgetfulness. But they provide the possibility of a '*biais*': an oblique step to the side that draws the hero and narrator together in digressive simultaneity, where a looser, more capacious form of feeling becomes possible. This is born out in the final, enigmatic scene of 'The Intermittencies of the Heart'.

In the last pages, Marcel escorts Albertine home and sets off on foot towards a road on which he and his grandmother used to go out for drives. Throughout this chapter and the beginning of the next, Albertine signals Marcel's intermittence in the teleological sense: whenever his grief recedes, he makes plans to see her, and whenever it returns, he cancels them. In this moment, leaving Albertine and deliberately seeking a place that will summon memories of his grandmother, Marcel returns us firmly to the mourning-narrative. His thoughts start to make their way ineluctably back to his grandmother: 'pools of water, which the sun, now bright again, had not yet dried, made a regular quagmire of the ground, and I thought of my grandmother who could never walk a yard without covering herself in mud' (IV: 208). But then, something unexpected appears:

> But on reaching the road I found a dazzling spectacle. Where I had seen with my grandmother in the month of August only the green leaves and, so to speak, the disposition of the apple-trees, as far as the eye could see they were in full bloom, unbelievably luxuriant, their feet in the mire beneath their ball-dresses, heedless of

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[42] Raymond T. Riva, 'Death and Immortality in the Works of Marcel Proust', *The French Review,* Vol. 35, No. 5 (April 1962), pp. 463-471, p. 463.

[43] Piette, 'Beckett, Affect, and the Face', p. 286.

> spoiling the most marvellous pink satin that was ever seen, which glittered in the sunlight. (IV: 208)[44]

The flurries of prose here, unlike in the digressive descriptions of the hotel, do not signal a discrepancy between the curious narrator and the grieving protagonist: the two modes meet. Marcel's univocal grief refracts around a dazzling, arresting sign of change.

This Proustian rarity, a surprise that is profound without being destructive, is also a recognition, a reunion. The narrator confesses at the end of Combray that, unlike the blossoms he encountered as a child, 'the flowers that people show me nowadays for the first time never seem to me to be true flowers'[45]. In contrast, 'the cornflowers, the hawthorns, the apple-trees which I may still happen, when I travel, to encounter in the fields, because they are situated at the same depth, on the level of my past life, at once establish contact with my heart' (I: 2019). In Proust's *Search,* communication is rarely so felicitous: as we have seen, the possibility of immediate contact requires a telephonic transformation, an unexpected expedient. Marcel's encounter with the apple-trees, like the telephone call in *The Guermantes Way*, interrupts habitual surroundings with a sudden moment of connection. But because of the incomplete likeness it bears to the preceding digressions, the mode of interruption in this passage is different.

The differences emerge less in his rapturous praise for the beauty of the blossoms (in the beginning of the telephone call, his grandmother's voice is irresistible and uplifting), but in a turn that occurs in the last lines:

> But it moved one to tears because, to whatever lengths it went in its effects of refined artifice, one felt that it was natural, that these apple-trees were there in the heart of the country, like peasants on one of the high roads in France. Then the rays of the sun gave place suddenly to those of the rain; they streaked the whole horizon, enclosing the line of apple-trees in their grey net. But these continued to hold aloft their pink

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[44] 'Mais dès que je fus arrivé à la route ce fut un éblouissement. Là où je n'avais vu avec ma grand-mère, au mois d'août, que les feuilles et comme l'emplacement des pommiers, à perte de vue ils étaient en pleine floraison, d'un luxe inouï, les pieds dans la boue et en toilette de bal, ne prenant pas de précautions pour ne pas gâter le plus merveilleux satin rose q'on eût jamais vu et que faisait briller le soleil' (Proust, *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, p. 177).

[45] In the French, '*les fleurs qu'on me montre aujourd'hui pour la première fois ne me semblent pas de vraies fleurs*'. In Lydia Davis's translation: 'the flowers I am shown today for the first time do not seem to me to be real flowers'. The difference in translation of Proust's 'vraies' as 'true' and 'real' is significant. 'True' indicates that the flowers fail to meet an ideal, whereas 'real' indicates a failure to be literal and material, a failure of instantiation. Both meanings are live in the text.

> and blossoming beauty, in the wind that had turned icy beneath the drenching rain: it was a day in spring. (IV: 209)[46]

This scene is not about Marcel's grandmother; we do not find Marcel overwhelmed by grief. In fact, the experience of the encounter is not exactly located in the character who led us to it. Marcel is *in* the scene, having walked through the mud to get there, and yet elusive to it: its beauty elicits tears, but the tearful subject, translated as 'one' above, is missing ('*elle touchait jusqu'aux larmes*'). Marcel's grandmother, while not the subject of the scene, is not wholly absent either; like her, the apple-trees heedlessly drag their feet in the mud. In a familiar digressive mode, this passage steps out of the interiority of the character Marcel and pauses the incessant thoughts of his grandmother—but it does not step very far. Perhaps this subtle adjustment of attention is why, unlike in the telephone scene, the rare contact that unfolds here does not enjoin anguish, alarm, or any direct response at all. Lucey evocatively suggests that 'whatever the narrator's seeming aloofness or distance from the scenes he sometimes describes, his taste (e.g., for Bergotte) and his desire (e.g., for Albertine) are also taking shape pragmatically, in process, almost without being referred to, as the novel unfolds.'[47] In this scene, we might say that Marcel's grief is still taking shape, very close to the surface of the text.

Benjamin describes the endeavor of *In Search of Lost Time* as that of a fisherman trawling 'the sea of the *temps perdu*.'[48] The 'grey net' of rain in this passage holds, not a memory, but other gifts retrieved from lost time: a grief sustained—not destroyed—by wandering attention, a simultaneity of detail and form. For whereas earlier in the passage Marcel describes the memory of his grandmother as rescuing him, through grief, from 'barrenness of spirit'—'*séchèresse de l'âme*', literally drought of the soul—for the ambiguous subject of this passage, there is another kind of deliverance by rain. Falling on ground not yet dried (*sechée*), introducing nothing different in substance, the rain carries the event from its singularity to its typicality. It envelopes the 'unbelievable' spectacle of the apple-trees in the closing recognition: 'it was a day in spring.' From the narrator's oblique position, the

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[46] 'Mais elle touchait jusqu'aux larmes parce que, si loin qu'on allât dans ses effets d'art raffiné, on sentait qu'elle était naturelle, que ces pommiers étaient là en pleine campagne comme des paysans, sur une grande route de France. Puis aux rayons du soleil succédèrent subitement ceux de la pluie; ils zébrèrent tout l'horizon, enserrèrent la file des pommiers dans leur réseau gris. Mais ceux-ci continuaient à dresser leur beauté, fleurie et rose, dans le vent devenu glacial sous l'averse qui tombait: c'était une journée de printemps' (Proust, *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, p. 178).

[47] Michael Lucey, 'Proust and Language-in-Use', *Novel: A Forum in Fiction*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (2015), 261-279, p. 277.

[48] Benjamin, 'The Image of Proust', p. 216.

beloved is made present with and through her absence: this time, it is not experienced as loss.

Chapter 2
Gossip and Reserve: Reading with Proust's Outsiders

In a long aside in *The Guermantes Way,* the narrator describes the social code of Mme de Guermantes's salon, in which she entertains talented poets and artists, but scrupulously refrains from mentioning anything to do with their work. The narrator imagines the experience of a guest who is not familiar with this code:

> And presently the luncheon came to an end and the party broke up, without a word having been said about poetry which they nevertheless all admired but to which, by a reserve analogous to that which Swann had given me a foretaste, no one referred. This reserve was simply a matter of good form. But for the fellow-guest (*tiers*), if he thought about the matter, there was something strangely melancholy about it all, and these meals in the Guermantes household were reminiscent of the hours which timid lovers often spend together in talking trivialities until it is time to part. (III: 236)[1]

But unlike with the timid lovers, exemplified in the previous chapter by Marcel with Albertine, the unhappiness that this unnamed guest perceives—the '*tiers*', literally, 'third' or outsider—is not felt by the conversing parties. We have no reason to believe the Duke and Duchess are dissatisfied with their own talk: they have hosted a successful dinner, shown off Mme de Guermantes' trademark wit, conformed to their own social mores, and entertained a respected artist. Indeed, the 'melancholy' in this passage is distinctly unlocated, removed several times from actuality: the imagined outsider perceives it only if he reflects afterwards, a clause which is further unrealized in the French by the use of the subjunctive. From this hypothetical remove, the unschooled third party perceives sadness in equanimity—a habitual avoidance, an unfelt and unimagined loss. It is left ambiguous whether this amounts to a projection of the interloper's own feelings or a sharper perception of Mme de Guermantes than she has of herself.

Whereas the previous chapter explores the dynamic interrelations between the constitutive subjectivities of the text, the hero and narrator, this chapter pursues the perspectives of outsiders: articulations or traces of articulations within the text that do not accord with the narrator's representations. Like the guest at the Guermantes salon, these accounts lack interpretive authority—but their very distance and disconnection from the

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[1] 'Et bientôt le déjeuner était fini et on se disait adieu, sans avoir dit un mot de la poésie que tout le monde pourtant aimait, mais dont, par une réserve analogue à celle dont Swann m'avait donné l'avant-goût, personne ne parlait. Cette réserve était simplement de bon ton. Mais pour le tiers, s'il y réfléchissait un peu, elle avait quelque chose de fort mélancolique, et les repas du milieu Guermantes faisaient alors penser à ces heures que des amoureux timides passent souvent ensemble à parler de banalités jusqu'au moment de se quitter' (Proust, *Le Côté de Guermantes*, p. 199).

scenes they observe may enable them to perceive truths that have grown obscure in the text. The first section of this chapter is dedicated to gossip in 'Swann in Love'. Gossip offers a gloss, sketch, or summary of an individual's affairs without insight into their feelings, reasoning, or personal history; it is, in Patricia Meyer Spacks's brisk formulation, 'idle talk about people not present'.[2] In the context of Swann's love affair, these deficient features of gossip enable it to cut through the confusions, nuances, feints, and delusions that typify Swann's experience with astonishing, even disorienting clarity. Concise where the text is prolix, brusque where it is melodramatic, lucid where it is convoluted, gossip presents an alternative, competing representation of the affair recounted in 'Swann in Love'. The second section turns away from Swann and back towards Marcel, who is not typically a subject of gossip in the *Search*. To read for traces of outside perspectives around Marcel is a more difficult and speculative task; as Proust's narrator famously declares, 'The only true voyage […] would be not to visit strange lands but to possess other eyes, to see the universe through the eyes of another' (V: 291). I argue that around the novel's hero and narrator, the novel gives shape to the perspective of an outsider through a negative space in the narration. Like the guest at the Guermantes luncheon, I identify the narrator's reserve—occasions when the narrator recedes to let events, utterances, and whole conversations pass by without comment—as the site of feelings that the text does not avow and omissions that it does not acknowledge.

This chapter thus theorizes gossip and reserve in the *Search* as the traces of insights that are not quite assimilated by the narration but cannot be dismissed either, remaining exterior, unsanctioned, or implicit. They shed light on the limits of what can be said by the novel's orienting subjects, the hero and narrator. As Benjamin observes in 'The Image of Proust', 'We do not always proclaim loudly the most important thing we have to say. Nor do we always privately share it with those closest to us, our intimate friends, those who have been most devotedly ready to receive our confession',[3] but with passing acquaintances and strangers. In the spirit of this remark, this chapter considers the perceptions and speculations of peripheral figures in the *Search* as sites of displaced or discreet importance. This inquiry foregrounds aspects of Proust's style that are often overshadowed by his reputation for length and volume: his capacities for pithiness, concision, and restraint, which

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[2] Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Gossip* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1985), p. 26.

[3] Benjamin, 'The Image of Proust', p. 207.

Malcolm Bowie described as Proust's 'art of brevity'.[4] In the analysis that follows, I aim to delineate not only an art but a hermeneutics of brevity in the *Search*: forms of knowledge and feeling made perceptible by the slight, perfunctory, and diffident forms of gossip and reserve.

1. Gossip and Knowledge

Proust's novel is full of gossip that varies dramatically in its measure of wit, accuracy, and cruelty. Most of it falls under the category that Spacks likens to Heidegger's 'idle talk': 'It derives from unconsidered desire to say something without having to ponder too deeply. Without purposeful intent, gossipers bandy words and anecdotes about other people, thus protecting themselves from serious engagement with one another.'[5] This unseriousness is demonstrated most starkly at the end of *The Guermantes Way*, when Swann tells his supposed great friend, Mme de Guermantes, that he is dying. Unable to acknowledge the gravity of his words in their standard banter, and unwilling to miss a dinner party that she has proclaimed to be a bore, she simply pretends that he is joking (III: 816). But alongside its deficiencies of sincerity and compassion, gossip also has an aesthetic function. In the literature of the salons, as Ross Chambers observes, gossip is a 'display language': it aims at displaying the knowingness of the speaker, their eloquence, and in particular, their skill in formulating 'what one always "knew" but never quite realized'.[6] In this variation, gossip aspires to a kind of inspired redescription that condenses and represents a state of affairs in 'a detail that is unfailingly *telling*'.[7]

This is the aspect of gossip that most interests Proust. The value of gossip, Proust claims, is its ability to capture a state of affairs in a new light, bringing out aspects of its subject that have grown obscure: 'It prevents the mind from falling asleep over the factitious view which it has of what it imagines things to be […] It turns this appearance inside

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[4] Malcom Bowie, 'Postlude: Proust and the art of brevity' in *The Cambridge Companion to Proust*, ed. by Richard Bales (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 216-229.

[5] Spacks, *Gossip*, p. 5.

[6] Ross Chambers, 'Gossip and the Novel: Knowing Narrative and Narrative Knowing in Balzac, Mme de Lfayette and Proust', *Australian Journal of French Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 1, pp. 212-233, p. 214.

[7] Chambers, 'Gossip and the Novel', p. 231.

out' (IV: 517).[8] Gossip is a site where insides meet outsides, where one's experiences undergo the unforeseeable transformations of another's perceptions. That this function of gossip is particularly potent in 'Swann in Love' is connected with the unusual narrative structure of this passage: the omniscient narration of 'Swann in Love', moving in and out of free indirect style, orients the protagonist, Swann, in a shifting perspective between external and internal modes of representation that is unique in the novel. The 'inside-out' perspectives of gossip, then, dovetail with the moving viewpoint of the narrator.

Swann's love, the apparent subject of the middle section of *Swann's Way*, is an elusive and possibly illusive entity.[9] As José Ortega y Gasset observed in 1923:

> Proust describes Swann's love as something that has nothing like the form of love. All kinds of things can be found in it: touches of flaming sensuality, purple pigments of distrust, browns of habitual life, grays of vital fatigue. The only thing *not* to be found is love. It comes out just as the figure in a tapestry does, by the intersection of various threads, no one of which contains the form of the figure.[10]

Ortega y Gasset elegantly posits love as the gestalt of 'Swann in Love', an alchemy of accumulation that transforms a heterogeneous collection into something greater than the sum of its parts. In this reading, Swann's love is a figure which is only perceptible as a whole, by a somewhat distant observer. This echoes Benjamin's elusive reflections on the 'image' in Proust, as a synthesizing relation to one's experiences which is unlocked by memory: 'According to Proust, it is a matter of chance whether an individual forms an image of himself, whether he can take hold of his experience.'[11] Swann does not have this good fortune: embedded within the tapestry, he is precluded from viewing the image of his love, confined to experiencing successively its immediate moods and impulses. Only the narrator, and with him the reader, may view the figure from a bird's-eye view; only these privileged viewers know the complete form of Swann's love.

But in addition to Swann himself and the enlightened narrator who, in Ortega y Gasset's formulation, weaves Swann's confusions into the form of love, there is another

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[8] This metaphor of 'inversion' indirectly references the Baron de Charlus, one of the most gossiped-about characters in the *Search*. Charlus is so hyper-visible to gossips and the narrator alike that gossip exercises an authoritative interpretive power over him, whereas for Swann, the subject of this inquiry, gossip plays a more ambivalent role. For further discussion of Charlus's hyper-visibility, see Eve Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

[9] In the French, the section title is '*Un amour de Swann*'; Lydia Davis translates it as 'A Love of Swann's' in the UK edition of her translation.

[10] José Ortega y Gasset, 'Time, Distance, and Form in Proust', trans. by Irving Singer, *The Hudson Review*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (Winter 1958-1959), pp. 504-3, p. 509.

[11] Walter Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire' in *Illuminations*, pp. 155-200, p. 160.

distinct perspective on Swann's love that occasionally finds a voice in the text. This is the perspective of the gossips. At the decisive moment of Swann's affair when his casual attachment to Odette metamorphoses into a ruinous obsession, gossip plays a critical explanatory role. On this occasion, out of boredom with Odette, Swann stays too long with his other mistress and arrives late to the Verdurins' salon to find Odette already gone. This induces a powerful feeling of anguish in Swann which he himself does not understand; the narrator, too, offers no clarification of its source or nature. Instead, as Chambers has argued, the text turns to the discourse of gossip to convey to the reader an apt evaluation of what has transpired: M. Verdurin turns to his wife and says, ''Did you notice the face he pulled when he saw she wasn't here? […] I think we may say that he's hooked' (I: 271).[12] The clarity of Verdurin's glancing assessment contrasts sharply with Swann's confused relation to his own feelings, which the narrator relates in free indirect discourse:

> Swann suddenly perceived how foreign to his nature were the thoughts which had been revolving in his mind since he had heard at the Verdurins' that Odette had left […] What! all this disturbance simply because he would not see Odette now, till tomorrow, exactly what he had been hoping, not an hour before, as he drove toward Mme Verdurin's. (I: 274-5)[13]

Swann is bewildered by the perceived incompatibility of his nature and his thoughts, his feelings and his understanding, his actions and his self-image. These are the characteristics of his love that has 'nothing like the form of love', the reality of which, as Brodsky observes, Swann himself seems to doubt.[14] But Verdurin, lacking any awareness of these nuances, easily identifies Swann's infatuation at the moment of its formation.

An interlude of gossip interposes Swann's anxious pursuit of Odette, which for the most part exemplifies the shortcomings of the practice: it is composed of prurient speculations into Odette and Swann's relation and second-hand reports of Odette's insipid avowals, punctuated by Dr. Cottard's persistent attempts to display fluency in idiomatic slang.[15] But the scene concludes with another surprisingly incisive remark from M. Verdurin at Swann's expense: 'I don't know whether you heard the way he lectured her the other evening about Vinteuil's sonata. I am devoted to Odette, but really—to expound theories of

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[12] Ross Chambers, 'Gossip and the Novel', p. 229.

[13] 'Swann tout d'un coup aperçut en lui l'étrangeté des pensées qu'il roulait depuis le moment où on lui avait dit chez les Verdurin qu'Odette était déjà partie […] Quoi? tout cette agitation parce qu'il ne verrait Odette que demain, ce que précisément il avait souhaité, il y a une heure, en se rendant chez Mme Verdurin !' (Proust, *Du côté de chez Swann*, pp. 273-4)

[14] Brodsky, 'Remembering Swann', p. 1016.

[15] For a lengthy examination of Cottard's linguistic style, see Genette, 'Proust and Indirect Language'.

aesthetics to her—the man must be a prize idiot' (I: 273). This observation touches on an aspect of Swann's private efforts to identify the substance or essence of his relation to Odette. In the absence of a straightforwardly visceral passion, one explanation Swann offers himself for the time and attention he devotes to Odette is an aesthetic one. In order to justify the time lost to his incomplete study of Vermeer, Swann associates Odette's beauty with the works of art that he admires. He reasons to himself that since she exemplifies his aesthetic principles, his time spent with her does not come at the cost of his more intellectual and elevated pursuits, but actually furthers them. The narrator of 'Swann in Love' documents the details of this internal argument, but liberally applies phrases like 'he told himself' and 'he would assure himself' that give Swann's gauzy rationalizations an air of implausibility (I: 269-70). Thus to the reader, despite Verdurin's ignorance of these private affairs, his remark has a ring of truth as it skewers Swann's intellectual pretensions: he looks a prize idiot bringing his aesthetic theory to Odette.

Verdurin's pieces of gossip are 'telling', but what they 'tell' is not accessible to Verdurin's diegetic listeners (in fact, Mme Verdurin refuses to accept the slight to Odette's intelligence). Verdurin's remark, 'to expound theories of aesthetics to her—the man must be a prize idiot', pinpoints Swann for the benefit of the reader, who has already encountered the narrator's quietly skeptical presentation of Swann's aesthetic theory of Odette; similarly, the prescience of 'I think we may say that he's hooked' is determined by the pages that directly follow it, which depict Swann in the first throes of an obsession that he does not understand. Later in the *Search*, Mme de Guermantes remarks about Swann's marriage to Odette, 'It was a great surprise, I admit, because she was a bit of an idiot, but she was never ridiculous, and she was at one time pretty […] Not that that made me any less sorry when Charles married her, because it was so unnecessary' (III: 260). Having very little insight into the affair itself, addressing an audience of equal ignorance, she nonetheless isolates its key attributes: its radical contingency and inexplicability. Gossip around Swann's love affair thus takes on a meta-narrative function that is displaced from the intentions and the speech situation of the speaker. It facilitates the inversion of perceptions that Proust attributes to the speech form, reformulating Swann's love affair into a foreign outside perspective, but not for the benefit of any character in the novel. Instead, M. Verdurin and Mme de Guermantes's gossip is offered to the reader as a transposition of Swann's love story, resolving its internal obscurity with the clarity of a glance.

In his own way, the narrator expresses and invites the suspicion that Swann's mystified experience of his love affair might be misleading, overwrought, rendered complex only through a lack of self-knowledge. When a bout of jealousy triggers in Swann an ornate psychodrama, impelling him from angered threats of severance to triumph, pity, affection, and remorseful reconciliation, the narrator spends ten pages developing the melodramatic arc of Swann's feelings, only to conclude with a devastating sentence from Odette's perspective:

> she could not reconstruct the several phases of these crises through which he was passing, and the notion she had formed of them omitted any attempt to understand their mechanism, but looked only to what she knew beforehand, their necessary, never-failing, and always identical termination. An incomplete notion (though possibly all the more profound in consequence), if one were to judge it from the point of view of Swann, who would doubtless have considered himself misunderstood by Odette. (I: 366)[16]

Here the narrator hints at the same kind of collision of interpretations that gossip produces: Swann's profusion of narrativized affect against Odette's perception of a concise and ineluctable law of return. But Odette's idea of Swann is incomplete not only from his own perspective but from that of the novel, which relates in detail the cycle of feelings that she ignores. 'Swann in Love' communicates the inconsistencies and limitations of Swann's perspective through a durational, intimate study of his iterated misconceptions, doomed schemes, and hapless attempts to evaluate his own feelings—a style of narration that, even if it condescends to Swann, is dedicated to detailing the complexities and fluctuations that he so vividly feels.

In contrast, the judgments of gossips are demonstratively unconcerned with Swann's muddy feelings. Their swift, reductive, yet effective characterizations have the kind of glancing persuasiveness that Natalia Cecire theorizes as 'flash'. Flash is a form of representation that claims to convey a complex whole in an instantaneous glance; its synecdochic perspicuousness is 'always reductive yet somehow also self-sufficient'.[17] Flash and its associated ideas—glance, *Blick*, *coup d'oeil*—are not terms one would characteristically associate with Proust's novel: when a glimpse or an instant produces an

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[16] 'Elle ne reconstituait pas les diverses phases de ces crises qu'il traversait et, dans l'idée qu'elle s'en faisait, elle omettait d'en comprendre le mécanisme, ne croyant qu'à ce qu'elle connaissait d'avance, à la nécessaire, à l'infaillible et toujours identique terminaison. Idée incomplète — d'autant plus profonde peut-être — si on la jugeait du point de vue de Swann qui eût sans doute trouvé qu'il était incompris d'Odette' (Proust, *Du côté de chez Swann*, p. 364).

[17] Natalia Cecire, *Experimental: American Literature and the Aesthetics of Knowledge* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), p. 50.

epiphany in the *Search*, it does so over pages of detail and proliferating analogies. Proust's novel, as Zhang observes, is 'constructed by means of an endless chain of likes' that weave his elongated sentences into a vast web of resemblances.[18] In direct contrast, 'flash marks out what is real, and, in doing so, it dislodges the sense of reality from *verisimilitude* or *resemblance*, resituating it instead in the encoding of detail in an intuitable glance.'[19] Gossip, by invoking the hermeneutics of flash, thus poses a challenge to Proust's style of intricate, analogic subjective representation. It does not simply offer a redescription of Swann's narrated experience, but issues a *competing* description that stakes its own claim to knowing 'what is real'. Brodsky observes that 'no one, not even Swann, could have told ['Swann in Love'] with such precision' as the narrator does.[20] In a similar vein, the narrator cannot tell 'Swann in Love' with the flash-like form of precision that adheres to gossip.

But the telling details of gossip, for all their incisiveness, lack the authority of Cecire's flash. 'In its instaneity, flash offers brevity. Yet this is not a brevity of spareness or withholding,' she specifies. 'Rather, flash's brevity is one of sufficiency, even plenitude, suggesting condensation or contraction.'[21] The gossips of the *Search* cannot offer this guarantee. The particular kind of insight they are capable of producing is premised on the breezy, frivolous, perfunctory nature of their form of talk, and it derives its potency from textual surroundings of which they know nothing. Thus the blunt assessments of gossips remain proximate to *mere* brevity: instead of the condensed plenitude of sudden insight, the reductive inaccuracies of ignorant chatter. Unlike the authoritative action of flash, these articulations unsettle but cannot fully unseat the sense of reality that adheres to the narrator's telling of 'Swann in Love'.

In her influential study of modernist description, Mieke Bal argues that in Proust's *Search*, 'the descriptions of the main characters—or rather, the difficulties of describing them —are the "essence" of the novel. Fugitive and ungraspable, the novel they generate is essentially without essence.'[22] But the sagacity of the gossip in Swann's love affair raises another problem of description—one that is not characterized by difficulty. Instead, the *ease*

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[18] Zhang, *Strange Likeness*, p. 88.

[19] Cecire, *Experimental*, p. 50.

[20] Brodsky, 'Remembering Swann', p. 1026.

[21] Cecire, *Experimental*, pp. 73, 83.

[22] Mieke Bal, 'Over-writing as Un-writing: Descriptions, World-Making, and Novelistic Time' in *The Novel, Volume 2: Forms and Themes,* ed. by Franco Moretti (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), pp. 571-610, p. 585.

with which other characters in the novel pinpoint Swann becomes a problem in itself, articulating his love affair with a simplicity that captures his experience without acknowledging its contents. From Swann's perspective, on the other hand, his love is as obscure as Marcel's image of Albertine, which forms the focus of Bal's study. As Marcel complains:

> If then we prove our predilection by the action that we perform rather than by the idea that we form, I must have been in love with Albertine. But this renewal of my suffering gave no greater consistency to the image of Albertine that I retained within me. She caused my ills like a deity who remains invisible. (V: 166)[23]

For the Proustian lover, introspection fails radically to provide certainty; the image of the beloved, synecdochic for the love itself, cannot be summoned to mind. But, as Marcel admits in the passage above, this private uncertainty is accompanied by a public legibility in which the lover's radical confusion is dissolved in the clarity of his behavior. The gossips of 'Swann in Love' give voice to this perspective in the text. 'Swann in Love' thus relates a Proustian love affair that, like Marcel's with Albertine, presents a 'fugitive and ungraspable' face to the lover, but counterbalances his mystified, fraught experience of the liaison with glimpses of the view from outside: the swift, telling expressions of gossips. These competing accounts of Swann's love—one intimate, arduous, and obscure, the other aloof, swift, and lucid—remain at odds throughout 'Swann in Love', suspended in ambivalent simultaneity as long as Swann's love persists.

This ambivalence is exemplified in the closing words of 'Swann in Love'. Years after the events that passage describes, young Marcel observes Swann's reluctance to voice an opinion without an air of ironic detachment, wondering, 'What other life did he set apart for saying in all seriousness what he thought about things, for formulating judgments which he would not put between inverted commas […] ?' (I: 116) This other life is, as Brodsky observes, the one related in 'Swann in Love', in which Swann pursues his jealous obsession with absolute earnestness.[24] At the end of 'Swann in Love', as Swann's sincerity begins to give way to his old detachment, he looks back on his love affair with the brisk, cursory carelessness of gossip: 'To think that I've wasted years of my life, that I've longed to die, that

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[23] 'Si donc on prouve sa préférence par l'action qu'on accomplit plus que par l'idée qu'on forme, j'aurais aimé Albertine. Mais cette reprise de ma souffrance ne donnait pas plus de consistance en moi à l'image d'Albertine. Elle causait mes maux comme une divinité qui reste invisible. Faisant mille conjectures, je cherchais à parer à ma souffrance sans réaliser pour cela mon amour' (Proust, *La Prisonnière*, pp. 179-80).

[24] Brodsky, 'Remembering Swann', p. 1023.

I've experienced my deepest love, for a woman who didn't appeal to me, who wasn't even my type!' (I: 454) In the French, Swann avows more equivocally, '*j'ai eu mon plus grand amour*'. This phrasing exploits an ambiguity in the French grammar of feeling, in which the verb '*avoir*', to have, permits a certain slippage between avowal and description.[25] Does it follow that one experiences love if one has a romance? When he exclaims that he wasted years of his life and had his deepest love, it remains uncertain whether the two statements differ at all in meaning: whether the '*plus grand amour*' earns this name by any content, any feeling, beyond the years that mark the observable scale of his investment. Swann's final words on the matter reiterate rather than resolve the ambiguity that defines the attachment: whether an outsider's glance evinces greater insight than the lover's earnest testimony.

2. Reserve and Feeling

Unlike Swann, Marcel is almost never a subject of gossip in the novel. He is more typically under-described, in Bal's sense: the impressions that are formed of him by other characters tend to be vague and unconvincing. Instead, Marcel's image in the text is bound up in his intimate relationships with his mother and grandmother—but if gossip derives a particular acuity from its weak connection to the subject, the impressions Marcel derives from his close family members are correspondingly obscure. Reflecting on his mother as an older man, Marcel realizes that 'when I wished to form an opinion of myself, I took the same point of view as she'; but the contents of this point of view are never specified.[26] In the second volume, during Marcel's stay at Balbec with his grandmother, he reports, 'I used to submit my impressions of life to my grandmother, for I was never certain what degree of respect was due to anyone until she had pointed it out to me' (II: 354). These interactions, which the narrator claims happen 'every evening' in Balbec, are nowhere recorded in the text. The perceptions and self-perceptions that Marcel derives from mother and grandmother, while apparently built into the structure of experience that the text relates, are not directly represented within it, emerging by omission as another kind of limit to what is articulable in the *Search*. This more speculative, elusive limit is the phenomenon that I have called *reserve*, which the remainder of this chapter will explore.

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[25] Lydia Davis translates 'eu' as 'felt': 'To think I wasted years of my life, that I wanted to die, that I felt my deepest love, for a woman who did not appeal to me, who was not my type!' (p. 396)

[26] Proust quoted in Leo Bersani, *The Fictions of Life and Art* (Cary: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 7.

A reader looking to glean Marcel's likeness from the impressions of other characters will generally find a suspicious wealth of largely unspecified approval. Eugène Nicole, tracing the different ways in which Marcel is addressed in the novel, finds a host of intimate diminutives: everyone from his grandmother to the Duke fondly addresses him with variations of '*mon petit*'.[27] As Prendergast observes, salon doors always open for him; his incredible social success rate is rendered more implausible still by the uniform omission, by the narrator, of whatever he says or does to charm his acquaintances.[28] Other scholars have noted the glaring omissions that mark the redactions of Marcel's speech in the text.[29] In one particularly stark example, he neither speaks nor is addressed in twelve pages of largely uninterrupted conversation, in the course of which Mme Verdurin enters and exits Odette's salon; on the twelfth page Mme Cottard tells Marcel he has '"made a complete conquest, first shot, of Mme Verdurin" (whom, she added, she had never seen "make so much" of anybody)' (II: 212). In the same salon, when Marcel speaks at length with the writer Bergotte, his own words are briefly summarized by the narrator ('I mentioned to Bergotte that I had recently been to see Berma'; 'I told him that I had liked the green light' (II: 154, 156)). Whatever he said must have been elegant indeed considering the high opinion of him that Bergotte forms, reported obligingly by Gilberte a few pages later. In this way, Marcel himself, and particularly Marcel's speech, is a curiously blank object of circulating admiration and regard in the novel.[30] Unlike Swann, Marcel is in little danger of being summed up by an authoritative external impression from these incidental acquaintances. His rich, elaborate internal world of feelings, impressions, and desires feels detached from the vague ideas formed of him by others, and comparatively much more real.

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[27] Eugène Nicole, 'Quel Marcel! And Other Oddities of the Narrator's Designations in *A la recherche du temps perdu*' in *The Strange M. Proust*, pp. 36-44, p. 40.

[28] Prendergast, *Mirages and Mad Beliefs*, p. 73n29.

[29] In *Eavesdropping in the Novel*, Gaylin notes, 'In a narrative chronicling his entrance into society, Marcel's participation in the witty repartee around him remains singularly unrecorded' (p. 160). Similarly, Freed-Thall observes in *Spoiled Distinctions* that '[w]e rarely hear the narrator's reported speech in this text—generally, he stands back and reports other peoples' speech' (p. 15).

[30] Marcel himself shares the reader's doubt over whether he really deserves Bergotte's approval. The narrator writes, 'Alas, how little I felt that what he was saying applied to me, whom all reasoning, however exalted it might be, left cold, who was happy only in moments of pure idleness, when I was comfortable and well […] I should have liked an existence in which I was on intimate terms with the Duchesse de Guermantes and often came across […] a fusty coolness that would remind me of Combray. And in this ideal existence which I dared not confide to him, the pleasures of the mind found no place' (II: 166).

But there is one figure in the *Search* who delivers a concise, compelling characterization of Marcel that in its incisive brevity resembles the assessments of Swann's gossips. After Marcel travels to Venice with his mother, he becomes unwilling to depart the city and declares he will not leave with her on the appointed train. This results in a surreal experience of paralysis and alienation that plays out over several pages, which has interested critics primarily as a portrayal of the breakdown of aesthetic experience. Tony Tanner interprets it as an experience of the dissociation of the ideal and the physical worlds, where 'the *idea* of Venice' departs from 'the mute unmeaning "material elements"', leaving lifeless stone behind.[31] In this estranged, defamiliarized environment, Marcel experiences the action of staying behind in the now-charmless Venice as already completed, mentally tracking his mother's progress to the train station as if from an out-of-body bird's-eye view. At the last minute, he runs to catch the train and finds his mother 'flushed with emotion and with the effort to restrain her tears, for she thought that I was not coming'. She says to him: 'your poor grandmother used to say: It's curious, there's nobody who can be as unbearable or as nice as that child' (V: 752).

Like those of the gossips, this summary remark disregards Marcel's complex and dramatic experience to draw his behavior, his perceived character, into sudden, unexpected focus. This pinpointing characterization comes not from a peripheral, casual observer, but from his mother and grandmother, the two people who know him best and care about him most. And it is spoken *to* him: whereas the gossip of 'Swann in Love' circulates around Swann's narrative without reaching him, Marcel's mother's gentle rebuke is given to him immediately as a rephrasing of his experience. After an episode of dissociation leaves Marcel feeling powerless to affect the world, this comment from his mother attests that she is affected and by these effects, he is perceived. In both length and rhetoric, her brief words are dramatically overshadowed by the striking account of alienation that precedes them—an imbalance which is evident from the volume of scholarship that takes up the Venice episode without dwelling on the role played by Marcel's mother.[32] It is clear that her distress is the implicit background of the desolate picture of Venice that forms in her absence, the reason for the decomposition of Venice's palaces into 'lifeless heaps of marble': the simultaneous

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[31] Tony Tanner, 'Proust, Ruskin, James, and *le Désir de Venise*', *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (April 1987), pp. 5-29, p. 12.

[32] See, for example, Tanner, 'Proust, Ruskin, James'; David Ellison in 'The Disquieting Strangeness of Marcel Proust' in *The Strange M. Proust*, pp. 12-22, p. 20; and Hannah Freed-Thall, 'Babble', p. 17. Leo Bersani's treatment of the Venice episode in *The Fictions of Life and Art* is a notable exception.

actions of hurt and guilt subtend these special effects (V: 749). But the narrator effectively diverts not only his own but the reader's attention from this aspect of the experience, conveying what Bersani calls 'a certain confusion about the reasons for this sudden concentration of feeling'.[33] This kind of diversion is one manifestation of the phenomenon I have identified as reserve.

'There has never been anyone else with Proust's ability to show us things; Proust's pointing finger is unequaled,' Benjamin writes in a much-quoted line of 'The Image of Proust'. Less frequently cited is the complementary insight that follows it: 'But there is another gesture in amicable togetherness, in conversation: [physical] contact. To no one is this gesture more alien than to Proust.'[34] Marcel's mother's flushed cheeks show that touch nonetheless occurs, though the narrator's attention might stay fixed to anything but his own hurtful gesture. Thus its effects, though utterly predictable, have the air of being unexpected, unintentional, or incidental, while the 'touch' (*Berührung*) transpires somewhere off-stage. If his mother's words touch him in return, causing a realignment of self-image or self-regard, this is omitted in the text; the narrator swiftly turns to a description of the countryside.

I now turn to the most grave and most fraught series of events that plays out between Marcel, his mother, and his grandmother in the *Search*: the grandmother's worsening illness and subsequent death. The narrator's turning-away gesture from above will repeat throughout this chapter's discussion of reserve, but its most literal manifestations occur around this sequence; Marcel, his mother, and his grandmother reflexively practice avoidance and reticence around the signs of loss and pain, literally falling silent and turning their heads away. It begins when Marcel and his grandmother are walking the Bois and she suffers a stroke. Communication stalls on the grandmother's part, the physical impediment of the stroke doubled by her unwillingness to betray it by speaking. But the strange movement of her body gives her away: Marcel suddenly notices 'the disjointedness of her gait' (III: 357). This prompts him to ask her a direct question—'I was afraid you were feeling sick, Grandmamma; are you feeling better now?'—and she is forced to reply, since 'it would be impossible for her not to make some answer without alarming me' (V: 358). But her

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[33] Bersani, *The Fictions of Life and Art*, p. 5.

[34] Benjamin, 'The Image of Proust', p. 214. I have placed 'physical' in brackets to emphasize the more mobile term 'contact', or 'touch', which is the direct translation of *Berührung*. In the original: 'Nie gab es einen, der so wie er die Dinge uns zeigen konnte. Sein weisender Finger ist ohnegleichen. Aber es gibt eine andere Geste im freundschaftlichen Miteinander, im Gespräch: die Berührung. Diese Geste ist keinem fremder als Proust.' (via https://www.textlog.de/benjamin-proust-leiden.html)

words seem to have nothing to do with Marcel's question: '"I heard the whole of the 'Marquise's conversation with the keeper," she told me […] "Ah! in what courtly terms those things were put!"' Something more alarming, more rupturing has occurred than a merely avoidant reply:

> Such were the remarks that she addressed to me, remarks into which she put all her critical delicacy, her love of quotation, her memory of the classics, more thoroughly even than she would normally have done, and as though to prove that she retained possession of all these faculties. But I guessed rather than heard what she said, so inaudible was the voice in which she mumbled her sentences, clenching her teeth more than could be accounted for by the fear of vomiting. (III: 358)[35]

How is the reader to synthesize the grandmother's words as the narrator records them—the exclamatory reference to Molière—with the image of a woman mumbling inaudibly? The gulf between the recorded speech and the description that follows gives a stuttering rhythm to this page, the narrator's lagging incomprehension retroactively muffling each of her utterances. In a similar fashion, Marcel responds to some other utterance than the one she has made: '"Come!" I said lightly enough not to seem to be taking her illness too seriously. "Since you're feeling a little sick I suggest we go home"' (III: 358). As they both uselessly try to conceal her symptoms from one another, the articulation of her illness hovers between his unconvincing matter-of-factness and her unheard, ventriloquized words.

In a posthumously published essay, Eve Sedgwick gives an uncharacteristically raw reading of this scene. She underlines the mutual, reflexive concealment that both parties immediately take upon themselves to maintain: 'she thought it would be impossible […] not to make some answer without alarming *me*', 'I was afraid of *her* noticing the strange way in which she uttered these words.' Observing their fixation with unfiltered frustration, she asks, 'What would this pair have thought or said on their walk if they were not occupied with such futile transactions?'[36] For Sedgwick, with her profound interest in the perlocutionary and periperformative, this is an unusually blunt condemnation of a circuitous form of talk: a lament that sticks out of the texture of her own criticism as much as it jars with the narrator's uninflected portrayal of Marcel and his grandmother's interactions. With an impassivity that the narrator sustains throughout the remainder of the

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[35] 'Voilà le propos qu'elle me tint et où elle avait mis toute sa finesse, son goût des citations, sa mémoire des classiques, un peu plus même qu'elle n'eût fait d'habitude et comme pour montrer qu'elle gardait bien tout cela en sa possession. Mais ces phrases, je les devinai plutôt que je ne les entendis, tant elle les prononça d'une voix ronchonnante et en serrant les dents plus que ne pouvait l'expliquer la peur de vomir' (Proust, *Le Côté de Guermantes*, p. 302).

[36] Sedgwick, *The Weather in Proust*, p 28.

grandmother's life, he describes without commentary their ongoing efforts to conceal the severity of her illness from one another. I hear in the critical fragility of Sedgwick's position, its vulnerability to accusations of projections, an echo of the melancholy outsider at the Guermantes luncheon.[37] Like the outsider, Sedgwick identifies a deficiency in the conversation of others that, for her, produces a pathos that the participants do not seem to feel. Registering no tongue-tied melancholy, no unasked question or missed connection, the text is unwilling, or unready, to open itself to Sedgwick's question.

Instead, the splintered conversation between Marcel and his grandmother yields to silence and a sudden, overwhelming experience of alienation:

> She, in whose heart I always placed myself in order to form an opinion of the most insignificant person, she was now closed to me, had become part of the external world, and, more than from any casual passer-by, I was obliged to keep from her what I thought of her condition, to betray no sign of my anxiety. I could not have spoken of it to her with any more confidence than to a stranger. She had suddenly returned to me the thoughts, the griefs which, from my earliest childhood, I had entrusted to her for all time. She was not yet dead. But I was already alone. (III: 359)[38]

Marcel's dependence on his grandmother has been exhaustively analyzed by critics, rarely if ever to his credit. In such readings, the instantaneous estrangement effected by the reversal of their standard care-taking dynamic is evidence that their relationship is dysfunctionally imbalanced in favor of Marcel's needs. One critic supports this picture by diagnosing Marcel's grandmother as a pathologically selfless melancholic and Marcel himself as a narcissist, citing 'Marcel's indifference (not to say downright hostility) to his grandmother's happiness in life'.[39] Bersani more forgivingly formulates Marcel's dependence on his grandmother as 'a persistent and fundamental need to merge with a source of strength outside of himself'.[40] In Bersani's interpretation, this is a structuring principle of Marcel's nature, which explains why his grandmother's withdrawal of support, however unwilling, causes an intense experience of isolation. Yet the rupture following her stroke, though likely

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[37] Her choice of word, 'futile', echoes the characterization of Mme de Guermantes's '*milieu futile*'. Proust, *Le Côté de Guermantes- Deuxième partie*, p. 200.

[38] 'Elle, au coeur de qui je me plaçais toujours pour juger la personne la plus insignifiante, elle m'était maintenant fermée, elle était devenue une partie du monde extérieur, et plus qu'à de simples passants, j'étais forcé de lui taire ce que je pensais de son état, de lui taire mon inquiétude. Je n'aurais pu lui en parler avec plus de confiance qu'à une étrangère. Elle venait de me restituer les pensées, les chagrins que depuis mon enfance je lui avais confiés pour toujours. Elle n'était pas morte encore. J'étais déjà seul' (Proust, *Le Côté de Guermantes*, p. 303).

[39] Richard E. Goodkin, *Around Proust* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 139.

[40] Bersani, *The Fictions of Life and Art*, p. 15.

caused by her newly apparent fragility, is located more precisely around the blockage of communication: what transforms his grandmother into a stranger and produces his own resounding aloneness is the imperative he feels to entirely hide his thoughts and feelings from her—an enforced reserve which is, however futile, an act of care.

It is, in fact, a form of care that his mother and grandmother reiterate to one another in mirrored acts of concealment and turning away. When Marcel and his grandmother arrive home after her stroke, he hopes that his mother will not notice the alteration in her own mother's face, but his worry is unnecessary: 'not once did she raise her eyes and look at the sufferer's face. Perhaps this was in order that my grandmother should not be saddened by the thought that the sight of her might have alarmed her daughter' (III: 366). Each of them attempts to forestall the relays of sadness, alarm, and fear that compound between them as each feels pain of and for the others. Thus, I am more inclined to read Marcel's alienation from his grandmother after her stroke as what Silvan Tomkins characterizes as a shame-response:

> There is some serious impediment to communication which forces consciousness back to the face and the self. Because the self is not altogether willing to renounce the object, excitement may break through and displace shame at any moment, but while shame is dominant it is experienced as an enforced renunciation of the object.[41]

It is hard to say exactly what the impediment is in Marcel's case. But as soon as his grandmother delivers her muffled remarks, he is determined that neither she nor his mother should notice the severity of her symptoms, and simultaneously that neither of them should perceive the scale of his own concern. Certainly none of these goals are achieved. Perhaps he simply follows the lead of his mother and grandmother in the concealment of one's own pain as an act of love. The contradictory effect is, as Tomkins predicts, his immediate estrangement from her in 'an enforced renunciation of the object'. His attempts at care resemble ministrations to the already-dead: he bids her not to speak and covers her face with a shawl.

Shame, Sedgwick observes in another essay, is 'both peculiarly contagious and peculiarly individuating', bringing Marcel, his mother, and his grandmother into a common posture that literally orients them away from one another, in which each feels alone.[42] Cavell similarly writes that shame is 'the most private of emotions', where this privacy designates a

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[41] Silvan S. Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*, ed. by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 138.

[42] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, p. 37.

radically inexpressive zone.[43] For Cavell, privacy as the opposite of public language is 'having nothing to say, being voiceless, not even mute.'[44] Muteness, having something to say but finding oneself unable to say it, is the same genre of problem that afflicts the 'timid lovers' to which the '*tiers*' likens the Guermantes, as they go on talking without saying the one thing on their minds. In contrast, voicelessness—where, as I discussed in the thesis introduction, 'voice' is the entity that subtends the possibility of communication— is a void. This imagined blank of language, then, might be the province of shame: an experience that robs one of voice, that stops up even the desire to speak.

How are we to read this profound silence in Proust's text? This question leads us back to the speculative perceptiveness of the outsider, who listens for what is not said and perceives feelings that are not felt. To read as the outsider here is to identify a pattern of reserve in the *Search* as a structure of deferred feeling. I contrast this critical position with another that refuses to take a declared lack of affect at face value: the close listener, represented by Adam Piette in his study of modernism's prose rhythms, *Remembering and the Sound of Words* (1996). Piette uncovers buried affect in Proust's novel by tracing a 'counter-sense' out of prose rhythms and lines of aural emphasis. In one instance, he unveils Marcel's superficially assuaged anxiety about Albertine in a long digression about *Tristan and Isolde*.[45] Piette's readings are compelling, but he does not address the complex para-identification between narrator and hero, treating the *Tristan* digression as emerging in real time from the mind of the hero. It follows, then, that the anxiety he uncovers beneath the passage's veneer of calm, while perhaps undetected by the present version of Marcel, is surely known to the narrator: seventy pages earlier, he remarks 'we know all too well that however profound these temporary respites may be, anxiety will still prevail' (V: 101). To read for the imprint of Marcel's grief is to come up against a different order of silencing, such that to imagine what might be said in its stead is to speculate beyond the limits of the text.[46]

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[43] Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, p. 286.

[44] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 28.

[45] Adam Piette, *Remembering and the Sound of Words: Mallarmé, Proust, Joyce, Beckett* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), p. 122.

[46] Piette's own reading of Marcel's mourning is sympathetic to this view. Part of how he distinguishes the grandmother's death from other charged events in the novel is by negation: by analyzing the qualities of the passages Proust eventually cuts from the death scene.

'The shame response is literally an ambivalent turning of the eyes away from the object,' Tomkins writes.[47] If we read Marcel's inexpressiveness around his grandmother's illness as a symptom of shame, then the diffidence of the passage following her stroke throws in relief a kind of distinct position—turned away from his grandmother's mortality—that the novel assumes in the third and fourth volumes, beginning with the worsening of her illness and extending to Marcel's delayed experience of morning. Long before the stroke occurs, the beginning of *The Guermantes Way* already conveys a blocked or uneven distribution of focus around the grandmother's illness. The opening description of the new apartment that Marcel's family has just moved into concludes with the illustrative sentence: 'Which, it is high time now that the reader should be told—and told also that we had moved into it because my grandmother, not having been at all well (though we took care to keep this reason from her), was in need of better air—was a flat forming part of the Hôtel de Guermantes' (III: 2). In this awkward announcement of the novel's titular theme, Marcel's obsession with the family of Guermantes, his grandmother's ill health is an even more awkward interruption. The third volume continues to develop Marcel's singleminded obsession with the duchess in familiar counterpoint with the narrator's leisurely digressions, but his grandmother's health remains off-limits until directly before her stroke, midway through the volume. Beyond the flows of awareness, knowledge, and temporality that scatter the novel's narration, the unspoken boundaries of its wandering attention show in relief a distinct pose: a concealment of and for the mourned object that the reader unconsciously takes up, turning our eyes away. It is a small step further to speculate a connection between this blanket reserve, the inhibiting structure of shame, and Marcel's delayed experience of grief months after his grandmother's death.

It is common to view—and Marcel himself views—the experience of grief initiated in 'The Intermittencies of the Heart' as a repudiation of the time spent ungrieving. In his first moments of misery, Marcel condemns those unfeeling months as 'ungrateful, selfish, cruel'—and perhaps this judgment is apt (IV: 180). But shame, for Tomkins, is still a form of attachment: a dynamic state of interruption that hovers in close proximity to the object-oriented movements of excitement and interest. The very self-orientation that alienates one

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[47] Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters*, p. 137. Tomkins treats verbal and ocular impediment in the same gesture, correlating the averting of the eyes to the interruption of speech. This diverges from a trend in Proust scholarship that emphasizes aurality in the novel at the expense of the visual, including Gaylin, *Eavesdropping in the Novel* and Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

from the object is a form of attachment to it: 'Self-consciousness is heightened by virtue of the unwillingness of the self to renounce the object.' In a resonant observation, Tomkins adds, 'In this respect it is not unlike mourning, in which I become exquisitely aware of the self just because I will not surrender the love object which must be surrendered.'[48] In this perspective, Marcel's non-experience of grief as a manifestation of shame is also part of the process of mourning. Where the gossip of 'Swann in Love' reduces a lengthy narrated experience to a flashing detail, reading for reserve around the grandmother's illness unspools Marcel's instantaneous experience of involuntary memory into a durational, unspoken practice of feeling.

Between Marcel and his grandmother, estrangement seems to be the complement of love. Recall the alienation he feels after racing home from Doncières to rectify their separation and banish the thought of her death: he sees her in 'a new world […] that which is inhabited by the strangers of whom we say "He's begun to age a good deal"' (III: 157).[49] Here as after her stroke, it is only with the brusque acuity of a stranger that he can perceive her mortality. In the previous chapter I read this passage as a failed attempt to make explicit their implicit, everyday companionship, but it can be simultaneously understood as a symptom of mourning: under the shadow of her ill health, his intense need for her produces an equally intense alienation. Joy followed by anguish followed by estrangement all emerge from contact with an everydayness in jeopardy. Piette reads this sequence as staging the incommensurability of the foreign, mortal body of the loved one with their intimate, particular voice: 'how can those two experiences, those two languages […] ever meet […]? One would suppose it needed a miracle.'[50] I pose the question in different terms: how could Marcel and his grandmother move through the estrangement of shame back into language? Or, to adapt Sedgwick's question, what might they have said to one another in her last days if they were not impeded by concealments and aversions? My answer is located in an

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[48] Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters*, p. 138.

[49] The observation '*il vieillit bien*' could also be translated 'he's aging well', which gives the imagined remark a matter-of-fact tone similar to that of Marcel's father in his mourning dream-sequences.

[50] The miraculous, climactic answer he finds is from the death-scene, when the oxygen-canisters in the grandmother's lungs produce a long, chant-like sound, and the restrained prose of the death-chapter opens into a subtle lyricism. Sedgwick, too, reads this passage as a 'powerfully resonant instance' of the dissolving flow between insides and outsides that serves as a counter-movement to the reified boundaries of the novel (Piette, *Remembering and the Sound of Words*, p. 99; Sedgwick, *The Weather in Proust*, p. 13).

untimely and ungraceful set of utterances: a stuttering, euphemistic, somewhat comic exchange from the second volume.

During Marcel and his grandmother's stay at Balbec, the intensity of his expressions of love induce her, for the first time, to prepare him for her death:

> Once I said to her: 'I couldn't live without you.'
>
> 'But you mustn't speak like that,' she replied in a troubled voice. 'We must be a bit pluckier than that. Otherwise, what would become of you if I went away on a journey? But I hope that you would be quite sensible and quite happy.'
>
> 'I could manage to be sensible if you went away for a few days, but I should count the hours.'
>
> 'But if I were to go away for months…' (at the mere thought my heart turned over) '… for years… for…' We both fell silent. We dared not look one another in the face. (II: 354)[51]

Once again, death initiates Tomkins's shame-response: 'The shame response is an act which reduces facial communication. It stands in the same relation to looking and smiling as silence stands to speech'.[52] As the grandmother's 'journey' euphemism stretches thinner and thinner, ellipses defer the final separation: the pair fall silent and look away from one another, ceasing verbal and facial communication alike. But in this case, Marcel resumes speech almost immediately:

> And yet I was suffering more keenly from her anguish than from my own. And so I walked across to the window and said to her distinctly, with averted eyes:
>
> 'You know what a creature of habit I am. For the first few days after I've been separated from the people I love best, I'm miserable. But though I go on loving them just as much, I get used to their absence, my life becomes calm and smooth. I could stand being parted from them for months, for years…'
>
> I was obliged to stop speaking and look straight out of the window. My grandmother left the room for a moment. (II: 354-5)[53]

His concern for his grandmother presses against the sudden imperative to silence, producing contrasting impulses of enthusiasm and retreat. In Tomkins's terms, the pressure

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[51] 'Une fois je luis dis: «Sans toi je ne pourrai pas vivre.—Mais il ne faut pas, me répondit-elle d'une voix troublée. Il faut nous faire un coeur plus dur que ça. Sans cela que deviendrais-tu si je partais en voyage? J'espère au contraire que tu serais très raisonnable et très heureux. — Je saurais être raisonnable si tu partais pour quelques jours, mais je compterais les heures. — Mais si je partais pour des mois... (à cette seule idée mon coeur se serrait), pour des années… pour…» Nous nous taisions tous les deux. Nous n'osions pas nous regarder' (Proust, *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, p. 295).

[52] Tomkins, *Shame and its Sisters*, p. 134.

[53] 'Pourtant je souffrais plus de son angoisse que de la mienne. Aussi je m'approchai de la fenêtre et distinctement je lui dis en détournant les yeux: «Tu sais comme je suis un être d'habitudes. Les premiers jours où je viens d'être séparé des gens que j'aime le plus, je suis malheureux. Mais tout en les aimant toujours autant, je m'accoutume, ma vie devient calme, douce; je supporterais d'être séparé d'eux, des mois, des années… » Je dus me taire et regarder tout à fait par la fenêtre. Ma grand-mère sortit un instant de la chambre' (Proust, *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, p. 295).

Marcel feels to reassure his grandmother is also his unwillingness to renounce her: in asserting his self-sufficiency, he reaffirms their bond. His attempt at reassurance/ reclamation does not entirely succeed, since he falls silent once again in the proximity of death. But in the course of this failure, he accomplishes a feat of perspective: a concise and accurate self-assessment. These dynamics of concealment and exposure, the stoppage produced by some 'impediment' and the desire to speak out of concern for the other, elicit a self-description that, like the remarks of gossips, sums up huge swathes of text: 'You know what a creature of habit I am'. Before Marcel is aware of his grandmother's illness, when the strongest barrier between them is the thin wall between their rooms, he is capable of more supple and less fearful affection: here, practices and promises of estrangement may enter into their intimacy without suspending it. Tomkins's alignment of shame with mourning gives credence to his tender phrase, 'though I go on loving them just as much'. The disconnections of shame, too, are proof of love.

Thus the silences that interrupt Marcel and his grandmother are powerful, but not final:

> But the next day I began to talk to her about philosophy, and, speaking in the most casual tone but at the same time taking care that my grandmother should pay attention to my words, I remarked what a curious thing it was that, according to the latest scientific discoveries, the materialist position appeared to be crumbling, and what was again most likely was the immortality of souls and their future reunion. (II: 355)[54]

Once again, his approach is transparently circumlocutory, keeping a wide berth from the specificities that might confront him again with silence. And once again, this very avoidance produces a prophetic remark, echoing the language the narrator uses elsewhere to describe the operation of involuntary memory; in his next visit to Balbec, he will experience this reunion of souls.[55] Similar but different to Prendergast's Proustian jokes, in which the novel's most significant themes are transposed into comic settings, Marcel's words are too

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[54] 'Mais le lendemain je me mis à parler de philosophie, sur le ton le plus indifférent, en m'arrangeant cependant pour que ma grand-mère fît attention à mes paroles, je dis que c'était curieux, qu'après les dernières découvertes de la science, le matérialisme semblait ruiné, et que le plus probable était encore l'éternité des âmes et leur future réunion' (Proust, *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, p. 295).

[55] 'I feel that there is much to be said for the Celtic belief that the souls of those whom we have lost are held captive in some inferior being, in an animal, in a plant, in some inanimate object, and thus effectively lost to us until the day (which to many never comes) when we happen to pass by the tree or to obtain possession of the object which forms their prison. Then they start and tremble, they call us by our name, and as soon as we have recognised them the spell is broken. Delivered by us, they have overcome death and return to share our life' (I: 51).

heartfelt to categorize as ridiculous. Indeed, they show a remarkable communicative ingenuity which attends to both his and his grandmother's worries without producing a rupture: a minor miracle.

The gesture that Marcel effects as he leans down to untie his boots, which returns to him the feelings he had when he first visited Balbec with his grandmother, is a stark literalization of the concept of 'affective positions': the basic orienting 'posture' that one takes up towards one's objects.[56] The shift it effects impacts the whole body of the novel. We might think of the halting words between Marcel and his grandmother at Balbec as affective positions in the more figurative, less abrupt sense. Nothing marks them as particularly significant among the many scenes of talk that Proust's narrator alludes to and records. But they instantiate a way of moving with shame back into language that was possible for Marcel in a particular environment, at a particular time: ephemeral, contextual, unremarked-on. In retrieving such an exchange to fill a future silence—a reserve between Marcel and his grandmother that the text does not acknowledge—I invoke another hermeneutics of gossip.

At the beginning of the second volume of the *Search*, Marcel recounts the story of a rare encounter with a piece of gossip about himself. As a young man, he hopes to secure an introduction to Mme and Mlle Swann through the kindness of M. de Norpois, a friend of his father's. But instead, he alienates Norpois by betraying the unseemly intensity of his gratitude: he is unable to completely suppress the impulse to kiss Norpois's hands. At the time, Marcel believes the 'impulsive movement' passes undetected (II: 56). But the narrator then steps out of time, out of the extended characterization of M. de Norpois's taste and bearing, and into a completely different discursive mode: 'it is quite possible,' he observes, 'that, even with respect to the millennial existence of the human race, the philosophy of the journalist, according to which everything is doomed to oblivion, is less true than a contrary philosophy which would predict the conservation of everything' (II: 57). The circumstances that occasion this sweeping remark are magnificently minute:

> Perhaps this does not quite hold true for the brief life of a human being. And yet, some years later, in a house in which M. de Norpois, who was also a guest there, seemed to me the most solid support that I could hope to find […] when, after the Ambassador had gone, I was told that he had alluded to an evening long ago when he had 'seen the moment in which I was about to kiss his hand,' not only did I blush to the roots of my hair but I was stupefied to learn how different from what I might have believed was not only the manner in which M. de Norpois spoke of me but also the composition of his memory. This piece of gossip enlightened me as to the

[56] Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, p. 128.

> incalculable proportions of absence and presence of mind, of recollection and forgetfulness, of which the human mind is composed; and I was as marvellously surprised as on the day on which I read for the first time, in one of Maspero's books, that there existed a precise list of the sportsmen whom Assurbanipal used to invite to his hunts a thousand years before the birth of Christ. (II: 57-8)[57]

Perhaps, Proust's narrator allows, it is not quite true that everything in one's life is conserved. 'And yet', this is the experience of plenitude which the evening's revelation invites—a plenitude in direct proportion with the inconsequentiality of the memory unexpectedly returned to him. The piece of gossip that Marcel learns does not have the form of a telling detail that condenses and redescribes his experiences; this is not the kind of exterior perspective that it represents. Instead, it opens a window onto a different composition of memory. There, in the mind of a passing acquaintance, a gesture is preserved long after Marcel has forgotten it and the feeling that animated it has passed. This is the exact complement to the blank, unmarked absences of Proustian reserve: the joyful, unlooked-for presence of a lost triviality. In the spirit of 'a philosophy which predicts the conservation of everything'—a remark which recalls the 'likelihood' of the immortality of souls—any such ephemera could name a possibility that the future will render prophetic.

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[57] 'Peut-être n'en est-il pas tout à fait de même pour la courte vie humaine. Pourtant quelques années plus tard, dans une maison où M. de Norpois, qui se trouvait en visite, me semblait le plus solide appui que j'y puisse rencontrer, parce qu'il était ami de mon père, indulgent, porté à nous vouloir du bien à tous, d'ailleurs habitué par sa profession et ses origines à la discrétion, quand, une fois l'ambassadeur parti, on me raconta qu'il avait fait allusion à une soirée d'autrefois dans laquelle il avait «vu le moment où j'allais lui baiser les mains», je ne rougis pas seulement jusqu'aux oreilles, je fus stupéfait d'apprendre qu'étaient si différentes de ce que j'aurais cru, non seulement la façon dont M. de Norpois parlait de moi, mais encore la composition de ses souvenirs. Ce «potin» m'éclaira sur les proportions inattendues de distraction et de présence d'esprit, de mémoire et d'oubli dont est fait l'esprit humain; et je fus aussi merveilleusement surpris que le jour où je lus pour la première fois, dans un livre de Maspero, qu'on savait exactement la liste des chasseurs qu'Assourbanipal invitait à ses battues, dix siècles avant Jésus-Christ' (Proust, *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, p. 49).

Chapter 3
Flirtation and Henry James's Economy of Form

The two texts by Henry James that this chapter interprets, *The Sacred Fount* (1901) and 'The Beast in the Jungle' (1903), provide examples of the 'essential secret' in James's fiction: they are organized around 'something which is not named, of an absent, overwhelming force which puts the whole present machinery of the narrative into motion.'[1] For the purposes of this thesis, the most interesting feature of the Jamesian 'essential secret' across both texts is the specific rhythm of talk to which it gives rise. In both *The Sacred Fount* and 'The Beast in the Jungle', the protagonist spends most of the text in conversations with others that circle around, speculate into, and allude to a secret that is not verifiable and, indeed, is not properly speakable. In this chapter, I consider this protracted, repetitive, allusive practice of talk as a form of *flirtation*: a term I wish to use in its colloquial sense as playful, erotically inflected or motivated interactions, but also in a more specific sense derived from Georg Simmel's concept of 'coquetry'. For Simmel, coquetry is a purely self-fulfilling, non-instrumental, pleasurable practice of relation. Consisting in the deferral of any definitive consent or denial, coquetry 'can bring […] polar opposites together in a quite integrated behavior, since the decisive and fateful content, which would bring it to one of the two decisions, by definition does not enter into coquetry'.[2] Coquetry thus marks out a zone of free, playful interaction that definitionally excludes any actions that would demarcate a definitive relation.[3]

In 'The Beast in the Jungle' and *The Sacred Fount*, the conceit of an essential secret is simultaneously productive of and inimical to coquettish or flirtatious forms of relation. Recall Leo Bersani's elegant formulation, which I quoted in the thesis introduction:

> the greatest Jamesian […] sophistication is to find a kind of sensual pleasure in following the ingenious evasions and indirections with which language deflects and serves insistent desires […] The surfaces of our thought and our speech don't merely cover up the depths behind thought and speech. They have appeals of their own, and

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[1] Tzvetan Todorov, 'The Structural Analysis of Literature: the Tales of Henry James' in *Structuralism: an introduction*, ed. David Robey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), pp. 73-103, pp. 74-5.

[2] Georg Simmel, 'The Sociology of Sociability', trans. by Everett C. Hughes, *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 55, No. 3 (November 1949), pp. 254-261, p. 259.

[3] There are echoes of Simmel's 'coquetry' in Adam Phillips's monograph *On Flirtation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), in which he defines flirtation as a deliberately maintained state of uncertainty (pp. xii, xix).

> as we compose our sublimations we can discover pleasures distinct from those for the sake of which we began to sublimate.[4]

Bersani describes Jamesian talk as a site of unpredictable transformations, where what begins as a pretext or a diversion may unexpectedly become a new object of attention and desire. In *The Sacred Fount* and 'The Beast in the Jungle', intimate, conspiratorial relationships form around the task of discovering an essential secret, but the pleasure of the ensuing relations may reorient the speakers away from the secret and towards the relation itself. This creates a clash of motives: as the enjoyment of talk begins to eclipse the interest of the secret itself, preserving the ongoingness of the conversation comes into conflict with the ostensible goal of revelation. Flirtation, then, can be viewed as an immanent challenge or counter-force to what appears to be the central conceit of these texts.

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At the time of its 1901 publication, *The Sacred Fount* was so universally reviled that Tony Tanner identified this period as 'the second really low point in James's reputation during his own lifetime'.[5] James himself declared that he 'mortally loath[ed]' *The Sacred Fount* and excluded it from the New York Edition. More than one commentator has suggested that *The Sacred Fount* was a kind of early draft or sketch of 'The Beast in the Jungle'—a theory which would vindicate the former novel by linking it to a better-received work.[6] My own readings do not attempt to invert these judgments quite to the extent of arguing for the merits of *The Sacred Fount* to the detriment of 'The Beast in the Jungle'. I do, however, want to link the perceived failings of *The Sacred Fount* and the comparative success of 'The Beast in the Jungle' to their respective depictions of flirtation—and particularly the relation between flirtation and what we might call James's economy of form. 'Economy' is a term of art for James: in the Prefaces to the New York Edition, he extols the 'sublime economy of art' and describes the aspirational formal balance between 'the expansive, the explosive principle' of the material and the artist's imposition of form as a 'perfect economic

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[4] Leo Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax*, p. 129.

[5] Tony Tanner, Introduction to *Henry James: Modern Judgements*, ed. by Tony Tanner (London: MacMillan, 1968), pp. 14-15. The first, according to Tanner, is the publication of *The Awkward Age*.

[6] H.A. Bouraoui attributes this view to Leon Edel and Jean Blackall in 'Henry James's *The Sacred Fount*: Nouveau Roman avant la Lettre?', *International Fiction Review*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (1974), pp. 96-105, p. 96.

mastery'.[7] *The Sacred Fount* represents one of his more extravagant failures of this economic mastery, ballooning from an intended 10,000-word story to an 80,000-word novel through, in James's words, 'a force of its own'.[8] This 'force'—something self-prolonging, expansive, undisciplined—is what this chapter will theorize as flirtation. But the novel's appearance in print is a response to a second, more literal sort of economic concern. As James explains somewhat sheepishly in a letter to a fellow author, 'I couldn't afford to sacrifice it; my hand-to-mouth economy condemned me to put it through in order not to have wasted the time already spent.'[9]

In the case of *The Sacred Fount*, this 'hand-to-mouth' economy is in direct opposition to James's more abstract economy of art; it induces him to publish a work that evidently fails by his own aesthetic standards. But in 'The Beast in the Jungle', the two senses of economy are curiously aligned. The novella uncovers its central secret, the long-awaited destiny of protagonist John Marcher, in a virtuosic reveal: Marcher realizes that in waiting for this destiny, he failed to live in any positive sense. The recognition of this utter absence, then, is his remarkable fate—a revelation that transmutes the non-happenings of the novella into a single, culminating event. As Sedgwick remarks, 'The denial that the secret has a content—the assertion that its content is precisely a lack—is a stylish and "satisfyingly" Jamesian formal gesture.'[10] But simultaneously, Marcher is haunted by the 'hand-to-mouth' economic logic that fears above all else a wasted investment and the shame that would accompany it:

> It wouldn't have been failure to be bankrupt, dishonoured, pilloried, hanged; it was failure not to be anything […] He didn't care what awful crash might overtake him, with what ignominy or what monstrosity he might yet be associated—since he wasn't after all too utterly old to suffer—if it would only be decently proportionate to

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[7] For a full analysis of the uses of economy in James's Prefaces and his letters, see Philip Horne, 'Henry James and the Economy of the Short Story' in *Modernist Writers and the Marketplace*, ed. by Ian Willison, Warwick Gould, and Warren Chernaik (Houndsmills, UK: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1996), pp. 1-35, p. 6; Henry James, *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), pp. 120, 278.

[8] Letter to J.B. Pinker, cited in Horne, 'Henry James and the Economy of the Short Story', p. 8.

[9] Letter to Mrs. Humphry Ward, cited in Horne, 'Henry James and the Economy of the Short Story', p. 8.

[10] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'The Beast in the Closet: James and the Writing of Homosexual Panic' in *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), pp. 182-212, p. 201.

> the posture he had kept, all his life, in the threatened presence of it. He had but one desire left—that he shouldn't have been 'sold'.[11]

It is precisely this single-minded desire that makes Marcher's destiny come true: the obsession with a fate that is 'proportionate' to the years spent in anticipation of it is identical with the failure to live that ultimately accumulates into his destiny. In this sense, the character's overbearing fear of being 'sold' is inextricable from the elegant formal gesture of the novella—from its 'perfect economic mastery'.

In this chapter, I propose that *The Sacred Fount* and 'The Beast in the Jungle' offer two complementary approaches to flirtation in the formal economy of James's late fiction. Both works pit flirtation against a fiscal logic that abhors waste, unproductivity, and investments that fail to yield tangible gain. In particular, both texts assert this logic through the paradigm of marriage, which demands a strong form of closure in order to ratify time spent in flirtation. Whereas the protagonist of *The Sacred Fount* suffers the imposition of this judgment, the protagonist of 'The Beast in the Jungle' inflicts it—a distinction that, in my analysis, is tied to the types of failure and success associated to the two works. The structuring importance of marriage and its others has been central to discussions of 'The Beast in the Jungle' since Eve Sedgwick's seminal reading of the novella as a closeting narrative. But while there is no shortage of queer and gay readings of *The Sacred Fount*, the thematic importance of marriage and what marriage excludes has not yet been explored in this novel.[12]

The next chapter of this thesis, Chapter 4, examines a more literal economic dimension to James's late fiction, reading scenes of extraction and exchange in *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) and *In the Cage* (1898). Here, the sense of the 'economy' that I deploy is largely James's metaphorical one, signifying narrative and formal qualities of proportion, balance, and grace. But these market metaphorics bring along their own wayward associations and affects which also inflect the analysis that follows. As Ross Posnock notes, for James, 'business can function as a metaphor for the generally congealed status of the

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[11] Henry James, 'The Beast in the Jungle' in *The Novels and Tales of Henry James, Vol. 17: The Altar of the Dead; The Beast in the Jungle; The Birthplace; and Other Tales (New York Edition)* (New York: Macmillan, 1937), p. 97. Hereafter cited in the text as BJ followed by the page number.

[12] On homosexuality in *The Sacred Fount*, see for example Adeline R. Tintner, 'A Gay Sacred Fount: The Reader as Detective', *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (Summer 1995), pp. 224-240; Stacey Margolis, 'Homo-Formalism: Analogy in *The Sacred Fount*', *A Forum on Fiction*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (Summer 2001), pp. 391-410; Paul Giles, 'Deterritorialization in *The Sacred Fount*', *The Henry James Review*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (2003), pp. 225-232.

American male, whose submission to compulsory heterosexuality results in psychic desiccation'.[13] And Eve Sedgwick argues that the vulnerability of a literary work to commercial failure—the apotheosis of such vulnerability and failure being, for Sedgwick, James's New York Edition—is bound up with the possibility of shame and humiliation: an 'annihilation by the blankest of nonrecognizing responses'.[14] The readings that follow bring out the entanglements of embarrassment, compulsory heterosexuality, the fear of a bad investment, and the shame of non-recognition in *The Sacred Fount* and 'The Beast in the Jungle'. Particularly, these anxieties emerge in the discrepancy between two kinds of relation: one legible, settled, and institutionally ratified, the other uncertain, suspensive, pleasurable, and flirtatious.

1. Sociability at *The Sacred Fount*

The Sacred Fount begins when the unnamed narrator boards a train for a weekend at Newmarch, a charming country house. On the train, he meets two fellow-guests whom he had previously encountered at the manor, Gilbert Long and Grace Brissenden, but they are both dramatically changed. Gilbert Long, who was previously terribly dull, has become very witty, and Grace Brissenden, who was plain, has become youthful and beautiful. Upon reaching Newmarch, the narrator discovers that Grace's much younger husband, referred to throughout the novel as 'poor Briss', appears correspondingly aged. Reasoning by analogy, he begins to hunt for the missing term: the woman whose association with Gilbert Long has resulted in the depletion of her own faculties, the siphoning of her sacred fount.

The progress of this inquiry—the curious alliances and antagonisms, conspirators and contradictions that briefly form—is paced by the novel's strong preference for successive two-person dialogues. The narrator finds himself in such paired conversations even when the setting would seem to preclude it: the first scene of the novel, confined to a railway car with Gilbert and Grace, the narrator carries out private conversations with each of them in turn. The first such exchange, in which Gilbert confirms the great transformation in Grace's appearance, is afforded by 'someone com[ing] up to speak to her' (*SF*: 19). The second, in which Grace confirms the tremendous improvement to Gilbert's wit and suggests

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[13] Ross Posnock, *The Trial of Curiosity: Henry James, Williams James, and the Challenge of Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 204.

[14] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Shame, Theatricality, and Queer Performativity: Henry James's *The Art of the Novel*' in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 35-65, p. 39.

this may be due to a liaison with an intelligent woman, apparently transpires while Long 'was occupied with a newspaper-boy' (*SF*: 21). As the novel unfolds, a series of equally implausible contrivances 'stage' the novel as a series of dialogues: the narrator investigates and conspires with the novel's small cast of characters, Gilbert, Grace, 'poor Briss', Ford Obert, May Server, and Lady John, in turn.[15]

Talk seems to have a special status in this novel, at least in part afforded by the setting. The narrator relates that he and his fellow-guests 'profited to the full by the noble freedom of Newmarch, that overarching ease which in nothing was so marked as in the tolerance of talk' (*SF*: 73). In this remarkable conversational atmosphere, no one distinguishes himself as well as Gilbert Long; he even impresses the urbane artist, Obert, with an impromptu discourse on a painting (though, in an omission reminiscent of Marcel's apparently charming speeches in the *Search*, this brilliant display is not recorded in the text). Gilbert's talk is the mark of his transformation, suggesting that talk will equally be the medium by which his lover is betrayed. What, the novel asks, does it look like for one's faculty of talk to become drained? In searching for this depleted talker, the novel both conforms to the conceit of the secret and invokes another central concern of James's late works, the inaccessible substrate of conversation that forms the subject of the next chapter: 'those suppressed processes and unavowed references which made the meaning of our meeting so different from its form'(*SF*: 188). In his search for Gilbert's lover, to borrow Tony Tanner's formulation, the narrator 'is trying to find warrant for writing a James novel'.[16]

It is odd how long this task takes the perspicacious narrator. His two closest confidantes and equals in analogic reasoning, Grace and Ford, each must warn him that something is not quite right with their fellow-guest, May Server, but the narrator does not agree with them. He cannot understand why Ford seems uncomfortable in May's presence, finding her only beautiful and charming. When pressed, Ford explains, 'She's too beastly unhappy […] It's uncanny' (*SF*: 28). Grace expounds at greater length:

> If there hadn't been so many people I should have noticed of myself after dinner that there was something the matter with her. I should have seen what it was. She was all over the place […] She couldn't keep still. She was different from the woman one had

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[15] The vocabulary of 'staging' to describe curious spatial relations in James's fiction comes from David Kurnick, *Empty Houses: Theatrical Failure and the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 128.

[16] Tony Tanner, 'Henry James's Subjective Adventurer: *The Sacred Fount*, from *Essays and Studies*, New Series Volume XVI (1963), published for the English Association by John Murray MCMLXIII pp. 37-55, p. 40.

> last seen […] She talked to ten [men] in succession, making up to them in the most extraordinary way and leaving them still more crazily. She's as nervous as a cat. Put it to any man here, and see if he doesn't tell you. (*SF*: 63)

The narrator's resistance to these impressions requires him to selectively forget his own account of May's speech, which, when no longer masked by the ambient chatter of the group, falls into incoherence. In their first one-on-one interaction, the narrator recounts the inconsequential gossip she relates to him, but then qualifies: '[of] these remarks […] I give rather the sense than the form, for they were a little scattered and troubled, and I helped them out and pieced them together' (*SF*: 47). Only after Ford and Grace have insisted on her strangeness does he concede: 'Mrs. Server *was* nervous' (*SF*: 75). Then he begins to place her manic, flighty social behavior as that of someone unable to sustain an illusion of faculties unimpaired; the 'snapped cord of her faculty of talk'—a gruesome phrase, evoking shattered vocal cords and broken instruments—constantly threatens to give her away (*SF*: 76).

This is the first mystery of the novel: why is the narrator so slow on this point? When it comes to May Server, the acumen that other characters attribute to him seems curiously lapsed or wrongly calibrated. His univocally charming impressions of May and unwillingness to identify her as Gilbert's lover unsurprisingly lead Grace to conclude he is in love with her. This explanation, though plausible on its face, is undermined by the narrator's odd reaction to Grace's accusation: on reflection, he decides that '[t]hat was as good a name as another for an interest springing up in an hour, and was moreover a decent working hypothesis' (*SF*: 75). It has been suggested that the narrator's application of the scientific method to his own potential affection demonstrates his willingness to assimilate all of his experiences and relations to his detective-like 'theory' and 'method'.[17] But I want to argue for the converse explanation: that the narrator's detached, slightly mystified relationship to his own amorous relations signifies a profound social and sexual confusion that his 'theory' allows him to circumvent. Signs of this confusion tend to flare up in the wake of May's profligate charms. After he first meets her, he is perplexed at Ford's suggestion that she was 'making love' to him:

> I reflected. 'Mrs. Server? Does Mrs. Server make love?'
>
> 'It seemed to me,' my friend replied, 'that she began on it to *you* as soon as she got hold of you. Weren't you aware?'
>
> I debated afresh; I didn't know that I had been. (*SF*: 27)

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[17] Marcus Klein, 'Henry James's Sacred Fount: The Theory, the Theorist, and the Lady', *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory*, Vol. 62, No. 3 (Autumn 2006), pp. 83-104, p. 94.

The narrator's inability to attune to this scene of flirtation undermines the 'working hypothesis' of his own attraction to May—or at least renders any such attraction an oddly insensible or disconnected one. In response to Ford's blunt question, the narrator produces a tangle of tenses: he didn't know that he had been aware, an awkwardly convoluted admission of ignorance.

Recall Grace's slightly edgy challenge to the narrator to 'put it to any man here and see if he doesn't tell you'(*SF*: 63). The narrator wonders whether other men, better schooled in an erotic etiquette that seems to have passed him by, are sharing knowledge with one another to which he is not privy:

> I wondered hereupon if the discovery were inevitable for each gentleman in succession, and if this were their reason for changing so often. Did everyone leave her, like Obert, with an uneasy impression of her, and were these impressions now passed about with private hilarity or profundity, though without having reached me save from the source I have named? (*SF*: 74)

His curiosity is almost like that of a child or a naïf trying to glean the mysteries of adult circles from which he is excluded. The narrator's obtuseness with May, then, seems connected to a more profound disconnection from the surrounding society, and particularly the society of other men. He finds himself 'for an hour or two, continuously shy' out of 'fear of what one of the men might say to me [about May…] It would have been almost as embarrassing to have to tell them how little experience I had had in fact as to have had to tell them how much I had had in fancy' (*SF*: 79). In the context of his 'theory', the narrator is entirely comfortable discussing relations profound and prurient with individual interlocutors, but he loses his nerve at the thought of commonplace group gossip. He is often accused of a neurotic sensibility that forces social impressions to coincide with his theories and collapses into nervousness before 'recalcitrant indigestible facts'.[18] But the nervousness he feels around other men is different, closer to shame. It has little to do with his 'theory'—in fact, the knowledge he imagines other men to have would be a confirmation

[18] Maha Jafri, 'Jamesian Sociability', *The Henry James Review*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (Fall 2011), pp. 218-226, p. 219; Tanner, 'Henry James's Subjective Adventurer', p. 45.

of his theory—and more to do with a proximate social knowledge against which he feels deficient, excluded, or backward.[19]

The narrator and the novel's exaggerated proportion of 'fancy' to 'fact' is not unique to *The Sacred Fount*. It is a typical feature of James's storytelling and an element of his 'economic' aesthetic theory: to produce 'the maximum of intensity with the minimum of strain', evincing tension and pressure without relying on the crude mechanics of narrative events.[20] The narrator's shyness and embarrassment on this point, though, call to mind some of the novel's more unsparing critics, who targeted their ire at this feature: the perceived disparity between the novel's 'intensity' and its underwhelming subject material.[21] Rebecca West, in a memorable early review, summarizes the novel:

> a week-end visitor spends more intellectual force than Kant can have used on *The Critique of Pure Reason*, in an unsuccessful attempt to discover whether there exists between certain of his fellow-guests a relationship not more interesting among these vacuous people than it is among sparrows.[22]

This remark echoes Grace Brissenden in her concluding diagnosis of the narrator as 'an intelligence gone wrong' (*SF*: 201). But whereas Grace's comment evokes an ominous, disquieting sense of 'wrongness', West's judgment of James's misapplication of intellect has no darkly glamorous associations. It targets not the narrator's sanity, as Grace's does, but the writer's judgment: he goes on and on about a theory that would be uninteresting even if it were true. Around the same time as Rebecca West's sparrows, H. G. Wells employed another unflattering zoological metaphor for James's writings, describing the author as 'a magnificent but painful hippopotamus resolved […] upon picking up a pea.'[23] In his review of *The Sacred Fount*, R. P. Blackmur recalls a remark by James's contemporary, Clover Hooper Adams: 'it was not that Henry James bit off more than he could chaw but that he chawed

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[19] By this last word, I intend a light reference to Heather Love's *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007). For a full inquiry into the metaphorics of backs, versos, and behinds in James's prose, see Eve Sedgwick, 'Is the Rectum Straight? Identification and Identity in *The Wings of the Dove*' in *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), pp. 73-103, and 'Shame, Theatricality, and Queer Performativity'.

[20] James, *The Art of the Novel*, p. xvi.

[21] Sedgwick's 'Shame, Theatricality, and Queer Performativity' also touches on the term 'shy' as a euphemism for homosexuality, p. 63.

[22] Rebecca West, *Henry James* (London: Nisbet & Co. Ltd., 1916), p. 108.

[23] T.J. Lustig, 'Mocking the Master: Early Responses to *The Sacred Fount*', *The Henry James Review*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (Winter 2017), pp. 22-36, p. 24.

more than he bit off'.[24] These rather undignified stylings lend an amusing physicality to James's exaggerated narrative proportions. Instead of the grace and beauty evoked by 'the sublime economy of art', these clumsy and compulsive bodies are closer to the comical and absurd—and thus proximate to embarrassment and shame. The social anxiety of the novel's narrator is thus, in a way, a meta-feature of the work: his embarrassment over the flimsiness of the subject that inspires his lengthy preoccupation is reiterated in the novel's reception.

The second mystery of *The Sacred Fount* is: after the narrator identifies May Server as Gilbert's lover, why does his inquiry continue for so long? The revelation occurs before the halfway point of the novel, after which there is not even a momentary lapse in the narrator's regular schedule of dialogues. In the subsequent conversation with Briss, Grace's aged husband says something about May that piques the narrator's interest all over again: 'he said an extraordinary thing, which all but made me start again. "Oh, she hasn't any *talk*!" (*SF*: 86) This is precisely what the narrator has just discovered for himself, the 'snapped cord of [May's] faculty of talk' (*SF*: 76). Why would Briss's observation strike him as extraordinary and make him *start again*? Briss's remark taps a fresh source of intrigue, opening up for the narrator the possibility of inquiry into a new set of relations: those between Briss himself and May.

At this point, the structuring conceit of *The Sacred Fount* definitively shifts from the narrator's search for one missing analogic entity and enters into a wider logic of pairings. It is not only that, as Laurence Holland observes, the novel repeatedly presents its figures in pairs of which only one partner is visible.[25] Further still, each conversation partner generates new possible pairings that combine and recombine the cast of men and women into fresh configurations. Almost every possible permutation of pairings appears as the subject of some possible liaison: Briss and Lady John, Gilbert and Grace, Lady John and Ford, Ford and May, May and Briss, Briss and Grace, Lady John and Gilbert, Gilbert and May. If 'the air of the place itself […] left one's powers with a sense of play', this tireless coupling game seems to be the mode of play readiest to hand (*SF*: 73). The opening scene of the novel introduces a piece of gossip: that lovers Mrs. Froome and Lord Lutley were, 'in the

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[24] R.P. Blackmur, 'Afterword' to *The Sacred Fount*, p. 220. In a similar figure of speech, Arnold Bennett complained that James 'seldom chooses themes of first-class importance, and when he does choose such a theme he never fairly bites it and makes it bleed'. Arnold Bennett, 'Henry James' in *Books and Persons: Being Comments on a Past Epoch 1908-1911* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1917), p. 279.

[25] Laurence Holland, *The Expense of Vision: Essays on the Craft of Henry James* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), p. 188.

wondrous new fashion', traveling together and combining their servants (*SF*: 19). In playful, tolerant Newmarch, the party takes on this modern ethos, speculating liaisons with appreciation and without compunction. The narrator's boundless conjecturing does not definitively 'place' anyone; it participates in a seemingly inexhaustible, unverifiable play of pairings, often describing mutually contradictory relations.

Maha Jafri links the luxurious conversational environment of Newmarch to Leo Bersani's theorization of 'sociability'. Sociability, a concept originally developed by Simmel that encompasses coquetry, describes a category of relation in which all personal interests and motives are suspended: a form of social interaction that aims only towards its own prolongation, of which coquetry is one example. In Bersani's paraphrase, sociability gives us the pleasure of 'relief' from the friction that arises between our own purposes and those of others or of the social whole.[26] 'Once stripped of those interests,' Bersani writes, 'we discover a new type of being, as well as a new type of pleasure. The pleasure does not serve an interest, satisfy a passion, or fulfill a desire' beyond the prolongation of sociability itself.[27] In Jafri's reading, the narrator of *The Sacred Fount* admires the 'ease' and 'tolerance' of Newmarch that resembles the conditions of an ideal sociability, but constantly betrays that ethos by instrumentalizing his interactions with others towards the formation of his theory.[28] In my interpretation, though, the narrator's 'theory' is not antithetical to sociability because it is primarily a mode of socializing. His apparent interest in occult flows of energy and vitality, solidarity and generosity, extraction and envy amongst his fellow-guests is identical with his investment in a field of sociable conversation blossoming with abundant combinatorial possibilities. Before and, crucially, *after* identifying May as the missing term in his analogy, the narrator approaches his fellow-guests with eagerness, even avidity, to solicit their feelings and perceptions, submit to their impressions, and propose his own theories. He derives from these conversations joy, wonder, shock, amusement, and on one occasion, a 'small secret thrill' (*SF*: 92).

Whereas under May's attentions, the narrator feels clueless, insensible, and excluded from the surrounding culture of flirtation, here, under cover of his theory, he participates in a distinct, intense kind of conversational eros. Between the narrator and Grace, there is an exciting, reciprocal dynamic of allusion and innuendo: 'We knew ourselves—what moved

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[26] Leo Bersani, 'Sociability and Cruising', p. 130.

[27] Leo Bersani, 'Sociability and Cruising', p. 132.

[28] Jafri, 'Jamesian Sociability', pp. 221-222.

me, that is, was that she knew me—to mean, at every point, immensely more than I said or than she answered' (*SF*: 188). Between the narrator and Ford Obert, a 'flirtatious' and 'all but explicitly sexual' dynamic takes shape: gripping his arm, the narrator tells him, "You excite me too much. You don't know what you do to me.'[29] Without quite emerging into 'experience in fact' rather than 'fancy', these flirtations introduce forms of sensuality that hold the distinction between the real and the fancied at bay. And instead of narrowing in the immediate aftermath of his discovery of May's condition, the possibilities for pleasure and surprise in this game of relation only seem to multiply. This form of flirtation is enabled by the narrator's pretextual theory, but eagerly exceeds and expands it, aiming only at more and more talk.

Up to a point. There are constraints: finite time and the finite interest of others. As the final evening of the weekend approaches its close, a kind of dread falls over the narrator: he faces almost as a death sentence his dwindling options of 'bed or the smoking-room' (*SF*: 142). Sociability has no aim but its own prolongation, but what if one's conversation partners are ready to pack their bags and return to their real lives? What if this conversational game is, for the narrator's partners, merely a weekend's diversion from the usual order of things? Holland reads one scene between the narrator and Obert in which the latter is clearly trying to truncate their interaction: 'the Narrator has managed to detain Obert by adding one question to an already long string of them, but as Obert strains to get away the discourse spins out to the edge of inconsequence since the dialogue is serving to parody the sheer task of keeping the novel going'.[30] At the end of the novel, past midnight and past the allotted time for talk between men and women, the narrator successfully elongates the story by soliciting from Grace one final audience. Here, his tactics are entirely oriented towards inducing Grace—in her 'least accommodating' mode—to continue their speculative, conspiratorial dynamic. When she tells him flatly she no longer agrees with his assessment of May, he pleads with her, 'Tell me […] teach me […] Lead me back to peace by the steps *you've* trod.' The conclusion that she offers him, though, is the blunt remark: 'I think you're crazy' (*SF*: 191).

The bizarre joviality with which he greets this remark does little to dislodge Grace's assessment. Even as he irritates and provokes her, he insistently replies 'with gaiety', literally laughing and smiling his words: '"Ah, the hour,' I laughed", '"Thanks," I

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[29] Stacey Margolis, 'Homo-Formalism', p. 401.

[30] Holland, *The Expense of Vision*, p. 185.

smiled' (*SF*: 162-3). These expressive tics seem to be oddly contagious, with the inimical Grace mirroring the narrator's strained, courteous affectations back at him. Nathalie Sarraute identifies these types of dialogue marker, which identify spoken words with nonverbal actions, as a sign that talk is losing its identification with character: 'proof that something is falling apart.'[31] And indeed, in this final, absurdly prolonged conversation with Grace, these peri-conversational markers proliferate. Ten 'smiles' and twelve 'laughs' decorate their increasingly obscure and adversarial dialogue in a simulacrum of pleasurable, sociable conversation. Despite announcing at several points her intention to leave him, Grace repeatedly becomes entangled in the narrator's questions, unable to account for her change of heart or successfully conclude the conversation (and the novel). The technique by which she finally manages it is telling.

It is accomplished by resolving the indeterminate coupling relations into two facts: the identity of Gilbert's lover, Lady John, and the identity of May's would-be one, poor Briss himself. In particular, Grace attests that both of these resolutions were supplied to her by her husband:

> 'But how,' I then proceeded, 'has it happily been confirmed to you?'
> It pulled her up a trifle. '"Confirmed"—?'
> 'That [Gilbert is Lady John's] lover.'
> My eyes had been meeting hers without, as it were, hers quite meeting mine. But at this there had to be intercourse. 'By my husband.' (*SF*: 211)

And again, 'She [May] made love to him [Briss…] he told me' (*SF*: 217). Grace is not exactly in her element here, but the narrator is nonetheless helpless against these inarguable marital confidences—along with the ratified, actualized sexuality they represent, voiced rather transparently by the narrator's 'at this there had to be intercourse'. Finally, Grace drops one more bombshell: Briss also tells her that May is in full command of her faculties—she's 'awfully sharp'. It is almost comical how utterly these three articles of hearsay defeat the endlessly scheming narrator. He is rendered completely powerless: 'I felt her dreadful logic, but I couldn't—with my exquisite image all contrasted, as in a flash from flint, with this monstrosity—so much as entertain her question. I could only stupidly again sound it. "Awfully sharp?"' (*SF*: 218) What epistemological privilege does Briss have, such that his word alone may be invoked by Grace to such powerful effect?

It is, of course, the privilege of marriage. Holland reads the scene:

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[31] Sarraute, 'Conversation and Sub-Conversation', p. 111.

> And her challenge, resting on information allegedly supplied by her husband, brings back into prominence the question of marriage—the question of the actual relation between the Brissendens within the form of their marriage—which is central in James's fiction […] She withdraws within the citadel of her marriage after asserting the facts presumably told her by her husband, leaving the Narrator with no means of testing her assertions.[32]

Grace Brissenden, tiring of the endless play of coupling and the multivalent streams of energy imagined and enacted in the narrator's and her own discourse, effectively quells it with a return to the reified order of knowledge and privacy encoded into marriage. In this interaction, Grace is 'blooming', the picture of health, increasing in strength as they near their departure. The narrator, in contrast, is increasingly enfeebled as he approaches the quitting of Newmarch and the resumption of a differently ordered world. He has twice her method, the narrator consoles himself, but what he cannot match is her tone. In other words, it's not really that she has defeated his 'theory' but that she has declared disinterest in the kind of flirtation for which the theory served as an enabling principle. He could parry her points indefinitely, but he cannot escape the derisive judgment that he has already talked too much.

2. Flirtation, Deferral, and Destiny

The ineluctable marital tone, then, and the epistemic closure it asserts put an end to *The Sacred Fount*. This is not the only one of James's novels that seems to squirm under a marital paradigm that eventually has the last word. David Kurnick reads a similar opposition between a permissive, collaborative, speculative milieu of talk and the determining, finishing logic of marriage in James's similarly ill-received *The Awkward Age*:

> in place of a studied disinterest in particular affective configurations, [the marriage plot] privileges one relation over others; instead of dispersing interest over a collective subject, it draws attention to two psychological centers; in place of the externalizing force of talk, it seeks out and ratifies characters' internal truth; and in place of an interest in the tributaries and eddies of potentially endless conversation, the marriage plot has an overriding interest in arriving at the end of narrative.[33]

Against the marriage plot as novelistic imperative, Kurnick writes, the characters' best weapon is talk. Just as the narrator of *The Sacred Fount* snares his increasingly restless interlocutors in convoluted, strangely compelling (to them) conversations, Kurnick claims that the progression of *The Awkward Age*'s marriage plot is 'continually sidetracked by the

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[32] Holland, *The Expense of Vision*, p. 204.

[33] Kurnick, *Empty Houses*, p. 134.

pleasures of dilatory, non-utilitarian conversation'. He pits this as a battle waged by characters against the 'generic constraints of the novel as a form'—that is, against the logic by which such a novel must end in a marriage.[34]

The scheme of 'talk against plot' in James is an intriguing one, and it will return in a different form in my analysis of Jamesian sub-conversation in Chapter 4. But in this chapter, we must observe that neither *The Sacred Fount* nor 'The Beast in the Jungle' actually ends in a marriage. The hermeneutic pressure that marriage exerts is registered in these texts in different ways. Without quite invoking the Scheherazade-like dynamic Kurnick describes, the deferral of narrative action through digressive talk, these texts negotiate marriage as an agent of relational closure which is also the dissolution and delegitimation of the suspensive form of relation I have called flirtation. The power of marriage, in Kurnick's words, 'to define an intelligible life'[35] leaves an embarrassing residue of unintelligibility. In *The Sacred Fount*, this manifests in the narrator's humiliating 'defeat' by Grace and the collapse of his 'houses of cards'; in 'The Beast in the Jungle', as we will see, the humiliation of exclusion is converted into a more complete form of negation, Marcher's total self-abnegation (*SF*: 181).

'The Beast in the Jungle' plays out, not over a weekend, but over the better part of a lifetime. It follows the curious relationship between John Marcher and May Bartram: a relationship which, like those of *The Sacred Fount*, is organized around mutual attention to and curiosity about an as-yet-concealed secret. In this case, the secret is firstly that Marcher awaits some catastrophic destiny that will 'strik[e] at the root of all my world', and secondly, that he does not know what form this will take (BJ: 72). The novella ends climactically with the secret's reveal: Marcher's fate is to have been 'the man to whom nothing at all was to have happened', an absolute failure to live which he recognizes as synonymous with his failure to recognize and return May Bartram's love for him (BJ: 125).

The novella's starkly moralizing ending is the site of much critical antipathy.[36] In Sedgwick's powerful reading of 'The Beast in the Jungle' as a closeting narrative, which inaugurates a tradition of queer readings of the novella, she links Marcher's secret to the

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[34] Kurnick, *Empty Houses*, pp. 134, 136.

[35] Kurnick, *Empty Houses*, p. 135.

[36] Kevin Ohi claims that the best readings of the novella 'find reason to regret its ending, viewing it as a failure of lucidity or nerve on the part of the author'. Kevin Ohi, 'The Beast's Storied End', *The Henry James Review*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (Winter 2012), pp. 1-16, p. 1.

form and function of the closet. When Marcher's secret is finally revealed, Sedgwick notes it is described as both an absolute lack and a very specific failure of heterosexuality:

> The apparent gap of meaning that [the secret] points to is […] far from being a genuinely empty one; it is no sooner asserted as a gap than filled to a plenitude with the most orthodox of ethical enforcements. To point rhetorically to the emptiness of the secret, 'the nothing that is', is, in fact, oddly, *the same gesture* as the attribution to it of a compulsory content about heterosexuality.[37]

The slippage of Marcher's existential lack into a social one, then, implies that outside of the legitimacy of the heterosexual couple, there is nothing intelligible—nothing salvageable. By performing this elision, in Sedgwick's argument, Marcher goes from being a victim to an enforcer of a heterosexual culture.

Bersani similarly laments the narrowing effect of the ending, remarking that reading 'The Beast in the Jungle' as a 'story of missed passion' renders Marcher one of 'the least interesting and least appealing' of James' characters. Rather, Bersani argues, what makes Marcher original is his radical unreality—his utter inhabitation of a state of expectancy and consequent deferral of realization:

> When James writes that confronted with May Bartram's 'inordinately soft' invitation to love her, 'he only waited', he is at once exposing Marcher's blamable aspect as a psychological individual, at the same time as he is concisely defining his character's ontological distinction: that of existing only in a mode of expectancy. May Bartram's 'whole attitude' is a 'virtual statement' only in the sense that she withholds the most important truth about her, her love for Marcher. John Marcher, on the other hand, is a virtual statement—and of nothing in particular. He is a life lived as pure virtuality—at least until the moment when he loses this rare dignity by speaking of it as if it were an affective and moral failure.[38]

In this reading, May is the source of the judgment by which Marcher's 'dignity' becomes his degradation. In distinguishing Marcher's 'psychological' and 'ontological' aspects, Bersani implicitly attributes the former perspective to May and the latter to the reader, framing Marcher's assumption of May's perspective at the end as his and the novella's true failure. This reading follows similar lines to Matthew Helmers's argument that 'The Beast in the Jungle' inhabits two different temporalities: an ordered, linear, historical, and heterosexual temporality that belongs to May and a disjunctive, queer, perpetual present that belongs to

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[37] Sedgwick, 'The Beast in the Closet', p. 201.

[38] Bersani, *Intimacies*, p. 24.

Marcher. Only through adopting May's temporality, Helmers argues, does Marcher view himself as 'a character whose gaps must be filled'.[39]

My own reading of the novella draws from the same themes that these critics foreground: the problem of intelligibility under a heterosexual imperative, the realization of a purely expectant or virtual relation, and the opposed movements of two kinds of temporality. But unlike any of the above readings, my understanding of these paradigms in 'The Beast in the Jungle' is derived from the novella's narrative form and its representations of talk. The text derives its compressed, almost parable-like pacing from its high proportion of narrated to recorded time, covering months and years of May and Marcher's relation in summaries of the habitual past. Meanwhile, the talk that the novella records—the exchanges that, in its narrator's telling phrase, 'we are especially concerned with'—are those that introduce and widen the final and most freighted distinction in the work, the insuperable rupture that grows between Marcher and May (BJ: 83). Beginning as a 'mystic line that she had secretly drawn round her' and ending with her removal 'across some gulf or from some island of rest that she had already reached', the talk reported in the text, though interposed by months and years, contributes to the progression of this breach between them from a flicker to an abyss (BJ: 89, 99). The patterns of their speech contract in tighter and tighter circles around the articulation of what Marcher has missed, enacting James's formal ideal of 'approaching the center […] by narrowing circumvalations'.[40] Instead of functioning as a stalling or diverting counter-force to plot, talk in 'The Beast in the Jungle' functions as the engine of the plot as it proceeds to Marcher's destiny, consigning long intervening periods of their relation to unreported or summarized time.

In one early sample of this summarizing mode, the narrator offers a portrait of Marcher:

> the secret of the difference between the forms he went through—those of his little office under Government, those of caring for his modest patrimony, for his library, for his garden in the country, for the people in London whose invitations he accepted and repaid—and the detachment that reigned beneath them and that made of all his behavior, all that could in the least be called behavior, a long act of dissimulation. (BJ: 82)

Marcher's generalized detachment is the elusive, though not quite undetectable quotient that differentiates him from the occupations that make up his life. His relationship with May,

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[39] Matthew Helmers, 'Possibly Queer Time: Paranoia, Subjectivity, and "The Beast in the Jungle"', *The Henry James Review*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Summer 2011), pp. 101-117, p. 114.

[40] Henry James, Preface to *The Wings of the Dove* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. xxxvii.

while exceptional, seems to share this basic structure: it is a friendship achieved through a deliberate execution of protocols, which seems to imply a marked absence of feeling. Marcher, the narrator relates, 'was careful to remember that she had also a life of her own, with things that might happen to *her*, things that in friendship one should likewise take account of'—a scrupulousness that, though it serves as a proof of friendship, is also a kind of negation (BJ: 77).

But as the years race by, Marcher's programmatic approach to friendship acquires an ambiguously tongue-in-cheek air, as if what began as play-acting as a friend becomes role-playing as a play-actor. In one telling passage, the narrator describes a suite of habitual pleasures that Marcher enjoys in May's company as if they were chores he diligently completes:

> He had kept up, he felt […] his consciousness of the importance of not being selfish, and it was true that he had never sinned in that direction without promptly enough trying to press the scales the other way. He often repaired his fault, the season permitting, by inviting his friend to accompany him to the opera; and it not infrequently thus happened that, to show her he didn't wish her to have but one sort of food for her mind, he was the cause of her appearing there with him a dozen nights in the month. It even happened that, seeing her home at such times, he occasionally went in with her to finish, as he called it, the evening, and, the better to make his point, sat down to the frugal but always careful little supper that awaited his pleasure. His point was made, he thought, but his not eternally insisting with her on himself; made for instance, at such hours, when it befell that, her piano at hand and each of them familiar with it, they went over passages of the opera together. (BJ: 90-1)

None of this is for *me,* Marcher insists in these little appositive phrases, none of this is for my pleasure; it is the necessary formal corrective, in a friendship, to displays of selfishness. For all his ostensible egotism, Marcher's unspecified selfishness functions as an alibi so thin that *it* appears to be purely formal: merely the in-game excuse for going to the opera a dozen times a month, dining together in May's home, and playing duets late into the night. The emptiness of the ostensible motivation gives way to a complementary fullness of incidental pleasures. Through the amusing absurdity of presenting such pleasures as Marcher's disciplined ascesis, the courtly language of this passage is positively sparkling with flirtation. James even indulges in a blunt innuendo, punctuating Marcher on his way 'in with her to finish, as he called it, the evening'. Is Marcher himself playing, or is the narration playing him? Free indirect style blurs the source and the butt of humor, leaving ambiguous whether Marcher is archly self-parodying or delusively self-serious. Somewhere in the vicinity of Marcher's consciousness, a parody is staged of the affectless calculations that

ostensibly regulate his relation to May; in this unspecified margin of humor and flirtation, the pretended and the real may mingle and change place.

The leisurely, self-sustaining, non-teleological character of this relation recalls Bersani's admiration of May and Marcher's 'talk as only talk', 'a special kind of talk unconstrained by any consequence other than further talk'.[41] He frames these formulations with Adam Phillips's description of psychoanalysis as 'talk without sex'. If sex, marriage, and what Sedgwick calls 'visible, institutionalized genitality'[42] are the forms of consequence Bersani has in mind, then it is true that May and Marcher's talk is consequence-free. But the insistent threat of some unspecified repercussion nonetheless infiltrates and gives form to the kind of inconsequence that May and Marcher practice. The narrator reports that Marcher and May have a propensity to produce 'commonplaces', repeated observations, the most prominent of which is: 'What saves us, you know, is that we answer so completely to so usual an appearance: that of the man and woman whose friendship has become such a daily habit—or almost—as to be at last indispensable' (BJ: 83). In all these repetitions, neither May nor Marcher ever gives a clear content to the social consequences of their being 'found out', an absence both foregrounded and buried in the sentence's variously elongated and truncated syntax: none of its elaborating interjections and qualifications provide the second half of the opening clause, 'What saves us *from X* is…'. Equally obscure to the threat they claim to avoid is the 'usual' relation which they claim to mimic: is it so very usual in their social circles for an unmarried man and woman to spend years in intimate companionship? May freely concedes to Marcher that it is not, conceding, 'I never said that it hadn't made me a good deal talked about' (BJ: 91).

If this chatter is not the avoided consequence, what is it? Could it be that what they claim to be 'saved' from through their proximity to normalcy is the guarantor of normalcy itself—marriage? As the narrator remarks,

> The real form [their relation] should have taken on the basis that stood out large was the form of their marrying. But the devil in this was that the very basis itself put marrying out of the question. His conviction, his apprehension, his obsession, in short, wasn't a privilege he could invite a woman to share. (BJ: 79)

Asking May to share his apprehension, however, is precisely what Marcher has already done: after their first meeting in the novella, he asks her to 'watch with him'. His courteous conviction that 'a man of feeling didn't cause himself to be accompanied by a lady on a tiger

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[41] Bersani, *Intimacies*, p. 29.

[42] Sedgwick, 'The Beast in the Closet', p. 206.

hunt' goes just far enough to prevent him from marrying May, but not so far to prevent their intimacy entirely (BJ: 79). The secret, then, serves as the paper-thin justification for maintaining a relationship that resembles a flirtation—going to the opera, dining late into the night—unmarked by the 'legitimating stamp' of marriage.[43] The anxious fragility of this measure shows up in their tics, their commonplaces: May and Marcher occupy their 'talk as only talk' with a measure of uneasiness, registering obliquely in their repetitions a felt need to account for themselves before an implicit audience. These 'commonplaces' labor to place them in relation to common life without enjoining a change to their relation.

The novella's second recorded conversation, which takes place after years of their friendship have elapsed, marks the first time a flicker of difference breaks their favored easy tone. It begins in pleasurable familiarity: they are engaged in their favorite conversation, discussing what 'saves' them from disapprobation. An unusual note enters after Marcher asserts his absolute faith in the imminence of his fate: 'One's in the hands of one's law—there one is,' he tells May. 'As to the form the law will take, the way it will operate, that's its own affair.' May's reply is worth attending to in full:

> 'Yes,' Miss Bartram replied; 'of course one's fate's coming, of course it *has* come in its own form and its own way, all the while. Only, you know, the form and the way in your case were to have been—well, something so exceptional and, as one may say, so particularly *your* own.' (BJ: 85)

Yes, May begins, conforming in manner to the role of co-conspirator, but subtle adjustments are pressed in her tenses and stresses. 'It *has* come […] all the while' revises the near future of 'one's fate's coming', refiguring the unimaginable futural force as something already present and unfolding; 'particularly *your* own' qualifies Marcher's passivity before an impersonal law, suggesting he produces 'the form and the way' of his fate as well as suffers it. These adjustments thus invert the novella's indiscernible, world-making principle, reorganizing its insides and outsides: not an absolute outer limit but an ongoing habitual occlusion, not a noumenal but an eminently phenomenological reality. Finally, May revises Marcher's simple future tense—'the form the law *will* take, the way it *will* operate'—to the temporally unsituated past subjunctive: 'the form and the way in your case *were to have been*'. This remark from May has a jarring effect on Marcher. From this point he feels more and more like he has missed something that passed between or before them; at one point he even hazards that May has perceived something invisible to him through her feminine sensitivity.

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[43] Sedgwick, 'The Beast in the Closet', p. 206.

Her invocation of the past future seems to gesture to an entire temporality that he has overlooked.

This dynamic significantly revises, even reverses Helmers's reading of Marcher and May's respective modes of time, in which May's time is 'chronological' and Marcher's is 'a queer time of lapses'.[44] Instead, Marcher is the one who situates his fate as an event in an approaching future; May's more convoluted tenses invoke a lapsed, unnoticed, or unrealized past. 'What was to have happened' is, Bersani notes, a significant formulation: in his reading, the grammatical suspension of events effected in 'the omnipresent Jamesian pluperfect' is brought to its extreme conclusion in the narrative logic of 'The Beast in the Jungle'.[45] Rendered in a floating past future, Marcher's fate 'is temporalized as both prior to and subsequent to its happenings, as if it were a kind of being, or a form of law, inherently incompatible with the very category of happening.'[46] But it moves against the drift of Bersani's reading, too, to observe that in this pivotal interaction, it is May who gives voice to this suspensive temporality and Marcher who speaks of what 'will' come to pass.

Helmers's two temporalities bear a strong similarity to Fredric Jameson's theorization of the two antinomies of realist fiction: *récit*, or narrative in its strictly temporally ordered, past-present-future form, and what Jameson calls 'affect', the postponing, dilating, intensive forces that obstruct and divert the *récit*. Whereas Helmers links the former to May's influence in the novel and the latter to Marcher, for Jameson, Marcher's secret is tied to the linear time of the *récit*: '[the novella's] premise, a man whose destiny is to have no destiny, underscores the continuing significance, for Jamesian storytelling, of that older fundamental category of the *récit*, which is destiny itself'.[47] Marcher's fate, as the conceit of the novella, impels the work forward to its realization—and Marcher, as the focalized character, internalizes this temporality: its priorities, its forms of attention and forgetfulness, its urgency. May, as the novella's obscure other, might represent the internal logic of the disregarded, truncated, durational relation that the text, in its narrative economy, summarizes and omits.

If we then read May's responses in this dialogue as an attempt to shift the narrative temporality of the text, they fail dramatically: in his immediate reaction, defensive and

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[44] Helmers, 'Possibly Queer Time', p. 107.

[45] Bersani, '*Intimacies*, p. 20.

[46] Bersani, *Intimacies*, p. 20.

[47] Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013), p. 182.

suspicious, Marcher seems not to hear her careful tenses at all. His sense of exclusion from his own secret links seamlessly with his fear of another humiliating possibility: that the secret is empty. 'As if you believe,' he says to her, 'that nothing will now take place.' From this point in the novella, these twinned fears of exclusion and embarrassment—that May knows what his fate will be, and that she knows it will be nothing—direct the text ineluctably towards Marcher's concluding revelations. If May hoped to dissolve, reformulate, or sublimate Marcher's destiny, as Sedgwick observes, she only succeeds in fortifying its grip on his attention.[48]

In the immediate scene of this confrontation, though, Marcher experiences an unexplained, momentary displacement of attention away from their tense exchange and towards the surrounding room:

> They were frankly grave now; he had got up from his seat, had turned once more about the little drawing-room to which, year after year, he brought his inevitable topic; in which he had, as he might have said, tasted their intimate community with every sauce, where every object was as familiar to him as the things of his own house and the very carpets were worn by his fitful walk very much as the desks in old counting-houses are worn by the elbows of generations of clerks. The generations of his nervous moods had been at work there, and the place was the written history of his whole middle life. Under the impression of what his friend had just said he knew himself, for some reason, more aware of these things; which made him, after a moment, stop again before her. (BJ: 85)

May's words leave an 'impression' which seems to mark Marcher even as his steps have marked the room. 'Some reason', a phrase that draws attention to its own obscurity, links the touch of May's words to the tactility of Marcher's moods. Lifted by what May has and has not said, the drawing-room emerges for Marcher from the background as a record of accumulated time, movement, mood, and talk. Held metonymically and metaphorically in touch with May and their shared space, he finds himself amidst the material, strikingly real traces left by the habits of their long friendship. En route to his 'inevitable topic', the principle that justifies his incessant return, this accidental archive formed: he encounters, in the intimate community of the inattentive past, the tangible record of a life he has lived—he who will later take himself to be '*the* man, to whom nothing on earth was to have happened' (BJ: 125).

What happened? Rather than (in Bersani's words) 'a form of law *inherently* incompatible with the category of happening', the drawing-room records events that have not been marked out as 'happenings' only because of their ordinariness, their irrelevance to

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[48] Sedgwick, 'The Beast in the Closet', p. 206.

any narrative consequence—the very inconsequence that falls short of record in the text, emerging only in this wordless form of inscription.[49] For a moment, then, Marcher encounters an unnoticed wealth of experience through which his life has kept a different kind of time: contingent, accumulative, iterative, and full. This experience recalls an early remark that passes between the pair at the very start of the second chapter, with the news that May has come into some money that will allow her to take a house in London. This change in circumstance ushers in a new era of their intimacy, from public space—'the National Gallery and the South Kensington Museum'—to the private and personalized interior (BJ: 76). It also marks the delicate surfacing of the topic that brought them together, the secret, which Marcher raises in a particularly playful and courteous way: he suggests that his great fate might be the 'circumstance, which touched him so nearly' of May's relocation to a house in London. Later in the novella, when Marcher's single-minded desire is that 'he shouldn't have been "sold"', he will come to the brutal conclusion that even May's death as the critical event of his life would be an 'abject anticlimax' (BJ: 95). But here, in his most flattering, flirtatious mode, he articulates his destiny as another kind of 'law': May's house in London as the site of their relation, a holding environment for habitual time.

A glib early remark, a momentary awareness of elapsed time: these are the slight imprints in 'The Beast in the Jungle' of a text and a consciousness whose attention strays from the secret's anticipated revelation and lingers in the improvisatory, inconsequential community that takes form around it. Where *The Sacred Fount* outstrips its readers' and characters' appetites for repeated, meandering, inconclusive talk, 'The Beast in the Jungle' truncates May and Marcher's flirtation and destroys the fluency of their discourse in its race to the concluding epiphany. In their last interaction, fittingly, all traces of Marcher's footsteps and moods have been swept from May's rooms: everything is 'wound up, tucked in, put away'. Here their dialogue reaches an inarticulate, fragmented stalemate:

> JM: 'Well, you don't say—'
> MB: 'I'm afraid I'm too ill.'
> MB: 'Don't you know—now?'
> JM: '"Now"—? I know nothing.'
> MB: 'Oh!' (BJ: 106-7)

May's truncated gestural evocations are only further splintered by Marcher's insensible repetitions. The sharply symmetrical repetitions ('you don't/don't you', '—now/now—')

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[49] Bersani, *Intimacies*, p. 20. Emphasis added.

have the air of language thrown back against a mirror. At the sharp point between May's death and Marcher's demand, speech gracelessly reaches its limit:

> JM: 'What then has happened?'
> MB: 'What *was* to.'(BJ: 107)

What follows after May's death is no less futile. Convinced that she has kept her knowledge of his destiny from him, Marcher devotes himself to uncovering it through a labor of memory:

> He declared to himself at moments that he would either win it back or have done with consciousness for ever; he made this idea his one motive in fine […] The lost stuff of consciousness became thus for him as a strayed or stolen child to an unappeasable father; he hunted it up and down very much as if he were knocking at doors and enquiring of the police. (BJ: 117-8)

'The lost stuff of consciousness', a Proustian phrase, brings to the mind the other novelist's famous upsurges of memory that vividly disorganize subjectivity, memory, and time. But where the madeleine inaugurates Proust's novel, Marcher ransacks the lost past in search not of a beginning but an end: deputized by the narrative to bring it to its conclusion, he searches for a form of closure that will fulfill his destiny and end the story. After the preceding reading of *The Sacred Fount*, it should come as no surprise that what he finds is the law of heterosexual legitimacy: 'The escape would have been to love her; then, *then* he would have lived' (BJ: 126).

Marcher's epiphany, then, is akin to the selective awareness that Nicolas Dames calls amnesia, which 'stiffens the self against the weight of mnemonic diffusion'[50]—or in Sedgwick's words, transforms Marcher's vexed and confused condition into 'a completed and rationalized and wholly concealed and accepted one'.[51] With the judgment that in his failure to 'love' May, 'nothing' had happened in his life and he had not lived, he affirms the unintelligibility of all relations outside of the coupling plot. In this final abnegation of their companionship as it was through all the unrecorded years, unmarked by marriage's legitimating stamp, unmoved by social or narrative imperatives, Marcher binds the text to the temporality of the *récit* and discards the excess. This once again marks the dissolution of a flirtatious paradigm with a marital one. We could also give May and Marcher's relation the name 'friendship'—a term which Foucault links to gay sexuality as an undetermined, non-

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[50] Nicolas Dames, *Amnesiac Selves: Nostalgia, Forgetting, and British Fiction 1810-1870* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 5.

[51] Sedgwick, 'The Beast in the Closet', p. 207.

teleological and improvisational form of relation.[52] The comparative grace of *The Beast of the Jungle*, against *The Sacred Fount*, lies in its willingness to sacrifice the immanent, unfinished structure of friendship and flirtation to an economy of narrative and formal closure.

[52] Michel Foucault, 'Friendship as a Way of Life' in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth, The Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume I*, trans. by Robert Hurley and others, ed. by Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997), pp. 135-140.

Chapter 4
Jamesian Sub-Conversation and the Subtleties of Exchange

Thirty years after Fredric Jameson issued his famous critique of Henry James in *The Political Unconscious*, in which he accuses James of furthering the ideology of bourgeois individualism through the doctrine of 'point of view', he quietly recants. In a much less-discussed essay, he concedes that point of view is a prominent feature of James's criticism, but when it comes to James's fiction, the defining characteristic is the *sub-conversation*:

> the sub-conversation—that imperceptible, hidden, far more intimate, engagement of two characters with each other in the Jamesian *agon* […] wishes to elude the naming of unnameable things, to shun the verbal stereotypes at the same time that it stakes out the space for unique interpersonal feelings that have no name in the first place—a space of apposition and anaphora, the enigmatic references to an 'it' the writer has not identified but which we are supposed to recognize and remember. At any rate, it is this virtual discovery and revelation of a whole layer of human relations that are not unconscious but which the literary apparatus had hitherto been too primitive to register, that is, to my mind, James' most enduring claim to greatness, and not the doctrine of point of view.[1]

As mentioned in the introduction, 'sub-conversation' is a concept Jameson adapts from Nathalie Sarraute, an essayist and novelist associated with the *nouveau roman*. In Jameson's adaptation, the sub-conversation encompasses the implicit, allusive significance that James's characters seem to grasp but that rarely emerges in their talk as a clear articulation. Around and under the uttered words, a more complete and delicate meaning seems to take shape: unspecified, perhaps unspecifiable, but present and palpable. This chapter examines the formal and tonal effects of Jamesian sub-conversation across two texts from his late fiction, *The Wings of the Dove* and *In the Cage*.

In Sarraute's original formulation, the sub-conversation consists in a constant, dynamic milieu that impels and inflects a surface of talk:

> an immense profusion of sensations, images, sentiments, memories, impulses, little larval actions that no inner language can convey, that jostle one another on the threshold of consciousness, gather together in compact groups, loom up all of a sudden, then immediately fall apart, combine otherwise and reappear in new forms, while unwinding inside us, like the ribbon that comes clattering from a telescriptor slot, is an uninterrupted flow of words.[2]

It is clear why Jameson chose this term to describe James's prose. 'Little larval actions' that ripple on the limits of language are a constant presence in James's fiction; they manifest in

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[1] Jameson, 'Remarks on James', pp. 301-2.

[2] Sarraute, 'Conversation and Sub-Conversation', p. 105.

sudden certainties, shifts in temperature, obscure victories and oblique surrenders. Some of this effect is produced through the stylistic peculiarities of Jamesian talk that I discussed in the thesis introduction: the tendencies to repeat certain words, deploy chains of phrasal verbs, and invert the standard order of tropes and idioms. But much of the work James does to foreground the 'sub' in the sub-conversation, the symbolic and affective *agon* from which the spoken words derive their elusive significance, is accomplished in the *narration* of conversation. Take, for example, this exchange in the opening scene of *The Wings of the Dove* between Kate Croy and her father, Lionel Croy:

> 'Of course I've not the least idea how you get on.'
>
> 'I don't get on,' Mr. Croy almost gaily replied.
>
> His daughter took the place in again, and it might well have seemed odd that with so little to meet the eye there should be so much to show. What showed was the ugliness—so positive and palpable that it was somehow sustaining. It was a medium, a setting, and to that extent, after all, a dreadful sign of life; so that it fairly gave point to her answer. 'Oh, I beg your pardon. You flourish.'[3]

There is, in Kate and Lionel's words, the idiomatic ambiguity that scholars have identified as typical of James's writing of talk: the phrase 'get on' could refer to any kind of perseverance, from the basic question of material resources to more perverse, taboo, or intangible forms of sustenance.[4] But what gives the interaction its freighted, slightly menacing aura is not only the words that Kate and Lionel utter but the revelation that emerges from them, both vivid and cryptic. Focalizing Kate, the narrator attests to something pronounced and striking, 'positive and palpable', that shows itself to her despite there being 'so little to meet the eye'—and the ear, for Kate's impression of 'ugliness' and 'life' arises from Lionel's telegraphic utterance, 'I don't get on'. The flagrant, foregrounded presence that emerges with these words is 'a medium, a setting' in which the vitality of Lionel Croy is beyond doubt.

It is therefore a little idiosyncratic of Jameson to apply Sarraute's concept of sub-conversation to Henry James. Her essay 'Conversation and Sub-Conversation' advocates for literary forms that cut talk loose from its anchoring in character, narrator and author; she describes the intrusion of 'he saids' and 'she saids' as the 'light but strong ties' that bind the

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[3] Henry James, *The Wings of the Dove*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 8. Hereafter cited in the text with abbreviation *WD* followed by the page number.

[4] Eve Sedgwick reads Lionel Croy's unspoken and apparently unspeakable disgrace as that of homosexuality in 'Is the Rectum Straight?'. The fraught ambiguity of Lionel and Kate's interaction thus brings together Jameson's 'refusal to name unnameable things' and Sedgwick's readings of homosexuality in literature as 'the love that dare not speak its name' in *Epistemology of the Closet*.

text to the author.[5] James's narration-heavy style of writing talk would no doubt have seemed archaic to Sarraute. To connect James to the sub-conversation thus requires a revision of Sarraute's original formulation, widening its purview to include narration as well as recorded speech—hence the more specific term I have used, 'Jamesian sub-conversation'. It also slightly revises or refines the characterization of James from the thesis introduction as a 'relational modernist', a novelist primarily interested in depicting relations.[6] The sub-conversation as an analytical concept and tool depicts a novelistic subjectivity that is constituted through what we might call *micro-relations*—as Deleuze and Guattari describe them, the 'micromovements, fine segmentations […] tiny cracks' that run through his characters' engagements with one another.[7] This minutely textured, fractured, seismic subject matches James's description of his own development of character. The 'figure', he explains, is 'placed in the imagination that detains it, preserves, protects, enjoys it, conscious of its presence in the dusky, crowded, heterogeneous back-shop of the mind'.[8] In this 'back-shop of the mind', busy with impressions that 'jostle one another on the threshold of consciousness', the author's acquaintance with his character takes shape. In the same half-obscured, half-articulate, yet vividly felt mode, James's characters compose themselves in relation to one another.

But for all James's admiration for subtle, implicit, allusive exercises of interpretation and insight, his fiction grapples with the pitfalls as well as the special affordances of a super-sensitive perceptual sensibility. *The Sacred Fount*, like the better-known *The Turn of the Screw*, explores the proximity of this disposition to madness: the protagonists of these stories perceive sinister forces in other characters which are never explicitly or externally verified. Milly Theale of *The Wings of the Dove* and the unnamed telegraphist of *In the Cage* face a more minor, bathetic charge than insanity: that their investment in the sub-conversation over the conversation, the implicit over the explicit, the indirect over the direct, is a symptom and expression of powerlessness. Both texts feature a heroine faced with an intractable state of affairs who attempts to shift the significance of her inevitable fate through subtle sub-conversational maneuvers. The limited ability of either heroine to escape her unwanted

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[5] Sarraute, 'Conversation and Sub-Conversation', p. 113.

[6] Zhang, *Strange Likeness*, p. 6.

[7] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 197.

[8] James, *The Art of the Novel*, pp. 47-8.

future, though, invites a cynical reading: when a character is unable to alter the major events of the text in which she is situated, an investment in the minutiae of talk—all of the relational, symbolic, and interpretive possibilities that 'bristle' across Jamesian exchanges[9]—might just amount to an aestheticization of her own ineffectuality.

My analysis of sub-conversational dynamics across these texts therefore returns to Jameson's initial critique of James's novels: that their formal innovations are attempts to compensate for their reification on the market. Both Milly and the telegraphist negotiate relations that are poised between the economic and the intimate: Milly's friends scheme for her fortune and the telegraphist becomes entangled in the personal lives of her customers. Milly, I will argue, complicates her status as the novel's victim by exercising an oblique tonal and interpretive power over the social and relational fictions that she negotiates and cultivates—but considering the telegraphist alongside Milly brings out an interplay between interpretive power and economic power that the latter's tremendous wealth obscures. As both characters wish to shift the depersonalizing narratives of extortion and exchange in which they are embedded with super-subtle, aestheticizing, interpretive maneuvers, they both—to different degrees—reflect the condition of the Jamesian 'art novel' as a commodity. The telegraphist's starkly limited capacity to escape the laws of exchange, alongside her status as a word-worker, embeds a materialist critique of James's sub-conversational literary aesthetics.

1. Moral Oppositions

The Wings of the Dove lends itself to a stark interpretive division. On the one hand, it is the 'least morally ambiguous' of James's late works and the one that seems to lend itself most to allegorical interpretations.[10] Bersani, for example, interprets Milly and Kate as the dyadic representatives of virtue and avarice (the 'dove' and the 'lioness') staged for the benefit of Densher as Everyman.[11] Such interpretations straightforwardly depict Milly as an innocent victim whose mortal condition is exploited by her companions, Kate and Densher, who scheme to enrich their own union by marrying Milly to Densher and inheriting her fortune after her death. On the other hand, the novel's convoluted, indirect way of relating

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[9] '[T]he little world determined for [Milly Theale] was to "bristle"—how I delighted in the term!—with meaning' (James, *The Art of the Novel*, p. 294).

[10] Kurnick, 'What Does Jamesian Style Want?', p. 213.

[11] Leo Bersani, 'The Narrator as Center in *The Wings of the Dove*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Summer 1960), pp. 131-144.

its central events seems for many commentators to unhinge the text from its starkly moralizing summary. In his influential work *The Melodramatic Imagination* (1976), Peter Brooks argues that the characters' meticulous 'circumambulation' of the topics of Milly's death and Kate's scheme amounts to a 'moral transmutation': it so scrambles the terms of right and wrong that any attempted recovery of a moral order will effect a misreading of some kind.[12] In a noteworthy work from the same period, John Goode argues that the ethical paradigm of the mercenary (Kate) versus the transcendental (Milly) collapses due to the extended, elaborate form of the story: 'we can imagine [such] a *tale* […] but the novel is too extended.'[13] Milly herself contributes to this air of moral uncertainty by imposing a law of silence over the key events of the narrative—not only her own mortal illness, but also the secret engagement between her own apparent suitor, Merton Densher, and her friend Kate Croy. Her 'prohibition' on direct acknowledgments (described variably throughout the literature as 'fierce privacy', 'silent treatment', and 'tact') prevents these stark states of affairs from fully materializing in the text.[14]

The Wings of the Dove thus offers a difficult sort of double aspect. Its invocation of tragedy and sacrifice is undeniable, but the moral oppositions of victim and victimizer that this framework brings with it are barely to be found in the text. Perhaps this sense of irreconcilability is what troubled James in his writing of the novel: he was afflicted while writing the work with an experience he described as the 'sealing-up of its face', as if the fundamental disposition of the novel remained as unsettled for him as it has for many readers.[15] Jameson, for his part, suggests that 'we have to step outside the text altogether' in order to levy judgment against Kate and Densher, but he queries whether this is really the mode of interpretation that the text 'wants' from us:

> I will hazard the guess that it is only by association with the last traces of the traditional narrative category of destiny or the irrevocable (Milly dies, after all, the

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[12] Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), pp. 187, 193.

[13] John Goode, 'The pervasive mystery of style: *The Wings of the Dove*' in *The Air of Reality: New Essays on Henry James*, ed. by John Goode (London: Meuthen, 1972), pp. 244-300, pp. 244, 246.

[14] Sigi Jöttkandt, '"A Poor Girl with Her Rent to Pay: *The Wings of the Dove*' from *Acting Beautifully: Henry James and the Ethical Aesthetic* (Ithaca: State University of New York Press, 2005), pp. 43-97, p. 69; Joan Lescinski, 'Fierce Privacy in *The Wings of the Dove*', *Literature and Medicine*, Vol. 9 (1990), pp. 125-133. ; Talia Schaffer, 'The Silent Treatment in *The Wings of the Dove*: Ethics of Care and Late-James Style', *The Henry James Review,* Vol. 37, No. 3 (Fall 2016), pp. 233-245; Samuel Cross, 'The Ethics of Tact in *The Wings of the Dove*', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (Fall 2010), pp. 401-423, p. 401.

[15] James, *The Art of the Novel*, p. 309.

> 'crime' has been committed) that such moral reactions and evaluations remain possible, and that thereafter, in the floodtide of the everyday, they are quickly swamped by the sheer multiplicity of points of view, which clearly do render them relative, in the sense of irrelevant.[16]

In Jameson's reading, Milly's death is the sole narrative element in *The Wings of the Dove* that keeps moral evaluation in play. He is joined in this interpretation by 'ethical' critics such as Samuel Cross, who portrays Milly's death in *The Wings of the Dove* as emitting a kind of aura which invests all actions in its vicinity with a stark ethical urgency.[17] But Jameson differs from readings like Cross's by concluding that a moral judgment is ultimately not an apt response to the novel. For him, *The Wings of the Dove* escapes its association with 'destiny or the irrevocable' in the 'floodtide' of perspectives through which the story is told, which collectively 'swamp' moral evaluation.

But Jameson's argument from perspectival relativism does not quite get to the heart of the matter. The novel's centers of consciousness are not so very multiple, limited to Kate, Densher, Milly herself, and briefly, Milly's older companion, Susan Stringham. Kate is focalized only in the first book and Susan only in the third. Densher's increasingly dominant point of view hardly poses a challenge to the possibility of 'moral reactions and judgments'; his desire to disentangle his attentions to Milly from any moral consequences leads him to increasingly casuistic formulations—for instance, 'the law was not to be a brute—in return for amiabilities. He hadn't come all the way out from England to be a brute' (*WD*: 349). Such 'laws' as these do not particularly muddy the moral waters; it's clear that Densher is in a state of bad faith, unwilling to endorse or repudiate his actions in stronger terms than those of social decorum, but dissatisfied with his own quietism. The point at which the novel begins to surrender to Densher's point of view is also where James himself begins to lose faith in the work: he describes the latter half of the novel as its 'false and deformed half' which fails to match the craft of the earlier part.[18] In the first half of the novel, before Densher assumes the place of 'center' and becomes the awkward site of a moral struggle, the oppositions of the text are already called into question when a strong sense of collaboration and coordination takes shape between Kate and Milly—the ostensible antagonists.

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[16] Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism*, pp. 183-4.

[17] Cross, 'The Ethics of Tact in *The Wings of the Dove*', p. 403.

[18] James, *The Art of the Novel*, p. 302.

In the midway point of the novel, Kate and Milly spend a pivotal evening in one another's company. Kate breaks with the anodyne rhythm and content of talk that Milly has come to expect, producing a shockingly straightforward confession:

> 'We're of no use to you—it's decent to tell you. You'd be of use to us, but that's a different matter. My honest advice to you would be'—she went indeed to all lengths —'to drop us while you can. It would be funny if you didn't soon see how awfully better you can do. We've not really done for you the least thing worth speaking of—nothing you mightn't easily have had in some other way.' (*WD*: 201)

Kate 'goes to all lengths', laying out the social facts of their association in the bluntest terms of social and economic utility. On this oppositional terrain, the two parties are portrayed as bargaining entities, each looking to exploit the other. Milly holds the better hand: she is foreign, she is wealthy, she is charming, and, as Kate frankly informs her, she could leverage those resources much more advantageously. Despite the self-effacing content of Kate's warnings, which ostensibly empower Milly to take greater control over her associations, Kate gives a powerful, almost predatory impression in this scene. When Milly protests that she rates highly the advantage of Kate's company, the other woman returns, 'Oh, you may very well loathe me yet!' Milly feels herself in the presence of 'a creature who paced like a panther', as if this harsh instrumental reasoning is palpably Kate's territory (*WD*: 201).

But this power dynamic completely transforms with Milly's reply:

> 'Why do you say such things to me?' This unexpectedly had acted, by a sudden turn of Kate's attitude, as a happy speech. She had risen as she spoke, and Kate had stopped before her, shining at her instantly with a softer brightness. Poor Milly hereby enjoyed one of her views of how people, wincing oddly, were often touched by her. 'Because you're a dove.' With which she felt herself ever so delicately, so considerately, embraced; not with familiarity or as a liberty taken, but almost ceremonially and in the manner of an *accolade*. (*WD*: 201-2)

In a delicate exchange of position and posture, Kate receives Milly's adjustment to her blunt assessments and issues back an answering description. With her soft words, 'Because you're a dove', Kate accepts Milly's tonal remapping of their relation: without exactly addressing or dissolving the mercenary logic that opposes them, she seals their gestural, symbolic, and affective alliance. This is Milly's soft power. Whereas Kate's wit, resolve, and subtlety all outstrip Milly's, Milly demonstrates to Kate that she can implausibly re-pitch Kate's instrumental reasoning into a relation of earnest, almost ritualistic tenderness. This tonal, relational, performative power is why she's a dove.

If we read this scene for the dialogue alone, we find a simple question and answer: 'Why do you say such things to me?' 'Because you're a dove.' This exchange stripped of its

subtleties sketches out a logic which James also invokes in the Prefaces: that Milly's tragic fate combined with her palpable unworldliness inevitably invites the schemes and machinations of others. But the sudden keen intimacy that Milly conjures, the transformation of feeling and gesture she effects, endows Kate's reply with anachronistic, profound affection—without changing the facts that Kate has described: Milly's status as an object of leverage and extraction for the other members of their party, including Kate herself. Jonathan Freedman describes this as Milly's ability to synthesize two forms of aesthetics: the commodity aesthetic of the London social scene that views her as 'an object of social and economic exchange' and an idealized Romantic aestheticism that consists in upsurges of authentic feeling.[19] This uneasy simultaneity, Freedman argues, allows Milly to collapse moral oppositions in the novel, eliding the transcendental with the mercenary and authenticity with manipulation. Milly's orchestration of these collapses occurs in the register of the sub-conversation, acting on the tenor, the atmosphere, the aesthetics of a relation, without at all revising or even challenging the instrumental logic that circumscribes it.

2. Impalpable Alliances

For Milly, the appellation 'You're a dove' amounts to a revelation. 'It was moreover, for the girl, like an inspiration: she found herself accepting as the right one, while she caught her breath with relief, the name so given her […] She was a dove. Oh *wasn't* she?—' (*WD*: 201-2) The significances she attributes to this term are idiosyncratic and somewhat heterogeneous. According to the principle of the 'most dovelike', she lies to Kate's aunt to conceal on Kate's behalf that Densher has returned to London. The next day, she continues her commitment to 'how a dove would act' in arranging to be out of the house when the illustrious Dr. Luke Strett visits, leaving him to confer secretly with Susan Stringham (*WD*: 202-3). In other words, from this point she resolves—with relief, with satisfaction, and even with caprice—firstly to be an accomplice to Kate and Densher and secondly to move her mortal illness firmly off-stage. As the novel progresses, Milly begins to openly participate in her instrumentalization by others in the London social set, and she brings to this participation the same disorienting warmth and strength of feeling with which she receives the symbol of the dove.

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[19] Jonathan Freedman, *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism, and Commodity Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 215.

Both of her new resolutions—to aid Kate and Densher and to sideline her illness—are tested out in the episode that directly follows in the National Gallery. This intense, revealing, and supple scene marks the first time Kate, Milly, and Densher form a group social relation. It begins when Milly sees Densher from across the room and watches him for an unspecified amount of time, only to suddenly realize that Kate is there with him and has been watching *her*. In this singular event, the three central characters of the novel must create a collective dynamic around the secret of Kate and Densher's liaison when it is in plain sight. The meeting takes its first cue from the social virtuoso, Kate:

> Kate was but two yards off—Mr. Densher wasn't alone. Kate's face specifically said so, for after a stare as blank at first as Milly's it broke into a far smile. That was what, wonderfully […] passed from her to Milly; the instant reduction to easy terms of the fact of their being there, the two young women, together. It was perhaps only afterwards that the girl fully felt the connexion between this touch and her already established conviction that Kate was a prodigious person; yet on the spot she none the less, in a degree, knew herself handled and again, as she had been the night before, dealt with—absolutely even dealt with for her greater pleasure. (*WD*: 209-10)

Kate's smile seems to physically travel across the room to touch Milly, a touch that she receives as a gift and an instruction, marking another moment of wordless communication between the pair. 'Handling' Milly effortlessly, Kate hands her the script for the occasion just as she gave her the illuminating 'dovelike' rubric.

Milly easily does what Kate desires, giving their subsequent interaction an air of effortless congeniality. This performance is not naive or unconscious: perfectly aware of her gift, she explicitly congratulates herself on her own social facility and successful dissemblance. In the National Gallery and during the luncheon that follows, she repeatedly evinces a delighted, even smug satisfaction with herself, her companions, and the relation they create. The stream of free indirect narration, closely focalizing her, congratulates them all on their 'triumph' and 'perfect manners' and applauds her own 'inspiration' to call upon her 'American girl' persona to put Densher at ease (*WD*: 210-1). She evaluates and approves their skillful repair of the initiating disturbance:

> Little by little, under the vividness of Kate's behavior, the probabilities fell back into their order. Merton Densher was in love and Kate couldn't help it—could only be sorry and kind: wouldn't that, without wild flurries, cover everything? Milly at all events tried it as a cover, tried it hard, for the time; pulled it over her […] drew it up to her chin with energy. If it didn't, so treated, do everything for her, it did so much that she could herself supply the rest. (*WD*: 213)

Milly, with her metaphorical feet sticking out from under a slightly truncated fiction, appraises Kate's cover job like an actor reading over a script or a writer reviewing a plot

device. It will do; the way she will bring it to life will make up for anything lacking. The practical, almost jocular spirit of this passage is the tonal opposite of the 'melodrama of consciousness' that Brooks associates with Milly. Indeed, the distribution of good and evil gets so muddled in the National Gallery by Milly's eager participation in the game of social fabrication that Goode designates this scene as the point at which the novel ceases to be a narrative of betrayal.[20] In this interaction, the oppositions intrinsic to the 'moral plot' of the novel are insistently and elusively unpicked by the perverse collaborations worked out and enjoyed in Milly and Kate's management of the dynamic.

Milly, then, is an active player in the affective and relational arrangements that throw doubt on her own status as the novel's victim. What are we to make of this complicity? David Kurnick explains the unmistakable note of cooperation between Kate and Milly by splitting Milly into two textual entities:

> As a character in the plot, Milly is of course committed to her personal lot […] But as an emblem of style—as the dove the text won't let us forget she also is—Milly must be seen as committed to the making-pervasive of the riches concentrated on her person. And in this redistributive project, she should be understood as, strangely but palpably, a collaborator even with her chief antagonist […] Kate and Milly radiate a sense of co-operating on some other plane that while not-quite-narratable nonetheless happily pervades this unhappy novel. This other scene may never rise to the level of narrated action, but it makes itself felt in the texture of the characters' language and in their emotional stance toward one another.[21]

Kurnick accounts for the discrepancy between Milly's 'personal' interests and the air of collaboration between herself and Kate by describing the former as characterological and the latter as stylistic. As a character, Milly's interests are opposed to Kate's, but as a dove, Kurnick argues, her interests are to serve the interests of everyone else. But if we attend more closely to Milly's defining characteristics, these two registers—the characterological and stylistic—cannot be so cleanly distinguished. Her attraction to stylized performances of various stock figures (the dove, the 'princess', the 'American girl') leads Laurence Holland to characterize her general mode of conduct as 'acting as if', a kind of subjunctive role-playing that blurs the distinction between authenticity and performance.[22] Freedman calls this characteristic of Milly's her 'ambiguous theatricality': 'her ability […] to deploy the idiom of gesture and the language of dress to play for Kate, for Densher, even for Lord Mark, the roles they have cast her in without ever letting them (or the reader) know whether she has

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[20] Goode, 'The Pervasive Mystery of Style', p. 273.

[21] Kurnick, 'What Does Jamesian Style Want?', pp. 219-20.

[22] Holland, *The Expense of Vision*, p. 297.

consciously adopted these parts.'[23] How should we separate Milly's true interests from her assumed ones? Against Kurnick, I argue that her performance of these social and stylistic roles is not in opposition to her interests; it is an indirect expression of them, a coordinated affective and hermeneutic challenge to her inevitable surrender to tragedy.

While the scene in the National Gallery is playing out, Sir Luke Strett is visiting Susan Stringham to confer about Milly's ill health. This off-stage event casts a shadow over her which the text only perfunctorily references:

> She would really, tired and nervous, have been much more disconcerted if the opportunity in question hadn't saved her. It was what had saved her most, had made her, after the first few seconds, almost as brave for Kate as Kate was for her, had made her only ask herself what their friend would like of her. (*WD*: 210)

Like May and Marcher, Milly omits any clarification of the threat from which she has been 'saved'; but in light of the scene she is carefully avoiding, we may begin to fill in the missing term. She has declined to receive her solicitous doctor, leaving Susan instructions—'Sir Luke Strett comes, by appointment, to see me at eleven, but I'm going out on purpose. He's to be told, please, deceptively, that I'm at home, and you, as my representative, are to see him instead'—that she likens to a 'priceless Persian carpet': an artful, colorful, and surprising ornament much to be preferred to the 'drab' notion of waiting at home for one's consultation with a doctor (*WD*: 203). But the activity that she substitutes for the drab one is not quite robust enough to occupy her—a little thin, a little contrived is her resolution to go to the National Gallery to edify herself with the 'pictures and things' that are the mark of 'continental tour' (*WD*: 205). What 'saves' her from succumbing to dread and anxiety is the much more urgent, vital, and demanding occupation that materializes in front of her with Kate's touching smile. The 'opportunity in question', then, is to overwrite a menacing, mortal threat with a 'sublimely civilized' evasion—a bravery for Kate that she lacks on her own behalf.

This may not seem like a proportional substitution; indeed, when Milly returns with Kate and Densher to her shared lodgings with Susan, Susan is at a loss to understand how Milly's attention to her friends has expelled her interest in the doctor's report. But Sigi Jöttkandt acutely suggests that this mode of substitution is Milly's defensive technique against her mortality: 'Rather than 'surrender' […] Milly vows to fight, and the way she

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[23] Freedman, *Professions of Taste*, p. 222.

does this is by interposing something between herself and her knowledge of her mortality.'[24] Milly's gratitude for the opportunity Kate gives her to play the careless American girl, echoing her earlier delight at the name of the dove, gives a clue as to how this interposition may function. In the ready-made scene of Kate and Densher's liaison, and the London social scene more broadly, the prefabricated roles Milly is handed in the various schemes of her companions offer her alternatives to being tired, nervous, and dying: the tragic heroine. In embracing these roles, with her special gift for confusing the boundaries between authenticity and contrivance, she releases Kate and Densher from the social role of her exploiters and releases herself from the narrative position of a 'young person […] stricken and doomed'.[25] Instead, she takes on the singular, incoherent, but unmistakable role of their confidant and accomplice. This deferral cannot continue forever, but the longer it goes on, the more pressure is applied to the overbearing tragic hermeneutics that accrue to her death, which, as Jameson and Cross both argue, threatens to impose a moral order over the text's disordered relations. Milly's peculiar complicity, then, may be read as her effort to displace and subvert, though not prevent, her fate.

Does she succeed? Densher reacts to her eventual death in a predictably blunt manner: he casts Milly as a sacred figure and melodramatically vows to leave Kate unless she refuses the fortune Milly bequeaths to them in her will. Of the novel's central trio, Densher is the one who most needs things to be stated plainly; as Kate warns him as he presses her for details of her scheme, 'If you want things named you must name them' (*WD*: 378). He is also the character who is the most committed to what Jöttkandt calls a 'bargaining principle' in his relations: a fundamentally quantitative logic of debt and exchange.[26] Whereas Kate immediately appreciates and responds to Milly's ability to synthesize affection with exploitation, power with victimization, Densher ultimately refuses to intermingle these terms. Thus, he believes that refusing Milly's dying gift will 'square' him with her ethically. In his final inscription of the transcendental/mercenary paradigm, Densher effects what Jameson termed the 'naming of unnameable things', a falling-back on 'verbal stereotypes'—in other words, a replacement of the paradoxically cooperative sub-conversation with an all-too-legible, oppositional tragedy.

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[24] Jöttkandt, 'A Poor Girl with Her Rent to Pay', p. 66. In Jöttkandt's psychoanalytic reading, this 'something' is the question of her desire, which may defer death as long as it remains unanswered and dissatisfied.

[25] James, Preface to *The Wings of the Dove*, p. xxxi.

[26] Jöttkandt, *Acting Beautifully*, p. 93.

It is worth noting that James locates this interpretation in Densher, the novel's least astute point of view. Kurnick asserts that Milly and Kate's collaboration is 'not-quite-narratable'; I would refine his characterization to argue that it is narrated in James's typically elusive register, the sub-conversation.[27] In the gestural, unsettled movements of Jamesian sub-conversation, the giving and taking of unspecified quantities, the exchange of 'sweet draughts' and 'cool pressure' of forms, their partnership takes shape (*WD*: 201, 211-2). It is a fundamental feature of this subtle rendering of relation that it is unevenly available to different characters in the text. Therefore when Kurnick locates the pathos of *The Wings of the Dove* in its 'inability to render palpable on the plane of the real' the oblique alliance between Kate and Milly, this overlooks an essential feature of James's late fiction: the impalpable is not strictly excluded from the 'real', though it may not be universally perceived.[28] As Zhang has argued, James 'broadens the category of the real to encompass affective climates that arise only ambiguously to the level of a fact'.[29] The obscure alliances, arrangements, and intimacies that Milly cultivates, then, assert an impalpable but undeniable narrative presence. Her death leaves the text in a dynamic condition that reflects her ambivalent success in resignifying or re-pitching its significance. It is not Densher's dullness alone (or the reader's) that makes him inclined to disregard Milly's indirect, implicit collaborations in light of her death. Sub-conversational subtleties are a slight force to weigh against the gravity of death. But as James confesses in the Prefaces, 'where a light lamp will carry all the flame I incline to look askance at a heavy.'[30]

James makes a point of completely abstracting and disembodying Milly's illness: as Kate explains to Densher, 'She won't smell, as it were, of drugs. She won't taste, as it were, of medicine' (*WD*: 255). Kate's repeated qualification, 'as it were', augments the subjunctive, unreal aura of Milly's ailment. Her efforts against her impending death appear as 'purely volitional,' in Brooks's words, 'a pure struggle of the will to live',[31] reflecting a spiritual rather than a material kind of labor. The strangely intangible affliction is summed up in her doctor's directive: that she could live if she would. In response to this diagnosis, she indulges in a fantasy of herself as 'a poor girl—with her rent to pay, for example':

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[27] Kurnick, 'What Does Jamesian Style Want?', p. 220.

[28] Kurnick, 'What Does Jamesian Style Want?', p. 220.

[29] Zhang, *Strange Likeness*, p. 71.

[30] James, *The Art of the Novel*, p. 129.

[31] Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, p. 183.

> Milly had her rent to pay, her rent for her future […] Well, she must go home, like the poor girl, and see. There might after all be ways; the poor girl too would be thinking […] It was perhaps superficially more striking that one could live if one would; but it was more appealing, insinuating, irresistible in short, that one would live if one could. (*WD*: 181)

This rather distasteful metaphor, which references but does not dwell on the forms of degradation and vulnerability a poor girl with her rent to pay in Milly's London would be forced to consider at this juncture, underscores an essential element of Milly's strictly immaterial struggle: her wealth. With a thoughtlessness enabled by her boundless resources, Milly never seems to think about money. The logics of compensation, exchange, and extraction are active all around her, spurred into motion by her fortune; but that very same fortune gives her a margin that makes any direct engagement with them unnecessary. It is significant, too, that her final act in the novel is the gift of her wealth. Through its sheer enormity, this transfer of funds transforms into a symbol of generosity; Kate eulogizes, '[S]he stretched out her wings, and it was to *that* they reached. They cover us' (*WD*: 508). Milly's wealth, then, is tied to her special, oblique power to shift the tone and obscure the significance of transactional events.

3. Discriminating Readers

The second part of this chapter turns to a minor heroine who conspicuously lacks any insulating margin between herself and the laws of value and exchange. These laws are essential to her function as a telegraphist, which is elucidated on the first page of *In the Cage*:

> to mind the 'sounder', which was always going, to dole out stamps and postal-orders, weigh letters, answer stupid questions, give difficult change and, more than anything else, count words as numberless as the sands of the sea, the words of the telegrams thrust, from morning to night, through the gap left in the high lattice, across the encumbered shelf that her forearm ached with rubbing.[32]

The telegraphist's duties center around the task of conversion: the conversions of goods into currency as well as the more unusual conversions of sound, word, and signal specific to her occupation. The sounder emits a series of long and short ticks which the telegraphist converts to text through 'sound reading'; the words surging through her narrow portal are converted into signals through her encoding.[33] She is an exchange point between aural,

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[32] Henry James, 'In the Cage' from *Eight Tales from the Major Phase: In the Cage and Others*, ed. by Morton Dauwen Zabel (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1985), pp.174-266, p. 174. Hereafter cited in the text with abbreviation *C* followed by the page number.

[33] Richard Menke, 'Telegraphic Realism: Henry James's *In the Cage*', *PMLA*, Vol. 115, No. 5 (October 2000), pp. 975-990, p. 983.

electric, and monetary mediums. These are her functions as a worker, which give the labor a rather abstract and disembodied character—'as if,' she protests, 'I had no more feeling than a letter-box' (*C*: 226). But her sensitive forearm, chafed by the bars of the cage, testifies otherwise. The first pages of *In the Cage* vividly materialize the telegraphist's surroundings, describing the 'poison of perpetual gas' that pervades the shop and the eternal odors of 'hams, cheese, dried fish, soap, varnish, paraffin, and other solids and fluids that she came to know perfectly by their smells without consenting to know them by their names' (*C*: 175). The numberless sands of words, then, mix with these more literal and less lyrical particles: the stinky emanations of ordinary goods.

In this claustrophobic setting, the telegraphist of *In the Cage* enjoys the dubious privilege of being a poor girl with her rent to pay. The structuring device of the novella, which gives its events the intensity of transience, is her desire to delay her imminent move to the dull suburb of Chalk Farm in the company of her placid fiancé. This move is rendered inevitable because of its economic logic: it would save the telegraphist three shillings a week on rent. In a turn of phrase strangely reminiscent of Milly's different struggle, she formulates her wish to defer this eventual fate as a desire for 'more life':

> She had surrendered herself moreover of late to a certain expansion of her consciousness […] as the blast of the season roared louder and the waves of fashion tossed their spray further over the counter, there were more impressions to be gathered and really—for it came to that—more life to be led. (*C*: 178)

From her position in the cage, the telegraphist receives fragmented hints and impressions of the lives of others—an anachronistic idea of 'more life to be led'. The telegraphist's desire to gather 'impressions' to compose what James elsewhere describes as 'a sense of having lived' aligns her with James's idea of the artist and writer's sensibility—life being, in his memorable formulation, 'all inclusion and confusion, and art being all discrimination and selection'.[34] In this aesthetic theory, receiving, organizing, and selecting impressions may produce something more lifelike than life itself. Like *The Wings of the Dove*, *In the Cage* depicts a protagonist who responds to an intractable, hated destiny, not with any direct attempts to avert it, but with an intense aesthetic and hermeneutic attention to the minute movements of language and relation that surround her.

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[34] James, *The Art of the Novel*, p. 120. Indeed, both Milly and the telegraphist have been described as artist-like figures, for example by Richard Menke in 'Telegraphic Realism', p. 975, and Laurence Holland in *The Expense of Vision*, p. 295.

James writes in the Preface to *In the Cage* that he was inspired by the strange, liminal position occupied by telegraph workers: the role, James observes, allows 'confined and cramped and yet considerably tutored young officials […] to be made so free, intellectually, of a range of experience otherwise quite closed to them.'[35] A disproportion of intellectual to actual experience is not a new theme in this thesis's study of works by James; it recalls the narrator of *The Sacred Fount*'s wealth of experience 'in fancy' compared to his dearth of experience 'in fact' (*SF*: 79). It is a typically neat device in James's storytelling that the telegraphist is privy only to the making of appointments and never to the appointments themselves. This constraining circumstance, limiting the telegraphist and the reader's access to the real events and creating instead an intangible, speculative aura of intrigue, again recalls *The Sacred Fount*: in that novel, the narrator deliberately confines his investigation to 'psychological material' in order to elevate his investigation above the vulgarity of 'the detective and the keyhole' (*SF*: 57). But whereas the well-heeled narrator of *The Sacred Fount* cites an ethical motive for this self-imposed limitation, the telegraphist is constrained by a metal cage: a physical obstacle that represents a rigid class barrier. Her situation of material constraint circumscribes and conditions the aesthetic activities that occupy her in the cage.

The telegraphist is one of many James heroines who exhibit profound sensitivity to minute social pressures and fluctuations, registering these hints and micromovements like 'sensitive instruments'.[36] For a major character like Milly Theale, this capacity not only allows her to subtly shift the feelings and relations that inflect the characters' actions; it also gives her epistemic access to realities that are hidden from others. In one pivotal scene in *The Wings of the Dove*, Milly discovers that Densher has returned to London and that Kate has seen him just from watching Kate from across the room:

> Kate had remained in the window, very handsome and upright […] she hovered there as with conscious eyes and some added advantage. Then indeed, with small delay, her friend sufficiently saw. The conscious eyes, the added advantage were but those she had now always at command—those proper to the person Milly knew as known to Merton Densher […] Kate had positively but to be there just as she was to tell her he had come back. (*WD*: 194-5)

Milly is so attuned to the obscure, microscopic changes she observes in Kate that she is able, almost magically, to extract knowledge from her obscure perceptions: seeing Kate as if through Densher's eyes, she deduces that he is nearby. Brooks describes this as an

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[35] James, *The Art of the Novel*, p. 154.

[36] Zhang, *Strange Likeness*, p. 73.

'astronomical observation […] where the invisible presence of a new planetary body is deduced from its influence, its "pull", on the observable bodies and their interrelations'.[37] Milly is thus likened to a scientist at a telescope, gleaning obscure truths from the amplified perceptions of a sophisticated instrument. The telegraphist, in contrast, blurs the line between a receptive subject and being herself a receptor. Like Proust's 'animated barometer' protagonist or (to look ahead) Larsen's irritable heroine, who themselves exhibit the volatility and unpredictability of weather events, the telegraphist undergoes involuntary and inexplicable transformations of mood and disposition in response to invisible environmental changes (V: 82). Richard Menke describes her as 'a sort of hyper-responsive emotional seismograph'.[38] Her reactions are immediate, intense, and completely unreflective:

> There were those she would have liked to betray, to trip up, to bring down with words altered and fatal; and all through a personal hostility provoked by the lightest signs, by their accidents of tone and manner, by the particular kind of relation she always happened instantly to feel. There were impulses of various kinds, alternatively soft and severe, to which she was constitutionally accessible and which were determined by the smallest accidents. (*C*: 187-8)

This volatile form of sensitivity, which seems to have no knowledge of its minute triggers, emerges from the special features of the telegraphist's interactions. Unlike the adept atmosphere-readers of *The Wings of the Dove*, she is not a participant in a social set piece, the nuanced dynamics of which compose the substance of the text. Her interactions are depersonalized and replicated on a large scale over the 'shuffling herd that passed before her', from whom she receives a tremendous volume of impressions while inhabiting a severely restricted realm of expression (*C*: 190). Thus, her comportment is represented here not so much as a practitioner of the subtle arts of the sub-conversation as it is an animation of the sub-conversation itself, a magnification of its micromovements: the 'absolute precise outward manifestation, reproduced without indulgence or desire to please, the way the magnetic needle of a galvanometer gives amplified tracings of the minutest variations of a current, of those subtle, barely perceptible, fleeting, contradictory, evanescent movements'.[39]

Occasionally, this susceptibility is connected to an acute, almost supernatural perceptivity, such as when the character who will come to be known as 'Lady Bradeen' first

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[37] Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, p. 184.

[38] Menke, 'Telegraphic Realism', p. 983.

[39] Nathalie Sarraute, 'From Dostoievsky to Kafka' from *Tropisms and The Age of Suspicion*, pp. 59-82, p. 69.

appears in the shop and files three telegrams. The last of these is directed to an 'Everard' at the Hôtel Brighton, and the telegraphist instantly identifies the first two as mere pretexts for sending the third. How does she do this? The narrator anticipates this question:

> How did our obscure little public servant know that for the lady of the telegrams this was a bad moment? How did she guess all sorts of impossible things, such as, almost on the very spot, the presence of drama at a critical stage and the nature of the tie with the gentleman at the Hôtel Brighton? […] If our young lady had never taken such jumps before it was simply that she had never before been so affected. (*C*: 181)

This passage describes the telegraphist's intensity of feeling, her condition of being 'affected', as the reason for her unnatural perspicacity—as if, like Milly, she can extract hidden truths from subtle shifts in perception. But at the very moment when the telegraphist accesses these elevated perceptive capacities, the narratorial perspective detaches from her. 'How did our obscure little public servant know?' the narrator queries, drawing the reader's attention to the absurdity of this functionally anonymous, inconsequential person gleaning with such certainty the troubled affairs of the gentry. James displays a tendency at several points in the novella to assert the narrator's external gaze upon the telegraphist, usually to remind the reader of her small and minor stature. For although her sensitive, susceptible, aesthetic, and at time revelatory perceptions form the central pillar of the telegraphist's character, James casually undermines her claim to these powers in his remarks in the Prefaces:

> My brooding telegraphist may be, on her ground of ingenuity, scarcely more thinkable than desirable […] My central spirit, in the anecdote, is, for verisimilitude, I grant, too ardent a focus of divination; but without this excess the phenomena detailed would have lacked their principle of cohesion.[40]

In light of this disavowal, we may interpret narrative interruptions like the one above as expressions of James's own incredulity regarding his character's 'focus of divination'. Following the author's suggestion, Menke proposes that 'the story cages the soul of an authorial narrator […] in the focalized and ironized figure of the telegraphist'; it's really James's 'capacity of scrutinizing consciousness' that we find in the text, he concludes, not hers.[41]

In the awkwardness of these patronizing deflections and interruptions, a correspondence begins to emerge between the telegraphist's class status and the limits of her faculties of interpretation and insight. The telegraphist is introduced as a reader of 'novels,

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[40] James, *The Art of the Novel*, pp. 156-7.

[41] Menke, 'Telegraphic Realism', p. 982.

very greasy, in fine print and all about fine folks', which she rents for a ha'penny a day (*C*: 176). Mark McGurl argues that James's creation of the 'high art novel', which foregrounds the intellectual labor of interpretation both in the characters it portrays and the demands it makes on the reader, is motivated by James's desire to distinguish his art from precisely this sort of 'greasy' novel. In McGurl's analysis, James's readers as well as his characters are directed through an interpretive fork which serves not only as 'a mechanism for differentiating the individual "in the know" from the one without' but also as 'a model of the social differentiation of different group of interpreters—different kinds of readers—in the common space of print culture.'[42] McGurl's materialist analysis thus offers a new approach to the central question of this chapter: the extent to which microscopic-molecular, sub-conversational interventions in James's fiction can alter and contest material states of affairs. In the 'high-art novel', this capacity underwrites the writer's privileged status as an intellectual laborer distinguished from other word-workers in the market.

The telegraphist, then, poses a problem for this paradigm. As a reader of greasy novels, a word-worker, and a poor girl with her rent to pay, she is not a member of the 'aesthete-intellectual' in-group that the Jamesian high-art novel aspired to create. But as one of James's protagonists, she is a 'subjective adventurer' seeking a sense of life through an exercise of the imagination. This incompatibility is registered in the text's narratorial tic, its regular signal to the reader that it shares their presumed non-identification with the character. It also manifests in the severance of the telegraphist's aesthete-like traits—imagination, ardor, sensitivity—from the acuity and insight associated with James's favored readers, 'those people on whom nothing is lost'.[43] For the telegraphist's moods to resemble an animated machine, enlivened by powerful, irrational hatreds and affections, seems to pose no difficulty to the narrative; these qualities are related smoothly in free indirect discourse. But the conversion of affect into correct interpretation—a critical moment in the story—jars the narrative voice into an externalized perspective. As McGurl argues, James's assertion of the power of a 'supple and ample consciousness' to give form to the material world means that his fiction is haunted by 'the inevitable return of "sharp" matters of fact',

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[42] Mark McGurl, *The Novel Art: Elevations of American Fiction after Henry James* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 34.

[43] Henry James, *The Art of the Novel and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 11. References to *The Art of the Novel* refer to *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces* unless otherwise specified.

including the fact of the market.[44] The telegraphist demonstrates the converse of this principle: her inability to forget or escape the demands of the market undermines and unsettles her aesthetic perceptivity. As the following section will explore, the logics of conversion and exchange repeatedly invade the space of aesthetic and interpretive labor that she tries to maintain as a kind of end in itself.

4. Aesthetic Workers

From the telegraphist's perspective as a converter of words to sums, the speech of her customers appears in the form of quantities. She describes her duties to a friend as 'to count all day all the words in the dictionary', words 'as numberless as the sands of the sea' (*C*: 197, 174). When she first encounters the charismatic Captain Everard at the office, she is so struck by him that she is unable to register the meaning of what he says: '*His* words were mere numbers' (*C*: 182). With this notable exception, her work in the telegraph office consists in the simultaneous operation of her interpretive and quantitative faculties. While performing an artist-like exercise of imagination and selection, arranging the words of the telegraph-senders into forms and interpretations, she also counts up their language as contentless units of exchange:

> in the shuffle of feet, the flutter of 'forms' […] the people she had fallen into the habit of remembering and fitting together with others, and of having her theories and interpretations of, kept up before her their long procession and rotation. What twisted the knife in her vitals was the way the profligate rich scattered about them, in extravagant chatter over their extravagant pleasures and sins, an amount of money that would have held the stricken household of her frightened childhood […] together for a lifetime. During her first weeks she had often gasped at the sums people were willing to pay for the stuff they transmitted—the 'much love's, the 'awful' regrets, the compliments and wonderments and vain vague gestures that cost the price of a new pair of boots. (*C*: 187)

At the site of exchange between speech and money, the telegraphist's interest in fitting bits of talk into 'types' and 'forms' vies for her attention with the undifferentiated exchange value that they represent, a value completely indifferent to the meaning of the words. On one side of this passage, words flutter diaphanously in a milieu of speculation and interpretation; on the other, the 'numberless' utterances that pass through the telegraph office cohere heavily into a pair of boots. Recalling McGurl's argument that the high-art novel demands a labor of interpretation from the reader in order to distinguish itself on the market, the costly monetary value that the telegraph office assigns to 'compliments,

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[44] Freedman, *Professions of Taste*, p. xxv; McGurl, *Novel Art*, p. 41.

wonderments, and vain vague gesture'—all mainstays of Jamesian talk—takes on a keenly reflexive significance: all this verbal obfuscation and affectation comes with a cash value. The telegraphist, as I have argued, occupies a liminal role—not only between her world and the world of the 'profligate rich', but between reader and receptor, subject and object. She is poised between her appreciation of aesthetic value and her sharp awareness of exchange value. In the telegraphist's dual consciousness of a collection of words as an expansive, airy, effervescent zone of interpretation and as a physical object representing a market value, *In the Cage* references the commodity status of the high-art novel itself. Her aesthetic attention is laced through with class ressentiment towards the same vague prolixity that provides the raw material for her 'play of mind'.

Despite this intermingling of negative and positive affects, the telegraphist is deeply attached to the special quality of experience afforded to her at the telegraph office:

> The great thing was the flashes, the quick revivals, absolute accidents all, and neither to be counted on nor to be resisted. Some one had only sometimes to put in a penny for a stamp and the whole thing was upon her. *She was so absurdly constructed that these were literally the moments that made up*—made up for the long stiffness of sitting there in the stocks, made up for the cunning hostility of Mr. Buckton and the importunate sympathy of the counter-clerk, made up for the daily deadly flourishy letter from Mr. Mudge, made up even for the most haunting of her worries, the rage at moments for not knowing how her mother did 'get it'. (*C*: 178)[45]

These epiphanic punctum-like flashes are a crucial counterweight to the telegraphist's daily concessions to a dozen irritants and discomforts. They 'make up for' the onerous and grating company of her hated coworkers, 'too oleaginous' fiancé, and helpless, dependent mother (*C*:199). A dynamic of compensation is active in this passage: aesthetic compensation for aesthetic, economic, and social want. But 'to compensate' is just one meaning of the phrasal verb 'to make up (for)', alongside 'to constitute' and 'to fabricate'; the italicized sentence fragment above drops the qualifying 'for' to invoke these other possibilities. 'Make up for' remains in the logic of currency and calculation, balance and conversion, weighing the telegraphist's aesthetic experience against material costs and benefits, presenting her little thrills and rushes as flowers on the chain of economic necessity that keeps her in the cage. But 'make up' moves towards a more radical, ontological claim: that the flashes of *somethings* that captivate her are constitutive of her experience, not merely compensatory for it. The telegraphist is 'so absurdly constructed that these were literally the moments that made up'—that compose and construct herself and the text she belongs to. The slippage in

[45] Emphasis added.

this passage between 'make up' and 'make up for' enacts the unsteady relationship between aesthetics and material constraint in *In the Cage*, pressing the question of whether the telegraphist's mysterious pleasures and one-sided relations can be understood as more than the aestheticization of constraint.

Everard comes to occupy the nexus of this question: the telegraphist's desire, imagination, and bitter resentment all circle around him. Eschewing the slower pace of writing and sending letters, Everard routes his entire correspondence through the telegraphist: '[he] belonged supremely to the class that wired everything, even their expensive feelings (so that, as he evidently never wrote, his correspondence cost him weekly pounds and pounds and he might be in and out five times a day)' (*C*: 184). She composes an elaborate account of his liaison with Lady Bradeen, arduously deciphered from his extravagant yet discreet messages:

> Nothing could equal the frequency and variety of his communications to her ladyship but their extraordinary, their abysmal propriety […] Their real meetings must have been constant, for half of it was appointments and allusions, all swimming in a sea of other allusions still, tangled in a complexity of questions that gave a wondrous image of their life […] on the whole, she pressed the romance closer by reason of the very quantity of imagination it demanded and consumed. (*C*: 184-5)

Everything is here to feed her fascination with what she calls a 'richness of reference', the inexplicit, enticing medium of their talk, rich with impressions and wealth alike (*C*: 185). The 'wondrous image' she composes of the couple remains obscure to the reader, and its component parts are described in mixed metaphors that give a sense of formal unclarity: a sea of allusions tangles with a complexity of questions. The difficulty of a visual rendering seems to be a part of the appeal of the affair, since it only makes the demand on her imagination greater. Here, too, the telegraphist acts as a representative for James's interpretive aesthetics; as Zhang argues, his preference for descriptions that lack clear visualizations require readers to 'feel the labor' of imagination.[46] The profligate correspondence between Everard and his absent mistress spur the telegraphist to ever more intense and inspired exertions of speculation and insight, which completely eclipse the labor of counting, weighing, transcribing, and transmitting that accompanies it.

Still, the simultaneity of the telegraphist's elective, imaginative labor with her compulsory, quantitative one presses the question: what are the wages of this former, more intangible work? What does it or can it do for her beyond 'making up' for the indignities of

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[46] Zhang, *Strange Likeness*, p. 63.

poverty and need? The telegraphist approaches this question in her daydreams but cannot quite answer it. She imagines 'going to him in the dusk of evening at Park Chambers and letting him at last have it':

> 'I know too much about a certain person now not to put it to you—excuse my being so lurid—that it's quite worth your while to buy me off. Come therefore: buy me!' There was a point indeed at which such flights had to drop again—the point of an unreadiness to name, when it came to that, the purchasing medium. It wouldn't certainly be anything so gross as money. (*C*: 207)

The 'purchasing medium': the phrase exemplifies James's particular style of luridness, somehow all the more obscene for its excessive abstraction. In return for the understanding she has gained through an acute interpretive sensibility, the telegraphist wants nothing so gross as money, which would degrade her aesthetic work through association with her hated waged labor. She also does not want any increased intimacy with Everard; as other commentators have noted, such an arrangement could only be to her own disadvantage.[47] When the meeting at Park Chambers finally arrives—an event she precipitates by walking past the house every evening—her confusion over the desired form of recompense persists. A droll, flirtatious, bantering style of talk forms easily between them, full of audacious observations on her part and flattery on his; but across their conversation, the specter of an imminent exchange or extraction seems to hover. The telegraphist fears this mercantile scene will somehow, in the absence of any clear avaricious intention, press itself into her tone: 'oh how she tried to divest this of all sound of the hardness of bargaining! That ought to have been easy enough, for what was she arranging to get?' (*C*: 226)

The telegraphist answers this question for herself in the course of their conversation. Disclosing frankly to Everard that she is aware of his wrongdoings—'Your extravagance, your selfishness, your immorality, your crimes—she concludes with the earnest promise, 'all I get out of it is the harmless pleasure of knowing. I know, I know, I know!—'(*C*: 226-7) She affirms to Everard and herself that the intertwined delights of pleasure and knowledge are their own reward and her only objective. But despite this declaration, the proximate 'bargaining' tone hovers around the scene. It belongs not to the telegraphist herself, but to a generic trope to which she is uneasily proximate: the virtuous working-class person exposing the dissolute aristocrat. Several commentators link the dynamic between the

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[47] Jill Galvan, 'Glass Ghosting *In the Cage*', *The Henry James Review*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (Fall 2001), pp. 297-306; Jennifer Wicke, 'Henry James's Second Wave', *The Henry James Review*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (Spring 1989), pp. 146-151.

telegraphist and Everard to the Cleveland Street Affair of 1889 and the Wilde trials of 1895.[48] The Cleveland Street Affair was a scandal which became a referendum on upper-class sexual lenience and deviancy, in which a male brothel was found to be providing young postal employees to an upper-class, aristocratic clientele. Like the more famous Wilde trials, this scandal provided a legal arena in which working-class employees of the postal system were temporarily given the power to testify against and subsequently convict upper-class people on the basis of sexual depravity. As Nicola Nixon observes, the telegraphist references these very courtroom tropes in her final scene with Everard, when she envisions herself in 'a chamber of justice, before a watching crowd, a poor girl, exposed but heroic' (*C*: 250).[49] These surrounding, sensationalized scenes motivate the idea that the telegraphist could turn her knowledge of Everard's private life to her material advantage. With her 'small retentive mind' and detective inclinations, she represents a deep anxiety of the dictating class—one with which James, who adopted a typist for his private correspondences in the mid-1890s, was intimately familiar.[50] Through this overbearing interpretive context, Everard fails to hear the sincerity in her declaration of the harmless pleasure of knowing. From his subsequent behavior, it becomes clear that he believes her to be blackmailing him: after their meeting, he begins discreetly leaving extra money for her at the office.

> The telegraphist's response to these occurrences is highly confused:
>
> What was most extraordinary in this impression was the amount of excuse that, with some incoherence, she found for him. He wanted to pay her because there was nothing to pay her for. He wanted to offer her things he knew she wouldn't take. He wanted to show her how much he respected her by giving her the supreme chance to show *him* she was respectable. (*C*: 242)

These convolutions express her efforts to resist a reduction of their relation to the logics of transaction and compensation. If he wants to pay her it must be for nothing, a gesture of generosity instead of an exchange; it must be a ritual of refusal dedicated to the integrity of their bond, expressing mutual respect. She is unwilling to comprehend, let alone accept what Everard offers: a blunt equivalence between her aesthetic, imaginative engagement

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[48] See Eric Savoy, '*In the Cage* and the Queer Effects of Gay History', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, Vol. , No. 3 (Spring 1995), pp. 284-307; Hugh Stevens, 'Queer Henry *In the Cage*' in *The Cambridge Companion to Henry James*, ed. by Jonathan Freedman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 120-138; Nicola Nixon, 'The Reading Gaol of Henry James's *In the Cage*', *ELH*, Vol. 66, No. 1 (Spring 1999), pp. 179-201.

[49] Nixon, 'The Reading Gaol', p. 195.

[50] Savoy notes that James often referenced the presence of the typist in his letters to indicate that his writing would be 'less than candid' (Savoy, '*In the Cage* and the Queer Effects of Gay History', p. 292).

and a cash value. In her unconvincing explanations, her attempts to refigure the act of payment as a symbolic gesture, the telegraphist comes up against the limits of her capacity to elevate, hermeneutically or tonally, the scene of exchange. This seems to be at least partly a problem of scale. Whereas Milly's enormous fortune effortlessly invokes an allegorical significance, the telegraphist struggles to resignify the handful of sovereigns Everard leaves in her reach.

Some readers of *In the Cage* attribute to the telegraphist the kind of impalpable yet transformative influence that Milly wields in *The Wings of the Dove*. In such readings, even though the novella ends with Everard's marriage to Lady Bradeen and the telegraphist's imminent marriage to Mr. Mudge, the significance of these ostensibly re-normalizing events is displaced and deterritorialized.[51] This indirect form of influence—the power to subvert and disturb but not to prevent certain decisive events—would exemplify the graceful narrative economy to which James aspires, evoking tension and movement without requiring the 'heavy machinery' of overt narrative action.[52] In James's late fiction, these obscure transformations of relation, tone, and significance are the intangible 'wages' of sub-conversational work; they are its 'purchasing medium' (*C*: 207). But the telegraphist is an odd Jamesian heroine whose efforts to perceive and compose singular, artful, elusive relations keep collapsing into quantitative exchanges. Whereas in the aesthetics of the sub-conversation, 'unique interpersonal feelings that have no name in the first place' unsettle and contest the apparent determinations of narrative, the telegraphist's desire to produce and participate in this kind of relation is pitted against the generic, depersonalized, interchangeable medium of exchange with which Everard addresses her. Thus, despite James's condescension towards her, the telegraphist dramatizes the compromised position of the novelist himself. As Freedman argues, the Jamesian novelist 'remodeled' the unproductive figure of the aesthete into a working professional.[53] The aesthetic worker must negotiate the simultaneity of various incompatibilities: the qualitative and the quantitative, the singular and the general, the indirectly influential and the directly instrumental. Her

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[51] Deleuze and Guattari offer a particularly strong reading to this effect in *A Thousand Plateaus*: 'Each of them [the telegraphist and Everard] is propelled toward a rigid segmentarity: he will marry the now-widowed lady, she will marry her fiancé. And yet everything has changed […] She has broken through the wall, she has gotten out of the black holes. She has attained a kind of absolute deterritorialization' (p. 197).

[52] Sarraute, 'Conversation and Sub-Conversation', p. 108.

[53] Freedman, *Professions of Taste*, p. xxv.

efforts to distinguish and maintain the former against the latter may, as the telegraphist's do, come up against the hard limits of her own material constraints.

In the final meeting between the telegraphist and Everard, he arrives in a state of agitation, desperate to retrieve a copy of an old telegram sent by Lady Bradeen. As if to underscore the strictly transactional, anonymous nature of their relation in his eyes, he addresses her without recognition: 'as if she had been some strange young woman at Knightsbridge or Paddington' (*C*: 247). We might expect the telegraphist to wince at this slight. But instead, she gleefully subjects Everard to an impenetrable performance of impersonality, responding to his urgent queries with the impassive, imperturbable, and eminently unhelpful rejoinders of the young woman at Paddington. Due to the special attention she pays to his correspondence, she remembers the exact contents of the old telegram, but this only induces her to further draw out their exchange:

> It came to her there, with her eyes on his face, that she held the whole thing in her hand […] That was positively the reason, again, of her flute-like Paddington tone. "You can't give us anything a little nearer?" Her "little" and her "us" came straight from Paddington […] She managed just the accent they had at Paddington when they stared like dead fish. (*C*: 248)

The telegraphist thus exacts her revenge on Everard. It is a bureaucrat's revenge, a petty weapon of the public servant: the refusal to understand more than exactly what has been said, apply imagination, or respond to expressions of feeling. It is, in other words, the negation of her aesthetic and imaginative attention—and, further still, the reluctance to convert that special attention into an improvement of her job performance, a convenience to her customer.

But after toying with him at length, she writes the relevant cipher for Everard from memory. It releases him from his anxiety and he vanishes. This experience forms a kind of apotheosis for the telegraphist: 'no happiness she had ever known came within miles of it' (*C*: 251). Is this the happiness of gratified affection or gratified resentment? Is she overjoyed to find that her ardent, perceptive attention has yielded a concrete use for Everard, or is she full of vindictive glee from the experience of withholding her knowledge? Far from resolving the tension between aesthetic work and waged labor, this sequence represents the telegraphist's investment in the scene of their confusion. She enjoys helping Everard as much as she relishes stymying him. The telegraphist's closing joy ambivalently combines the pleasure of the working artist and the *jouissance* of the unaccommodating worker, the mingled delights of aesthetic productivity and professional ineffectuality. She

thus represents the constricted agency of the aesthetic worker: whether a good artist or a bad worker, she cannot escape her position in the marketplace of words. All that she can do is modulate her tone.

Chapter 5
Taste, Distaste, and Small Talk in *Quicksand*

Helga Crane, the itinerant heroine of Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*, is difficult to pin down. In this episodic novel, she moves through the Tuskegee-like Southern school Naxos, a Chicago boarding-house, the center of Harlem artistic and intellectual society, European society by way of Copenhagen, and, in the novel's dismal closing chapter, a town in rural Alabama. In each case, Helga ultimately refuses to identify with these settings and their associated communities. She excoriates Naxos, for instance, for its strictly controlled vision of racial 'uplift' premised on hierarchy and conformity, and she mocks a hypocritical streak in her Harlem peers who espouse hatred of white people while emulating the behavior and lifestyle of white, bourgeois society (*Q*: 27). It is common, then, to consider Helga's non-identification with these cultures to indicate a political or ideological stance—albeit one best defined in negative terms like non-conformism or anti-identitarianism.[1] Ross Posnock, for example, describes Helga as an 'antirace race woman'.[2] But in this chapter, I maintain that Helga's primary mode of critique in *Quicksand* is better described by aesthetics than politics: when she perceives ideological shortcomings and blind spots in her surrounding milieus, the focus and expression of her criticism consistently slip past disputes of principle to settle on matters of taste.[3] For instance, in one of the most explicitly systemic critiques that she voices in the novel, Helga compares the school system of Naxos to 'drab' material, 'poorly prepared' and shorn by 'a big knife […] ruthlessly cutting all to a pattern'—an appraisal of Naxos education in which its products appear as ugly, cheaply-made, mass-produced garments (*Q*: 4).

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[1] W. E. B. Du Bois offers one of the most explicit interpretations of Helga as a non-conformist political exemplar in his review of *Quicksand*, proclaiming her to be 'typical of the new, honest, young fighting Negro woman—the one on whom "race" sits negligibly and Life is always first'. More recently, critics have balked at attempts to make Larsen's protagonists into exemplars, but it is still standard practice to identify Helga's dissatisfactions with particular political disputes; the designation of Harlem hypocrisy as the reason for Helga's disenchantment with its society, for example, is suggested by Hazel Carby and Cheryl Wall. Du Bois, *Book Reviews by W. E. B. Du Bois*, p. 114; Hazel Carby, 'The Quicksands of Representation' in *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Cheryl A. Wall, 'Passing for What?', pp. 97-111.

[2] Ross Posnock, *Color and Culture: Black Writers and the Making of the Modern Intellectual* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 85.

[3] Sianne Ngai also argues that Helga's refusals are not straightforwardly political, focusing on Helga's tendency to irritation, which she describes as a 'politically effete' affect. Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 181.

In my analysis, Helga applies her judgments of (dis)taste to two principal phenomena: decorative commodities and small talk. Critics of *Quicksand* have made much of Helga's acute aesthetic sensitivity, particularly with respect to commodities, but her sensitivity to talk has largely passed without comment.[4] Small talk may be considered an aesthetically deficient mode of social conversation: like conversation, it has no immediate instrumental purpose and aims towards more indirect goals of social cohesion and fellow-feeling, but unlike conversation, it is associated with strictly conventional topics, lacking conversation's personal touch and potential for virtuosity. It is in this register of judgment—aesthetic deficiency—that Helga addresses the practices of talk around her in Harlem: just as the garb of Naxos is drab and dull, the talk of Harlem is dull and insipid (*Q*: 17, 51). Her displeasure hovers around but does not address the substance of what is said in Harlem talk, instead remaining in (or retreating to) the hazier domain of aesthetic distinction.

Her preference for this more aloof, less consequential register of judgment contributes to an aura that one critic describes as Helga's 'bourgeois ethos'.[5] It is an 'ethos'—not, say, an identity—because it is not reflected in the material conditions of her upbringing in a Chicago slum or her adult working life. Instead, Helga's 'identification with the bourgeoisie' emanates from 'signifiers of social distinction'—her clothing, her demeanor, her aesthetic sensitivity, her way of speaking— even as she deploys these very tools to disidentify from the bourgeois environments in which she finds herself.[6] The ambiguous success of such attempted disidentifications is dramatized in the novel's immediate reception; George Hutchinson notes Larsen's shock that the Women's Auxiliary of the NAACP, the very women she satirizes in the Harlem section of *Quicksand*, gave a tea in her honor after its publication. For these women, Hutchinson surmises, the mere representation

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[4] For example, Barbara Johnson associates Helga's sensitivity with narcissism and a subjectivity structured 'like a commodity'. Ngai likens Helga to figures like the dandy and the neurasthenic, and Meredith Goldsmith emphasizes Helga's attachment to commodities as a symbol of self-worth. The only explicit analysis I have encountered on Helga's relationship to talk is a brief aside in Nicolas Krumholtz's essay on small talk in *Passing*, discussed at length in the second section of this chapter. Barbara Johnson, 'The Quicksands of the Self: Nella Larsen and Heinz Kohut' in *Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*, ed. Elizabeth Abel, Barbara Christian and Helen Moglen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 252-265, p. 263; Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 180; Meredith Goldsmith, 'Shopping to Pass, Passing to Shop', p. 280; Krumholtz, 'Nella Larsen's Etiquette Lesson'.

[5] Wall, 'Passing for What?', 97. For a summary of unsympathetic reactions to the book based in the perceived frivolity of its subject matter, as well as a sensitive rejoinder, see Mary Helen Washington, *Invented Lives*, pp. 159-167.

[6] Anthony Dawahare, 'The Gold Standard of Racial Identity in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and *Passing*', *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (Spring 2006), pp. 22-41, p. 30; Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 180.

of educated, tasteful, well-spoken Black women in the novel was enough to elicit a congenial reaction, regardless of the 'incisive social critique' which Larsen apparently expected to sting them.[7] This curious case of the Women's Auxiliary misreading an insult, or at any rate failing to feel insulted by it, illustrates how fragile the aesthetic distinction between Helga and the more securely bourgeois Anne Grey, for instance, might be—how, in a particular instance of reading, Helga's (or Larsen's) performative act of distinction-making could fail to register.[8]

The difficulty of 'placing' Helga decisively inside or outside of Harlem society recalls Posnock's description of the Black intellectual as an 'unclassified residuum': an elusive positionality that reproduces signifiers associated with the Black bourgeoisie without quite belonging to it.[9] For Posnock, who reads Helga as one such figure, the Black intellectual appropriates 'the weapon of "distinction"' for their own use, turning it away from its conventional social functions and towards a liberatory one—towards an 'art of living'.[10] But for Helga, the transformation of her series of refusals into an affirmation, her judgments of (dis)taste into an art of living, is a more remote prospect than for Posnock's idealized aesthete-intellectuals. As this chapter will argue, her rejections of the joyless aesthetics of Naxos and the conventional talk of Harlem invoke the insufficiency of these etiquettes for self-expression, but the implicit, desired alternatives—an aesthetic relation to commodities that would be self-fashioning and self-actualizing, a form of social talk that would be pleasurable and self-sustaining—likewise fail to cohere for her, finding themselves blocked in the novel by a disruptive or blank affectivity.

The first section of this chapter analyzes the character and function of Helga's taste for commodities in Naxos and Chicago. It is perhaps surprising that with a novel so circumscribed by accusations of middle-classness, critics have had little recourse to theories of bourgeois subjectivity in readings of *Quicksand*. In this section, I highlight *Quicksand*'s citation of an iconic bourgeois setting—the bourgeois in his salon—and Helga's limited capacity to inhabit its attendant form of aesthetic subjectivity. In the subsequent section of

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[7] George Hutchinson, *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2006), p. 277.

[8] Pamela Caughie argues that the literature of the Harlem Renaissance is full of such intimate, nascent class distinctions because this literature is engaged in the act of class-making itself: 'the "black bourgeoisie" is created through intraracial rivalry around aesthetic markers of class' ('"The best people"', p. 520).

[9] Posnock, *Color and Culture*, p. 86.

[10] Posnock, *Color and Culture*, p. 111.

Quicksand, in which Helga finds herself among peers who share her discernment in styles of dress and furnishing, the object of her distaste shifts to talk: in particular, small talk. The second part of this chapter analyzes Helga's antagonistic relation to small talk in counterpoint with the depiction of the speech genre in Larsen's second novel, *Passing* (1929). As with Helga's taste for objects in Naxos, her dislike of Harlem small talk provides material for her to disidentify with the environment but falls short of illuminating an alternative, more satisfying form of expression. In the third and final section, I turn to Helga's return to Harlem after her spell in Copenhagen—a brief interval in the text before her disastrous marriage and relocation to Alabama. The abject end of Helga's story, in poverty and awaiting almost-certain death in childbirth, is sometimes interpreted as an inevitability: a symbol of the inhospitality of Helga's world to her needs.[11] Dwelling on an exchange of small talk at a party, I explore one alternative, precarious possibility.

1. Decorations and Subjectivity

We meet Helga Crane in a narrative mode that will prove incongruous in the novel as a whole: an intimate, flattering, yet fully external description of Helga's room, then Helga herself. The objects around her are described first:

> Helga Crane sat alone in her room, which at that hour, eight in the evening, was in a soft gloom. Only a single reading lamp, dimmed by a great black and red shade, made a pool of light on the blue Chinese carpet, on the bright covers of the books which she had taken down from their long shelves, on the white pages of the opened one selected, on the shining brass bowl crowded with many-colored nasturtiums beside her on the low table, and on the oriental silk which covered the stool at her slim feet. It was a comfortable room, furnished with rare and intensely personal taste. (*Q*: 1)

In her influential early essay on *Quicksand,* Hazel Carby notes that Helga is represented here 'as an isolated figure but a consumer, a character initially defined through the objects that

[11] Rafael Walker, 'Nella Larsen Reconsidered: The Trouble with Desire in *Quicksand* and *Passing*', *MELUS,* Vol. 41, No. 1, Negotiating Trauma and Affect (Spring 2016), pp. 165-192; Claudia Tate, 'Death and Desire in *Quicksand* by Nella Larsen', *American Literary History*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Summer 1995), pp. 234-260.

surround her'.[12] In addition to its cluster of commodities, there is a pronounced aestheticism to the scene: it insists on Helga's good taste and offers appreciative descriptive detail, which in the following paragraph the narrator applies to her clothing, figure, face, and skin. The consumer and the aesthete thus form the introductory paradigms for Helga's character. The unusually externalized focalization of this opening scene renders Helga an object within the scene as well as its architect, her 'yellow satin' skin another costly cover: as much aesthetic object as aesthete here, she is the compositional center of a constellation of commodities (*Q*: 2).[13]

In these opening pages, taste is introduced as the principal site of friction in Helga's life in Naxos. In her own understanding, it is Helga's excessive or differing taste that causes her failure at the Georgia school. 'All her life,' the narrator relates, 'Helga Crane had loved and longed for nice things. Indeed, it was this craving, this urge for beauty which had helped to bring her into disfavor at Naxos' (*Q*: 6). Helga's curiously inextinguishable taste seems to have a disproportionate destabilizing effect on her colleagues. Despite her efforts to simplify her clothing, the 'hawk eyes' of her supervisors detect 'the subtle difference from their own irreproachably conventional garments'. They find the colors 'queer', the trimmings 'odd', her 'faultless, slim' shoes make them 'uncomfortable', and her 'small, plain' hats strike them as 'indecent'(*Q*: 18). The mismatch between the narrator's exculpating characterizations—Helga's 'faultless', 'plain' garments—and the responses they elicit underscores the severity of Naxos standards, but it also emphasizes Helga's taste as a perceptible but unlocalized quality, detectible but elusive to description. Giorgio Agamben, in his monograph on taste, characterizes the 'problem of taste' in a Kantian vein as that of '"another knowledge" (a knowledge that cannot account for its judgments but, rather, enjoys them ; or, in the words of Montesquieu, "the quick and exquisite application of rules that we

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[12] Carby, 'The Quicksands of Representation', 170. Keguro Macharia suggests that the orientalist motifs in this opening description embed Helga within immigrant discourse and remove her from the organic aesthetics of Black nativism. From this perspective, we might also call on Anne Cheng's concept of ornamentalism to interpret this scene: as an inquiry into the figure of the 'yellow woman', Cheng's ornamentalism theorizes 'the racialized woman who is assiduously assembled', who blurs the boundaries between human, synthetic art, and commodity. Keguro Macharia, 'Queering Helga Crane: Black Nativism in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 57, No. 2 (Summer 2011), pp. 254-275, p. 261; Anne Cheng, *Ornamentalism: A Feminist Theory for the Yellow Woman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 7.

[13] 'For slippers and pocket watches, thermometers and egg-cups, cutlery and umbrellas [the bourgeoisie] tries to get covers and cases.' Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. by Harry Zohn (London: Verso, 1983), p. 46.

do not even know")'.[14] In the ascetic, conformist, and suspicious setting of Naxos, the rules that Helga transgresses are no more explicit, but the ensuing judgments of taste are characterized by discomfort and dislike rather than enjoyment. Reflecting on her ill-fated engagement with the socially well-connected and successfully conformist James Vayle, Helga concedes that she is 'in a queer indefinite way, a disturbing factor' (*Q*: 7).[15]

But the narrator's assimilation of 'beauty' (Helga's urge for beauty) to 'nice things' (Helga had always longed for nice things) makes it clear that Helga's taste lacks the disinterestedness that defines Kant's aesthetics. Helga has the sensitivity and susceptibility to atmosphere that we tend to attribute to the aesthete, but the aesthetic milieu in which she is introduced is that of a decorated room, in which the sources of beauty are furnishings and clothing. Commodities, then, are the medium through which we are introduced to her 'urge for beauty', which raises the question of the significance and use of Helga's taste. Walter Benjamin cynically observed that the importance of a customer's taste increases as his expertise, his familiarity with the uses of the relevant object, declines, rendering bourgeois taste a mere symptom of alienation.[16] Agamben goes so far as to posit the commodity form as the antithesis and counterpart of aesthetics:

> Where aesthetics takes as its object a knowledge that is not known, political economy takes as its object a pleasure that is not enjoyed […] are not Marx's teachings but the demonstration (placing the value-form and fetish-character of the commodity at the centre of his analyses in the first chapter of *Capital* [1867]) that this discipline is founded not so much on use value (on utility, an enjoyed pleasure) as it is on exchange value, which is to say, on that which can neither be enjoyed nor grasped in the object—a pleasure that one cannot have?[17]

This neat theorization leaves little room, though, for the evident pleasure that the narrator clearly intends to evoke with her lingering description of Helga's elegant room—filled as it is with lustrous, decorative objects. To explain this, I turn to Adorno's formulation of the *intérieur* in *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic* (1933): the space that rehabilitates

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[14] Giorgio Agamben, *Taste*, trans. by Cooper Francis (London: Seagull Books, 2017), p. 6.

[15] Judith Butler tracks usages of the word 'queer' in Larsen's later novel, *Passing,* and finds that it tends to accompany a 'betraying [of] what ought to remain concealed' and 'something short of proper conversation, passable prose'. I return to this in the following section. Judith Butler, 'Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen's Psychoanalytic Challenge' from *Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*, ed. by Elizabeth Abel, Barbara Christian, and Helene Moglen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 266-284, p. 274.

[16] Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, p. 105.

[17] Agamben, *Taste*, p. 66.

alienated objects and bridges the gap between the intangibility and characterlessness that typifies the commodity form and the practical application of taste.

The opening description of Helga's room is almost an exact match to Adorno's description of the *intérieur*: the bourgeois apartment artificially sealed off from the circulation of labor and capital in the city, representing the externalized counterpart to bourgeois subjectivity. He develops the concept in his book-length critique of Kierkegaard, from whose 'Diary of a Seducer' (1843) the following examples are drawn:

> The contents of the *intérieur* are mere decoration, alienated from the purposes they represent, deprived of their own use-value, engendered solely by the isolated apartment that is created in the first place by their juxtaposition. The 'lamp shaped like a flower'; the dream orient, fit together out of a cut paper lampshade hung over its crown and a rug made of osier; the room an officer's cabin, full of precious decorations greedily collected across the seas—the complete *fata morgana* of decadent ornaments receives its meaning not from the material of which they are made, but from the *intérieur* that unifies the imposture of things in the form of a still life […] The self is overwhelmed in its own domain by commodities and their historical essence. Their illusory quality is historically-economically produced by the alienation of the thing from use-value. But in the *intérieur* things do not remain alien. It draws meaning out of them. Foreignness transforms itself from alienated things into expression; mute things speak as 'symbols'. The ordering of things in the apartment is called arrangement.[18]

From the 'dream orient' conjured by a Chinese carpet and 'oriental silk' to the painterly chiaroscuro of her reading lamp, Helga's room strongly resembles the space that Adorno describes. This places her firmly within a recognizable style of bourgeois, would-be cosmopolitan decor, once again pressurizing the intangible quality that transforms the conventional furnishings into a scene of 'rare and intensely personal taste' (*Q*: 1). If as Henriette Steiner suggests, the alienated commodity recalls the Freudian uncanny, then in Adorno's conception the *intérieur* naturalizes objects back into the homelike.[19] It draws another meaning from commodities, neither the pragmatic meaning of use-value nor the abstract and empty meaning of exchange value, but some kind of gestalt: through 'arrangement', unification, composition, this other 'expression' is formed. In fact, the *intérieur* consists in this very composition, since the sealed apartment is 'created' by the juxtaposition of objects.

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[18] Theodor W. Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), pp. 43-4.

[19] Henriette Steiner, 'On the Unhomely Home: Porous and Permeable Interiors from Kierkegaard to Adorno', *Interiors*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2010), pp. 133-148, p. 140.

In this light, our readings of the opening pages may shift. Taking Adorno's critique as a starting point, Helga's 'oriental' furnishings undergo the *intérieur*'s curious naturalization: 'foreignness transforms itself'. Therein Helga, figured as a particularly glistening object within the tableau, may find her alienness provisionally naturalized as well. In a manner typical of the *intérieur*, Helga's room is a sealed domain, an 'oasis': 'This was her rest, her intentional isolation for a short while in the evening, this little time in her own attractive room with her own books. To the rapping of other teachers […] at that hour Helga Crane never opened her door'(*Q*: 1). Mirroring the parallelism Adorno notes between the *intérieur* and the ethos of 'inwardness' that imagines the spirit as a private reflective domain, 'the refuge of the subject as soon as it is overwhelmed by objectivity', Helga retreats to her room to recover from the 'strenuous rigidity of conduct' and depersonalized aesthetics that her environment demands (*Q*: 1).[20] But although these opening pages of *Quicksand* insistently evoke the luxurious, curated boundedness of Helga's room and color it with a light, aloof rendering of her aspect and expressions, the novel in fact begins at the moment when the spell of the *intérieur* has begun to falter: the walls have been breached. 'Ever since her arrival in Naxos she had striven to keep these ends of the days from the intrusion of irritating thoughts and worries. Usually she was successful. But not this evening.' Her chosen book—a nested refuge within the physical one, selected for the purposes of 'complete mental relaxation'—'could not charm her'(*Q*: 2-3).

On this evening, Helga's sanctuary is invaded by a memory of talk. Previously that day, the teachers and students of Naxos were obliged to listen to the speech of a racist preacher, who expressed his backhanded approval of Naxos in the register of taste:

> And he had said that if all Negroes would only take a leaf out of the book of Naxos and conduct themselves in the manner of the Naxos products, there would be no race problem, because Naxos Negroes knew what was expected of them. They had good sense and they had good taste. They knew enough to stay in their places and that, said the preacher, showed good taste. (*Q*: 3)

Good taste, in the preacher's formulation, is a euphemism for obedient subservience to white supremacy. This event contravenes Cheryl Wall's suggestion that Naxos's disapproval of Helga's clothing is an epiphenomenon of or even a distraction from the root causes of her alienation, the 'real struggle' of living within restrictive expectation of Black womanhood.[21] Instead, what the preacher's speech crystallizes—and what gives it the power to invade

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[20] Adorno, *Kierkegaard*, p. 38.

[21] Wall, 'Passing for What?', p. 98.

Helga's meticulously composed interior—is that taste is itself a discourse in which politics are expressed and enacted. At the same time, the preacher's transposition of a political agenda to the language of etiquette anticipates the action of small talk that forms the topic of the next section: a kind of talk that trivializes and conventionalizes its topic, regardless of content. Instead of responding directly to the sinister subtext of the preacher's words, Helga's response mirrors his trivializations: her anger is first introduced by the narrator in the register of 'petulance', then focalized by Helga as 'irritating', 'annoying', and indeed, 'distasteful' (*Q*: 2). The narration of this passage diverts Helga's displeasure around the preacher's speech and onto surrounding, trivial particulars, emphasizing her exasperation that the speech interrupted her plans for the 'sweet pleasure of a bath' and lingering with seemingly equal disgust on the 'heavy hot meal' that preceded the incident (*Q*: 2). Helga's discontent thus hovers in the register of (dis)taste, with its air of elective rather than requisite dissent.

But the subsequent passage of text registers a different, unarticulated reaction. The narration abruptly retreats once again to an external perspective as Helga sits motionless, unexplained expressions passing over her face, apparently for hours. Finally, she utters the first spoken words of the novel: the striking declaration, 'No, forever!' (*Q*: 3) She suddenly rises, floods the room with electric light, and throws the contents of her desk on the floor around the wastepaper basket. This exclamation and disarranging action—the destruction of the *intérieur*—is simultaneous, perhaps identical, with her decision to leave Naxos. Thus, as much as the *intérieur* indicates a structure of subjectivity and an aesthetic relation to commodities, it is also revealed to be a strategy for Helga Crane, and its dissolution marks the point at which the strategy becomes untenable: when Naxos's regulation of taste cannot be kept outside. What happens to a subjectivity of carefully arranged inwardness when it moves on to another aesthetic strategy? On the point of her departure, Helga's colleague Margaret says to her, 'I do wish you'd stay […] We need a few decorations to brighten up our sad lives' (*Q*: 14). One scholar points to this comment as a sign of the objectification to which Helga is subjected throughout the novel.[22] Indeed, Helga's identification with a decoration repeats in the later Denmark episode, in which Helga's aestheticization is explicitly racialized and blatantly leveraged by her aunt and uncle for social capital (*Q*: 73). But in the Naxos context, Margaret's wistful appeal has already missed the mark: the *intérieur* has been disassembled, its decorations are disjointed, and Helga is 'in love with the

[22] Walker, 'Nella Larsen Reconsidered', p. 170.

piquancy of leaving'(*Q*: 15). If the 'mere decorations' of the *intérieur* get their meaning from their arrangement, what happens to a decoration disarranged? Far from reifying Helga, Margaret's comment poses her as an inscrutable or as-yet-undefined kind of excess: a decoration that will not stay put has become alienated from even its own frivolous function.

'A decoration that will not stay put' is a tempting formulation for the female dandy —and as Helga takes her sophisticated taste, sardonic wit, and aversion to conformity to an urban setting, the formulation beckons. But as Helga is displaced from Naxos to Chicago, her aesthetic excess to use and nature—the archetypal domain of the ornamental—is given a new, disturbing form. Her plan for Chicago is to seek help from her white Uncle Peter, who has shown her qualified kindness in the past. After being rebuffed by Uncle Peter's new wife, who insists that he is not her uncle, Helga inhabits the perspective of her white family to see herself as 'an obscene sore in all their lives, at all costs to be hidden' (*Q*: 29). The sore, a figuration Sianne Ngai marks as 'strangely cutaneous', mars and obtrudes from the surface of white skin, demanding to be hidden as much as the decoration demands to be displayed.[23] As a pathologized element uselessly and superficially appended to a functioning body, the figure of the sore enters into tense circulation with the alienated decoration. As Barbara Johnson observes, 'What luxury and garbage have in common is that each is a form of excess with respect to an economy of use or need.'[24] Although Helga attempts to recover her composure in dandiacal acts of luxury, these abject figures—the sore, the piece of garbage—jar and undermine her would-be pleasures. Thus I am reluctant to adopt the reading of the Chicago episode of *Quicksand* as *flânerie,* a view most explicitly articulated in Jeanne Scheper's 2008 article 'The New Negro Flâneuse in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*'. Reading *Quicksand* as an initiatory example of 'black female *flânerie*', Scheper emphasizes the 'aimless strolling' that occupies Helga when she first arrives in Chicago and cites her purchasing of 'a book and a tapestry purse' in lieu of food as an example of a 'small indulgenc[e] in leisure'.[25] Another scholar similarly describes these two features, strolling and a habit of luxury in the absence of means, as circumscribing an 'economy of excess' that Helga apparently occupies 'in true Baudelairean fashion'.[26] But these excesses are related in

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[23] Ngai, *Ugly Feelings,* p. 185.

[24] Johnson, 'The Quicksands of the Self', p. 263.

[25] Jeanne Scheper, 'The New Negro Flâneuse in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*', *African American Review*, Vol. 42, No ¾ (Fall-Winter 2008), pp. 679-695, p. 687.

[26] Mary Esteve, 'Nella Larsen's "Moving Mosaic"', *American Literary History*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Summer 7), pp. 268-286, p. 278.

a strikingly perfunctory narration: a formal curtness that undercuts the languorous, pleasure-first sensibility in which Helga seems to be taking part.

Arriving in Chicago, Helga plans, 'I'll get a taxi to take me out, bag and baggage, then I'll have a hot bath and a really good meal, peep into the shops—mustn't buy anything —and then for Uncle Peter.' A taxi, a hot bath, a culinary indulgence, a bout of window-shopping: commitment to measured but relished pleasures marks every step of the way except the last. But the narrator is not inclined to linger with Helga, choosing instead to redact the entire course of the day: 'It was late, very late, almost evening, when finally Helga turned her steps northward, in the direction of Uncle Peter's home. She had put it off for as long as she could, for she detested her errand'(*Q*: 27). The harsh rejection she meets there from Mrs. Nilssen vindicates her dread. A second rejection, this time from the library staff who dismiss her due to lack of qualifications, inaugurates another spell of leisurely walking; in a contradiction reminiscent of Proust, Helga exclaims aloud her intention to 'go straight back' to the employment office at the Young Women's Christian Association, then proceeds to spend 'hours in aimless strolling'. Arriving after the office has closed, she resolves to return first thing in the morning, but instead spends three days in 'leisure […] walks, the lake, the shops and streets with their gay colors' (*Q*: 32). Once again, the narrator cursorily summarizes these outings in the past tense, having already skipped to the moment when Helga finally arrives in the employment office (where she will once again be unsuccessful). The *flâneur* suspends directional thinking in a geography of drift—but seen from the perspective of plot, drift is wasted time: evasion, avoidance, stalling. In Chicago, the narrator explicitly frames Helga's drift in this latter sense: in each case, her wanderings are diagnosed as 'putting off' a 'hated' or 'detested' moment(*Q*: 27, 32).

Towards Helga's extravagant purchases (the book and tapestry purse), the narrator displays the same parsimony, briefly describing the items as things '[Helga] wanted, but did not need and certainly could not afford.' In sharp contrast to the opening scene, there is no description of the book's 'bright cover', 'white pages', or amusing subject matter, nor of the vivid colors in which the purse is covered. Instead, these commodities are strictly and simply rendered as excessive to need and means. Meredith Goldsmith reads these expenditures as Helga's attempt to 'masquerade as a woman of means': in this performance, she can 'imaginatively possess the sense of history she lacks' and compensate for her rejection by her white family (*Q*: 32).[27] In a similar vein, Johnson diagnoses Helga's

[27] Goldsmith, 'Shopping to Pass, Passing to Shop', p. 270.

prioritization of goods over food as a 'narcissistic hunger' in which affirmation of the self's value is experienced as a need that takes precedence over physical sustenance.[28] Such readings, though plausible in the broader context of Helga's character, require a tremendous extrapolation from the minimal and retroactive account of these purchases given in the text, which omits the experience entirely to relate only the regret Helga feels in its aftermath. Thus the psychology that underpins Helga's shopping and walking in Chicago is of less interest to me than the narrator's apparent indifference to it, which produces these acts of leisure as blanks in between critical scenes: pleasures which are not enjoyed.

Georg Simmel influentially claimed that urban life under a money economy is characterized by the reduction of qualities to quantities, the homogenizing function that Marx attributes to exchange value.[29] In Adorno's formulation, the anonymity and alienation within public life is the structural counterpart to the intimate, textural, homelike composition of the bourgeois *intérieur*: it is what the *intérieur* is designed to keep out. But the *flâneur*, according to Benjamin, has the talent of recovering the qualitative, sensuous particularity of the city without in any way changing or exiting its economy: the ability to 'turn a boulevard into an *intérieur*', to *enjoy* exchange value.[30] 'To him,' Benjamin continues, 'the shiny, enamelled signs of business are at least as good a wall ornament as an oil painting is to a bourgeois in his salon.'[31] Helga is neither the bourgeois in his salon nor the *flâneur* on his boulevard: if in Naxos the narrator introduces Helga within a finely rendered apartment that has been invaded and overturned by the preacher's poisonous discourse of taste, in Chicago she arrives in a hasty, descriptively unadorned cityscape. Her *intérieur* is discomposed, her *flânerie* truncated; her attempts in Chicago to reassemble an aesthetic subjectivity through a relation to commodities is formally blocked by the narration.

2. Small Talk, Race Talk

In Harlem, Helga's taste is finally fed: no more of Naxos's drab uniforms, nor the 'thick cups' and 'queer dark silver' of the Chicago YWCA (*Q*: 31). Here, she lives with the perfectly elegant and profusely moneyed Anne Grey, and 'Anne's home was in complete

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[28] Johnson, 'The Quicksands of the Self', p. 263.

[29] Georg Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' in *The Blackwell City Reader*, ed. by Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 11-19, p. 12.

[30] Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, p. 37.

[31] Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, p. 37.

accord with what she designated her "aesthetic sense"' (*Q*: 44). The narrator provides another list of furnishings:

> Bed with long, tapering posts […] bonneted old highboys, tables that might be by Duncan Phyle, rare spindle-legged chairs […] These historic things mingled harmoniously and comfortably with brass-bound Chinese tea-chests, luxurious deep chairs and davenports, tiny tables of gay color, a lacquered jade-green settee with gleaming black satin cushions, lustrous Eastern rugs, ancient copper, Japanese prints […] (*Q*: 44)

The list goes on. In this interior, Helga is not described as an ornament arranged among the other beautiful things. Anne's home instead forms the hub from which Helga samples the 'panorama' of Harlem in a montage of parties, theaters, shops, and teeming streets (*Q*: 45). And in this more sociable arena, another source of discontent starts to emerge around which Helga begins to assert her difference: the style and rhythm of talk in Helga's surrounding society.

This is not the usual diagnosis for Helga's dissatisfaction with Harlem. It is typically attributed to one of two factors: one political, one libidinal. The first is her disillusionment with Anne Grey and the bourgeois racial politics she represents; Helga's initial amusement at Anne Grey's simultaneous hatred of white people and emulation of white society does indeed transform into 'great irksomeness', and Anne's abhorrence of race mixing particularly grates on Helga, who is concealing her biracial background (*Q*: 49). The second is Helga's unexpected encounter with Dr. Anderson, the principal of Naxos to whom she unceremoniously handed her resignation in the story's previous act; it is a commonly held viewpoint that Helga is a repressed subject who flees from the objects of desire, of whom Dr. Anderson is taken to be the foremost.[32] But neither of these explanations quite align with the timing and direction of Helga's unhappiness: her discontent had already begun to rise before her meeting with Dr. Anderson, extending beyond Anne to encompass the whole of her social circle—including other figures (Audrey Denney and Helen Tavenor, in particular, whom the next section discusses in more detail) whose politics and socialities could offer Helga more breathing room.

The explicit object of Helga's displeasure is an ambient, inescapable milieu of talk: what she calls the 'constant prattling' about race (*Q*: 49). Repeatedly, Helga's dissatisfaction

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[32] For example, Deborah McDowell, Introduction to *Quicksand* and *Passing* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986); Claudia Tate, 'Desire and Death in *Quicksand,* by Nella Larsen'; Kimberly Monda, 'Self-Delusion and Self-Sacrifice in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*', *African American Review,* Vol. 31, No. 1 (Spring 1997), pp. 23-9; Gregory J. Hampton, 'Beauty and the Exotic: Writing Black Bodies in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*', *CLA Journal,* Vol. 50, No. 2 (December 2006), pp. 162-73.

with Harlem is directed at and aggravated by race talk. When she later begins to feel unhappy in Copenhagen and wonders whether she ought to have stayed in Harlem, she once again designates 'prattle' about race—here referred to as 'chatter'—as the site of her frustration with her life there: 'Yes, if I hadn't come away I'd be stuck in Harlem […] Chattering about the race problem' (*Q*: 81). In an account of one Harlem salon, the reader receives a summary of how this 'chatter' is composed:

> The aimless talk glanced from John Wellinger's lawsuit for discrimination because of race against a downtown restaurant and the advantages of living in Europe, especially France, to the significance, if any, of the Garvey movement. Then it sped to a favorite Negro dancer who had just then secured a foothold on the stage of a current white musical comedy, then on to other shows, to a new book touching on Negroes […] Then back again to racial discrimination. Why, Helga wondered, with unreasoning exasperation, didn't they find something else to talk of? (*Q*: 51-2)

Glancing, speeding, returning: like the dancer who briefly occupies it, this talk is light and mobile, even flighty, giving the impression of both choreography and spontaneity. The chosen topics are captured in precarious or fleeting positions that match the style of talk: the dancer who has just 'secured a foothold' before the conversation whirls away, the book that 'touches' on Negroes. In the swift succession of ideas, personified yet curiously mindless, one can perceive a certain oblique, restless logic. The opening topic of racial discrimination in downtown New York emphasizes the hostility of the wider city to Black people and the stark geographic limitations to the life Harlem makes possible; looking to Europe then suggests or shadows an impulse towards escape; turning to Garvey redirects that impulse, hinting at an awareness of European racism and the pitfalls of Eurocentrism. The conversation then runs out of geographic escape routes and circles to cultural ones with the success of emerging Black artists in New York. That this ultimately leads back to racial discrimination again, enclosing the wanderings of conversation in that stark reality, perhaps starts to limn the source of Helga's frustrations. The trajectory of talk, repelled from Harlem to Europe and drawn back to Harlem again, foreshadows her own literal movements, but where Helga tends to believe her egresses will radically transform her life, here they are part of a fluid but stable equilibrium. The conversation's inevitable return to New York and its racial geography reflects the slightness, even weakness, of its escapist impulses, even as the abuse that prompts them continues to orient the flow of talk.

This ambient quality, this dynamic equilibrium, is perhaps what justifies Helga's diminutive terms for this kind of talk—'prattle' and chatter'—and her avoidance of descriptions like 'discussion' or 'debate' that might signify more focused or intense

exchanges. But outside of the salon setting, even the novel's more serious talkers are not treated with much reverence; Anne's passion for uplift politics and hatred of white people are characterized coolly as 'slogans' and 'harangues' (*Q*: 48, 52). Thus Anne's polemics, like the less heated salon conversations, are rendered as a predictable collage of familiar topics and phrases that repeat without producing reflection or insight. In this they resemble the speeches of another of the novel's serious talkers, 'race woman' Mrs. Hayes-Rore, who hires Helga in Chicago to correct and compile her words. Reading over her speeches, Helga concludes:

> Ideas; phrases, and even whole sentences and paragraphs were lifted bodily from previous orations and published works of Wendell Phillips, Frederick Douglas, Booker T. Washington, and other doctors of the races ills. For variety Mrs. Hayes-Rore had seasoned hers with a peppery dash of Du Bois and a few vinegary statements of her own. Aside from these it was, Helga reflected, the same old thing. (*Q*: 38)

Phillips, Douglas, Washington, and Du Bois; discrimination lawsuit, race in Europe, Garvey, Negro art. The rote, stagnant feeling that Larsen gives to these assemblies hollows them of their ostensible importance. Helga's dismissal of Anne and Mrs. Hayes-Rore's politics for the most part does not occur on political grounds: the failures she identifies in them are not what we might think of as political failures—of efficacy, integrity, ambition, or inclusiveness—but primarily formal and aesthetic ones of unity, originality, and pleasurability. She judges her companions' political speech by the standards of party conversation, and finds it lacking. This context drift might reflect a shallowness in Helga or in her interlocutors; or it might subtly register the uneasy continuity between purposeful speech, speech that is associated with direct action and thus with political urgency, and talk that aims to fill time for the purposes of pleasure, sociability, performance, social maneuvering, social regulation, and other indirect effects.

In this sense, even the 'big' topics of *Quicksand*'s conversations resemble Nicolas Krumholtz's analysis of small talk in Larsen's second novel, *Passing*. Small talk, according to Krumholtz, is a form of conversational etiquette with particular qualities and functions that distinguish it from a flashier salon discourse, gossip. Whereas gossip 'craves scandal and exposes secrets', small talk tends towards 'impersonal topics' and gives the impression of neutrality.[33] In Chapter 2, I discussed Ross Chambers's formulation of gossip as a form of display language, showing off the 'gift' of making common sense brilliant; in contrast, small

[33] Krumholtz, 'Nella Larsen's Etiquette Lesson', p. 4.

talk is generic, depersonalized, and forgettable.[34] If the gifted gossip forms the dazzling center of a linguistic and social system, the aptitude for small talk might be linked to unglamorous, lower-status forms of upkeep. Krumholtz likens it to 'housekeeping', but it also resembles the clerical work of Melville's 'Sub-Sub Librarian' with which Ngai compares Helga's work for Mrs. Hayes-Rore, or the labor of the telegraphist of *In the Cage*: minor bureaucratic workers who process and compile the language of others.[35] In a short essay on small talk, Zhang characterizes the form as 'endless repetitions of what has already been said' and cites an eighteenth-century Parliamentarian who describes 'chit-chat, or smalltalk' as 'a sort of middling conversation, neither silly nor edifying'—again recalling Ngai's suggestion that *Quicksand* 'demotes' Helga from 'intellectual' to 'clerical worker with discriminating tastes'.[36]

But Helga's constant irritation with this assembly of talk makes her a disgruntled worker, and as we will see, the unpredictable whorls of feeling and composure that pass through her in conversation make her incapable of keeping talk properly small. On this point she contrasts sharply with Larsen's other heroines, Irene and Clare of the later novel *Passing*. If the middling-ness of the conversations that surround Helga in Harlem is part of what irks her—the simultaneity of their self-seriousness with superficiality and unoriginality—the achievement of just this conversational quality makes Clare an object of admiration for Irene. Krumholtz analyzes a tense early scene in the novel between Clare, the protagonist Irene, and a third character, Gertrude: all three are Black women with the ability to pass as white who have different relationships to their racial identity. Irene is a prominent member of Harlem's Black bourgeoisie but occasionally passes as white as a social convenience, Gertrude is married to a white man who knows she is Black, and Clare passes as white in her marriage and (until she runs into Irene at the start of the novel) the rest of her life. Lines are swiftly drawn between Irene and the other two when Clare and Gertrude express horror at the possibility of having dark-skinned children. Perceiving the rising tension, Clare begins to talk:

> It was the most brilliant exhibition of conversational weightlifting that Irene had ever seen. Her words swept over them in charming well-modulated streams. Her laughs tinkled and pealed. Her little stories sparkled.

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[34] Ross Chambers, 'Gossip in the Novel', p. 231.

[35] Krumholtz, 'Nella Larsen's Etiquette Lesson', p. 7; Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 176.

[36] Dora Zhang, 'Small Talk', *The Point Magazine*, Issue 5 (May 2013), <https://thepointmag.com/issue/issue-5/> [Accessed 8 November 2021]; Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 175.

> Irene contributed a bare 'Yes' or 'No' here and there. Gertrude, a 'You don't say!' less frequently.
>
> For a while the illusion of general conversation was nearly perfect. Irene felt her resentment changing gradually to a silent, somewhat grudging admiration.
>
> Clare talked on, her voice, her gestures colouring all she said of wartime in France, of after-the-wartime in Germany, of the excitement at the time of the general strike in England, of dressmaker's openings in Paris, of the new gaiety of Budapest. (*P*: 170)

Producing small talk in these freighted circumstances comes down to the deft manipulation of proportions, the difficulty of which is perhaps registered in the awkward mixed metaphors that attempt to describe it: Clare's 'weightlifting' magically redistributes monologue into conversation, diminishes politics to anecdote, and converts weights to streams. As Krumholtz notes, Clare's chosen subjects do not seem to suit the effect she achieves of smooth, 'little', and uncontroversial speech. 'Under Clare's subtle tone,' Krumholtz observes, 'the social upheavals brought to Europe during WWI diminish in scale. The leveling effect of her talk turns these subjects into uncontroversial fare for a polite reunion'.[37] It is unsurprising that Irene, who above all hates messy scenes and public confrontations, witnesses this conversational feat with admiration. On multiple occasions in *Passing*, Irene admires her own ability to maintain an air of inconsequence when she is secretly feeling rage or fear.

But close attention to *Passing* reveals that Irene's self-regulation and smooth social facility veil her susceptibility to odd displacements of judgement in the course of conversation. The scene in Clare's rooms is abruptly pressurized by the return of her husband, John Bellew, which forces all three women to pass or risk outing Clare. When Bellew starts to spew racist hate in a careless, conversational mode, Irene and Gertrude are obliged to appear unmoved. While marveling at Clare's and her own ability to perform, Irene concludes that Gertrude is undisturbed by Bellew's words:

> It was, Irene thought, unbelievable and astonishing that four people could sit so unruffled, so ostensibly friendly, while they were in reality seething with anger, mortification, shame. But no, on second thought she was forced to amend her opinion. John Bellew, most certainly, was as undisturbed within as without. So, perhaps, was Gertrude Marin. At least she hadn't the mortification and shame that Clare Kendry must be feeling, or, in such full measure, the rage and rebellion that she, Irene, was repressing. (*P*: 174)

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[37] Krumholtz, 'Nella Larsen's Etiquette Lesson', p. 8.

Miriam Thaggert notes that at the start of the scene, Irene judges Gertrude's appearance harshly, thus implicitly aligning herself with the elegant Clare against the 'fashion victim'.[38] In Thaggert's reading, Gertrude's greatest transgression is that against Clare and Irene's polished performances, with her cheap stockings and clumsy manicure, 'she is a shade too obvious, a shade too *readable*'.[39] Yet despite her sharp eye for taste, Irene completely fails to read Gertrude. Her assumption that she, Irene, would feel Bellew's racial hatred more acutely than Gertrude is immediately overturned when the two women leave together: it is Gertrude, not Irene, who bursts out, 'Gee! Wasn't it awful? For a minute I was so mad I could have slapped him' (*P*: 175). But Irene makes no note of this, no revision to her earlier judgment, wordlessly amending her private reflections on the scene to cast Gertrude as a lesser victim. This is not the only inconsistency she displays that goes unaddressed. During the fraught conversation with Clare and her husband, and against her own claim to a self-righteous rage beyond what she imagines Gertrude could feel, Irene bafflingly remarks to herself that 'under other conditions she might have liked' virulent racist John Bellew—showing herself to be capable of both a stubbornly prejudicial and a strangely pliable disposition in the course of a single conversation (*P*: 173).

Butler notes that the word 'queer' in *Passing* stands in for multiple forms of deviancy, employed by Irene to euphemistically identify something she views as a threat or a problem: the 'queer' ideas her sons are picking up at school ('D'you mean about sex?' Brian forces her to clarify) and the 'queer, unhappy restlessness' that drives Brian's desire to move to Brazil.[40] Another valence of 'queer' in *Passing*, Butler observes, is 'something short of proper conversation, passable prose'.[41] This usage is targeted at Gertrude, who responds to Bellew's anti-Black tirade with 'a queer little suppressed sound' (*P*: 172). Irene's refusal or inability to interpret Gertrude's queer sound as a sign of feeling gives credence to Krumholtz's intriguing suggestion that Irene's 'oversights' might be understood as 'an impairment of vision occasioned by her commitment to small talk.'[42] Rafael Walker points to Gertrude's interracial marriage as a significant intermediary between the extremes represented by Irene and Clare. Of her omission in the 2021 film *Passing*, he writes:

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[38] Miriam Thaggert, 'Racial Etiquette: Nella Larsen's *Passing* and the *Rhinelander* Case', *Meridians,* Vol. 5, No. 2 (2005), pp. 1-29, p. 10.

[39] Thaggert, 'Racial Etiquette', p. 11.

[40] Butler, 'Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen's Psychoanalytic Challenge', p. 274.

[41] Butler, 'Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen's Psychoanalytic Challenge', p. 274.

[42] Krumholtz, 'Nella Larsen's Etiquette Lesson', p. 6.

> The exclusion of Gertrude from the film, while seemingly negligible as she is a minor character, constitutes a major loss, for it conduces to a simplistic vision of biracial and interracial possibilities in the 1920s, a vision almost as simplistic as the racial binarism against which both Larsen and [director] Hall position themselves.[43]

Omitting Gertrude and the 'biracial and interracial possibilities' she represents also omits what Gertrude reveals about Irene: Irene's refusal to perceive her as such. Her failure to interpret Gertrude's sign of solidarity, which falls short of proper conversation, mirrors her general disinterest in reading Gertrude in any way that is not a dismissal, whether as a class-marked fashion victim or as a traitor to the race. Crossed wires of race and class thus muffle Gertrude's voluntary and involuntary expressions, even while her physical presence looms 'broad' and 'stout' (*P*: 167).

Indeed, in Krumholtz's reading, small talk is an explicitly classed form of speech: a technique of 'distancing' the speaker from their own utterances, in this case through its predictability and conventionality, which Bourdieu attributes to bourgeois language.[44] But it is also bound up in the complex confluence of class and racialized performance for *Passing*'s middle-class heroines. He contends that Irene and Clare's use of small talk in their first meeting on the hotel roof allows them to 'pass for bourgeois' as part of effective racial passing, the achievement of bourgeoisness thus neutralizing the suspicion that they are passing for white.[45] Analyzing the same scene, Caughie argues that Irene's oversight on the roof of the Drayton—her failure to recognize Clare—is due to the fact that she, Irene, is 'passing as bourgeois', implying that for Irene a certain 'whitening' of vision follows from the classed performance of racial passing.[46] Caughie's claim, that Irene's own ability to perceive and recognize race is warped by her practices of class as well as racial passing, echoes Krumholtz's suggestion that Irene's commitment to small talk impairs her vision. Meanwhile, Goldsmith observes that while Gertrude successfully passes as white in the conversation with Bellew, 'her class passing is in doubt'.[47] Gertrude thus falls into the cracks of Irene's incoherent assembly of racial transgression and class deference: Irene's own act of passing 'whitens' Gertrude and disqualifies her for racial solidarity, while Gertrude's classed

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[43] Rafael Walker, 'Passing into Film: Rebecca Hall's Adaptation of Nella Larsen's *Passing*', *Modernism/modernity,* Vol. 6, Cycle 10 (November 2021), <https://modernismmodernity.org/forums/posts/walker-passing-film-hall-adaptation-larsen> [Accessed 21 November 2021].

[44] Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, p. 85.

[45] Krumholtz, 'Nella Larsen's Etiquette Lesson', p. 5.

[46] Caughie, '"The best people"', p. 528.

[47] Goldsmith, 'Shopping to Pass, Passing to Shop', p. 280.

failures of speech and dress render her sub-intelligible, effectively erasing her genuine interracial existence from the realm of 'passable prose'. That Helga Crane finds small talk intolerable might reflect an awareness of how it stigmatizes and excludes miscegenation, and it might also indicate her own more liminal position with respect to the Harlem bourgeoisie.

Numerous 'oversights' thus texture the opening exchanges of *Passing*: subtle deformations of representation that misalign Irene's convictions and judgments from scene to scene. By the end of the novel, Clare's influence has wrenched these inconsistencies into gaping holes. As Karen Roffman argues, the louder and less plausible Irene's unknowns become, the more the reader comes to realize that 'the question of what must be excluded from Irene's consciousness' is the key to understanding the belief system that drives her choices.[48] While *Quicksand* is similarly patterned with 'expressive gaps and discontinuities', I want to argue that they have a fundamentally different character and function from the discontinuities of *Passing*.[49] We can understand the distinctions between the two formal strategies through the protagonists' differing relations to feeling in talk. Unlike Irene, Helga is obviously susceptible to feeling in conversation, often careening from poise to agitation and back again in the course of a single interaction. In the first extended conversation of the novel, in which she gives her notice to Dr. Anderson, a dizzying series of feelings pass over her in quick succession: an 'attack of nerves' is succeeded by the return of unconcern, followed by 'something very like hysteria […] an almost overpowering desire to laugh […] then, miraculously, complete ease', then 'a desire to wound' (*Q*: 17, 19). Listening to Dr. Anderson's plea for her to stay, she is 'stirred', utterly persuaded to remain not only for one academic year but for the next as well, but when he makes the mistake of complimenting her 'breeding', she is filled with rage and 'lacerated pride' and gives her notice on the spot (*Q*: 21). Afterwards, she shares in the reader's confusion, asking herself frankly 'just what had happened' in that tumultuous exchange (*Q*: 22).

The next conversation she has with Dr. Anderson takes place in the much less charged setting of a Harlem cab and resembles the small talk of Harlem salons in *Quicksand* and *Passing*. But Helga does not feel at home in this mode:

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[48] Karen Roffman, 'Nella Larsen, Librarian at 135th Street' in *From the Modernist Annex: American Women Writers in Museums and Libraries* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2010), pp. 67-102, p. 99.

[49] Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 178.

> In the open taxi they spoke of impersonal things, books, places, the fascination of New York, of Harlem. But underneath the exchange of small talk lay another conversation of which Helga Crane was sharply aware. She was aware, too, of a strange ill-defined emotion, a vague yearning rising within her. (*Q*: 50)

A parallel conversation subtends the stream of small talk, leaving Helga dissatisfied and disappointed when the cab reaches its destination. Here small talk resembles something like 'chat' for Marcel when he is courting Albertine: 'the things I said to her […] were totally unconnected with what I was thinking about, what I desired from her, remaining obstinately parallel thereto […] We go on chatting, whereas the sentence we should like to utter would have been accompanied by a gesture' (III 408). But just as for Marcel, the longed-for gesture fails to match the real experience of kissing Albertine, the articulation Helga yearns for remains essentially formless. The first time Helga and Dr. Anderson spoke, she felt the upsurge of this same 'mystifying yearning'—but there, it was given a clear object, since it arose during his speech about the great worthiness of the mission of Naxos (*Q*: 20). The feeling thus manifested as the 'urge for service […] for this man who was talking so earnestly' and an internal commitment to stay at Naxos (*Q*: 20). In the Harlem cab, there is no earnest speech to attach her 'ill-defined' feeling to—only small talk. In the final exchange of this conversation, Robert Anderson says to Helga, 'You're still seeking for something, I think': an articulation that seems to reflect her feelings, but which she rejects with a fresh wave of anger (*Q*: 50).

In Zhang's overview, the accusations generally leveled at small talk attack its 'vapidity' and 'idleness'—terms which imply the existence of a more profound and active kind of talk which the accuser prefers, and which small talk defers.[50] But what would Helga rather be saying? What is the 'other conversation' of which she is so 'sharply aware'? The text's evasiveness on this point might recall Linda Dittmar's diagnosis of the novel's overall 'reluctance to utter', which she attributes to emotional inhibition and repression.[51] Ngai, however, offers a different reading of the novel's 'blank spots', observing that 'subjective gaps or erasures' characterize Helga's encounters with different performances of Black identity, but in each case, she is compelled to 'fill' the gap by producing an identification or disidentification with the version that is modeled in each. Ngai points out that none of these identifications or disidentifications lead to Helga's happiness, suggesting that the

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[50] Zhang, 'Small Talk', p. 3.

[51] Linda Dittmar, 'When Privilege Is No Protection: The Woman Artist in *Quicksand* and *The House of Mirth*' in *Writing the Woman Artist: Essay on Poetics, Politics, and Portraiture*, ed. Suzanne W. Jones (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), pp. 133-154, p. 145.

preservation of 'expressive vacancy' might be an achievement, not a failure.[52] This argument is supported by my reading that Helga's unarticulated yearning, the mysterious 'other conversation', previously found an explicit form as a pledge to Naxos.

Still, Helga *feels* the small talk in the cab to be a failure of some kind—an intense emotion that seems obliquely linked to her more generalized irritation with the talk that surrounds her. Interestingly, in his brief analysis of *Quicksand,* Krumholtz confuses the two, claiming that 'Helga's irritation, what Sianne Ngai calls her "epidermal discomfort", hinders her from maintaining composure in social situations and from making small talk.'[53] While it is true that the narrator reports Helga's irritated reactions to chatter, prattle, and aimless talk, the only occasions in which we observe Helga losing or nearly losing composure in conversation are due to stronger, more transient feelings: rage, yearning. Unlike the weak repulsion that characterizes irritation, these stronger feelings seem to call for action, to demand alternatives, before they swiftly transform or subside. The minor inaccuracy of Krumholtz's account points to the difficulty of articulating the logic or desire underlying Helga's feelings around talk—does she want to replace the small talk around her with more interesting, witty, or appealing chat, or does she desire another form of talk altogether? The ambient, repetitive quality of small talk makes it a static, undirected mode of talk: it circulates 'not in order to inform, not in this case to connect people in action, certainly not in order to express any thought'.[54] Malinowski asserts that the purpose of this kind of interaction is the sheer pleasure of company, a dandyish formulation; but in Harlem, as in Chicago, Helga does not feel the pleasure that would motivate the form.[55]

In Copenhagen, the balance shifts again. For a few pages, Helga seems to be enjoying both an indulgently aestheticized lifestyle and a congenial atmosphere of talk. Buoyed by the Dahls' money, dressed in the extravagant outfits recommended by Axel Olsen, she walks the city, the sites of which are rendered in appreciative detail. The rest of her time is filled with dinner-parties where 'the conversation is brilliant and witty', coffee-parties with 'much talk, interesting talk', and sittings for Olsen's portrait. But this rhythm is disrupted when her aunt, Fru Dahl, brings up the question of marriage and coolly dismisses Helga's reservations about mixed-race unions. The conversation ends abruptly when they are joined by another

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[52] Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 201.

[53] Krumholtz, 'Nella Larsen's Etiquette Lesson', p. 7.

[54] Malinowski, 'The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages', p. 313.

[55] Malinowski, 'The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages', p. 315.

character, but Fru Dahl manages to conclude quietly, 'Or stop wasting your time, Helga.' Helga's reaction is instantaneous:

> Her whole body was tense with suppressed indignation. Burning inside like the confined fire of a hot furnace. She was so harassed that she smiled in self-protection. And suddenly she was oddly cold. An intimidation of things distant, but none the less disturbing, oppressed her with a faintly sick feeling. Like a heavy weight, a stone weight, just where, she knew, was her stomach. (*Q*: 80)[56]

The invocation of 'waste' has this chilling power. Whereas in Harlem the rote social forms that for Anne held grave importance struck Helga as tedious and redundant, in Copenhagen Helga witnesses a lifestyle that to her feels 'more than pleasant […] important' diagnosed by her aunt as mere stalling (*Q*: 67). In an echo of Henry James's Grace Brissenden from Chapter 3, Fru Dahl truncates and delegitimizes Helga's pleasurable, undirected, flirtatious relation with a compulsory marital conclusion. At this sudden narrowing of her story in Copenhagen to a marriage plot, anger gives way to dread—a looming futurity, an intimation of things distant, threatening to enclose her in some final horizon. The scene ends with the return of Helga's bad temper, now directed at Fru Fischer's chatter.

The remainder of her time in Copenhagen finds Helga in an uncharacteristically attritional mode. When Olsen asks her to be his mistress, instead of giving vent to one of the gusts of anger that are known to erupt in her over lesser insults, she remains tactfully silent and thus plausibly insensible of his offer:

> This simplified things […] she could still go attended by him, and envied by others, to openings in Kongens Nytorv, to showing at the Royal Academy or Charlottenborg's Palace. He could still call for her and Aunt Katrina of an afternoon or go with her to Magasin du Nord to select a scarf or a length of silk, of which Uncle Poul could say causally in the presence of interested acquaintances […] 'Is that the new one Olsen helped you with?'(*Q*: 84)

Krumholtz argues that Irene and Clare make small talk to 'expand their social maneuvering room';[57] with this pragmatic application of silence, Helga does the same. In fact, this is the point at which Helga and Irene almost converge. Towards the end of *Passing*, gripped by the unfounded certainty that her husband and Clare are having an affair, Irene experiences something like Helga's fatigue with Harlem salon conversation. A tea-party begins with 'chatter, chatter, chatter'—a tedious string of inconsequential utterances, with ellipses standing in for their inconsequential replies:

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[56] This appears to be a misprint in the Serpent's Tail edition of *Quicksand*; it should read 'an intimation of things distant'.

[57] Krumholtz, 'Nella Larsen's Etiquette Lesson', p. 2.

> She went on pouring. Made repetitions of her smile. Answered questions. Manufactured conversations. She thought: 'I feel like the oldest person in the world with the longest stretch of life before me.'
>
> 'Josephine Baker? … No. I've never seen her. … I do think Ethel Waters is awfully good. …' (*P*: 219)

Despite its failure to amuse or engage her, Irene clings to the small talk, convinced that if she can keep up the performance of inconsequence then 'everything could go on as before' (*P*: 222). Where Irene seeks to maintain a joyless stream of talk in order to secure the only life that she will accept, Helga deploys reserve in order to prolong a state she finds pleasurable and knows to be provisional. Unlike for Irene, the stakes of Helga's strategic insensibility are nothing so grand (and vague) as 'my children', 'my family', or 'my future', but small, specific pleasures: attention from Olsen, envy from others, an occasion for Uncle Poul to make an utterance that pleases him. These minor enjoyments inevitably come to an end: Olson eventually proposes to Helga and she disappoints her aunt and uncle by refusing him.

3. Collage and Composure

After she returns to Harlem, Helga continues in this newly circumspect mode. She feels a rush of the same exhilaration that she experienced on first arriving, but this time the emotion is firmly qualified:

> Not that she intended to remain. No. Helga Crane couldn't, she told herself and others, live in America. In spite of its glamour, existence in America, even in Harlem, was for Negroes too cramped, too uncertain, too cruel; not something to be endured for a lifetime if one could escape it; something demanding a courage greater than was in her. No. She couldn't stay. Nor, she saw now, could she remain away. Leaving, she would have to come back. (*Q*: 96)

No, this passage repeats in free indirect discourse, recalling Helga's first utterance of recorded speech in the novel: the exclamation 'No forever!' that precedes her disarrangement of the Naxos apartment. But in this case, the negation is partial, its repetitions sketching in relief a rhythm of return: Helga wants to be both in Harlem and elsewhere. For the first time, instead of enforcing a complete break with the past and complete identification with the future that a given setting seems to promise, she undertakes the imaginative work of assembling a life and a self out of disparate pieces—a more measured kind of optimism, if not necessarily more realistic. Aware of the clumsiness of this first attempt of bricolage, she mentally caricatures herself 'moving shuttle-like from

continent to continent'(*Q*: 96). The affectivity of this suspensive, mobile, and parodic self-imaging is not clear. Helga's inhabitation of the same feint-like movement of escape and return that used to frustrate her in Harlem conversation might signify a growing dejectedness, a gradual wearing-down of her will—but it might also be the first exercises in an experimental spirit of cosmopolitanism, a positive non-rootedness.

Sensitive to both the pleasures of the environment and its precariousness, to the possibility of escape and its attenuated promise, Helga remains in a provisional and fragile state of attachment. The psychic world of Harlem is rendered in a metaphorics that recalls the opening *intérieur*: it is an enclosed space of delight, where everything is 'amusing, interesting, absorbing, and enjoyable'—as long as certain 'mental doors' are kept 'deliberately shut'. For Helga, in Harlem as in Naxos, the arena is all too often invaded: in this case by 'an acute feeling of insecurity', almost fright. '"I must," she would say then, "get back to Copenhagen." But the resolution gave her not much pleasure,' the narrator confides (*Q*: 96). The arrested impulses of this strange second spell in Harlem resemble Lauren Berlant's analysis of the state of *impasse*: 'a holding station that doesn't hold securely but opens out into anxiety',[58] 'a time of dithering in which someone or some situation cannot move forward'.[59] The impasse, then, might take its place among other forms of idling referenced in *Quicksand*: like circular small talk or dandyish drift, it names a state of suspension. Helga's partial identification, partial disidentification with this period of the novel leaves it adrift amidst her other scenes of conversion and rejection, thus enacting formally Berlant's description of the impasse as 'a space of time lived without narrative genre'.[60] By calling on Berlant to provide a framework for the mood that pervades this period of the novel, I hope to reformulate the significance of the tight downward spiral to which it gives way, initiated by the unexpected kiss with Dr. Anderson at a Harlem party.

The turmoil induced by the kiss followed by Dr. Anderson's subsequent rejection unambiguously sets Helga on the path to her most intense conversion, final migration, and cruelest disillusionment. After an overwhelming, cathartic experience of worship in a shopfront church, she decides to seduce and marry the preacher, Reverend Pleasant Green. The abjectness of the novel's end, which finds Helga in poverty in rural Alabama, repulsed by her husband, and unable to physically recover from too many pregnancies, has incited

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[58] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 199.

[59] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 4.

[60] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 199.

rebellious responses from some readers. Taking this reaction as given, Kate Stanley suggests that the tendency of this ending to provoke frustration is a deliberate provocation for the reader's imagination:

> the very fact that so many readers have voiced dissatisfaction with *Quicksand*'s unfulfilled narrative trajectories makes clear that Helga's plunge feels anything but inevitable. By compromising both plot and protagonist to conventionality, Larsen creates the narrative conditions under which frustrated readers can imagine an alternate ending that resists the unsatisfying closure they are left with, willing Helga one more act of elusive escape. They might, in other words, be motivated to take up Helga's characteristic position, to continue seeking 'something else', and to project this unpenned epilogue beyond the last page.[61]

Mary Esteve literalizes Stanley's readerly fancy at the level of plot, insisting that 'there is no telling that Helga will remain submerged in the quagmire of Southern rural life and childbearing […] she may indeed resurface.'[62] Neither scholar attempts to give any texture to Helga's imagined epilogue, letting the significance of their readings lie in an ongoing, unspecified movement towards escape.

But what if we were to try the imaginative exercise Stanley encourages—to bring a more satisfying closure to one or more of the novel's 'unfulfilled narrative trajectories'? Notably, all of Helga's unfulfilled narrative arcs break off with the failure to commit to a distinctly more illustrious heterosexual union than one in which she ends the novel.[63] In his essay on *Quicksand* and Black nativism, Keguro Macharia points out that Helga's decision to marry Reverend Green is a 'dysgenic' choice: a coupling that 'refuses to fulfill nativism's eugenic demand'.[64] The dysgenic, then, would be another term for narrative waste in *Quicksand*—the wasting of what Dr. Anderson called 'good stock' (*Q*: 21). While Helga's nativist failure also fails *her*, we ought to be wary of what rubrics might implicitly guide an imagined, recuperative sequel. When at the end of the novel Helga lies in her sickbed and daydreams about 'softly lighted rooms filled with inconsequential chatter and laughter and sophisticated tuneless music', this is a pure fantasy of respite (*Q*: 135). The ambient atmosphere of inconsequential chatter offers nothing but an indeterminate, background sociality. Helga's blurred desire for this undefined promise, against her previous irascibility

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[61] Kate Stanley, *Practices of Surprise in American Literature After Emerson* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 145.

[62] Esteve, 'Nella Larsen's "Moving Mosaic"', p. 282.

[63] For more on Larsen's subversion of the marriage plot as fulfillment, see Ann duCille, *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[64] Macharia, 'Queering Helga Crane', p. 268.

with the same inconsequential talk, amounts to a desire for inconsequence itself from a position of unrelenting crisis: what Berlant calls the 'need for banality'.[65] In this desire there is nothing of the earlier bricolage of Harlem and Copenhagen, the challenge of realizing a composite identity, but only an indistinguishable melding of the two environments into an ambience of comfort and unspecified culture. The important felt distinctions between Helga's life in Harlem, in Copenhagen, or in some suspension or alternation of the two are dissolved into a vision of vague bourgeoisness.

Helga's prior dissatisfaction, then, has been cured by deprivation—a punitive normalization. Macharia incisively paraphrases the desire to correct Helga to make her fit for a happier ending: 'If Helga and Larsen were psychically mature, they would be able to sustain normal, heterosexual relationships'.[66] Helga's ending condition demonstrates the violence implicit in this process of maturation. Against Esteve and Stanley, I read *Quicksand*'s ending as devastatingly final: a finality that truncates even its own imagined escape. But their responses to the provocation *Quicksand* seems to issue to readers to 'imagine otherwise' offer a clarifying contrast to the forms of possibility that I theorize in this thesis. The possibilities that I perceive around talk do not consist in narrative happenings that are yet unwritten but imaginable, events projecting beyond the last page of the text. They are *strictly* possibilities: forms of relation, feeling, expression, identity that cannot be fully actualized or inhabited, glimpsed in interludes between events in which the structuring conditions and distinctions of the text quietly lapse or recede. Thus, instead of speculating past the novel's end for 'one more act of elusive escape', my own speculative reading looks back to its tentative penultimate act in Harlem, which almost resembles an interlude.[67]

The most prominent distinction between the second Harlem and the first, the absence of Anne Grey in Helga's life, is given two explanations. The first is Anne's marriage to Dr. Anderson: a rare passage of omniscient narration discloses in an unusually portentous tone that, while Helga remains 'pleasantly unaware' of it, Anne perceives her husband's repressed, 'lawless', and, to his ascetic mind, unacceptable attraction to Helga and resolves to keep them apart (*Q*: 94-5). This explanation is given considerable narrative weight and sets up the kiss that shapes the final events of the novel. Seen from this perspective, Helga's brief return to Harlem awaits Dr. Anderson's fatal interruption from the beginning and its

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[65] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism,* pp. 61-2.

[66] Macharia, 'Queering Helga Crane', p. 271.

[67] Stanley, *Practices of Surprise in American Literature*, p. 145.

contents are merely filling time until the inevitable fall. The second explanation for Anne's nonappearance is recounted more typically in free indirect discourse and inflected with Helga's sardonic style: 'In [Anne's] opinion, Helga had lived too long among the enemy, the detestable pale faces […] If they had been Latins, Anne might conceivably have forgiven the disloyalty. But Nordics! Lynchers! It was too traitorous' (*Q*: 99). In other words, Helga and Anne have become alienated from one another due to their incompatible outlooks on race and identity—Anne's polemical and essentialist, Helga's suspensive and composite. Unlike the ominous, doomed character of the Anderson-centric narrative, this second account offers Helga a newly workable and pleasurable political and social life. The novel touches only lightly on this aspect of Helga's return, yet the space it opens is palpable in the party scene that precedes her collision with Dr. Anderson.

The setting, the party itself, is daring and pluralistic, attended by 'representatives of several opposing Harlem political and social factions, including the West Indian' and 'a few white people'(*Q*: 99). Upon arriving, Helga is occupied by talk of an unusual kind for her: extended periods of reported speech that do not produce unmanageable irruptions of feeling. Her first interlocutor, Helen Tavenor, seems to be a kind of kindred spirit: having incited chaos with her guest list, she offers to introduce Helga to Audrey Denney, the beautiful and composed young woman known for socializing freely with white and Black people. 'You wouldn't have met her,' Helen Tavenor observes, 'living as you did with Anne Grey. Anderson, I mean' (*Q*: 99). This talk is distinctly small, but significant, emphasizing the new field of possibilities that Helga finds herself in now. In contrast, Helga's ensuing conversation with the unfashionable James Vayle runs through a laundry list of big race topics, each of which are freighted with feeling and history for Helga: whether racial ties could ever permit a Black person to live in Europe (James thinks no), whether miscegenation is acceptable (James thinks absolutely not), and even whether there is a eugenic imperative for educated Black people to have children (James thinks yes). Bucking all of her own precedents, Helga smooths over her own angry reactions throughout, recalling her earlier admiration for Fru Dahl's ability to recover an easy tone after the intrusion of anger: 'It took […] a great deal of security. Balance' (*Q*: 79). Whether this balance is supplied to her through James' palpable naïveté, the surrounding milieu that supports her own views, or some change in her own constitution is left ambiguous. 'Well, I for one don't intend to contribute to any cause,' she tells him lightly. 'But how serious we are! And I'm afraid that I've really got to leave you. I've already cut two dances for your sake. Do come to see me' (*Q*: 103).

The most striking balancing act occurs at the end of their conversation, when James announces his intention to ask Helga to marry him: 'Helga Crane was suddenly deeply ashamed and sorry for James Vayle, so she told him laughingly that it was shameful of him to joke with her like that, and before he could answer, she had gone tripping off with a handsome coffee-colored youth' (*Q*: 104). Now it is Helga who moves with the tripping, glancing, light step of small talk, easily converting James's solemn breach of etiquette into elegant party banter. James's conversation soberly rewrites Fru Dahl's schematic of marriage/waste in the language of eugenics, but here no heavy weight sinks in Helga's stomach. Instead her surge of feeling is linked obscurely by the causal connector 'so' to a trivializing, evasive motility: despite and through her susceptibility to sudden conversational intensities, she successfully deploys chat to sidestep demands of plot. In this use of talk to manipulate narrative time, *Quicksand* anticipates Berlant's characterization of conversation as 'a key genre of the present', a way of ephemerally structuring a space of time and 'of taking over what would otherwise seem the arrhythmic rule of crisis'.[68] Berlant's description of the conversationalists she examines, the voices in Susan Sontag's 'The Way We Live Now', works as a portrait of Helga at this moment in the text: 'They're in a race to jog in place, to not lose a step, or trip: to maintain—no, attain—composure.'[69] Composure, in Adam Phillips's formulation, is a practice of control that can also be seen as an openness to the possibility of surprise. For Phillips, keeping composure is 'a deferral, a self-holding that keeps open the possibility of finding an environment in which composure itself could be relinquished'.[70] Helga's new capacity for small talk holds this possibility: of an environment that could support her in another kind of expression.

The next lines of the novel show these efforts failing as she literally trips into Dr. Anderson's arms, steps away with a smile—another act of evasive recovery—and finally ends up caught in his kiss. Laura Doyle offers an interesting, eccentric reading of this event that emphasizes the proximate presence of Audrey Denney. Recalling Helga's fascination with the transgressive woman, Doyle notes that the party is set up to be the scene where the two of them finally meet. 'Just at the moment when she might approach a "lovely" woman she admires—Robert Anderson kisses her', Doyle writes, interpreting the kiss as the tragic

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[68] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 57.

[69] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 59.

[70] Adam Phillips, *On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored: Psychoanalytic Essays on the Unexamined Life*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 44.

normative thwarting of queer desire.[71] The party scene is thus rendered as one of flouted actualization. Though I share with Doyle a preoccupation with the possibilities that the kiss blocks, considering the *impassive* qualities of Helga's situation organizes this scene differently. Instead of conceiving of the party as a space where something momentous is about to happen, we might perceive it as a zone of movements that do not rise to the level of events. Here, Helga has the maneuvering room to prolong a conversational present and evade the upsets that drive dramatic narrative shifts. In this assembly Audrey Denney might act not as another truncated narrative trajectory, but as one element of a constellation of possibilities that could have allowed Helga's narrative to rest: in Berlant's words, to coast, cruise, or drift.[72] This precarious, pleasurable, anxious mode of narrative drift seems to me the only genuine possibility Helga encounters in the novel of a livable practice of improvised identity. That this dynamic suspension is fleeting and swiftly upset is also characteristic of the impasse's incipient, fragile form. Of the doomed affair with Dr. Anderson, Rafael Walker writes, 'Helga's attempts at decisive action—to move her narrative forward from the paralyzing indecision that stalls it—have perverse effects, much like struggling in a pool of quicksand.'[73] Against this dismissal of narrative suspension as mere 'indecision', I would point to the rigorous, hazardous discipline it takes to stay where she is.

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[71] Laura Doyle, 'Transnational History at Our Backs: Long View of Larsen, Woolf, and Queer Racial Subjectivity in Atlantic Modernism', *Modernism/modernity*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (September 2006), pp. 531-559, p. 554.

[72] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 64.

[73] Walker, 'Nella Larsen Reconsidered', p. 175.

Coda
'Nothing Happened'

'What happened?' Deleuze and Guattari ask in their reflection on James's *In the Cage*. 'It may even be that nothing has happened, but it is precisely that nothing that makes us say, Whatever could have happened […] What is this nothing that makes something happen?'[1] This thesis could be considered a study of non-happenings around talk: talk that endlessly defers and prolongs, intimations bristling with meanings that do not emerge into action, attested feelings that are not felt and affected ones that, perhaps, are. In the introduction to this thesis, I framed these qualities in Proust, James, and Larsen's novels as the traces of partial, precarious possibilities, theorizing talk as a medium for the expression of peripheral forms of feeling and relation. In this coda, I want to consider an alternative description of these elusive affects, relations, and subjectivities—to read 'nothing happened' as a question, an accusation, even perhaps an aspiration.

In Stanley Cavell's memoir *Little Did I Know* (2010), he recalls an early childhood memory of being knocked unconscious. At one moment he is running exuberantly into the street to retrieve a loose ball, and at the next he opens his eyes to a hospital bed and a crowd of people. 'I clearly remember asking, "What happened?"'[2] What happened, according to his parents, is that he was struck by a car. But for the boy, the event is absent, and the explanations that others offer to him cannot replace it. To recall this, Cavell turns to Proust:

> Proust's narrator describes his repeated awakenings, or stages of awakenings, in the opening paragraphs of his great novel, as containing moments of not knowing who he was (an experience I am unsure that I recognize) […] But my question, 'What happened?' does not directly express disorientation—I knew immediately who I was, and I recognized familiar faces—but expresses rather some sense of interruption that has changed everything, like a jump cut in a film, as though one might move from reality to reality as one moves from dream to reality or from reality to dream.[3]

Not only does Cavell allude to the opening pages of the *Search* to recount this incident, his reaction to it also has a distinctly Proustian character that is recognizable from the first chapter of this thesis. He describes how this childhood accident left a lingering fear of 'consequences disproportionate to their casual cause', and admits, 'Sometimes this takes the form of giving what has seemed to my impatiently observant children to be unnecessarily

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[1] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 193.

[2] Stanley Cavell, *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), p. 28.

[3] Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, p. 28.

elaborate directions, say, to a visitor about how not to get lost finding our house.'[4] In the impatience of Cavell's children, there is an echo of the anecdote from Proust's life that Benjamin recalls: 'He sent a valet […] giving him a lengthy description of the neighborhood and of the house. Finally he said: "You cannot miss it. It is the only window on the Boulevard Haussman in which there still is a light burning!" Everything but the house number!'[5] Cavell, like Proust, discovers a natural complementarity between the surprising volatility of small accidents and the practice of circuitous over-elaboration. Although the experience of non-experience he describes above is indeed dissimilar to the passage of the *Search* in which Proust's narrator recounts an elongated experience of awakening, it recalls a number of less prominent moments from Proust's novel that have featured in this thesis. When Venice decomposes into lifeless stones, or when Marcel returns home to his grandmother only to see her as a stranger, these jarred impressions seem to follow from a blow, an impact, that was not itself felt or observed: an interruption in associative chains of habit and affection that makes the world suddenly strange.

My readings of Proust in *Around Talk* are patterned with non-events like the ones Cavell describes: occurrences that become unreal or feel unrealized because of gaps in one's experience, sensibility, or attention. The speech of others fails to register with Marcel either because it comes at the wrong time, or because, with Albertine, the very intensity of his attention causes her words to escape him. When an utterance does break through, like Andrée's 'I happen to have seen Albertine's aunt', it has the mysterious effect of Cavell's 'jump cut': interrupting and reforming Marcel's perceptions in the wake of some obscure contact (II: 587). Events that have to do with significant, narrativized feelings in Proust's *Search* are particularly elusive: Swann spends years of his life in a protracted state of asking 'What happened?' over a love affair that never clarifies as a tangible feeling. As for Marcel's grief over his grandmother's sickness and death, to approach this highly occluded affect in the *Search* is to step through a series of non-happenings: the illness that was barely mentioned, the stroke that was not observed, the words that were not said, and the uncertain, subjunctive melancholy of an imagined guest at the Guermantes salon. Assembling this web of omissions and erasures allows us to perceive an indisputable, major event, the experience of involuntary memory in 'The Intermittencies of the Heart', as on a continuum with the inexpressive feelings that precede it. Indeed, the interpretations of

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[4] Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, p. 29.

[5] Benjamin, 'The Image of Proust', p. 210.

Proust in Chapters 1 and 2 of this thesis tend towards continuities, finding half-spaces of subjectivity and feeling that connect events and non-events through odd temporalities and uncertain voicings.

My readings of James in Chapters 3 and 4 have a more disjunctive character; they raise more pointedly the question of what it means for something to *count* as having happened. 'What then has happened?' John Marcher presses May Bartram in their final exchange, but he can make nothing of her cryptic reply: 'What *was* to' (BJ: 107). Marcher ends the novella by supplying his own answer, declaring that his shared life with May was a 'sounded void', altogether 'nothing […] to have happened' (BJ: 125). The narrator of *The Sacred Fount* suffers a less total, but still powerful abnegation when Grace Brissenden gnomically informs him, 'One's husband isn't talk': her conferral with her husband declares an end to the play of suggestion and implication that constitutes the novel, replacing it with firm, finalized states of affairs (*SF*: 211). In *The Wings of the Dove* and *In the Cage*, James carefully withdraws certain significant events from the reader's view: Kate Croy's scheme and Milly Theale's illness are shrouded in misdirection and circumlocution, while the telegraphist's perspective is confined to 'appointments and allusions' between her favorite lovers (*C*: 184). While these affairs are pushed to the side, other, implicit relations seem to be forming below the level of narrative events—triangular collaborations, aesthetic compositions—that then must vie for significance against the return of the missing plot points. Across Chapters 3 and 4, the non- and sub-happenings that cluster around Jamesian talk are tested and challenged by the imposing closure of narrative events.

In Larsen's *Quicksand*, the most significant, mysterious non-events are those that precipitate Helga Crane's abrupt departures. Larsen's novel is structured around cuts and interruptions that leave Helga as bewildered as the reader, impelled by unpredictable, volatile eruptions of feeling. After the first egress of the novel, her dramatic departure from Naxos, she wonders to herself, 'Just what had happened to her there […]?' (*Q*: 22) My reading of *Quicksand* in Chapter 5 aims to bring out an alternative rhythm of non-happening that the novel invokes but cannot sustain: the fragile equilibrium of party talk, a practice of non-eventfulness in which Helga might sidestep the obscure collisions that overturn her hard-won poise. In a double negation, this non-happening does not quite happen: after stepping into Dr. Anderson, Helga's nascent holding pattern is thrown out of joint. In *Quicksand*, the possibility of nothing happening—nothing more consequential than dancing, chatting, drifting—emerges as an aspiration, a weak but perceptible desire.

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Later in *Little Did I Know*, Cavell writes of a different kind of crisis that afflicted him in his middle life: he found himself unable to conclude the book project that would become *The Claim of Reason*. '[W]ith hundreds of acceptable pages recognizably my own,' he recounts, he could not find a way to bring the work to a conclusion.[6] In a turn of phrase that resembles John Marcher's in 'The Beast in the Jungle', he recalls 'the banality of a fifty-year-old crisis of misgiving', a growing doubt that his life's work had amounted to 'too little to show, too late altogether for compensation'.[7] Cavell's response to this predicament was to start seeing a psychoanalyst—a fruitful avenue, it transpired, for addressing a mental block around a book about talk:

> If I began by being unable to talk, and unable to talk about being unable, then I might at that stratum talk about being unable to talk about being unable. And then I would be into one or other continuations of the manuscript, which was so often about talking too much or too little, and about who starts a conversation, who has the right to speak, and/or the obligation to respond […][8]

But how were these 'continuations' about talking and not talking, blockages and circumventions, to leave the analyst's room and attach themselves to Cavell's 'untouchable manuscript'?[9] He relates that his analyst, Eugene Smith, advised him to unpack his manuscript from the closed boxes in which he had stored it and put it on his desk 'as you would if you were continuing', but without any intention of really doing so.

> The following week I began by reporting the results, which went as follows. 'I did as you suggested but nothing happened.' — 'You must have felt something.' — 'Really nothing. Well—except—I guess for a mild—pervasive—sense—of pleasure.' And after a stunned silence, we broke into the grandest of the laughs we had had together.[10]

Cavell identifies this as the breakthrough that returned to him his confidence that the writing would be done.

'Nothing happened'. This anecdote strings together a series of negated and blocked happenings, beginning with Cavell's inability to write and his talk about being unable to

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[6] Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, p. 451.

[7] Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, p. 452.

[8] Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, p. 453.

[9] Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, p. 453.

[10] Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, p. 454.

talk, or talk about being unable to talk about being unable. Then comes Smith's suggestion, the hypothetical placement of the manuscript on the desk, *as if* for writing, but not for writing, followed by Cavell's report: 'nothing happened […] Really nothing. Well—except […] ' The eruption of laughter that followed Cavell's disclosure that this 'nothing' is an unacknowledged pleasure seems to me to have three sources: the absurdity of his deriving pleasure from the manuscript at all, the perversity of deriving pleasure from *not writing* in the manuscript, and the sheer bathos of finding (weak) pleasure where one expected to find dread, crisis, or void. 'Tragedies are tragedies, but folly can make a tragedy out of what is not tragic, and folly exposed in time may become hilarious,' is all Cavell writes by way of an explanation.[11] His breakthrough was not an epiphany; it did not reveal in a flash how his book should be concluded. It simply made it possible to continue with the work, or for the continuations he was already making to connect with the idea of continuing: keeping notes of ideas, forming intermediate 'subgoals'.[12]

To my mind, the story of Cavell's analysis shadows 'The Beast in the Jungle', whose hero exemplifies the folly that makes tragedy out of what is not tragic. Cavell's exercise of daily, undirected proximity to the manuscript recalls the moment in the novella when Marcher considers his habitual relations to the objects in May's room: the tread of his pacing on the carpet, the record of their shared history of friendship and flirtation. But Marcher does not recognize his own mild, pervasive pleasures under the glaring fear that 'nothing will now take place' (BJ: 85)—and, as Cavell notes in another essay, Marcher will not laugh at himself, this being the reaction he fears the most from others.[13] Laughter might smooth the slippage between happening and non-happening, triviality and consequence, blockage and continuation—an implicit element, perhaps, of what in the introduction I called Cavell's effective weak theory of talk. Helga, too, laughs as she evades James Vayle's proposal to maintain a delicate state of composure.

Cavell mentions tragedy in this passage only to put it to one side, considering folly and laughter in its place. In the aftermath of his successful analysis, the continuation that proved most fruitful for the task of concluding *The Claim of Reason* was on the subject of tragedy. The last section of the book argues that tragedy is the lived experience of philosophical skepticism, the destruction of one's connections with the world of others out

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[11] Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, p. 454.

[12] Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, p. 454.

[13] Cavell, *Cities of Words*, p. 391.

of the fear of one's unknowability. Cavell writes in *Little Did I Know* that these preoccupations—with 'the inescapable human subjection to the terror of inexpressiveness'—directly followed from his experience of being unable to conclude the work.[14] But they do not, perhaps, reflect the curious, enigmatic, somewhat comical chain of non-events that allowed him to resume it, nor the discovery of a weak, pervasive pleasure where the 'terror of inexpressiveness' ought to have been. There is a passage in *Cities of Words*, written twenty-five years after *The Claim of Reason*, in which Cavell considers a different disposition, a different rhythm of skepticism, that seems to me to reflect this milder, more surprising affectivity. Setting aside the tragic concept that he developed in *The Claim of Reason*, he entertains a new formulation:

> our temptation to skepticism […] may be at work anywhere, woven into the restlessness of vacations at the beach as well as into the business of getting along every day with others back in town, walking along the streets with them, and through tunnels and down and up stairs in their company, riding with them in trains, and subways, and buses, and automobiles.[15]

What is this 'temptation' that is woven into the fabric of everyday life, its rhythms and interruptions, in the company of others? Cavell does not specify, but the setting he describes is evocative: the moving public sphere of the city, on transit links and streets, in a space of tacit or ambient relation with others who, in Simmel's phrase, 'are constantly touching one another in fleeting contact'.[16] We might perceive a reformulation of the 'interruption of the automobile accident', where instead of a single vanished moment of impact, there is a continuous rhythm of light touches: something like the 'impersonal intimacy' that Bersani theorizes as cruising.[17] Here, the distinctions blur between solitude and company, a touch and a collision, event and non-event.[18]

Cavell writes admiringly of a tale by Maurice Blanchot in which he imagines a city of people who did not see anyone, with a narrator who cannot resist 'the temptation—the desire' to go looking for them. '"How does one go about meeting them?"—"Well, nothing

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[14] Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, p. 451.

[15] Cavell, *Cities of Words*, p. 426.

[16] Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', p. 15.

[17] Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, p. 29; Bersani, 'Sociability and Cruising', p. 165.

[18] In a later essay, Cavell reflects on 'company' as the minimal experience of closeness that conveys 'we are not alone in the world' (Stanley Cavell, 'Companionable Thinking' in *Wittgenstein and the Moral Life: Essays in Honor of Cora Diamond*, ed. by Alice Crary (Cambridge: MIT University Press, 2007), pp. 281-298, p. 286).

could be more simple. You will stumble upon them."'[19] In the expression of this elliptical desire, the intentional and the accidental blur together; the implausible and the inevitable easily combine. 'Weak thoughts, weak desires,' the narrator continues, 'I feel their force.'[20] In the aimless temptations of Cavell and Blanchot's city streets, there is another echo of Cavell's successful treatment: the mild, pervasive pleasure of sharing space with his unfinished manuscript. If skepticism in *The Claim of Reason* is tied to his experience of inexpressiveness, incompletion, and inaction, its transposition to this cityscape seems to assuage the attendant fear of collapse. Instead it is *tempting*: an intriguingly ambiguous word which may designate both what spurs us to desire and the object of desire itself. In this space, we might say, we are tempted to make nothing happen—to prolong or practice a state of being we already, without noticing, inhabit.

[19] Maurice Blanchot, *The Step Not Beyond*, trans. by Lycette Nelson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 3. As Cavell notes, Blanchot's title *Le pas au-delà* can be translated both as *The Step Beyond* and *The Non-Step Beyond* (Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, p. 447).

[20] Blanchot, *The Step Not Beyond*, p. 3.

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