

Weak Feelings:
Femininity, Affect, and Sexuality in Modern Fiction and Theory

by

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*For my parents
and
for MK*

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Abstract

Weak Feelings: Femininity, Affect, and Sexuality in Modern Fiction and Theory

recuperates what I call “weak feeling” in the period during which libidinal desire was the primary mode of constructing gender and sexuality. Early twentieth-century psychoanalytic discourses of the libido imagined erotic attachment and gender identification as an energetic and biological instinct. As these discourses of sexuality inundated public consciousness, women who lacked libidinal desire were labeled repressed or perverse. Against this pathologization, the four “weak feelings” that I trace—liking, susceptibility, influence, and interest—cluster around femininity within modern fiction not as symptoms of diseased libido but as forms of attachment in their own right. Each chapter explores the limitations presented by the libido as a hermeneutic device for sexuality in modernist fiction and psychoanalysis and offers a “surface reading” of a literary text that sets erotic desire aside in order to explore how weak feelings function. Reading “liking” within Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Hotel*, Chapter 1 examines how the assumption of libidinal energy in queer and feminist theory pigeonholes femininity as the failure of lesbian desire. Chapter 2 takes Rosamond Lehmann’s *Dusty Answer* as an occasion to juxtapose lessons from the history of sexuality alongside the theorization of sentimentality. It proposes that the “susceptibility” to affective encounters deployed by the novel’s sentimental mode disorients the subject/object binaries that sustain libidinal desire. The reading of E.M. Forster’s *Howards End* in Chapter 3 troubles the relationship between libidinal desire and political desire through an analysis of feminine influence. Finally, the reading of Henry James’s *The Awkward Age* in Chapter 4 critiques the emphasis on confession within theories of sexuality in order to analyze

the opaque ways that women encounter knowledge around sex, gender, and sexuality in the past. Throughout, *Weak Feelings* sticks with the impasses within critical methods of knowing sexuality afforded by placing femininity at the center of one's investigations. In so doing, it argues that femininity is not only an occasion for identification and/or desire—including queer desire—but also a site of epistemological trouble for both what we know about sexuality and how we go about knowing it.

Introduction

This dissertation, *Weak Feelings: Femininity, Affect, and Sexuality in Modern Fiction and Theory*, recuperates what I call “weak feeling” in the period in which libidinal desire was the primary mode of constructing gender and sexuality. Early twentieth-century psychoanalytic and sexological discourses of the libido imagined erotic attachment and gender identification as an energetic and biological instinct. As these medical discourses of sexuality inundated public consciousness, women who lacked libidinal desire were labeled repressed or perverse. Against this pathologization, the “weak feelings” that I trace—liking, susceptibility, influence, and interest—cluster around femininity within modernist literature not as symptoms of diseased libido but as forms of attachment in their own right. Engaging interdisciplinary studies of affect and “surface” methods of reading fiction by Henry James, E.M. Forster, Elizabeth Bowen, and Rosamond Lehmann, this dissertation demonstrates how weak feeling offers a queer, feminist analytical alternative to the focus on libido within the history of sexuality.

What exactly are weak feelings? The project of this dissertation is to collect and theorize weak feeling through imaginative and historically-inflected readings of literary and psychoanalytic texts. Overall, as a conceptual category, weak feelings are forms of attachment that, under the privileging of libidinal desire, register as symptoms, failures, or trivialities. By setting the libido aside, however, this dissertation reframes weak feeling as a form of attachment in and of itself. Throughout this dissertation, weak feelings come into focus through the delineation of their differences from libidinal desire. Whereas libidinal energy is understood as energetic and purposeful, weak feelings gather irresolutely around objects and confound

unidirectional aims. Whereas libidinal desire originates in the instinctual subject, the origins of weak feelings are difficult to locate. They shimmer and coalesce within atmospheres and settings that prime intimate encounters. Whereas libidinal desire is known through forms of titillating confession and open secrets, weak feelings remain opaque, reticent, or fall upon deaf ears.

In analyzing weak feelings, this dissertation intervenes in a specific problem at the intersection of feminist, queer, and literary studies. For several decades, historians of sexuality have shown that because discourses of libidinal desire have been primarily concerned with men, their usefulness for seeing, categorizing, and historicizing women's sexuality is limited. At the same time, queer theorists have taken up the study of affect to investigate a range of attachments between themselves and their objects of study. Combining a critique of libido with this turn to affect as a critical and sometimes historical method, my research asks: what might a history of sexuality focused on feeling—rather than libido, identity, or behavior—look like? Can a focus on feeling enable us to see women's sexuality anew? Femininity remains a comparatively under-researched topic in the history of sexuality; within studies of lesbianism, for instance, scholars favor resistant bodies and identities, such as the female invert or the mannish lesbian over figures that look "ordinary." I reframe this problem of feminine desire as a methodological opportunity; explore the limitations and possibilities presented by the queer focus on erotic desire; and offer literary readings of weak affect that set erotic desire aside in order to suggest ways of approaching femininity in the past. My dissertation, in other words, is not a history of feminine sexuality or of weak affect, but a literary study that provides new historiographic methods that take femininity seriously.

The remainder of this introduction elucidates central aspects of the project including its stakes, terminologies, and reading practices. The first two sections explain the role that the libido

plays in psychoanalysis and clarifies the distinction I draw between libidinal and weak feelings. Then, I outline some of the central ways in which the literary texts considered by this dissertation mobilize weak feelings and, thus, offer an alternative to dominant narratives of modernism as an aesthetic movement about sexual expression, speed, and energy. Finally, I provide an overview of the dissertation's primary methodological practice—surface reading—and end with a chapter overview that forecasts each chapter's central questions and concerns.

Weak Feelings in the Libidinal Age

The fault I have to find with these and many other similarly-worded opinions is not that they are mistaken but that they prove insufficient to explain the details in the picture of nervous disturbances and that they leave out of account precisely the most important of the aetiological factors involved. If we disregard the vaguer ways of being 'nervous' and consider the specific forms of nervous illness, we shall find that the injurious influence of civilization reduces itself in the main to the harmful suppression of the sexual life of civilized peoples.

—Sigmund Freud, “‘Civilized’ Sexual Morality” 147

In his “‘Civilized’ Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness” (1908), Sigmund Freud dismisses a coterie of “opinions” that attempt to explain the origins of “modern nervous illness.”¹ Qualifying arguments by social theorists about the effects of “telegraphs and telephones,” “political, religious, and social struggles,” and “city life,” Freud tells us that the origin of modern problems lies in one specific location: “sexual life.” If channeling the libido leads to the formation of “civilization” itself, then the libido’s “harmful suppression” can destroy the health of both the individual and “civilization” writ large. Freud draws his conclusion tautologically: “A certain amount of direct sexual satisfaction seems to be indispensable for most organizations, and

¹ This paper is a summary of Freud’s findings in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905). I will analyze this lengthier work in Chapter 1. I take up “‘Civilized’ Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness” here because it contains a reference to weak sexual instincts, which I use to situate the central concerns of this dissertation.

a deficiency in this amount . . . must be regarded as an illness” (150). No libido makes one sick; one is sick if one expresses no libido. The sexual instinct is natural. It is vital. Its denial is dangerous. For Freud, the libido reigns supreme.

Originating in the Latin for “desire” or “lust,” the “libido” as a term wasn’t coined in the early twentieth century nor did it disappear at the end of that epoch. Often isolated as the key ingredient to a happy sex life and the target of pharmaceutical intervention, the libido (also known as the “sex drive”) still plays a role in erotic lives in the early twenty-first century. But this dissertation works from the assumption that the libido did experience a kind of renaissance in modern Britain through its reinvention as the ontological root of the human subject. Centralizing the libido as *the* energetic force that powered the subject, Freud engineered the expression of the sexual instinct as vital to health, productivity, and animation. The libido governed the individual’s sexual life but, more broadly, it acted as the hermeneutic key to human psychology. All good and all bad could be traced back to the libido’s repression or expression.²

Although Freud imagined libidinal desire to be timeless—an instinct unnaturally repressed by the conditions of modern civilization—the libido is a historically specific epistemology of sex, gender, and sexuality. Due to its prominence in the early twentieth century in Britain, the time span considered by this dissertation might be marked as the emergence of “a libidinal age.” From the turn of the century until the interwar years, psychoanalytic notions of

² I use the terms “libido,” “libidinal desire,” and “sexual instinct” interchangeably in this dissertation because they are used interchangeably in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. For histories of sexuality that trace the importance of the libido to the organization of psychological life in Britain, see Arnold Davidson, “How to Do the History of Psychoanalysis: A Reading of Freud’s ‘Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality,’” *Critical Inquiry* 13, no. 2 (1987): 252–77; Graham Richards, “Britain on the Couch: The Popularization of Psychoanalysis in Britain 1918–1940,” *Science in Context* 13, no. 02 (June 2000): 183–230; R.D. Hinshelwood, “Psychoanalysis In Britain: Points Of Cultural Access, 1893–1918,” *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 76 (1995): 135–151; Stephen Frosh, “Psychoanalysis in Britain: ‘The Rituals of Destruction,’” in *A Concise Companion to Modernism*, edited by D. Bradshaw (Blackwell, 2003). For the centrality of sexuality to modern identity (and critiques of that centrality), see Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, translated by Robert Hurley, 1st ed. (Vintage, 1990) and David M. Halperin, “Is There a History of Sexuality?,” *History and Theory* 28, no. 3 (1989): 257–74.

gender and sexuality filtered into British literature, print culture, and medicine. Beginning around 1895, small, intellectual circles encountered Freudian discourse when the British sexologist Havelock Ellis reviewed Freud and Charcot's work on hysteria and the Society for Psychical Research adapted it for their interests in spiritualism. In 1919, psychoanalyst (and disciple of Freud) Ernest Jones founded the British Psycho-Analytical Society, an organization that broadened the scope of psychoanalytic theory within British culture by exposing not only psychoanalysts but also artists and medical doctors to Freudian thought.³ One of its members, James Strachey, a psychoanalyst and member of the Bloomsbury group, would play a key role in the cross-pollination between psychoanalysis and British literary culture. Beginning in 1924 and with the help of Virginia and Leonard Woolf's Hogarth Press, Strachey translated and published Freud's *Collected Works*. This translation acted as "the turning point in the dissemination of psychoanalytic theory in England" (Abel 1).⁴

Ironically enough, Freud's naturalization of the sexual instinct as energetic, purposeful, and in need of expression depends upon an inventory of broken libidos. Within his painting of the modern landscape, "nervous illness" is everywhere. Marriages are unsatisfying. Perverts and neurotics abound. Freud's case that it is natural for people to want to have sex is built on the fact that, by his own admission, most people are either having the "wrong" kind of sex or, more horrifyingly, not having sex *at all*. In so pathologizing the lack of "direct sexual satisfaction," Freud not only restricts what counts as satisfying sex but also produces the very notion that sexuality is essential. In this way, Freud naturalizes the fact of the sexual instinct and reveals the sexual normative and non-normative as dependent on one another. In Robyn Wiegman and

³ Of all the psychoanalytic leagues in Europe, this one had the highest number (40%) of nonscientific and lay members.

⁴ As I will discuss further in the subsequent section, modern fiction played a large role in the popularization of psychoanalytic characterizations of the libidinal subject.

Elizabeth A. Wilson's formulation, an antinormative position is slippery because "the norm is already generating the conditions of differentiation that antinormativity so urgently seeks" (16). The naturalization of the libido depends on a variety of instances in which the libido appears to be functioning in an unnatural manner; Freud collates heterogeneous instances in his normalization of sexual life. Under the umbrella of the sexual instinct sit privileged and unprivileged objects, bleeding into one another and destabilizing Freud's attempt to demarcate the difference between nature and culture, normal and abnormal. For instance, unlike the perverts and inverts who redirect their libidinal energies toward improper aims and objects, Freud's neurotics and hysterics repress their sexual instincts until they "fall ill" and their unconscious desire presents in the form of bodily symptoms. Freud claims that "the dammed-up libido" finds a way to "break through and obtain substitutive satisfaction of a neurotic kind in the form of pathological symptoms" (156). Although the neurotic is still controlled, so the story goes, by the libido, she moves apart from the naturalization of the sexual instinct's expression as heterosexual intercourse; her "expression" of the sexual instinct might be said to "reorganize the body's erogeneity" away from the genitals (Jagose, *Orgasmology* 187).

Freud's discussion of the neurotic makes allowances for the possibility of a non-normative expression of libidinal desire. This is a concession from which queer theory has extracted evidence of a queer past, of non-normative identities, behaviors, and longings. But Freud's essay also contradicts his greater thesis, the thesis upon which both Freudian and queer accounts of the sexual subject depend. Undermining his confident assertions of the fact of a universal libido are instances that reveal the libidinal instinct might be less imperative, less powerful, less all-encompassing than one might initially believe. For example, in discussing the differences between perversion and inversion, Freud declares that one can see how, in a family,

“quite frequently a brother is a sexual pervert, while his sister, who, being a woman, possesses a *weaker sexual instinct*, is a neurotic whose symptoms express the same inclinations as the perversions of her sexually more active brother” (153-4, emphasis added). For Freud, this demonstrates that men are more likely to be perverts while women are more likely to be “high-minded and over-refined, but severely neurotic” (153). It provides evidence that neurosis is the “negative” of the perversions in that they stem from the same “inclinations.”⁵ But it also suggests, quite casually, the ontological existence of “a weaker sexual instinct,” a pre-neurosis libido that is, relatively speaking, more sluggish or insubstantial, even inessential, and indicatively feminine. Some people, and women in particular, it seems have less libidinal energy than others.⁶

This dissertation embraces this suggestion of weak feeling in order to destabilize the naturalness of the libido’s energy, directedness, and overall defining presence within modern sexual lives. Freud and the queer readers who follow him—as I will discuss at length in Chapter 1—tend to emphasize the libido’s improper objects and aims as sites of perversion or nonnormativity. In so doing, the libido itself remains intact. But here, even as Freud faults the repression of the libido for the neurotic’s troubles, he implies the libido’s very animateness could be subject to individual differences. Some libidos are weak in that they lack the very drive that defines the sexual instinct *as* a drive. In this admission, Freud offers an opportunity to critique the very definition of the sexual instinct as a biological force with energy, purpose, and meaning. This dissertation dares to think that some people just aren’t that driven by the sexual instinct.

⁵ I discuss the relationship between perversion and neurosis further in Chapter 1.

⁶ Some people may have been having less reproductive sex in the modern period, not necessarily because of a pathology but due to a series of cultural-historical factors that Freud minimizes. In England, beginning in the 1870s, fertility rates began to level off dramatically until the 1930s, at which point they had reached “a low of 1.7 children per woman” (Cook 923). Although “direct methods of birth control” were growing, historians of sexuality argue that this decline was mostly due to “intimate sexual restraint within and outside marriage” or abstinence from reproductive intercourse (923). Cook argues there is no evidence that suggests this decline in heterosexual sex was the result of pressure from eugenicists or other governmental forms of population control.

If Freud's notion of the "weaker sexual instinct" provides fodder for a critique of libidinal supremacy during the modern age, it also affords an opportunity to describe the affective, political, and aesthetic possibilities that proliferate *athwart*, or to the side of, the subject of sexuality. I borrow the term "athwart" from Wiegman and Wilson as a way to acknowledge the fact that weak feelings move not against sexual norms but rather in an "intimate and complicit" manner with and alongside norms (11).⁷ Whereas Freud pathologizes neurotics, perverts, and other repressed figures for their libidinal problems, he mentions weakness with a certain casualness as if it were a norm itself. Although this dissertation mobilizes weak feelings to offer a critical counter-discourse to the assumption of libidinal supremacy in the modern age, weak feelings are not exactly *against* gender and sexual normativity writ large.

Specifically, weak feelings are "intimate and complicit" with normativity in the sense that they rely on the deployment of normative discourses of gender. Weak feelings cluster around figurations of female passionlessness and, as Freud's paper shows, can reinforce the notion that women and men are more different than alike when it comes to matters of sex. Freud claims that women are more likely to be neurotic than their more perverse brothers due to their "weaker sexual instinct." If the libido is natural and energetic in men, it is less so in women. As Felski summarizes this gender distinction, "On the one hand, . . . sexology and psychiatry encouraged a perception that everyone was potentially deviant; on the other, they inaugurated a differentiation between the pathologies of men and women" (181). While some feminist theorists have taken to reading hysteria and neurosis for its feminist protests, Felski's work locates examples of figurations of the "desiring subject" that "simultaneously [refuse] their typical representations of femininity" (184).

⁷ I alter Freud's language here—from weak instinct to weak feelings—because I want to get away from the idea that the libido is instinctual. For my discussion of the meaning of "feeling," see the next section of this introduction.

Instead of following Felski's lead to uncover examples of perverse and gender nonnormative women or expose the secret political and sexual desires of neurotic subjects, this dissertation inhabits and mobilizes the association of femininity with a "weaker sexual instinct" for three interrelated aims. First, as I mentioned above, attending to representations of passionless femininity enables me to recuperate the weak feelings that are so often read as symptoms of a broken libido and undo their designation as pathologies. In so doing, this dissertation sidesteps the project of "democratizing desire" and takes up weak feeling as an opportunity to theorize attachment anew. In thinking through these feelings, I unpack the lockstep relationship between femininity and emotion as well as offer an opportunity for femininity to do conceptual work through its problematic relationship with desire rather than despite it.

Second, and relatedly, in so taking up femininity as a vehicle for weak feeling, this dissertation challenges the dominant narrative of the history of sexuality which argues that, within the twentieth century, sexuality emerged as the central mode of organizing bodies, intimacies, and identities. Within this dominant model of sexuality, libidinal desire supposedly holds the key to our deepest identities—as Freud theorized desire, it's an instinct that determines our entire personalities—but this dissertation explores how femininity troubles the explanatory power of the libido through competing notions of female passionlessness. I attend to how weak feelings cluster around femininity in order to exploit the discursive incoherence femininity causes for sexuality. In this dissertation, femininity as a vehicle for weak feelings undermines not only the characterization of the libido as instinctual, energetic and essential but also the very effectiveness of the system of sexuality as a disciplinary system for women's bodies and subjectivities. In the following chapters, I take up this discursive incoherence as an occasion to

rethink some of the key concepts of sexuality studies such as the confession, pleasure, the sexual secret, sexual repression, and, of course, libidinal desire.

Finally, exploring the relationship between femininity and weak feeling, this dissertation follows Wiegman and Wilson's call to think "queer theory without antinormativity" (2). One of the results of a queer theory focused on antinormativity, as I will discuss in Chapter 1, is that femininity is often characterized as a treacherous "swamp" for women, one that must be avoided through queer-feminist alignment with either gender neutrality, female masculinity, perversity, inversion, or anti-reproductivity. Looking at femininity through the lens of weak feelings enables us to see femininity anew, to take it on as a methodological opportunity for queer studies and an epistemological problem in the libidinal age. Throughout this dissertation, femininity becomes an opportunity to look more carefully at normativity and destabilize the position that heterosexuality holds in queer studies as that which all other queer identities and sexualities must and do oppose.

Why Feelings? Affect, Attachment, and Sexuality Studies

At this point, I imagine that some readers might be wondering: but what about sex? Isn't sex what makes sexuality studies *sexuality studies*? For several decades, as I discuss in Chapter 1, queer studies projects have typically undermined aspects of disciplinary sexuality by focusing on forms of bodily pleasure that destabilize the coherence of the sexual subject. In so doing, queer studies not only questions the distinction between forms of sexuality (the heterosexual/homosexual binary, for instance) but also expands the definition "sex" from its status as heterosexual, orgasmic intercourse to include everything from reading to fist-fucking.⁸

⁸ For reading as sex, see Kathryn Bond Stockton, "Surfacing (in the Heat of Reading): Is It Like Kissing or Some Other Sex Act?" *J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists* 3.1 (2015): 7–13. For fist-fucking, see David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 91–94.

My project, however, takes a counterintuitive leap in its attempt to denaturalize the sexual instinct within the libidinal age. If queer studies has cashed in on the idea that everything is sex, this dissertation imagines that *nothing* is sex. By taking up weak feeling, I aim to contract the definition of sex in order to find instances of attachments that spring from affect rather than libidinal desire.

But what exactly is “affect”? Because affect studies is an interdisciplinary field bringing together scholarship from neuroscience, psychology, and cultural studies, those seeking to define the term “affect” struggle with concise definition and cite its lack of definition as part of its usefulness.⁹ I define affect broadly as any psychological and/or physical sensation, perception, or mood that connects one thing to another, be it a character to another character; a character to a narrator; a reader to a text; any of these categories to an idea, an inanimate object, an environment, or another feeling. But within this dissertation, I also specifically use “affect” (interchangeably with “emotion” and “feeling”) in order to designate those bodily and psychic states that are subsumed and consolidated under the libido within the psychoanalytic rubric of the drive system.¹⁰ As I mentioned in the previous section, Freud imagines that all psychological and bodily states can be traced back to a disturbance in the libido. In psychoanalysis (and often within queer studies of sexuality), libidinal desire acts as the “glue” of relationships, providing the structure and shape of subject-object relations (Sedgwick 18). In producing a hierarchy between libidinal desire and feeling, libidinal desire does not exclude emotion but rather “views emotion primarily as a vehicle or manifestation of an underlying libidinal drive” (18). Under this privileging of the libido, weak feelings become known as mere appendages to the drive system.

⁹ For a definition of affect along these lines, see Melissa Gregg, and Gregory J. Seigworth, eds., *The Affect Theory Reader* (Duke University Press, 2010).

¹⁰ I use the terms affect, emotion, and feeling interchangeably because I see little use in distinguishing them for this project. Their distinction, I have noted, usually relies on the reproduction of the mind/body, conscious/unconscious, or transgressive/normative binary.

Throughout this dissertation, I follow Eve Sedgwick's attempt to undo the "habitual subordination of affect to drive" in order to describe and analyze feelings as though libidinal desire did not have ultimate causative and explanatory power (18). I set libido aside precisely in order to critique its prominence in psychoanalytic, modernist, and queer epistemologies of attachment and to unpack feelings such as embarrassment, grief, and interest as entities unto themselves. While Sedgwick's ruminations on Henry James and Marcel Proust provide models for this project, I focus on weak feelings that cluster around femininity (within texts by both men and women) in order to correct what Susan Lanser has called the "gender imbalance in queer studies" (*The Sexuality of History* 4). Moreover, I find that focusing on femininity offers specific epistemological opportunities that masculinity cannot because, first, as I have already shown, femininity has the benefit of having a less productive relationship to the libido than masculinity and, second, feelings and femininity are in an over-determined relationship. A project on weak feelings not only brings affect to bear on sexuality studies but also attends to the sticky relationship of femininity to feeling.

In focusing on feeling, I intend to shift the critical terrain of queer studies from the study of sexuality to what I refer to as "attachment." If libidinal desire is the glue within the disciplinary system of sexuality, then weak feelings act as the connecting tissue of attachments. Throughout this dissertation, attachment acts as an umbrella term for the connections and disconnections that weak affects make; attachment, in other words, is the *syntax* of the object relations described here. When I refer to "sexuality," I am calling upon the Foucauldian notion of sexuality as the disciplinary system that emerges to govern bodies, identities, and pleasures in the modern era. I take up the term "attachment" as an alternative to sexuality primarily because attachment, while still being about relationships between subjects and objects, has no specific

meaning within sexuality studies and, thus, can be more easily reframed as ungoverned by libidinal desire.

In contrast to sexuality's status as key to identity, attachment has no particular link to identity formation (at least in queer studies).¹¹ Whereas sexuality has a specific relationship to medical, juridical, and institutional power in modernity, especially in its usage within psychoanalysis and sexology, attachment lacks sexuality's over-determined relationship to discipline. As I will show, most of the affects that I take up are either seen as out-of-date in the modern era (sentimentality or susceptibility) or too minor to merit attention from psychoanalysis unless they are directly connected to the libido (liking, embarrassment, surprise, interest, sadness). While the attachments discussed in this dissertation can be sticky (infused with gendered ideologies and problematic in their association with feminine passivity), they lack official designation as forms of sexuality—heterosexual, homosexual, or otherwise—or as an extension of Oedipal kinship. Whereas sexuality is known primarily through confession and incites discourse, the attachments studied here are often opaque, reticent, or ignorable.

Weak Modernism and Surface Reading

This dissertation explores four fictions, published between 1899 and 1927: Henry James's *The Awkward Age*; E.M. Forster's *Howards End*; Elizabeth Bowen's *The Hotel*; and Rosamond Lehmann's *Dusty Answer*. These fictions tend toward lethargy and vibration instead of clear-cut action. They privilege stillness and interiors. They often end almost where they began, uncommitted to change or growth. They draw upon the formal elements of realist fiction. In their citation of psychoanalysis, they satirize or shrug off repression, neurosis, and hysteria. Reticent

¹¹ "Attachment" has a specific meaning in late-twentieth-century psychology, but I do not intend to invoke attachment theory in this dissertation.

and remote, these novels display rippling surfaces and opaque encounters instead of what Virginia Woolf calls the “dark places of psychology” (“Modern Fiction” 156).

With these thematic, political, and formal properties, these fictions of weak feelings depart from modernism as it tends to be characterized within dominant narratives of this literary movement. Following the example set by Benjamin Kahan’s *Celibacies: American Modernism and Sexual Life* and Heather Love’s *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, this dissertation seeks to tell a story of an alternative modernism, one that departs from modern fiction’s association with speed, drive, and sexual expression. In so doing, it intends to break apart the historical, thematic, and formal convergence of psychoanalysis and high modernism to add to growing number of accounts of alternative genealogies of modernism and modern fiction within literary studies.¹² Each chapter addresses how the novels collected here lend themselves to undoing the congruence between psychoanalysis and some modernist texts, especially in their shared methods of knowing the libidinal subject.

High modernist fiction, so the story goes, “evoke[s] the power of unconscious desire” and draws its narrative energy from “that which lies beneath the surface of British decorum” (Boone 70). In so doing, it breaks the rules and bucks the censors. Expressive and revelatory, it leaves behind Victorian prudishness and reveals the secret depths of the sexual subject. Full of intercourse, masturbation, pissing, menstruation, and defecation, novels written between the 1870s and 1930s contained a deluge of “sexualized obscene bodies,” and this “literary drive towards frankness” prompted an exponential increase in persecutions for literary obscenity

¹² For example, see especially Joseph Allen Boone, *Libidinal Currents: Sexuality and the Shaping of Modernism* (University of Chicago Press, 1998). This dissertation is less interested in following the specifics of the cross-pollinations between psychoanalysis and modernism than in gesturing toward what they both have in common as methods of knowing sex, sexuality, and subjectivity in the early twentieth century and in sketching out points of convergence in order to provide background for my analysis.

(Potter 3). Both psychoanalysis and modernism place sexuality at the center of the modern subject, and some modernists, such as D.H. Lawrence, drew directly from Freud's theory of the sexual instinct as part of their own theories of sexual liberation.

In contrast, the novelists and novels brought together in this dissertation deemphasize the importance of sexuality to the subject's life, health, and expression. While *Dusty Answer* led some to question Rosamond Lehmann's "modesty," Lehmann bemoaned this image of herself as a sexual revolutionary to insist that her novel was not about sex. Dismissive of the craze for sexual explicitness by modern writers, Elizabeth Bowen joked that, by the time the 1930s rolled around, it had become commonplace for modernist writers to "shock" readers with images of lesbianism: she wrote to a friend in 1932, "If I write a story about two women called 'Barren Love, shall I bring [my publication press] in for the tail end of the homosexuality romp?" (qtd. in Glenndinning 239). Pioneering gay activists referred to E.M. Forster as the "Closet Queen of the Century" because he declined to publish his explicit gay novel, *Maurice*, during his lifetime; this jab prompted a scholarly volume dedicated to finding what was "queer" about Forster (Reed 76). Finally, Henry James has figured in queer studies as consistently toeing the boundary between silence and suggestiveness, the explicit and the implicit, but as I will show, *The Awkward Age* conceives of confessions, sexual and otherwise, as less than titillating. While both Forster and James publish these novels prior to the widespread citation of psychoanalysis, Bowen and Lehmann offer a chance to investigate the satirical dismissal of Freudian notions of repression in their heyday.

Each of the novels analyzed here share a focus on young women who are "coming of age" but do so without recourse to the libidinal energy that characteristically powers that genre. Typically, the modern *bildungsroman* represents the movement from youth to experience;

(sexual) innocence to (sexual) knowledge; single to married; or, as in the case of the modernist *kunstlerroman*, artistic promise to artistic achievement. What makes these fictions of weak feeling stand apart, however, is the fact that they obscure the genre's developmental payoff. All of these figurations of modern femininity end in impasse, without marriages, psychological revelations, or even sublimated desire in the form of aesthetic attainment. Key to this developmental stasis is the fact that these fictions lack the libidinal drive that powers the coming-of-age novel. These texts don't imagine that anyone is going anywhere with speed or experiencing the natural awakening of a sexual instinct (for either sex). Rather, each text focuses on the libido-less-ness of its protagonist—their lethargy, stasis, or recalcitrance.

As I discuss in the following chapters, some readers have interpreted this developmental lack as evidence of a diseased libido while others see these texts as witnessing the claustrophobic aspects of female passionlessness. As I will argue, both accounts effectively naturalize the libido in its minoritized meaning (as a sexual instinct) and its universalized stance (as the drive that makes things happen), and thus, adopt a psychoanalytic understanding of development and the drive system. In contrast to these readers, I recognize these texts as offering an opportunity to set the libidinal subject aside. Instead of attempting to decode the problem of desire, I look at how these texts represent nonlibidinal feelings and see these figurations of femininity without libidinal desire as an opportunity to inhabit the forms of affect that are subsumed under the logic of the drive system. I make a case for seeing the attachment represented within these texts—to other characters, things, and ideas—not as failures, successes, or blockages of the libido but as forms of attachment in and of themselves.

Formally, these novels of weak feeling offer an alternative to what often has been seen as axiomatic to canonical modernism. Departing from that formal element which is usually known

as central to modernist stylistic innovation, these novels rarely make use of either stream-of-consciousness narration or focalized free indirect discourse. These narrative methods, often associated with modernism, purport to reveal the psychological depths of the modern subject by “exposing the repressions and ruptures that subtend consciousness” (Boone 7). Expressiveness, especially expressiveness about sexuality, gives the impression of psychological as well as artistic depth. While Freudian psychoanalysis listened to confessions and utilized symbol analysis to know the truth of the subject, the modernist novel developed these formal strategies to give the sense of being inside the head of another. Both psychoanalysis and high modernism imagine that “there is some interpretive depth reality which is more true than surface appearance” (Frosh 123).

In contrast, the fictions under examination here neglect the dominant formal techniques of modernism. Each of the following chapters explores fictional methods of representing subjectivity and attachment that focus on “surfaces” rather than depths. *The Awkward Age* utilizes an omniscient narrator, thereby differing from James’s “late” fictions, which are often seen as predecessors of the modernist psychological novel. Forster’s *Howard End* likewise retains elements from realist fiction such as copious dialogue and a noticeable, fairly cheeky narrator. While Bowen’s work has been recuperated into modernist literary canons in the past years, her first novel, *The Hotel*, teases readers with a glimpse of internal consciousness but neglects full psychological exposure. Through its deployment of the sentimental mode, Lehmann’s *Dusty Answer* offers the text least recognizable as formally modernist in this dissertation.

Methodologically, this dissertation takes up the recent turn toward what has been termed “surface reading” in queer and literary studies. Surface reading has taken numerous forms—

including Eve Sedgwick’s reparative reading; Heather Love’s thick description; Rita Felski’s “neophenomenology”; and Sharon Marcus’s just reading—but they all, in one form or another, depart from reading methods that aim to excavate the secrets of a given text. Reading for what is beyond or underneath the text—variously called critical, suspicious, or paranoid reading—was the dominant reading practice in queer and literary studies before critiques of this practice prompted the invention of interpretive methods that focused on what a text says instead of what it doesn’t say. Within queer studies, critical reading has offered a robust method for illuminating forms of desire that have been disavowed, censored, or closeted. In lesbian studies, this form of reading revealed female same-sex desire when it was rendered invisible or ghostly and opened up ways of locating the homoerotic within the homosocial.¹³ Through this practice, queer readers overturned the myth of lesbian impossibility. Moreover, this critical hermeneutic provides a robust way to know power and power relations. It renders visible how power resides not just within institutions, ideologies, and discourses but also within forms of resistance and identity. As a critical reading practice, it is invaluable for revealing how sexuality, even when it feels personal, is a technology of power.

For these reasons, I have not completely abandoned suspicious reading within the pages of this dissertation. Critical reading practices allow me to unpack the prominence of the libido and read against the grain within psychoanalysis to locate weak feeling. Surface reading exists as a response to critical fatigue and, thus, is bound intimately to critical reading practices. But, as I will discuss in Chapter 1, suspicious reading practices within queer studies mirror psychoanalytic methods of knowing through their mutual faith in demystification, depth, and libidinal desire. For this reason, surface reading offers this dissertation an opportunity to sideline the libido’s

¹³ For a full discussion of this practice, see Chapter 1.

explanatory power and develop readings that attend to forms of embodied attachment and feeling. In taking up this method, this dissertation “look[s] carefully at rather than through *appearances*” to unpack the attachments so often subsumed under libidinal desire (Felski 31).

While I suggested above that the texts considered by this dissertation position themselves athwart libidinal desire through their formal and thematic properties, I also want to acknowledge that my ability to conceptualize these texts as weak in their attachments depends upon my adoption of this particular methodology of surface reading. Admittedly, it would be possible to read these texts psychoanalytically—for their subconscious motivations, sexual and political repressions, and censorships—and as I will show in the following chapters, some of these novels have, indeed, been read through the lens of neurosis, perversion, hysteria, and repressed lesbianism. Surface reading has enabled this dissertation to resist the impulse “to ferret out ‘closeted’ content, which has necessarily been the paradigmatic reading practice of queer studies” and instead concentrate on what risks being dismissed as obvious, such as the fact that characters in these novels like each other (Lanser, unpublished). In this way, my dissertation utilizes surface methods of reading in the name of recuperating those weak feelings so often pathologized by psychoanalysis and ignored by queer studies.

Queer Fatigue, Or A Note on Terminology

In the search for weak feelings, this project took a number of unexpected turns, but at least one clear line runs through the trajectory of conducting this research and, thus, deserves noting in this introduction for its influence on my choice of terminology throughout. From the beginning of this project, I have felt “queer fatigue,” a hesitation about, even a frustration with, using the terminology “queer” to describe what I saw happening within the fictions of Bowen, Lehmann, Forster, and James. Early on, I knew that I wanted to set aside *both* libidinal desire and

the language that theorists in my field typically use to account for what is strange, unexpected, and non-normative.

While I set “queer” aside in favor of weak, this dissertation mobilizes my queer fatigue in its effort to take queer for a critical ride. I employ the term “queer” in these pages not to describe my primary objects of study but to think about queering as a form of knowledge production—as a form of queer study. Although queer is often deployed in both popular and academic discourse as an erotic or political mode, this dissertation takes it on as an epistemology—one that is good for illuminating certain objects and less good for illuminating others. Throughout this project, what I have found is that although queer prides itself as being beyond coherence—being a mobile positionality rather than an identity—queer is, in fact, wedded to a number of specific critical mainstays. Queer, I have found, can be as coherent as any of the things that it sets to queering. In the chapters that follow, I will investigate these queer allegiances—allegiances to nonnormativity, to pleasure, to open secrets, to resistance, to sex, and, yes, to libidinal desire—with the hope of subjecting queer to its own game.

Throughout, weak feeling stands in an alternative analytic to the queer methods for thinking women’s attachments in the past. As many genealogies of queer studies note, queer studies distinguished itself from gay and lesbian history and criticism by moving away from “the ground of a specific identity” in order to move toward “a general theory of sexuality that raised the profile of sexuality (or queer) studies to ‘outperform’ gay and lesbian studies” (Love 181). This move toward generalization, however, has caused some critics to allege that queer “loses the specific experiential and historical anchors that gave it meaning” causing the universalism of queer to look like a “false universalism” (183). In contrast, weak feeling offers an opportunity to

think about the specificity of women and sexuality together. Setting aside the queer, the weak feelings of femininity may emerge.

Despite the fact that none of my objects materialized into accounts of lesbian desire, the framework of the “lesbian” and the ability of lesbian studies to bring together gender and sexuality through a focus on women’s bodies, did enable the project in ways that I felt queer could not enable it. As Valerie Traub theorizes it, lesbianism moves from being the “the canonical form that now circulates globally as a modern identity category” to the more expansive analytic that attempts to account for “the presence of symptomatic preoccupations about the meanings of women’s bodies and behaviors” (85). In this way, it is fitting that the lesbian as a heuristic led me to this project even if I found weak feeling to be its most hardy analytical frame. Setting aside but not forgetting the lesbian, weak feeling emerged.

Chapter Overview

Each of this dissertation’s four chapters provides a literary case study that demonstrates what is afforded by inhabiting—rather than rejecting—femininity’s association with libidlessness. Organized around a central weak feeling, each chapter contests one or more aspects of the libido’s typical characterization and, in so doing, further defines the meaning of libidinal weakness. While all the weak feelings discussed here are not weak in the same ways, each feeling is remarkable for its distinction from libidinal forms of sexuality; its association with femininity; and its ability to cause epistemological trouble for the study of sexuality in the past.

Chapter 1, “Setting Libido Aside: Surface Reading Femininity in Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Hotel*,” continues the critique of libidinal hermeneutics launched in this introduction. It argues that one of the most common effects of the assumption of libidinal energy is the tendency for

queer theory to translate an absence of sexual desire into evidence of repression, censorship, or closeting. Taking Judith Butler's interpretation of Joan Riviere's "Womanliness as Masquerade" as an example of these queer, psychoanalytic reading methods, I examine how a libidinal hermeneutic works specifically to pigeonhole femininity as a traumatic gender identity founded on repressed same-sex desire.

Following this critique of queer reading methods, the chapter turns to expound upon the opaque attachment between two women in Elizabeth Bowen's first novel *The Hotel* (1927). Taking its ironic treatment of psychoanalytic hermeneutics as an invitation for surface reading, I argue that the novel engages femininity's association with libidinal lack through its representation of between-women "liking." The superficiality of "liking" short-circuits the queer attempt to uncover (lesbian) desire, providing a weak counterpoint to the emotional intensity and psychological depth of the libido. Overall, this chapter shows that, despite the fact that queer studies promises to put to bed the notion of a naturally occurring sexuality, the assumption of libidinal energy still plays a role in both what we know about sexuality and how we go about knowing it.

Chapter 2, "'Inexplicable Reactions': Affective Susceptibility in Rosamond Lehmann's *Dusty Answer*," investigates what I term "affective susceptibility" within Rosamond Lehmann's first novel, *Dusty Answer* (1927). Combining elements of modernist aesthetics with sentimental modes of storytelling, *Dusty Answer* provides an aesthetically hybrid text that features *both* representations of the libidinal subject associated with modernist narrative *and* sentimental figurations that imagine the female body as susceptible to contingent encounters with opaque objects and atmospheric feelings. While Chapter 1 investigates weak feeling as subdued emotional tenor and hermeneutic superficiality, Chapter 2 claims that weak feeling disorients the

subject/object relational syntax that sustains libidinal desire to contest psychoanalytic theories of the libido that imagine attachment as beginning in the energetic subject and extending to a passive object until interruption.

From here, Chapter 2 moves from aesthetics to epistemology, probing how Lehmann's aesthetically hybrid text maps onto divergent ways of (not) knowing sexuality in the past. Since the publication of Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality Vol.1*, a key tenant of sexuality studies is that libidinal desire exists in a "distinctively privileged relation to our most prized constructs of individual identity, truth, and knowledge" (Sedgwick 3). In contrast, discourses that surrounded sentimentality in the twentieth century yoke women's intimate confessions to inauthenticity, excess, and triviality. Analyzing readers' responses—both popular and academic, historical and current—to *Dusty Answer*, the chapter works through this paradoxical relation to consider how femininity's association with affective susceptibility problematizes the linkage between sexuality and personal truth. Throughout, the chapter offers *Dusty Answer* as a case study in how epistemologies of gender and sexuality (mis)align in early twentieth century popular literary culture.

If Chapter 1 discusses between-women relationships in an effort to theorize weak feeling as a form of attachment *between subjects*, Chapter 3, "Weak Will: Feminine Influence in E.M. Forster's *Howards End*," returns to figurations of female friendship to investigate how weak feelings shape attachments between subjects and nonhuman objects—specifically, political ideals and the material forms they take. The chapter begins with an overview of how feminist and queer readers ascribe political power to the intimate bonds represented within the fictions of E.M. Forster. Through an interrogation of the political knowledge produced around and through *Howards End* (1910), I argue that such a focus on Forster's representation of love (also known as

“friendship” or “comradeship”) equates political change with the sublimation of libidinal desire and, thus, reinforces the psychoanalytic tendency to equate properly channeled libidinal energy with civilization’s advancement.

From here, Chapter 3 shifts to advance a surface reading of *Howards End* that sets libidinally-infused love aside to pursue what I term “influence.” Zeroing in on the opacities of Ruth Wilcox’s weak will, I argue that feminine influence bewilders both political efficacy and the relationship between libidos and motivation. As a counterdiscourse to love, influence signifies as a form of political will that shrugs in the face of the future and the past to focus on what can be done in the present. The chapter ends with a discussion of how the religious movement of Spiritualism acts as a historical source for knowing libidinally weak forms of connection and power.

The final chapter, “Weak Knowing: Epistemologies of Interest in Henry James’s *The Awkward Age*,” concludes this dissertation by taking up a final aspect of the libido: its paradoxical disinterest in the specificity of its desired objects. Queer theorists have shown that desire operates to reduce the world, in Leo Bersani’s formation, to a mere “re-flection of the desiring subject.” At the same time, feminist theorists interpret heterosexuality not as the desire for specific, material women but as a mere occasion to extend and cement patriarchal or homosocial bonds. Taking up these theorizations, this chapter asks: can weak feeling reorient the study of sexuality around apprehending objects instead of creating subjects? From here, the chapter reads James’s *The Awkward Age* (1899) to trace how the novel represents the turn-of-the-century marriage market as motivated by object-sensitive “interest” rather than the egoism of libido. Shifting the queer focus from James’s representations of between-men relationships to those between men and women, I argue that interest is a weak form of attachment that attends to

what James calls “the object itself” and depends on comparison rather than the substitutive logic of desire.

Chapter 1

Setting Libido Aside: Surface Reading Femininity in Elizabeth Bowen's *The Hotel*

Two women sit at an outdoor cafe in an Italian resort town. To a passerby, they would appear “well-dressed, distinguished looking and leisurely.” They would exude “a graceful air of being friends, of being completed by one another.” Between them, however, things are more complicated. Sydney Warren, the younger of the two, is rattled, feeling almost like a child who “has upset a table of china” (Bowen 131). Mrs. Kerr, the older, speaks “gently” in an effort to diffuse the public tension and to explain what her young friend has failed to understand about their relationship: “I begin now to guess,” she says to Sydney,

you’ve expected much more of me, and that I’ve been taking and taking without so much as a glance ahead or a single suspicion of what you would want to have back . . . You see, I’m so fond of you, but . . . There is nothing else there. It had always seemed to me simple to like people and right to be liked, but I can never feel that much more is involved. Perhaps I am cold. (133-4)

With this, Mrs. Kerr asks Sydney to pay for their desserts and drinks, and the two women exit. As if nothing had happened, the older woman asks Sydney how they should spend the remainder of their leisurely day.

What immediately stands out about this moment taken from Elizabeth Bowen’s first novel *The Hotel* (1927) is Mrs. Kerr’s claim that she is not just disinterested in Sydney *but in everyone*. Mrs. Kerr can find it in her heart to be “fond” or to “like” but nothing more. It is not that Sydney simply isn’t “the one” for Mrs. Kerr or that her desire for Sydney has dwindled with

time and familiarity. Rather it is that there was *never* any feeling for Sydney or, as far as Mrs. Kerr can recall, for anyone.

Queer theorists tend to interpret a claim like Mrs. Kerr's as disingenuous, a sign of something buried and hidden.¹⁴ They would explain it as a screen for thinly veiled lesbianism; as a sign of Mrs. Kerr's closeted feelings. This kind of queer reading has been generative for studies of sexuality since Eve Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) inaugurated the deconstruction of the hetero/homo binary; and it has provided an important academic, and politically salient, method that insists on queer visibility throughout time and finds the homoerotic at the heart of the apparently heteronormative.¹⁵

In this chapter, however, I will shelve this method of queer reading, and all it can do and has done for queer theory. I do so because, as I will argue, queer theory's tendency to read figures like Mrs. Kerr through the heuristic of failed lesbianism re-inscribes the pathologization of women as neurotic or repressed as professed by early twentieth-century psychoanalysis. This kind of queer reading also makes it impossible for queer theory to take femininity seriously within the history and theory of sexuality.¹⁶ In what follows, I continue the critique of libidinal hermeneutics launched in this dissertation's introduction to argue that one of the most common

¹⁴ My thinking here has been influenced by Benjamin Kahan, *Celibacies: American Modernism and Sexual Life* (Duke University Press, 2013) in which he argues that queer theory tends to read celibacy as repressed same-sex desire. My purpose is to extend his insight to account for the similar position that figurations of femininity occupy in queer theory and queer readings of modernist fictions as repressed lesbianism. In studying the weak feelings that cluster around femininity, I aim to explore how attachments may lead to pleasure or erotic satisfaction but do not necessarily amount to an identifiable sexuality or sexual identity. Kahan argues for celibacy as a form of sexuality and a political identity. The weak feelings that I trace act as a counter-discourse to libidinal desire but, at least in the case of Elizabeth Bowen and her fiction, are too diffuse to be claimed as a political or sexual identity.

¹⁵ This method of queering fiction is pervasive. See, for instance, Eve Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (Columbia University Press, 1992); Kathryn Kent, *Making Girls into Women: American Women's Writing and the Rise of Lesbian Identity* (Duke University Press, 2002); Valerie Traub, "The Ambiguities of 'Lesbian' Viewing Pleasure: The (Dis)Articulations of *Black Widow*" in *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity* ed. Julia Epstein (Routledge, 1991), 305–28; and Patricia Juliana Smith, *Lesbian Panic: Homoerotics in Modern British Women's Fiction* (Columbia University Press, 1997).

¹⁶ I use the words "neurotic" and "repressed" interchangeably throughout the essay although there are subtle differences. "Neurotic" is a diagnosis for a category of person suffering from sexual repression while "repressed" signals the more diffuse state of having unconscious thoughts in need of expression.

effects of the assumption of libidinal energy is the tendency for queer theory to translate an absence of sexual desire into evidence of repression, censorship, or closeting. Taking Judith Butler's interpretation of Joan Riviere's "Womanliness as Masquerade" (1990) as an example of these queer, psychoanalytic reading methods, I examine how a libidinal hermeneutic works specifically to pigeonhole femininity as a traumatic gender identity founded on repressed same-sex desire.

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The Failures of Femininity

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, sexuality arguably became a new object of medical discourse.¹⁷ Central to this medical study of sexuality was the assumption of the naturalness of the sexual drive. Drawing on the work of sexologists such as Richard Von Krafft-Ebing, Albert Moll, Havelock Ellis, and Magnus Hirschfeld, Freud in his *Three Essays on*

¹⁷ See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley. First Edition. (Vintage, 1990); Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism*; Arnold Davidson, "How to Do the History of Psychoanalysis: A Reading of Freud's 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality,'" *Critical Inquiry* 13, no. 2 (1987): 252–77. David Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (Oxford University Press, 1997).

the Theory of Sexuality (1905) referred to the sex drive as an “instinct,” an innate aspect of human life. He compared this drive to the instinct for food, taking up the term “libido” as the carnal “counterpart” to hunger (1). Freud argued that the libido was not just instinctual but indispensable, a key aspect of human well-being and a fundamental analytic for understanding both healthy and “disturbed” psychological lives. For example, in his case study of hysteria in a patient referred to as Dora, he explains that sexuality “does not simply intervene, like a *deus ex machina*, on one single occasion” but acts as the “motive power for every single symptom, for every single manifestation of a symptom” (*Dora* 105). For Freud, when it came to the psyche, sexuality was the explanation for everything, especially, as Paul Morrison quips, “the explanation for everything bad.”¹⁸

Freud’s understanding of the relationship between sexuality, libido, and identity would become one of the dominant discourses of sexuality within Britain.¹⁹ During the long twentieth century, sexuality arguably emerged as the “truth” of the subject, or as David Halperin summarizes it, the “positive, distinct, and constitutive feature of the human personality, the characterological seat within the individual of sexual acts, desires, and pleasure—the determinate source from which all sexual expression proceeds.”²⁰ Queer theorists and historians of sexuality, many of whom follow the example set by Michel Foucault’s publication of *The History of Sexuality*, have sought to denaturalize this codification of the sexual instinct by rethinking desire as an “implantation” of discourse and a technique of disciplinary power rather than as innate

¹⁸ Paul A. Morrison, *The Explanation For Everything: Essays on Sexual Subjectivity* (New York University Press, 2002).

¹⁹ For an account of how Freudian psychoanalysis gradually replaced other methods of conceptualizing sexuality in Britain, see Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism*, 126-163; and Davidson, “How to Do the History of Psychoanalysis.” For the popularization of psychoanalysis, see Graham Richards, “Britain on the Couch: The Popularization of Psychoanalysis in Britain 1918—1940,” *Science in Context* 13, no. 02 (June 2000): 183–230.

²⁰ David M. Halperin, “Is There a History of Sexuality?,” *History and Theory* 28, no. 3 (1989): 257–74.

“expressivity” of the human self.²¹

While a full genealogy of this field is beyond the purview of this chapter, I want to foreground one major strand of queer studies that historicizes and deconstructs what early twentieth century sexologists, psychoanalysts, and psychiatrists saw as deviations of the sexual instinct categorized as “inversion” and “perversion.” The early twentieth-century definition of the sexual instinct did not just reference the desire to have erotic contact, broadly defined, but also referenced the urge to engage in “heterosexual, genital intercourse” in the name of species propagation. Under this medicalized rubric, manifestations of libidinal desire such as homosexuality, sadism, fetishism, and masochism all came to be understood as “perverse expression[s] of the sexual instinct” (Davidson 79). That is, as sexuality became known as a key aspect of psychological life, it was naturalized in one particular form, thereby marginalizing other manifestations of libidinal desire as “diseased.” Resisting this narrow heterosexual frame for understanding libidinal desire, much queer theory of the last two decades has focused on revaluing those practices, identities, and subcultures pathologized as deviations. Queer theorists argue that fist-fuckers, “cruisers, dyke bois, barebackers, and erotic vomiters” undo disciplinary discourses of sexuality and re-imagine what counts as desire (Jagose, “Counterfeit Pleasures” 519). This trajectory of queer theory has provided many lessons about the body’s “capacity for reterritorialization” and the ability for a sexual practice to “give rise to new inhabitable worlds” of pleasure instead of discipline (521).

And yet, as Annamarie Jagose has pointed out, certain kinds of bodily practices have become reified in queer scholarship: “The sexual scenarios that catch the light of critical

²¹ Annamarie Jagose, *Inconsequence: Lesbian Representation and the Logic of Sexual Sequence* (Cornell University Press, 2002), 88, summarizes this position: “Sexuality is less an expressivity than an implantation that requires us to take the strategies and effects of sexual discipline as the sites and signs of our most private and cherished sexual self.”

attention tend to the bent rather than the straight, the subcultural rather than the dominant, the urban rather than the suburban or rural, the anonymous rather than the monogamous.” Only a particular cast of characters function as the “paradigmatic referents” for queer theory to rethink sex and sexuality after its medicalization (519). This focus leaves potential lessons about the history and theory of sexuality from less-likely queer candidates unexplored. More importantly, these tried and true queer figures situate the sexual and the political in a lockstep to liberation. Sexual agency is assumed to equate with political agency; sexual life is political life. In so theorizing the world re-making power of fisting or s/m, queer theory reinforces sexuality’s primacy, its “allegorical force,” its centrality to the psyche. Even as they re-interpret or deconstruct the writings of Freud, his predecessors, and his followers, these queer theorists reiterate one of the primary assumptions of psychoanalysis: the supremacy of sex and sexuality. Some iterations of queer theory are invested specifically in the rhetorical, intimate, and transformative power of libidinal desire—its energy, its force, its agency, its fight with the social order. Privileged figures and sexual practices of queer theory pervert, invert, or otherwise disturb the libidinal object or aim but retain libidinal desire as the primary mode of cathexis. Even when divorced from identity categories and specific sexual practices, queer theory tends to mythologize sexuality as “an undomesticated, unsymbolizable force” (de Lauretis 245).²² In this

²² Not all queer theory is reverent when it comes to psychoanalysis. Arguably, the field was founded on a critique of psychoanalysis leveled by Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*. But psychoanalysis still has a strong hold on queer theory with some of the field’s most prominent thinkers turning to psychoanalysis for its hermeneutic power. See, for example, Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Duke University Press, 2004); Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013). In addition to those queer scholars who draw directly from psychoanalysis, many allude to the rhetorical power of the libido when writing about the subversive power of queer desire, sex, or cathexis, imputing libidinal levels of energy and agency to queer subjects. José Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009) depends on the world-transformative power of queer sex and attachment. Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press, 2011), 29, argues for subversion of the entire neoliberal economy through queer “forms of embodiment and desire [that] are central to the struggle against corporate domination” (29). My interest in weak feeling mirrors those queer scholars who turn to affect to make smaller, more local claims for what queer sex, identity, and politics can and cannot do such as Eve Sedgwick, *The Weather in Proust* (Duke University Press,

way, the instinctual energy of the Freudian libido is left intact even as that libido shifts its ultimate purview from reproducing the species via traditional means to a kind of cultural reproduction based on shared sexual practice, marginalization, resistance, or loss of signification.

One of the most common effects of this privileging of libidinal energy is the tendency for queer theory to see an absence of sexual desire as evidence of repression, censorship, or closeting. In his project on celibacy, Benjamin Kahan critiques queer reading practices for their tendency “to interpret [the] ‘absence’” of sexual acts as “‘evidence’ of same-sex eroticism” (3). Similarly, I contend that due to the privileging of libidinal energy, queer readers interpret the absence of sexual desire as it coalesces around figurations of femininity within the twentieth century as evidence of repressed lesbianism, effectively translating any attachment that is not heteronormative into an instance of female same-sex desire.

Judith Butler’s reading of Joan Riviere’s “Womanliness as Masquerade” (1929) acts as an exemplary instance of this critical practice of finding lesbianism beneath what is perceived as feminine sexual repression. Riviere’s famous essay is a case study of a woman who adopts a feminine demeanor and appearance in order to disguise her masculinity. For Riviere, this “masquerade” effectively collapses the distance between being feminine and appearing feminine.²³ Although she adopts Riviere’s suggestion that being feminine is actually a process of performing femininity, Butler balks at the psychoanalyst’s insistence that her subject’s femininity is not just a mask for lesbian desire: “Riviere would have us believe,” she writes skeptically, “that this curious typology cannot be reduced to a repressed female homosexuality”

2011); Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Duke University Press, 2002); and Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Harvard University Press, 2007).

²³ See Joan Riviere, “Womanliness as a masquerade,” in *The Inner World and Joan Riviere: Collected Papers 1929-1958* (London; New York: New York: Karnac Books, 1991), 90-101.

(71).²⁴ Fueling the fire of *Gender Trouble*'s most powerful thesis—that gender is “a phantasmatic ideal that cannot be copied without failure”—Butler argues that femininity is a fundamental sign of repressed homosexuality: in taking up femininity, women become “the object [they] forbid [themselves] to love” (72). Butler’s canonical reading exemplifies the queer tendency to read identification with femininity as a repressed or sublimated lesbian practice, thereby conflating gender and sexuality in a way that has proven powerful, no where more so than in queer/feminist studies of modern fiction.²⁵

In this reading, Butler distances her argument from the psychoanalytic construction of the libidinal position as the masculine position, finding lesbian desire at the heart of womanliness; but, in so doing, she reinforces the hermeneutic power of the libido. Although Butler follows Foucault in arguing against the libidinal drive as a “prediscursive, temporally primary, and ontologically discrete” entity, she nonetheless retains the importance of the libido when discussing the formation of femininity as the result of a repressed libidinal drive (89). Effectively she collapses gender into sexuality. In this move, Butler reproduces the Freudian hermeneutic that pathologizes disinterest in sex as neurosis.

For Freud, disinterest in sex is an invitation for medical intervention; for queer theory, disinterest in sex is an opportunity to unearth queer sex. Because of the libido’s supposed innateness, Freud is unable to comprehend someone who is actually without libidinal desire,

²⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Psychology Press, 1990), also claims that Riviere eschews heterosexual desire but seeks to theorize specifically the repression of lesbianism for the sake of her queer argument.

²⁵ For example, see Kent, *Making Girls into Women: American Women’s Writing and the Rise of Lesbian Identity*, analyzes multiple forms of mass culture—novels, the girl scouts, public schools, sentimental literature, and poetry—to suggest that modern lesbian identity has its roots in the U.S. in middle class white women’s culture and its focus on the mother’s role in the pedagogies of self-making, suggesting that at the heart of all femininity lies lesbian desire. Rohy, *Impossible Women*, 117 takes up Butler’s idea that femininity is a “melancholic formation” of repressed lesbian desire. Smith, *Lesbian Panic*, excavates repressed lesbians within modernist women’s fiction. I will describe the argument made by Maud Ellmann, *Elizabeth Bowen: The Shadow Across the Page* (Edinburgh University Press, 2003) in greater detail in the next section of this essay.

unable to take seriously the declaration of a disinterest in sex, and sees sex where there is none.²⁶

When Butler constructs femininity as a traumatic gender identity founded on repressed lesbianism, she repeats Freud's belief in the impossibility of libidinal fatigue. In effect, both fail to imagine a body undisciplined by the absence of libidinal energy, the paradoxical position of desiring *not* to desire.

Overall, Butler's reading of femininity is a paranoid one. Her analysis—in this specific instance and elsewhere in *Gender Trouble*—depends upon the excavation of hidden meanings buried within cultural texts. Femininity holds a secret and that secret is repressed lesbian desire.²⁷ In response, I ask: what if we assume that femininity isn't motored always and exclusively by libidinal desire? What if we assume that femininity has nothing to hide? In the following section, I begin to argue that Bowen's novel invites just such a surface reading. Focusing on the characterization of Mrs. Kerr, I show that Bowen's figuration of femininity pushes against the queer/psychoanalytic tendency to look for the repressed libidinal energy that flows beneath the surface of the text by equating femininity not with libidinal repression but with superficiality and libidinal indolence.

Surface Reading Femininity: The Weakness of Mrs. Kerr

In *The Hotel*, Bowen gathers a motley cast of English vacationers under the roof of an unnamed seashore hotel in Italy. Crowding together men and women, the young and old, the married and the unmarried, the novel describes the medley of interpersonal encounters resulting from this holiday mash-up. James Milton, a clergyman, insults the wealthy Pinkerton sisters by

²⁶ Freud, *Dora*, 43 writes, "All psychoneurotics are persons with strongly marked perverse tendencies, which have been repressed in the course of their development and have become unconscious." In other words, sexual disinterest is an impossible position so all neurotics are only readable as repressed perversions or inversion.

²⁷ See Eve Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," for an in-depth analysis of Butler's paranoid methods.

accidentally washing up in their bathroom using their personal loofah. An unmarried couple, Veronica and Victor, embarrass and titillate other hotel guests with sloppy kisses and sloppier dessert consumption. Colonel Duperrier flirts with women half his age and only half-interested in his advances while his wife languishes in their room upstairs. The characters in Bowen's novel eat, sleep, bathe, buy, and talk. They read, sit, look, play, and walk. One day, they dance. Bowen's chapter titles reflect the everydayness of these events: "Quarrel," "Late for Lunch," and "Going Away" (7; 19; 193). On holiday from their fictional lives as students, businessmen, wives, and officers, their affairs are leisurely and relatively aimless. Nobody in this hotel does much out of the ordinary or, for that matter, much at all. *The Hotel* is a novel about and on vacation.

By far, Mrs. Kerr is the character most at home in the novel's laid-back setting. She is profoundly idle, sitting still for hours and indulging in daily afternoon naps. Her eyes are depicted as closed, half-closed, or "vacant" (153). She can't seem to finish a novel and "forgets" when a kettle is on for tea (64). In a hotel full of people on vacation, Mrs. Kerr is an exemplary vacationer. In fact, some hotel patrons declare that Mrs. Kerr is *too* comfortable with rest and relaxation. Early on, a group of hotel wives gossip about the fact that Mrs. Kerr does "nothing" all day (59). An unnamed critic opines: "I cannot think . . . what a woman of that sort finds to do with herself . . . She has no interests. She hasn't a large correspondence, she does nothing at all for herself" (58). If the other women at the hotel find ways to busy themselves in unproductive ways—in this case, "embroidering something unpractical and therefore permissible"—Mrs. Kerr is content to be immersed in the task of doing nothing.

Mrs. Kerr's ability to do nothing, however, cannot be left alone by the sewing circle and, soon enough, it draws a form of paranoid reading suggestively akin to the queer/psychoanalytic

reading that I described in the previous section. The gossipy conversation turns from Mrs. Kerr's laziness to speculation about what her lack of productivity *hides*. When one woman claims that Mrs. Kerr "must think a good deal" because "nobody could do absolutely nothing all day and look so very superior about it, like a cat," others agree that there must be something more to Mrs. Kerr and her behavior (59). Finally, they decide that her idleness, her comfort with staring out into nothingness, conceals an enigma: "That woman," claims one, "has something at the back of her mind" (59). Exactly *what* that "something" is "would be impossible to say" (59). Whether these women do not *know* Mrs. Kerr's secret or believe they know and only *refuse* to utter that secret aloud, her lethargy is seen as a target for exposure. From here, through the paranoid eyes of the sewing circle, Mrs. Kerr's *absence* of meaning becomes the *presence* of hidden and, thus, ominous meaning. Whatever is "at the back of [Mrs. Kerr's] mind," it isn't a good influence on the novel's central character, Sydney: the opaque "attachment" between them, the sewing circle says, isn't "quite healthy" (60). Much like queer/psychoanalytic readers I discussed above, the hotel matrons come to believe that repressed (not to mention, suggestively sexual) meaning could afford insight into Mrs. Kerr's behavior at the hotel.

But if Bowen's novel enacts a paranoid form of (sexual) knowledge production within this scene, it also distances itself from that form of reading in relation to Mrs. Kerr. While the scene references the modern alignment of secrets with repressed sexuality, the tone of the scene takes up that alignment with a satirical edge. The sewing circle—and the knowledge that its members (don't) produce—is trivialized, associated with idle chatter by mostly unnamed characters who are trying to pass the time and "get through" their "days abroad" (58). Moreover, Bowen suffuses the scene with a central irony: the pathologization of Mrs. Kerr depends upon behavior that is, in fact, *ordinary*. The sewing circle is at pains to distinguish how they wile away

the time—sewing something that has no practical purpose—from how Mrs. Kerr wastes her time by doing nothing. The dividing line they draw between their normal vacation behavior and Mrs. Kerr’s excessive idleness is thin at best. This scene suggests that a deep reading of Mrs. Kerr—and of her secret—is misplaced if not laughable. In sum, Bowen both represents and critiques paranoid reading practices.

Elsewhere in the novel, Bowen suggests that Mrs. Kerr is too superficial in her meanings and motivations to be hiding anything. As the novel’s locus of what the narrator terms “sheer femininity,” Mrs. Kerr’s characterization draws upon the association of femininity with triviality and a concern for surfaces (107). Mrs. Kerr is frivolous. She decorates her hotel room with flowers and useless “ornaments” that have “the evident air of being appreciated” (70). To Sydney’s dismay, she eats dessert in the middle of the day and likes to read books for “amusement” (18). She can’t get through the serious volumes that Sydney recommends, preferring depthless reading to academic study (18). Furthermore, Mrs. Kerr concerns herself not with the meaning of things but with how they appear to others. During their spat at the *pâtisserie*, Mrs. Kerr tells Sydney not to look so angry: “You know how reprehensible I am, how I do like my friends to be pleasant” (130).

All this suggests that Mrs. Kerr’s superficial, lazy femininity might be defined not by repressed desire but by libidinal indolence. In other words, the libidinal energy that psychoanalysis connects to hidden motivations, psychological depths, and repressed lesbian desire does not appear to drive Mrs. Kerr’s characterization. One of the novel’s scenes makes this point with particular clarity. When Mrs. Kerr’s son, Ronald, visits the hotel, he attempts to share his declaredly feminist viewpoint that women may “canal the natural forces” which compel them to seek motherhood and work to “understand themselves” (109). In response, Mrs. Kerr

declares: “Oh! But I don’t feel as if I had got any natural forces” (109). In the face of her son’s attempt to read below her superficiality and to forgive her for ignoring him all these years, she denies that there is anything below her surface in need of forgiveness, expression, or explanation.

Overall, the libidinal hermeneutics of paranoid reading are misplaced when brought to bear upon the “sheer femininity” of Mrs. Kerr because her femininity is defined by a *lack* of libidinal energy. The novel, in fact, encourages surface reading not only of Mrs. Kerr’s characterization but also of her attachment to Sydney. Despite what the sewing circle thinks, Bowen’s novel writ large suggests that Mrs. Kerr’s feelings for Sydney are weak. Recall her speech from the beginning of this chapter:

I begin now to guess [that] you’ve expected much more of me, and that I’ve been taking and taking without so much as a glance ahead or a single suspicion of what you would want to have back . . . You see, I’m so fond of you, but . . . There is nothing else there. It had always seemed to me simple to like people and right to be liked, but I can never feel that much more is involved. Perhaps I am cold (133-34).

In light of Mrs. Kerr’s libidinal weakness, this moment of dialogue reads as a kind of plea for surface reading. She begs both Sydney and Bowen’s reader the she be taken “for granted” (72). There is no need to read her deeply because “there is nothing . . . there” to be read (113). And, lest the reader think that Mrs. Kerr is so repressed that she can’t even admit her own repression, her admission comes without the usual psychic “symptoms” of repression, at least as they are typified in early twentieth century psychoanalysis. Her speech is clear and logical. She is not plagued by anxiety or paranoia. Moreover, with Mrs. Kerr’s admittance, “Perhaps I am cold,”

Bowen gestures toward an awareness that, within a libidinal frame, there is no way to be disinterested in sex without being pathologized; but, by putting this admission in Mrs. Kerr's mouth, she also preempts the psychoanalytic "discovery" of her character's "coldness." The diagnosis, thus, loses some of its power of surprise. It anticipates what one might find beneath Mrs. Kerr's explanation, undoing some of the psychoanalytic power of exposure and interpretation.

Importantly, Mrs. Kerr's account of the mildness of her relationship with Sydney does not impede an attachment to her; rather, it enables a form of weak attachment. Her feeling for Sydney is not a screen for another, more passionate form of intimacy but a form of intimacy *in and of itself*—which is why Mrs. Kerr sees no problem in continuing their relationship after what we might initially read as a lesbian break-up scene or a repression-of-lesbian-desire scene. This kind of intimacy is not easily recognizable within our typical frameworks for classifying intimacy as romantic or friendly, platonic or passionate, identificatory or desirous. Mrs. Kerr "likes" Sydney and professes to enjoy the circular aimlessness of "liking" and "being liked" in return. Mrs. Kerr's attachment refuses to build toward something bigger; it is recursive and non-developmental, like a stitch sewn only to be unsewn. In contrast to the future-driven, forward movement of libidinal desire, Mrs. Kerr's weak feeling prompts her to give not "a glance ahead."

At the same time, this weakness of affection cannot be reduced to the usual feminist and queer image of female friendship as an egalitarian social relation free from the pressures attributed to the presence of libidinal desire.²⁸ Mrs. Kerr does not need the forcefulness and energy of the libido to take, take, and take some more from Sydney. The characteristic image of the libido is an economic model of build up, followed by the release of expenditure. Mrs. Kerr,

²⁸ See Sianne Ngai, "Competitiveness: From 'Sula to Tyra,'" *Women's Studies Quarterly* (2006): 107–39 for a critique of this tendency to read for egalitarianism in feminist and queer theory.

in contrast, has an endless capacity for receptivity; but what exactly she takes is left to the imagination. Her feeling is not attached to a particular object or aim. It surrounds Sydney ambiguously, like a warm bath or a suffocating miasma.

Depending on how you look at her, Mrs. Kerr's disinterest in desire and/or sex offers two kinds of political story. On the one hand, Mrs. Kerr might be said to project a familiar tale about the disciplinary norms of white bourgeois femininity, to harken back to an over-determined Victorian sense of female "passionlessness." An older woman, she could be read as the relic of a generation past that generation's time, living in a modern world where to be passionless is not evidence of white womanhood's civilization but of its problematic sexual repression. On the other hand, plopped as she is in the late 1920s, Mrs. Kerr's sense of being outside of her "own" time might be said to resist the new sexual order, the invention of the hetero/homo binary but also of sexuality as the truth of the self writ large. Situated as she is on the cusp on two figurations, the last weakness of this scene is a political one. The weakness of Mrs. Kerr pushes against our queer attempt to join the political and the sexual in one lockstep movement toward liberation. She might be ordinary; she might be extraordinary. In either formation, she pushes against our tendency to depend on the importance of sexual expression, on the energy of the libido, and on psychoanalytic readings of sexual disinterest.

Narrative Reticence and the Ironizing of Psychoanalysis

Sydney Warren, however, is a more complicated character than Mrs. Kerr. While dipping into and out of the lives of the other characters, Bowen sustains Sydney's narrative across the novel's twenty-five short chapters, interweaving it with minor vignettes to make Sydney as central as the eponymous hotel itself. Despite Sydney's centrality, the novel never quite coalesces into the *bildungsroman* to which it gestures, as evidenced by the novel being called

The Hotel instead of, perhaps, *Sydney*. Bowen's protagonist fails to achieve what is conventionally understood as artistic, moral, social, or psychological growth or change. At the story's conclusion, she neither resolves to enter the professional world as a doctor nor plans to marry as her anonymous relatives wish she would. Readers are never privy to the continuous flow of thought so paradigmatic of the modernist *bildungsroman*; nor do they know if Sydney matures psychologically into an artist or artist-like figure with an aesthetic grasp of the world in which she lives.²⁹

While it would seem that the plot of *The Hotel* is also on vacation, the motionlessness of the novel's form does its own aesthetic work. The eccentric stagnancy of the narrative echoes the "curious" nature of Sydney's peculiar form of idleness (Bowen 16). Against the novel's background of relatively serene or ordinary tourism, Sydney's leisure looms large as pent-up, idiosyncratic stillness; she strikes several characters as "remote," "aloof," "curiously dammed up," even "neurotic" (77; 16; 21). And while most of the other vacationers take their pleasures placidly or see their holidays as a welcome break from busy lives, Sydney's leisure is socially obligatory, resembling a form of rehabilitation rather than simply time off from the workaday grind. Characterized as a young medical student "on the verge of a breakdown" after "passing too many . . . examinations," Sydney is "forced" to go on holiday by unnamed but concerned "relations." Ventriloquizing the voices of these nameless relations, Bowen's narrator forecasts the therapeutic effect that "sunshine," tennis matches, and Sydney's "happy" cousin Tessa might have on "the Sydney problem" (20). Despite the medicinal promise of her retreat, Sydney

²⁹ On Bowen and the female *bildungsroman*, see Joshua Esty, "Virgins of Empire: *The Last September* and the Antidevelopment Plot," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 53, no. 2 (2007): 257–75. Susan Fraiman, *Unbecoming Women: British Women Writers and the Novel of Development* (Columbia University Press, 1993), sees sexual and social awakening as at odds in the nineteenth-century novel of women's development; intimacy, marriage, and family closes down women's intellectual, professional, and artistic development. Bowen seems to undo Fraiman's binary not by implying that women can have both sexual and social awakening but by offering an alternative formation in which Sydney has neither and remains stuck.

remains a “problem” throughout her stay at the hotel and the trajectory of the novel’s narrative. We leave Sydney as we found her, “looking unnatural” and “strained,” with her coming-of-age story inconclusive (196).

Critical readers of *The Hotel* argue that “the Sydney problem” is central to the novel’s plot and form and gravitate toward psychoanalytic methods for interpreting Sydney’s disturbing and disabling stuck-ness and its narrative ramifications. Engaging with trauma theory, Jessica Gildersleeve reads Sydney’s story through a “repetition-compulsion” model as a “survivor’s life narrative” (3). Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle likewise interpret Sydney’s “problem” psychologically, explaining her eccentricity as a form of “catatonia” that turns Sydney away from relationships and into a poetic world created by her own mind (4). Finally, Maud Ellmann argues that Sydney is “a living embodiment of impasse” because of her inability to act on lesbian sexual desire due to an undisclosed trauma (71). As Sydney is parentless, Ellmann speculates this trauma might be connected with the loss of her mother, a speculation that links Sydney’s unrepresented history to Bowen’s loss of her own mother when she was thirteen.

These readings of the “Sydney problem” depend upon the pathologization of Sydney’s reticence. Sydney’s situation and actions suggest a symptom of an underlying problem—a social or sexual trauma—that serves to explain her abnormal psychological “life.” Although Gildersleeve, Bennett, Royle, and Ellmann all value stagnancy for its power to reveal social or sexual trauma, they nonetheless naturalize libidinal energy in their reading of Sydney’s story as trauma. In so doing, these readers align themselves with the psychoanalytic normalization of libidinal energy as an agency-filled and forward-moving biological instinct or universalize the experience of libidinal desire by interpreting the lack of sexual expression, desire, behavior, or identity as repression. There is no way within the current criticism on Bowen’s novel for this

character to be unconventionally reticent and still, and, by extension, disinterested in libidinal erotic attachment without also being psychologically sick.

As the novel's troublesome protagonist, Sydney represents the interpretative problem at its heart; for this reason, it seems to anticipate interpretations of Bowen's representation of psychological life. I would suggest, rather, that Bowen's novel ironizes psychoanalytic methods of reading Sydney by rendering them explicitly on the surface of the text. That is, within the world of the novel, it is no secret that Sydney would be viewed as repressed by psychoanalysis. The novel reveals as much during its first few pages when Sydney is diagnosed as "curiously dammed up" by Colonel Duperrier, in a phrase that echoes Freud's metaphor of the "stream" of the libido (16).³⁰ By placing the diagnosis within the mouth of one of the more interpersonally obtuse and intellectually stilted characters at the hotel, Bowen effectively preempts and ironizes a neurotic diagnosis of her main character. In another instance, Sydney off-handedly claims, "It would be kinder if neurotics were to be chloroformed" (17). The declaration is ambiguous: is Sydney differentiating herself from neurotics or expressing a death wish? Either way, Bowen uses these moments of psychoanalytic jargon to indicate both the marginalized social location of those deemed neurotic and how pervasive psychoanalytic language, at least within literary circles, was by the late 1920s.

Minor characters also repeat the commonplaceness of repression as a diagnosis, revealing the tendency to naturalize libidinal forms of attachment. Bowen's ironizing of the psychoanalytic diagnosis of Sydney as neurotic thus acts as a kind of textual permission to set libidinal desire and, by extension, trauma and repression aside. Her textual acknowledgement of psychoanalysis enables a critical distancing from it. Her irony enacts a kind of ground clearing, a burning of the

³⁰ Freud, *Dora*, 44, draws on this metaphor to describe neurosis: "A stream of water which meets with an obstacle in the river-bed is dammed up and flows back into old channels which had formally seemed fated to run dry."

forest floor that allows for fresh growth. Reading Sydney for weak feelings, rather than deep repression, situates repressed libidinal desire in the text as a discourse, a realistic part of the historical fabric of the early twentieth century.

The novel's narrative form further demonstrates Bowen's ironic relationship to Sydney's pathologization. One of the distinguishing formal features of the modern novel is its heightened attention to the subject who perceives as opposed to the object that is perceived.³¹ Despite Bowen's usual classification as a modernist writer, readers often note that she "relishes the narrative business of the realist" (Ellmann 3). That is, Bowen rarely fills her novels with only the psychological inner life of her subjects, turning instead to their environs, their interactions, their social relationships.

Bowen's first novel inaugurates this flair for opaque realism. Through the third person narration of *The Hotel*, we knock on the door of Sydney's internal consciousness but rarely cross the threshold. In a key moment when Bowen's reticent narrator might give us access to Sydney's internal life and reveal how she feels about marriage, sexuality, and Mrs. Kerr, the narrator instead pulls back: "[Sydney] stood between Tessa and Mrs. Kerr as inanimate and objective as a young girl in a story told by a man, incapable of a thought or a feeling that was not attributed to her, with no personality of her own outside their . . . projections on her" (178). The narrator critiques the de-subjectification of women by, in this instance, a male novelist's gaze. But rather

³¹ This is a standard definition of British modernism and can be found in aesthetic statements made by modernists themselves such as in Virginia Woolf, "Modern Fiction," *The Common Reader* (Harvest Books, 1953) 150-58. Woolf critiques "materialist" novelists for filling their fiction with trivial stuff, such as buttons on coats, rather than mental life and consciousness, "the dark places of psychology" (151; 156). Many scholars have troubled this definition by attending to how modernism attends to nonhuman objects. See, for instance, Bill Brown, "The Secret Life of Things: Virginia Woolf and the Matter of Modernism," *Modernism/Modernity* 6, no. 2 (1999): 1-28; and *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (University of Chicago Press, 2003); and Elizabeth Inglesby, "'Expressive Objects': Elizabeth Bowen's Narrative Materializes," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 53.2 (2007): 306-333.

than projecting upon her anyway or purporting to represent Sydney's "true" inner life, Bowen's narrator allows Sydney simply *to be*, enshrouded in the internal obscurity of the "inanimate."

The weakness of the narrator's attachment to Sydney in this moment, representative of many such in the novel, positions itself apart from the conventional omnipotence of the omniscient narrator and a stream-of-consciousness style in which Sydney's thoughts and feelings could be "revealed." In figuring Sydney as "inanimate," Bowen's narrator suggests not the impossibility of ever knowing the truth of the character but, more radically, implies that there is nothing to be known. The narrator is content to accept Sydney as she is: her inanimacy is not a problem to be solved by a better, more intimate narrative style but rather the very means by which readers apprehend and attach to her. Provocatively drawing upon the objectification of women in fiction, Bowen enables a counter-discourse of lifelessness in which Sydney's lack of libidinal energy is allowed to remain without the need for reparation or remedy.³²

This scene of the inanimate acts as a key for understanding the novel's (lack of) climax. In the next scene, Sydney, her fiancé Milton, Mrs. Kerr, and Tessa ride down a steep mountain in a car, only to be interrupted on their journey by a "long wagon of timber jammed crossways" (179). Sydney is empowered by this interruption to return to her state of stuckness and tells Milton she cannot marry him. This marriage had momentarily promised Sydney a direction that

³² Queer readers have recognized this form of narrative reticence as a kind as a counter-discourse to the psychoanalytic and modernist method of stream-of-consciousness narration that acts as a method for representing the depths and desires of characters in the modern novel. See, for instance, David Kurnick, "'Horrible Impossible': Henry James's Awkward Stage" in *The Henry James Review* 26, no. 2 (2005): 109–29. Kurnick praises James's distant narrator as conducive to pleasure, defined as erotic possibility freed from the territorialization of the truth-telling discourse of desire. While Kurnick's analysis aids me in my reading of Bowen, the narrative reticence of *The Hotel* is not a resistance to being known, per se, but *rather the very means by which we apprehend and attach to Sydney*. In other words, the epistemological weakness of this narrative moment tethers to the way in which Sydney is known through narrative reticence rather than despite it. The weakness of the narrator's attachment positions itself between the conventional omnipotence of the omniscient narrator and a relational idea of knowing in which, if we could just get to know Sydney well enough, we would see her personality without recourse to projection. In this way, Bowen highlights not the impossibility of ever knowing the truth of the subject but, more radically, implies that this kind of reticent attachment is a way to know that offer an alternative to both the egotistical projection of the omniscient narrator and invisibility of the narrator in stream-of-consciousness narration.

her non-libidinal energy could not, in the end, afford. Upon hearing her decision, Milton reaches out to touch her and Sydney demands, “Oh, my dear, no, don’t touch me” (182). Sydney’s refusal of his touch offers a palpable metaphor for the impossibility of her relationship with Milton. Milton is not impossible because of his sex but rather because of his inability to comprehend Sydney’s intimacy as an intimacy predicated on emotional inhibition rather than emotional expression. Her manner to him will always be mysteriously “at once intimate and very impersonal.” His demand for an explanation of her change of mind is met with Sydney’s exasperated dismissal: “Shall I have to tell you everything?” When he says that he would “rather [she] did,” Sydney does not answer (182-3). At the end of the novel, Sydney stays weak—unwilling to reach a conventional narrative or erotic climax; directionless; unexpressive. Without access to her internal psychological state afforded by nosy narrators, Sydney’s stuck-ness invites no psychoanalytic diagnosis; it simply is her identity and her preferred method of attachment.

The Weakness of Elizabeth Bowen

Readers familiar with Elizabeth Bowen’s personal life might be surprised by the idea that her fiction has much to teach us about weak feeling as the non-pathologized absence of libidinal energy. Bowen could hardly be described as sexually repressed or neurotic and never struggled with the diagnosis as other early twentieth century women did. Married in 1923 to Alan Cameron, Bowen was content to live platonically with her husband until his death in 1952. Alongside this reportedly chaste relationship, Bowen cultivated passionate relationships with men and women other than her husband including her long-time lover, Charles Ritchie, and her friend, the writer May Sarton.³³ Nor was Bowen weak in the more general sense of aimless, undirected, or feeble. She was a productive writer and public intellectual, and she often set about

³³ Glendinning, *Elizabeth Bowen*, discusses the trajectory of Bowen’s personal life. See also May Sarton, “Elizabeth Bowen” in *A World of Light: Portraits and Celebrations* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1988) 191-214.

completing a task with matter-of-fact plain-spokenness.³⁴ The overall impression we get of Bowen is that she was direct about what she wanted, when she wanted it—erotic or otherwise.

An anecdote from her biographer, Victoria Glendinning, however, is telling for an exploration of weak feeling. Bowen had a lifelong stammer, coming and going during her conversations with friends and family, her public lectures at universities, and her appearances on television and radio. According to Glendinning, many listeners found the speech impediment “endearing” rather than “distracting” but “once a rich friend paid for her to go to an Austrian psychiatrist to have [her stammer] cured.” Upon visiting the therapist, Bowen apparently “laid bare nothing” about her personal life while her doctor “laid bare before her his own personal anguishes, both private and professional” (Glendinning 27). Bowen, so the story goes, listened politely and with fascination but quickly abandoned the treatment and kept her stammer. From then on, Bowen shunned psychoanalysts. This story of her visit with the “Austrian psychiatrist” appears to have been both her first and last attempt at talk therapy.

As Glendinning’s anecdote of failed therapy illustrates, Bowen’s life and fiction capture the difference between reticence and repression that is key to understanding weak feeling as a counter-discursive formation. Bowen understood her speech impediment not as an obstacle to expression but as a kind of expression in and of itself. She integrated the stammer fully into her public presence, treating it as a stammer rather than a symptom of repressed truth indicative of childhood trauma. A member of the British Council who saw her speak once remarked, “She is a most successful lecturer with a most successful stammer” (qtd. Glendinning 27). In Glendinning’s anecdote, Bowen captures the possibility that one might reveal little of one’s personal life without being plagued by one’s unconscious and secret desires.

³⁴ I take my characterization of Bowen from Victoria Glendinning, *Elizabeth Bowen: Portrait of a Writer* (Faber & Faber, Limited, 2012), 59. For example, writing about her decision to marry, Bowen resolutely opines, “It would be difficult to settle to anything else until this was done.”

Bowen's reticence to reveal her thoughts and feelings to others, in fact, was seen by some of those who knew her as the key to her ability to sustain attachments. May Sarton recalls: "She drew out confidences with magnetic attentiveness as she listened to the answers to her percipient questions. But she did not give" (195). Sarton's desire for Bowen is palpable in her essay on their relationship, and she confesses that Bowen's reticence toward erotic or emotional exchange is what most sustains her passionate interest. Sarton confides that Bowen finally "responded to [her] passionate feelings for her" and the two women shared "an exchange that had great tenderness in it" (197, emphasis added). Whatever Sarton means by this erotic euphemism, the "exchange" does not act as a climax to the relationship or the narrative. Bowen's continued coolness toward Sarton after the "exchange" draws the writer deeper into the infatuation and acts as that which Sarton continues to recollect and analyze painstakingly in the second half of the essay. But as the frustrated Sarton repeatedly tries to peer into the "mystery" that is Bowen's "soul," the irony of the attempt becomes clear (211). There is no mystery to solve. Sarton has figured Bowen out already. Bowen's blockage of her secret self or the essay's disavowed alternative—that there might be no "mystery" about Bowen at all—is Bowen. Her reticence is not an obstacle to overcome but the very means by which Bowen crafts her persona and sustains her attachments.

Analogously, Bowen's novel *The Hotel* imagines a lack of libidinal desire not as the repression of an attachment but a method of attachment in and of itself. Specifically, the novel envisions the cultivation of attachment that is, ironically, about the inhibition of emotion rather than its exchange. In the dynamic the novel imagines between narrator and characters, Bowen re-values reticence as a weak but nonetheless intimate form of attachment that relies upon a lack of expression and revelation.

Chapter 2

“Inexplicable Reactions”: Affective Susceptibility in Rosamond Lehmann’s *Dusty Answer*

Dear Rosamond Lehmann, I have just finished reading your book ‘The Echoing Grove.’ I have read and greatly appreciated all your books, but this one has impressed me more deeply than I can tell you. It is not only because you have understood and been able to express so amazingly well the inexplicable reactions of one human being on another, but also perhaps that I have read the book at the moment when I am particularly open to what you had to say. I feel I want to thank you for having written ‘The Echoing Grove,’ for I imagine it cannot have been an easy book to write. I would not like to presume that I have grown to know you a little through your books, and as you don’t know me, this letter is only the outcome of a most unexpected impulse, and of no value to you whatsoever. But I do thank you.

—Anne de Muschamps, 1953³⁵

Rosamond Lehmann, an early twentieth-century English author of a dozen major novels that garnered both popular success and contemporary critical praise, received heaps of fan letters throughout her life. From one of these letters, cited above and sent by someone signed “Anne de Muschamps,” one can glean several elements common to Lehmann’s letters and to fan letters more generally. Like most fan letter writers, Muschamps tells Lehmann that she has “read and greatly appreciated all [her] books.” In true fan letter form, the writer declares herself moved by Lehmann’s work and praises the author for her insight and style. The missive is both an expression of thanks and hints at an imagined intimacy amongst Muschamps, Lehmann’s characters, and Lehmann herself.

³⁵ Unpublished letter, 1953. King's College Archive Centre, Cambridge, The Papers of Rosamond Nina Lehmann, RNL.2.427.

But the letter also deviates from what one usually finds in twentieth-century fan mail. In contrast to the typical fan letter's emotional fervor, this letter wields a cool, almost reserved tone. Muschamps "appreciates" Lehmann's books, but she doesn't declare her love for them or obsess over the idea of meeting Lehmann. Not sure what has animated her to reach out to Lehmann, Muschamps vaguely claims that she has been "impressed" upon by her reading of *The Echoing Grove* (1953) and written the letter out of an "unexpected impulse." She simultaneously declares and negates her feeling of kinship with Lehmann: "I imagine it cannot have been an easy book to write. I would not like to presume that I have grown to know you a little through your books." Vague empathy for an unnamed hardship or loss suffuses the (dis)connection between fan and star. Rather than express her feelings outright, Muschamps emphasizes what she cannot say and offers a connection via the unsaid, confiding that Lehmann's novel has touched her more than she "can tell." Muschamps is certainly a fan of Lehmann, but her letter does not adopt the rhetorical position of the fanatic.³⁶

In addition to departing from the tonal fervor of the fan letter, Muschamps's letter engages in an unconventional performance of the fan-star encounter. Scholars of fandom emphasize how the "partial intimacy" of the fan-celebrity relationship allows fans to do identity work with a considerable amount of control over "the terms of engagement" (Thompson 220). In contrast to this one-sided, secure relation, Muschamps's letter imagines her relationship with Lehmann as an ephemeral and unpredictable encounter. Evoking a soft collision between text, writer, and reader, she portrays herself not as projecting onto Lehmann but as "particularly open" to "what [Lehmann] had to say," to what she terms "the inexplicable reactions of one human being on another" over time and space. Moreover, Muschamps inhabits this receptivity to susceptibility without the expectation of return or of the accumulation of "value." Breaking one

³⁶ See Cornel Sandvoss, *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption*, 34 on fanatic rhetoric and fan letters.

of the cardinal rules of the fan letter, Muschamps doesn't ask for a response from Lehmann. Muschamps supposes that the "reaction" of fan upon star—of letter upon letter writer upon letter reader—will remain as "inexplicable" as any of the encounters that Lehmann represents "so amazingly well" in her fiction.

I begin this chapter on Lehmann's fiction with Muschamps's fan letter for several reasons. First, as I detailed above, the letter departs from our expectation of fan letters, making it noteworthy in and of itself. Second, Lehmann is a relatively minor figure within academic considerations of modern literature, and this letter serves to suggest the level of her celebrity in her own time. Third, and most importantly, Muschamps's letter suggestively enacts the themes and tone that, I will argue, animate Lehmann's fiction. Specially, this fan's response to Lehmann's work acts as the provocation for this chapter because both the letter and Lehmann's fiction marshal susceptibility as a form of weak feeling and, in so doing, activate a counter-discourse of attachment in the libidinal age.

One might be tempted to read the restraint of Muschamps's letter and her claim that some relationships are "inexplicable" as a symptom of repressed lesbian desire or as a sign that fandom is but a sad simulacrum of "real" intimacy. But in reading the letter for what it says rather than for what it doesn't say, I pause before pathologizing Lehmann's fan as repressed, neurotic, or closeted. Instead, Muschamps's letter, I would argue, offers an example of weak feeling as I have, thus far, been theorizing it. Like Lehmann's representations of attachment itself as aimless and uncertain, the letter lacks the energy and intention ascribed to expressions of libidinal desire in the early twentieth century. Moreover, through the letter's suggestion that susceptibility and irresolute encounter are Lehmann's central contributions, it both captures and enacts how Lehmann's fiction disorients the subject/object binaries that sustain libidinal desire.

In contrast to the psychoanalytic theories of the libido that imagine attachment as beginning in the energetic subject and extending to a passive object until interruption, Lehmann's fiction and Muschamps's letter both imagine weak feeling to cluster around contingent encounters in the form of "inexplicable reactions of one human being on another."

Specifically, this fan letter incites me to ask two interrelated questions. First, where does attachment *begin* when feeling is weak? Departing from the queer theoretical focus on the dissolution of the subject through forms of illicit desire, this chapter takes Lehmann's first novel *Dusty Answer* (1927) as an opportunity to read for a specific affective stance—susceptibility—in order to assess how sentimental subjects offer a counterpoint to the agential subject of libidinal desire. In what follows, I show that as far as sexuality is concerned, the novel's protagonist, Judith Earle, is an epistemological cipher, bewildering readers in both her time and ours. Her attachment to everyone and everything—men, women, animals, inanimate objects—problematizes "the stable, coherent identity through which modern sexuality is administered and regulated" (Jagose 523). Reading Lehmann's novel alongside contemporary reader responses, I argue that through Lehmann's mobilization of sentimental discourse in modern times, Judith's intimate life comes into focus as a contingent production based on receptiveness to physical, psychical, and aesthetic conditions.

Second, this chapter asks: how does attachment (not) end when feeling is weak? Because Judith's attachments are the product of susceptibility, they are accumulative (remarkable for their sheer volume) but also ephemeral. As Judith gains new attachments, she "loses" countless others (from old umbrellas to childhood friends) and the ideals they represent (from romantic love to religious belief). She refuses, however, to detach from the dead and de-idealized through the process of libidinal repair offered by early-twentieth-century psychoanalysis. Comparing

libidinal grief as it is conceptualized by Sigmund Freud's "Mourning & Melancholia" (1917) to "weak grief," the chapter explores how Lehmann's novel summons weak grief not as a barrier to attachment but as an attachment in and of itself. Whereas Lehmann's popular text flies mostly under the critical radar today, Freud's "Mourning & Melancholia" is cited widely as a central text for thinking about sadness. As Ann Cvetkovich in *Depression: A Public Feeling* recently noted, while the essay may have fallen out of favor within psychology and neuroscience, it lives a full life in feminist, queer, and critical race studies of the relationship between loss, history, and politics. Rather than use the tensions between Freud and Lehmann's texts to redefine modern grief, the chapter thinks through the emotional tenor of hearable and believable grief in modernity.

While Muschamps's letter focuses on "inexplicable reactions of one human being on another" within Lehmann's *The Echoing Grove*, I focus on susceptibility and its relationship to weak grief in *Dusty Answer* because it enables me to extend my theorization of weak feeling in particular directions. The novel's publication history, I will argue, provides a vibrant snapshot of the public reception of a sentimental text in the modern era. This focus on *Dusty Answer* continues my dissertation's attendance to texts that are "out of time" aesthetically, formally, and discursively. Out of all of Lehmann's novels, *Dusty Answer* represents the text with the least adherence to modernist formal conventions. Like many canonical modernist fictions, Lehmann's other works—including *Invitation to the Waltz* (1932), *The Ballad and the Source* (1944), and *The Echoing Grove*—concern themselves with the exploration of subjective depth and individual consciousness and adopt modernist formal innovations such as nonlinear timelines. In contrast, the "middlebrow" sensibility of *Dusty Answer* maintains a focus on sentimental bodies and, thus, offers an alternative archive through which to assess women's relationship to sexual modernity.

Reading Rosamond Lehmann

When Lehmann published *Dusty Answer* in 1927, much to the author and publisher's surprise, it became an international sensation. Alongside its multiple printings in England, the novel's French translation sold 42,000 copies and U.S. sales reached 75,000.³⁷ After the book was named the September choice for the newly established American Book-of-the-Month Club, Lehmann found herself on a book tour in the United States, taking part in the publishing industry's emerging emphasis on advertisement and marketing. Alongside its popular fame, Lehmann's novel also garnered laudatory reviews from contemporary critics and writers including, most notably and influentially, the poet Alfred Noyes. She received personal notes of congratulations from Compton Mackenzie and E. M. Forster. Later, she would befriend Virginia Woolf and Elizabeth Bowen and, thereby, install herself "at the fringes of the radical Bloomsbury group" (Plock 83).

As this brief summary suggests, the reception of *Dusty Answer* positioned Lehmann ambiguously between "high" and "low" culture, between the avant-garde artists and the popular audiences that defined emerging forms of modern literary culture. Lehmann was a popular writer but, as Wendy Pollard points out, not popular enough to merit attention from scholars interested in mass culture. Likewise, Lehmann is considered a "good" writer but not as stylistically innovative as the writers to whom she is so often compared including Woolf and Bowen.³⁸ Given this over-determined position, how does one read Lehmann's fiction? What kind of reading practice is necessary for reckoning with a figure like Lehmann?

³⁷ To contextualize Lehmann's popularity, Pollard in *Rosamond Lehmann and Her Critics: The Vagaries of Literary Reception* compares these numbers to Virginia Woolf's first novel, *The Voyage Out* (1915), which sold about 1500 copies all together.

³⁸ See Pollard, 20-21, for an in-depth consideration of Lehmann's "middlebrow" status.

In comparison to the other novelists considered by this dissertation—Bowen, Forster, and James—critical scholarship on Lehmann is scarce.³⁹ But, in one of the few book-length projects on Lehmann, Pollard tackles head on the methodological problem that Lehmann’s work presents. Conducting a sociological study of her work, Pollard places less emphasis on interpreting Lehmann’s texts in order to attend to the publication and reception history of those texts (9). Drawing upon an impressive archive of correspondence and reviews, Pollard’s monograph treats Lehmann less as an author and more as a cultural event. In so doing, she illustrates how Lehmann came to occupy the “middlebrow” position that prevents her from being taken seriously by critical readers today.

Drawing on Lehmann’s reception history, Pollard convincingly illustrates how Lehmann was effectively pigeonholed as a writer of “women’s fiction”—a writer whose only concern is women’s emotions and desires and whose fiction is only read by women readers. Most notably, she argues that Lehmann’s second novel, *A Note in Music*, was panned because its representation of aging women and class hostility departs dramatically from the portrait of romantic youth offered by *Dusty Answer*. This response and poor book sales, Pollard contends, prompted Lehmann to turn away from the seriousness promised by her second novel to write more “pleasant stories that can give offense to no-one” (Lehmann, qtd. in Pollard 76).

Moreover, Pollard contends that the early image of Lehmann as a writer of women’s feelings still persists in academic work on Lehmann today. Much like its contemporary reviewers, present-day critical readers of *Dusty Answer* tend to emphasize its portrayal of women’s desire and romance. Nicola Humble comments that Lehmann’s novel offers an especially “daring

³⁹ On Lehmann, see Selina Hastings, *Rosamond Lehmann: A Life*; Kaplan, Sydney Janet. “Rosamond Lehmann’s The Ballad and the Source: A Confrontation with ‘The Great Mother.’”; Andrea Lewis, “Glorious Pagan That I Adore”; and Vike Martina Plock, “‘I Just Took It Straight from Vogue’: Fashion, Femininity, and Literary Modernity in Rosamond Lehmann’s Invitation to the Waltz.

treatment of sex” and represents Judith as “intensely aware of the physical attractions of men” (213; 202). Andrea Lewis also calls Lehmann’s representation of sexuality “daring” and emphasizes its depiction of female same-sex desire (232). Although Lehmann insisted her first book was not autobiographical, her biographer, Salina Hastings, calls Judith and Lehmann “twin souls” (95). The biography plays up the similarity between Lehmann’s life and her work, particularly the emotional similarities of the fact and fiction: “The life of Rosamond Lehmann was as romantic and harrowing as that of any of her fictional heroines” (“About the Book”). Other late-twentieth-century readers of Lehmann see her portraits of female desire as part of a bigger picture—writ large, Lehmann’s fictions are about women’s psychology. Vike Martina Plock, for instance, comments that Lehmann supplies “convincing portrayal[s] of women’s emotional experience” that “emphasize dark undercurrents in a progressive narrative that forcefully pronounces the revolution of gender roles in post-war Britain” (84). Sydney Kaplan agrees that Lehmann delivers a complex portrait of female psychology with her representation of “genuine conflict between social role and archetype, societal expectation and inner compulsion” (132). As such, Lehmann’s work is repeatedly called upon to offer a glimpse into the feminine self, a self quietly relegated to the margins of modernity. Overall, scholars have emphasized Lehmann’s fiction as a vehicle for authentic feeling, what Kaplan refers to as Lehmann’s “emotional resonance” (128).

What is striking about these readings of Lehmann’s fiction is how her representation of desire and emotion is seen as somehow expressive of women’s subjectivity. Whether in reference to desire or some other strong feeling such as envy or loss, readers link Lehmann’s writerly power to her own identity as a woman and, thus, her ability to write representations compelling to women readers. In this way, Lehmann’s writing has not been subjected to the

scrutiny of post-structuralist feminist accounts of gender identity and sexuality, though Pollard's begins to rectify this with a genealogy of *how* Lehmann came to be seen as a representative of women. Like Pollard, I take up a skeptical position in relation to Lehmann's fiction as a product of self-expression and a window onto women's emotional experience. At the same time, however, I also depart from Pollard, who takes up Lehmann's reception history in order to undo the "reductive" image of her as a "novelist of feminine sensibility" and restore her to her place as a "major" modern writer (73; 166). Especially in her case history of *A Note in Music*, Pollard refigures Lehmann as a serious writer by emphasizing the novel's class politics and its exclusion from the Lehmann "canon." My goal is not to rescue Lehmann from classification as a writer of women's emotion; instead, I leverage the "emotional baggage" associated with Lehmann's status as a woman author writing "women's fiction" to put pressure on the history of sexuality. Confronting the feminine feelings that cluster around and within Lehmann's novel, I ask: what does Lehmann's designation as "emotional" reveal about early-twentieth-century sexuality? And how does Lehmann's representation of emotion interrupt understandings of sexuality as an expression of the libidinal subject?

One Novel, Two Receptions

In its most basic formulation, *Dusty Answer* is a *bildungsroman* that traces its protagonist Judith's life from early childhood to the years after she finishes college. Told in the past tense, the novel consists of five discrete parts, each one focusing on a sampling of memories from a particular epoch in Judith's life: her youth (part 1); her adolescence prior to college (part 2); her years attending university (part 3); and the time immediately after graduation (part 4). In the last section, Judith makes an unsuccessful attempt to return to college for a reunion with Jennifer, her flaky best friend. The novel ends with the sense that Judith must move on from past attachments

to Jennifer and the various members of the Fyfe family—who lived next door to her as a child and reappear in all five sections of the novel: “She was a person whose past made one great circle, complete now and read to be discarded” (348). But with the novel’s last few lines, Lehmann suggests that Judith is neither ready to let go of this “great circle” nor to move toward something new: “Soon [Judith] must begin to think: What next? But not quite yet” (348).

One way to read Judith’s reticence to let go of all those who had “all gone from her” is through Lehmann’s conflation of intimate and aesthetic attachments. If Judith’s intimate relationships are conventionally inconclusive, Lehmann suggests that an oft-broken heart might be put to aesthetic use. As Judith concludes, after Roddy tells her that he doesn’t want to see her again: “It had all been experience, and that was a salutary thing. You might write a book now, and make [Roddy] one of the characters (263). Throughout the novel, Lehmann implements Judith’s attachments as figurations for aesthetic feeling, interweaving Judith’s intimate ties with her attempts at aesthetic production to explore the relationship between interpersonal and aesthetic emotion.

In one such scene in part 3, Judith sits in a “lecture room” that “swam and shone in a faint translucent flood” of light (139). Against the sound of a boring don spouting on, the call of a bird—“three wild enquiring notes”—triggers “a thought of green” as Judith composes a bit of poetry only to dismiss it as “juvenilia” (140). Inspired, she begins thinking of one of her many love objects—Roddy Fyfe, a childhood friend—who is attending Cambridge at the same time that Judith goes to a women’s college nearby.⁴⁰ After the lecture finishes, Judith finds herself lingering under a dormitory window, “stoking the wall” of the college and crying out “speechlessly” for fate to bring Roddy to the aperture. When no one appears to bring Judith’s imagined scene to fruition, she contemplates running into the dormitory room to take Roddy by

⁴⁰ The college is, by all accounts, Girton, though it is never named as such.

surprise with a daring expression of her feelings. She morphs her fantasy's first message, a simple "I love you," into a quotation from T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock": Judith wishes "to dare everything, run to him and cry: 'I am Lazarus come from the dead, / Come back to tell you all, I will tell you all'" (142). She imagines Roddy answering "with that disastrous answer" that follows in Eliot's poem: "That is not what I meant at all, / That is not it, at all" (142).

As I mentioned above, Lehmann's fiction occupies the middle ground between modernism and various manifestations of popular genre fiction, and *Dusty Answer* is no exception to Lehmann's penchant for hybridized text. In this particular scene of Judith at college, Lehmann's use of free indirect discourse envelopes the reader in Judith's consciousness despite the novel's third-person narrator. With her rendering of Judith's impressions ("translucent flood," "thought of green"), Lehmann adopts modernist methods of revealing "internal psychic space" and the subject's struggle with a hostile "outside" world, figured here as a boring Cambridge don attempting to discipline both her body and spirit (Broughton 85). Further, Lehmann calls upon Eliot's modernist poem to imbue her work with the literary allusion that Eliot himself uses in his poetry. As Lazarus will confess so will Judith tell us "all" there is to tell about her inner life.

Yet the tone of Lehmann's scene clashes with its use of modernist formal elements. Eliot's poem is the dramatic monologue of an insecure man who stumbles at every attempt at decisive action: "Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?" Prufrock asks pitifully (122). The lines quoted in Lehmann's novel represent one of the poem's most distilled realizations of his neurotic character and connects the speaker's hesitancy to libidinal desire. He wishes to express his desirous feelings to a woman but fears she will reject his advances, as the prophetic message of a resurrected Lazarus would be rejected by those still living. Likewise,

Judith fears that Roddy would rebuff her attempt at intimacy, that she has misinterpreted his interest in her, but Lehmann's narration of Judith's feeling contrasts with the emotional and sexual repression that suffuses Prufrock's monologue. Judith's feelings are available on the surface of the text in a way that Prufrock's are not, as evidenced by Lehmann's translation of the allusive statement, "I am Lazarus come from the dead, / Come back to tell you all, I will tell you all" to the obvious declaration of "I love you" that Judith yearns to make (142).

Such hybridity—incorporating modernist form and popular sentiment—makes *Dusty Answer* a difficult text to read, not because of the complexity of its form but because of its affective confusion. When one reads *Dusty Answer*, is one supposed to follow the modernist stylistic cues and "feel" modernist—which is to say, not feel *at all*, to inhabit a place that is cerebral and serious? Or should one follow the urge to manifest emotion on the surface, to let the swoons and tears take over? Personally, my experience reading *Dusty Answer* (multiple times over the course of several years) has been such that even as I engage intellectually with the text as a modernist text—in this case, attending to its methods of representing subjectivity—I suddenly find myself feeling emotionally aroused by it. Judith's romances excite me. I get a little thrill—*will they or won't they?* Her troubles, likewise, trouble me. I get a little misty eyed—*will they or won't they?* Then, almost simultaneously, my meta-emotions kick in, and I feel embarrassed for having been so easily manipulated into feeling such feminized feelings.

I acknowledge my own reading response because it correlates with the two divergent categories of responses to *Dusty Answer* by its early readers.⁴¹ As I mentioned above, many of Lehmann's reviewers celebrated the novel as a portrait of a modern woman and her inner feelings. Calibrated toward the modernist leanings of the novel, these enthusiastic readings see

⁴¹ Robyn Warhol, *Having a Good Cry*, 31 reads reactions like mine as an inheritance of modernism. Sentimentality induces in modernism a "philosophical and aesthetic recoil from the feminine associations of popular culture."

the novel as a moving expression of Judith's psychology; Noyes, for example, referred to as it "study of modern youth" (cited in Pollard 37). Some reviewers even found the novel to be so psychological and emotionally truthful that they read it as autobiographical despite the fact that it was marketed as fiction.⁴²

In contrast, other reviews were more attuned to the alternative strand of *Dusty Answer*—the surfaceness of its emotions wherein surfaceness becomes indicative of superficiality. Writer Rose Macaulay criticized the novel as "unoriginal" and overdone: "The only question Judith asked of life was 'Does he, or she, love me? And the answer was . . . 'No, not very much'" (qtd. from Hastings 99). Lytton Strachey, founder of the Bloomsbury Group, wrote in a private letter that, although he thought the novel was promising, he believed that it was "charged with sunset sentiment" (qtd. from Hastings 106). With the publication of the subsequent novels, literary critic Q. D. Leavis chimed in to condemn Lehmann's whole oeuvre as "sentimental emotional vulgarizing [and] middlebrow" (qtd. from Hastings 168). Another reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement* called Judith an "emotional vampire" and the novel an account of her "antics" (qtd. from Pollard 36). And it wasn't just professional writers and reviewers who used an allegation of sentiment to criticize Lehmann's work. Even the many fan letters filled with praise would sometimes take aim at the emotional tone of her first novel. One letter writer confided that she reread Lehmann's first novel and found it lacking: she "felt distressed by the raw childishness of the book—like the writing of a sensitive child of 9—poor little girl."⁴³ Despite that fact that the novel was her best-selling and most widely acclaimed novel, even Lehmann herself later referred to Judith as an object of "hatred," a character that, with retrospect, seemed "embarrassingly vulnerable" (qtd. from Pollard 46).

⁴² See Pollard, 46.

⁴³ Unpublished letter, 1953. King's College Archive Centre, Cambridge, The Papers of Rosamond Nina Lehmann, RNL.2.673.

One text, two diametrically opposed receptions. What are we to make of these seemingly contradictory readings? Is *Dusty Answer* emotionally deep or emotionally superficial? Psychological or sentimental? Decidedly modernist or the very opposite? Casting a shadow across the accounts of *Dusty Answer* as a modern representation of consciousness, the latter group of reviews register doubt concerning the truth of Judith's—and occasionally, Lehmann's—emotional expression. The critiques vary in fervor, tone, and authority, yet all are couched in the rhetoric of failed feeling that typically accompanies allegations of sentimentality within the modern era. Judith is too trivial, too romantic, too feminine, too inauthentic, too excessive. Lehmann's writing is too bourgeois, too overwrought, and too superficial.⁴⁴ Together, such reviews reveal modernism's distaste for popular culture forms and for popular culture's ability to “so readily and mechanically arouse emotion” (Warhol 35). Lehmann's mobilization of the sentimental mode diverges from her use of modernist form and leaves us with a readerly reception marked by this duality.

Modernist Sexuality

Each of Lehmann's textual registers—modernist subjectivity and superficial sentimentality—enacts a different way of conceptualizing emotion's relationship to subjectivity. Modernist methods of representing the subject strive to create “a truer realism” that “reveals that reality is fluid” and that the subject's true self lies with “the impulses of the unconscious” which can be represented through innovative modernist forms (Felski 25-6). In Robyn Warhol's formulation, modern fiction presupposes that “individual subjects are repositories of ‘real feelings,’ and that sincere and authentic emotional experience can be distinguished from false sentimentalism and affectation” (11). This conceptualization of emotion is analogous to how

⁴⁴ See Clark, *Sentimental Modernism*, for an exploration of how all these terms come to signify “sentimentality” during the age of literary modernism.

psychoanalysis imagines the libidinal subject as instinctive, expressive, and in need of confession. The libidinal drive accounts for the emotions of the modern subject because the libido is imagined to be both the origin of feeling and the hermeneutic key through which psychoanalysis can unlock feelings' meanings.

Those enthusiastic reviewers who conceptualize *Dusty Answer* as a "modern" text do so because of Lehmann's use of modernist form but also because the novel's form aligns with these expectations of libidinal subjects and performs the confessional imperative of the modern sexual subject. In other words, when the feelings in *Dusty Answer* are *believable* to readers, they are believable because they participate in the conceptualization of the libidinal subject as the origin point for object attachment. For instance, an anonymous article in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* claims that Lehmann's novel is the "passionate expression of youth" in which "nothing exists except as it exists in connection" with Judith. With the story of how the Fyfe family "opens" up to Judith, Lehmann "tells exactly what happened" and nothing else. The novel, the article opines, reads more like "A Young Girl's Diary cast into the shade for subtlety of its psychology" ("*Dusty Answer* is First Novel" 12). What makes this novel believable for this reviewer is how its confessional narrative draws on modernist-psychoanalytic conceptualizations of the libidinal subject that locate emotional and sexual truth deep within the subject.

And there is ample support for this reading of the text. A major storyline within the novel is the revelation that Judith "surrender[ed]" herself to Roddy without ensuring that his love and devotion would be given in exchange. Conceptualizing "sex" as a form of relinquishment, Lehmann represents Judith's sexuality not only as a means of barter but also as a kind of compulsion, as titillating as it is shameful: "The shame of her surrender, her unrequited love would go on gnawing, burning, till the end of her life" (263). In so revealing her sexual secrets in

all their “shame,” Lehmann suggests that Judith’s sexuality—specifically, her virginity—is central to her identity (263). The narrativization of Judith’s first sexual encounter prompts the reader both to recognize having sex as central to a coming-of-age story and forgive Judith for what she refers to as her “vulgarity” (262). This aspect of Judith’s story narrativizes sexuality and, thus, disciplines it, making sex the truth of the subject and the object of identity-forming shame.

If Judith’s sexuality is known and disciplined through a confessional narrative that draws on the language of sexual shame, Lehmann also takes up confession as a mode of sexual knowledge production about the Fyfes, an aspect of the text that the *Chicago Tribune* review likewise notes. Against Judith’s emotional expressiveness stand her foils: the Fyfe family. After Charlie Fyfe’s death in World War I, the other members of the family become representations of various forms of emotional repression. Mariella, Charlie’s cousin and wife, is “queer” and quiet, casually diagnosed as a potential case of “arrested development” (4). Cousin Roddy rebuffs Judith’s many attempts at lasting intimacy and breaks her heart, coming off as secretive and cold. When the stoic Martin dies in a boating accident, he takes his unexpressed feelings of anger toward Judith to the grave. Finally, Julian, Charlie’s brother, never fully heals the wounds left by his experience in the war. His melancholia is punctuated by outbursts of temper and nihilistic pleasure seeking.

Judith attaches to all the Fyfes and has romantic relations with Roddy, Martin, and Julian. In the conventional conjunction of desire and knowledge, Judith’s attachment to family manifests itself not only in romantic pursuit but also in her position as the investigator of the family’s secrets. The narrator of *Dusty Answer* keeps well away from the Fyfe consciousness, thereby preserving the family as a collection of emotional ciphers that Judith attempts, across the

span of the novel's action, to decode. As a child, the neighboring Fyfes offer objects for Judith's enterprising imagination: "In the long spaces of being alone which [the Fyfe children] only, at rarer and rarer intervals, broke, she had turned them over, fingered them so lovingly, explored them so curiously that, melting into the darkly-shining enchanted shadow-stuff of remembered childhood, they had become well-nigh fantastic creatures" (5). As Judith grows older, she attempts to elicit confessions from these "fantastic creatures" in order to gather more authentic knowledge about them: "One day they would all like her better than anyone else: even Roddy would tell her everything. Their lives, instead of always being remote and mysterious would revolve intimately round her. She would know all, all about them" (22). Judith equates confessional knowledge not just with intimacy but also with power. She wants their lives to "revolve intimately round her" and recognizes power-knowledge as the method to achieve this hierarchical status, that which would take her from being the marginalized next-door neighbor to the center of the Fyfe family.

Judith inhabits the position of both truth-teller and truth-seeker. *Dusty Answer* is her confessional narrative and the narrative of her coming to sexual knowledge not just about herself but about those surrounding her. The Fyfe family is ripe for psychoanalysis—plagued by incest, trauma, repressed desire—and its members act as the objects of Judith's enterprising imagination, abundant sympathy, and superior cognition. Judith unearths their buried emotions and desires. Mariella, it turns out, is not "cold and dull and sexless" but wholly absorbed by her secret desire for Julian (110). Roddy's "apathy" is revealed as an essential defect of character from which Judith tries to save him but can't. He acts as the novel's representation of a "sensation hunter" or queer aesthete incapable of deep feeling (166; 170). At the end of the novel, Julian formalizes Judith's detective work by writing her a letter that airs all the family's dirty laundry. With the

inclusion of the letter within the novel, Lehmann provides both Judith and her readers the final truth of the Fyfes. Through Judith's position as truth-seeker, Lehmann effectively pathologizes the weak feelings this dissertation has been attempting to recover. Lehmann represents apathy, lack of energy, and nonlibidinal desire (especially in the case of Mariella and Roddy) as symptoms in need of the cure of truth-telling and, thus, participates in the very discourses of pathologization that make it impossible to see weak feelings as feelings in and of themselves.

Sentimental Attachment

Yet, alongside this confessional narrative, the hybrid generic form of *Dusty Answer* offers a secondary story: a counter-discourse of weak feeling that depends on an account of emotion conceptualized as out-of-time and decidedly unmodern. Fracturing readings of the novel as an expression of sexual truth and self-identity elicited through the technology of confession are those readings that foreground instead the novel's sentimentality. For those who criticize Lehmann's deployment of too much affect, the novel diverges from modernist forms that purport to represent the subject of sexuality. But as such, the case of *Dusty Answer* and its reception provides an opportunity to explore how the categories by which we think sexuality in the past are altered by "pervasive gender asymmetries," particularly "the gendering of propriety, emotion, and sensibility" (Traub 96-97). How does the fact that women, in sentimental discourse, are taken to be both more "in touch" with their emotions and, paradoxically, more likely to be affectively overwrought render feminine sexual confession suspect rather than truth-producing? What is the emotional tenor of the believable confession? Where do the histories of gender and the histories of sexuality converge and diverge?

Given the fact that “sentimental,” as has been argued by June Howard, is a particularly over-determined site of meaning both in the present and in its long literary history, the sentimentality of *Dusty Answer* deserves considerable scrutiny and elaboration. Apart from the actual text of the novel, sentimentality clusters around Lehmann’s novel as a discursive event in modern mass culture. In other words, *Dusty Answer* is sentimental, at least in part, *because it is said to be sentimental*. Howard argues that while sentimental literature is a particular genre or literary mode, “sentimentality” is also an allegation, an accusation of sentiment gone awry. A text can be classified as “sentimental” by a diverse set of discursive communities (critics, academics, readers, artists) because the “emotion involved is characterized as affected and shallow, or as excessive” (Howard 65). “Sentimentality” designates the line between what one perceives to be “genuine” emotion and what one disavows as manipulated sentiment.

As my earlier recitation of the novel’s reception history illustrates, this was the case for criticism of *Dusty Answer* that alleges the text’s superficiality of emotion. But *Dusty Answer* is not just discursively produced as sentimental; the text also deploys certain formal aspects characteristically associated with the sentimental mode. That is, it is formally as well as discursively sentimental. As Howard shows, sentimentality is typically associated with literary forms that place emphasis on the body *that feels*, the body that is impinged upon from the outside rather than expressed from the inside out. Likewise in Lehmann’s novel, sentimentality is deployed as a form of affective susceptibility. What I term “susceptibility” is an affective *position* rather than a particular feeling; it is a state of being open to a multitude of emotions that do not begin within the subject but rather are based on contingent interactions between susceptible subjects and objects.

Lehmann deploys the sentimental mode primarily through her characterization of Judith as a susceptible body. In addition to her position as a confessing subject, Judith is defined, paradoxically, by her openness to encounter with objects; she attaches to pretty much every possible object that comes within her orbit. As I mentioned above, Judith dates an entire family—the Fyfes who live next door—thereby living out her childhood vow that “one day they would all like her better than anyone else” (22). She falls in love with women on the street; with youthful ice skaters; with rabbits and umbrellas. Through this representation of indiscriminate attachment to people, animals, and objects, Lehmann suggest that the condition of the encounter with objects act as the origin of Judith’s attachments. Her love is circumstantial and atmospheric. She is vulnerable to affective charges.

For instance, in the scene quoted above in which Judith visits the window where she believes Roddy to be staying in Cambridge, poetry, nature (in the form of a bird call), and the suggestion of spring *move* her. The movement toward encounter begins neither in the subject of desire (Judith) nor the object of desire (Roddy) but rather in the setting and conditions of affective charge. Lehmann represents Judith as susceptible to moods, to being what we might call today “in the mood”: “It was the sort of evening on which anything might happen. Excitement took her suddenly by the throat and made her feeble and tingling to her finger-tips” (141). Her susceptibility is to the “evening” which renders her physically weak. Alongside the modernist representation of Judith’s internal consciousness and psychic life, Judith’s “finger-tips,” vehicles of touching and being touched, alight with feeling, later to be compulsively animated in stroking the wall below Roddy’s window. Feelings are the active subjects of Lehmann’s sentences: they impinge upon Judith, who is but a vessel for their workings. The evening and its

“ecstasy” “[make] her stomach feel drained and helpless and beating in odd pulses all over her” (141). Her “excitement” is personified as an entity that might take one “by the throat.”

Unlike what happens to the hysterical body of psychoanalysis, however, Lehmann doesn’t pathologize Judith’s physical responses; her “odd pulses” are not symptoms of some repressed desire but rather the origin of her body’s extension toward not just Roddy but toward the atmospheric evening itself. While the Fyfe family, as I argued above, acts out textbook psychoanalytic disorders, Judith’s bodily performances are never pathologized as indications of psychic turmoil. For instance, when Judith first meets Jennifer, her college girlfriend, Jennifer is animated by excitement and alcohol. She talks quickly, reciting a litany of modern tropes, including a truncated rendition of Aestheticism with her “art for art’s” sake manifesto: “I want beauty, beauty, beauty . . . Lovely people . . . Lovely stuff, lovely colours . . . O, colours! . . . I could eat them. I’m awfully sensuous—I look it, don’t you think? Or do I mean sensual?” (133). She riffs on the trends associated with the New Woman, smoking a cigarette and talking about the fact that she is “keen on muscle” even though it is “more womanly not to be” (136). Finally, she worries that she will never marry because she is too tall; she confesses that she is “terrified of getting repressions” (134). Judith just stands there, taking Jennifer’s monologue in, estranged by these modern-day problems as the novel lampoons psychoanalytic ideas about neurosis and repression. This pastiche of tropes satirizes modern concerns, and Jennifer’s reference to “getting repressions” places this possibility on the surface of the text, warding off a reader who might search for deeper meanings through psychoanalysis—much like Bowen’s references to neurotics in *The Hotel* as I discussed in Chapter 1. Moreover, Jennifer’s fear of “getting repressions” refigures the nature of repression. Rather than imagining repression as something from which an individual might suffer because of their personalized psychic history and relationship to the

oedipal family, “repression” becomes something one might contract from the air, much like the other emotions in the sentimental strain of the text. Repression becomes contagious, even fashionable, thus questioning its power as an individual diagnosis.

In and of itself, we might see the residue of sentimentality in *Dusty Answer* as part of a problematic women’s culture that, according to Lauren Berlant’s *The Female Complaint*, haunts modern popular culture and undoes the political work of feminism. But alongside the contemporary reviews of Lehmann’s novel that characterize sentimental emotion as a form of highly suspect feeling, we can begin to imagine how the susceptibility of the feminized body provides a way of undoing the instinctive, psychologized, and individuated libidinal subject through its emphasis on “the inexplicable reactions” of one person on another. That is, mobilizing the doubt that Lehmann’s novel garnered for its confession, Judith’s vulnerable body plays a key role in thinking about emotion that begins outside the self. Although the sentimental mode depends on problematic discourses that imagine femininity as irrational and overly emotional, the specific case of sentimentality in *Dusty Answer* reads as decidedly out-of-time to contemporary reviewers. In its backwardness, *Dusty Answer* crystallizes how sexuality as a libidinal discourse emerges at the beginning of the twentieth century to clash with gendered discourses of femininity and emotion. In their relation to the discursive production and disciplining of the female body, sexuality and sentimentality within this novel enact what Eve Sedgwick calls “the unrationalized coexistence of different models during the times they coexist” (*Epistemology* 47). That is, if *Dusty Answer* is a hybrid text of the sentimental and modern, it is also a hybrid text of sexual discourses, suggestive of how epistemologies of gender and sexuality have not aligned in 1927.

Freud's theorization of femininity and its relationship to the libido highlights this "unrationalized coexistence" of different models of conceptualizing gender and sexuality in the modern era. He understands femininity as the taking up of "passive aims" but claims that "this is not, of course, the same thing as passivity; to achieve a passive aim may call for a large amount of activity" ("Femininity"). In his lecture, Freud attempts to align the problem of conceptualizing femininity as the taking up of a "passive" sexuality with the fact that he imagines women as motivated by the same libidinal energy as men. The result is a paradox of passivity that stems from the libido's activity, but Freud remains unconvinced by his own figuration of feminine sexuality; he cautions, "[W]e must beware in this of underestimating the influence of social customs, which force women into passive situations. All this is still far from being cleared up" ("Femininity"). Discourses of sexuality that imagine a libidinal subject necessarily clash with discourses of femininity that depend upon passivity. In contrast to Freud's feminine passivity, the susceptibility that I highlight within Lehmann's text is not a paradoxical position taken up by the libidinal subject but rather an alternative to the subject as defined by libido. While Freud imagines the inner life in a struggle with outer reality, susceptibility is about an encounter between the subject and that which is outside it in such a way as to confuse where it is that attachment begins.

Within both the negative reviews of and the text of *Dusty Answer*, this "unrationalized coexistence" of sentimentality and sexuality leads to a figuration of Judith and her susceptibility as out-of-time, or what Heather Love calls "temporally backward" (6).⁴⁵ In the reviews, readers draw heavily from the tropes that Suzanna Clark has identified as the dominant responses to

⁴⁵ Love writes, "If modernization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century aimed to move humanity forward, it did so in part by perfecting techniques for mapping and disciplining subjects considered to be lagging behind Not only sexual and gender deviants but also women, colonized people, the nonwhite, the disabled, the poor, and criminals were marked as inferior by means of the allegation of backwardness" (5-6).

sentimentality by modernists who believed that “sentimentality was both a past to be outgrown and a present tendency to be despised” (2). Age as both a period in history and marker of personal time become the tropes through which both aesthetic failure and feminist failure are rendered and connected to Lehmann’s pathos. For modernists, such as Strachey and Leavis, the sentimental signifies aesthetic failure, a failure of the writer to attain aesthetic truth. Modernist truth depends upon an emotional register of the present unmarked as emotion but decidedly opposed to the backward style of Victorian literature or public reading cultures that fail to be avant-garde. For Macaulay and Lehmann’s fan who is “distressed by the raw childishness of the book,” the sentimental is the failure of femininity, a failure of emotional seriousness or control marked by both gender and age. In both cases, the sentimental marks that which is both eccentric to personal and public time that is *on time*.

The text itself registers this backward quality in its intermingling of discourses of sentimentality with sexuality. For instance, the poem Judith imagines writing during the lecture is “one of those paragraphic poems” that would be about how everyone is “*insensible* to blackbirds” (140, emphasis added). Her susceptibility to external stimuli is contrasted to her peers’ insensitivity whom she sees as “clods, all of them, stones, worse than senseless things” (139). In this scene, susceptibility offers a position of emotional and moral authority as well as the inspiration for her aesthetic musings, but Judith also recognizes her poem as out-of-date: “A year or two ago, how fervently you would have written, how complacently desired to published that sort of thing! No regret could be quite so sickly as that with which one wished out of existence the published record of last year’s errors of taste” (140). The fact that Lehmann has Judith substitute her idea for a poem about susceptibility to nature for Eliot’s modernist “Love Song” suggests that Lehmann realizes that sentimental poetry is *passé* according to the avant-

garde, symbolized by the male Cambridge college students whom she imagines making fun of her poem.

The citation of Eliot's poetry provides an apt metonym for modernist poetry writ large thanks not only to Eliot's canonical status but also to his dismissal of sentimental expressions of feeling in "Tradition and the Individual Talent." In this essay, Eliot famously claims, "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" (119). Eliot even suggests that "the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates" (117). In transmuting experience into poetry, Eliot practices indifference, what he calls impersonality, so that the poet might reach a place of cerebral objectivity. This emphasis on body/mind dualism that suffuses Eliot's poem offers a dramatic monologue of a speaker who suffers from an inability to express his inner truth—a subject of sexuality—in contrast to Lehmann's portrait of a sentimental subject impinged upon by art, nature, and atmospheric feeling.

In its conversation with modern poetry, *Dusty Answer* acknowledges itself as a less-than-radical text in terms of its formal properties. But in so doing, it also suggests that modernism itself is not an artistic movement transcendentally above genre but rather a form of generic literature, recognizable in its formal preoccupations and emphasis on particular styles of (not) feeling instead of others. Through *Dusty Answer*, conventions of modern prose and poetry become visible as conventions of innovation. Moreover, in Lehmann's juxtaposition of Judith's unwritten blackbird poem and Eliot's poetry, *Dusty Answer* satirizes modernist conventions of (not) feeling. The unharmonious juxtaposition of sentimental and modern reflects the fact that feminized sentiment was seen to have no place within the modern literary movement. Virginia Woolf agrees with Eliot that art should be free of overtly personal emotions and, in so doing,

associates gendered subject positions with feeling. In *A Room of One's Own*, she argues for the importance of art created by the “androgynous mind,” a mind unencumbered by neither femininity nor masculinity, and critiques women writers who allowed their gender to influence their prose (88).⁴⁶ Judith’s outdated poem stems from her outdated susceptibility, an affective position that clusters around femininity in modernity.

In the positive reviews of *Dusty Answer*, there is one particular aspect of the text that is read as lacking verisimilitude, thus provoking similar critiques of artificial emotion. Again, in the *Chicago Tribune*, the anonymous reviewer claims that Judith’s time at women’s college is “done much less convincingly than the rest.” The article complains that Judith “loves another girl and suddenly finds her under the power of an older woman” (“*Dusty Answer* is First Novel” 12). As Pollard notes, this complaint circulates in numerous reviews and suggest that between-women relations were impossible for these reviewers to comprehend. But alongside the complaint’s homophobia, it also suggests how the parts of *Dusty Answer* that focus on Judith’s relationships with other women are permeated with descriptions of sentimental affect as it clusters around representations of femininity; as Judith declares, the women’s college is a “terrible place for getting overwrought” (192). In one scene, female undergrads finishing their exams are contrasted to the Cambridge boys who, after completing their tests, “cheerfully” go to lunch: “The girls crept out in twos and threes, earnestly talking” about how they think they did (209). Their susceptibility to group feelings of anxiety makes them “obviously female students” who, according to the narrator-as-focalized through Judith, “needed a little discipline” (209). The satire of this comment stems from the fact that Judith lives for susceptibility and serves to

⁴⁶ Woolf writes, “But how would all this be affected by the sex of the novelist, I wondered, looking at *Jane Eyre* and the others. Would the fact of her sex in any way interfere with the integrity of a woman novelist—that integrity which I take to be the backbone of the writer?” (66). Woolf goes on to decide that Bronte’s grievances against her situation as woman harmed her novel.

showcase how conventions of feeling leave masculine affect unmarked and exacerbate those feelings that cluster around femininity.

The heightened atmosphere of feeling in the women's college is crystallized by Lehmann's representation of Jennifer, one of Judith's central objects of attachment. The frenzy for Jennifer circulates around the school: "everyone [falls] madly in love with her" (149). The college students aren't just vulnerable to her; she overwhelms them. Judith is "absorbed" by Jennifer (211). Lehmann's representation of a women's college as an exemplary setting for emotional susceptibility corresponds more with Freud's portrait of a all-girls school as a place where "contagious outbreak[s] of . . . emotion" are common rather than his understanding of libidinal energy (Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* 149). But, unlike Freud, Lehmann depathologizes this "contagion" by emphasizing how all feelings are the result of an encounter between inner feelings and external objects.

Weak Grief

The sentimental is not just about affective susceptibility—being open to the feelings of others—but also about the specific affect that emerges from being vulnerable. In being open to others, susceptibility goes hand-in-hand with suffering, with a propensity for woundedness and grief. Because Judith's attachments are the product of susceptibility, they are accumulative (remarkable for their sheer volume) but also subject to loss. As Judith gains new attachments, she "loses" others and mourns their loss in displays of sentimental grief. How do Lehmann's sentimental tropes of embodied grief act as a counter-discourse to the process of libidinal repair offered by early twentieth-century psychoanalysis? How do we know grief in modernity? And what forms of grief are not knowable?

Freud's account of grief in "Mourning and Melancholia" knows grief by listening to the subject who feels the grief. He writes:

If one listens patiently to a melancholic's many and various self-accusations, one cannot in the end avoid the impression that often the most violent of them are hardly at all applicable to the patient [her]self, but that with insignificant modifications they do fit someone else, someone whom the patient loves or has loved or should love. Every time one examines the facts this conjecture is confirmed. So we find the key to the clinical picture: we perceive that the self-reproaches are reproaches against a loved object which have been shifted away from it on to the patient's own ego. The woman who loudly pities her husband for being tied to such an incapable wife as herself is really accusing her husband of being incapable, in whatever sense she may mean this. (248)

Freud knows grief as he knows most things psychological: through confession and via exemplary case history, by taking the particulars of one case and (sometimes, hesitantly) universalizing them to account for patterns in the psyche. This essay on mourning, however, shows how Freud's method of listening can take on a particular *tenor*—a specific listening style. Freud isn't just listening; he is listening "patiently" to his grieving patient, listening "patiently" to her "insistent communicativeness which finds satisfaction in self-exposure" (247). Patient listening is listening that tolerates, that allows what has already started to finish, despite annoyance or listening fatigue. As the sad patient lists her "many and various self-accusations" as reasons for her grief, Freud waits for the "end" of her story, for the moment he can abandon listening as a state of quieting the body and mind and begin theorizing.

But does patient listening really *hear* its interlocutor? In Freud's story, his patient listening is, in fact, a kind of half-listening or a listening past what is said. Reproducing the narrative of the analysis in his essay, he allows the melancholic to finish before he says what he has been waiting to say. In this particular case of the conventional figure of the complaining wife, Freud reports that the wife says that she is "incapable" but what Freud hears is that she thinks her husband is "incapable." Freud believes this interpretation is an "insignificant modification" to the melancholic's "loud" and "insistent" story, but could it be that the problem with both the husband and with Freud is that they are both "incapable" of listening to the wife's grief for what it is? In his posture of annoyed patience with the repetition of the wife's grief, Freud projects himself into the cliché position of long-suffering husband who doesn't listen. These gendered dynamics cluster around and coalesce within Freud's method for knowing grief, and in so doing, the wife's confession of grief remains *unheard*.

Clearly, Freud attends to his patient's words but, through his patient listening, takes her complaint not at face value but rather for what it conceals. In this, Freud's psychoanalytic methods of knowing his patient's grief are like his methods for knowing almost anything: part of an interpretative hermeneutic that takes the psyche as a mystery to decode. His patient's words aren't just words; they are unconscious symptoms of a broken libido. For Freud, the woman's libidinal attachment to her husband has been "shattered" but "the result was not the normal one of a withdrawal of the libido from this object and a displacement of it on to a new one" (249). Instead the libido has been "withdrawn into the ego" and the loved object is incorporated into the ego through identification, thus leaving his patient with the pathological version of mourning—melancholia. In other words, the women's self-accusations indicate the repressed truth that this woman cannot face but that Freud certainly can: her lack of an ideal husband.

As several scholars have noted—Eve Sedgwick, Heather Love, and Rita Felski—Freud’s method is one of “reading against the grain” and has become the primary method taken up by queer studies, “psychoanalytical feminism, New Historicism, and postcolonial criticism” (Felski 217). Called variously suspicious reading, deep reading, and paranoid reading, these methods “share the conviction that the most rigorous reading is one that is performed against the grain, that the primary rationale for reading a text is to critique it by underscoring what it does not know and cannot understand” (Felski 217). In this particular instance, grief is only knowable *as true grief* when it hides its sources; when it requires translation; when grief doesn’t *really* know itself. Grief is only knowable insofar as it must be worked through in order to repair the libidinal subject’s ability to attach. Grief is only knowable through its triangular formation of grief giver, grief-stricken subject, and analyst.

What I want to draw out here is that grief might not be a barrier to continued attachment but a form of attachment in and of itself. That is, it is through the elaboration of grief—its complaints, its self-accusations, its loud insistence—that grief can be known and known as a form of attachment. Perhaps this elaboration of grief is not only what connects the husband to the wife but also what connects the complaining woman to Freud himself. If one shifts the focus from the content of the complaint to the form it takes as a knowledge relation, one can see grief both as the expression of a grieved subject and as a pedagogical—possibly even pleasurable—relation, in which connection through grief is taught though perhaps unlearned, at least by Freud.

This lesson is not only a lesson about grief but also about sexuality. Because Freud imagines feelings such as grief to be subordinate appendages of libidinal desire, Freud takes grief to be a broken “erotic cathexis” and the result of a damaged libido. For Freud, repairing grief resolves sadness not to replace it with some other feeling but in order to restore the subject to its

instinctive, energetic sexuality: “When the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again” and becomes once more capable of libidinal attachment (244). If we take the wife at her word rather than deeply reading her, we might imagine that her description of herself as “incapable” is, in fact, the communication of herself as a non-libidinal subject: someone who lacks the energetic instinct that Freud assumes her to have. To read the incapable woman with attention to what she says rather than what she doesn’t say is to de-pathologize her weak feelings, to take Judith’s abjection seriously, and to make room for subjects without libidos who prefer “the exclusive devotion to mourning” rather than energy for “other purposes or interests” (244).

Like Freud’s grieving woman, the grief-stricken Judith offers up a form of sadness that is difficult to hear and know for Lehmann’s contemporary reviews. While Freud reads against his patient’s words to unearth a story that supports his theory of the libidinal subject, some readers of Lehmann’s novel, as I illustrated above, register Judith’s tale of woe but dismiss it as unbelievable. Placing Freud’s incapable woman and Judith side by side leads me to ask: what makes Judith’s grief unknowable to these readers? Lehmann certainly tries to get Judith’s sadness across; Judith loses friends, family members, girlfriends, boyfriends, acquaintances, cute bunnies, and old, chummy umbrellas. She is forgotten, ignored, dumped, manipulated, and teased. But rather than psychologize Judith’s feelings through free indirect discourse or stream-of-consciousness prose as one might expect in a modernist *bildungsroman*, Lehmann provides her reader with plenty of physical evidence of Judith’s grief. All these losses are met with a kind of equal-opportunity gusto, an exhausting mix of trembling, sobbing, bleeding, sweating, and shivering. Like a more present version of the “loud” and “insistent” woman of Freud’s essay, Judith repetitively grieves these losses in a way that seem to “find satisfaction in self-exposure.”

Connecting Judith's unknowable grief to that of the "incapable" wife in "Mourning and Melancholia," it is notable that the grief of *Dusty Answer* resists the patient listening and interpretation that Freud offers as an epistemic tool. Judith's grief is unknowable because *Dusty Answer* won't let its reader "listen" patiently and decode. The novel is all surface—from its emphasis on pain as an affect on the surface of the body to its capacity to render analysis as always already done, thereby, leaving very little for the reader to read *into*. In one scene, for example, Roddy dumps Judith. During the breakup, she throws herself on the ground. Bleeding and shivering, she hurtles accusations at her Roddy and at herself. Her grief is rendered both physically and discursively; just in case you missed the meaning of her tears, Judith howls: "I was so romantic and idealistic about you." She says, "I'm not ashamed of anything I've done" but the narrator chimes in to say that, in fact, Judith will use this grief to stay cathexed to her lost object forever: "The shame of her surrender, her letter, her unrequited love would go on gnawing, burning, till the end of her life."

Moreover, Judith's grief is weak because it is never reconciled via the methods imagined by psychoanalysis for the healing of the libido. For instance, one of Judith's first loves is a rabbit that is accidentally killed by one of the children who live next door. Judith is the only child moved to tears by the occasion: "She picked it up: she would carry it, though she almost fainted with anguish at the feel of its tender thin body. . . . She felt choked, drowning. Weeping, weeping she carried the rabbit down the hill into the garden. . . . She could not bear it at all. She was beyond all coherence now, a welter of sobs and tears." After the rabbit's death, Roddy attempts to console Judith with a tender funeral for the creature. As Judith cries, he buries the animal ceremoniously in fern leaves and creates a makeshift tablet from "the top of a cake tin, smooth and clean and shining" with the words "In memory of a Rabbit" etched upon it. Roddy's funeral

inscription momentarily fills Judith with “peace and comfort”: “The rabbit was under all that quiet and green gloom [. . .] no longer terrible and pathetic, but dignified with its memorial tablet, lapped in the kind protecting earth, out of the reach of flies and boys and the mocking stare of the sun. It was all right. There was not any sorrow” (24).

The funeral promises to aestheticize the animal’s death, to redeem and dignify the lost object through symbol and meaning, transforming it from unnamed rabbit to a memorialized Rabbit. But the funeral does not offer the “redemption through art,” the sublimation of loss as beauty, at least not for Judith (Bersani 414). After the burial of the rabbit, Judith’s feeling of meaningful plentitude does not last: “But afterwards it did not seem true. She only remembered that next time she saw [Roddy] he had been quite ordinary and indifferent, and she herself, still looking for signs and wonders, chilled with disappointment” (25). While she is unable to transcend her pain, the grief through which she attaches to the rabbit—an attachment that was never anything but grief—animates her ability to connect to others. That is, unhealed grief may be unhealed but it acts as a form of attachment in and of itself. It is the impasse that Judith experiences here that will define so many of her relationships and their inability to go beyond the surface. In contrast to the sentimental fictions that Berlant identifies as trafficking in the humanist fiction of “universal capacity to suffer” that connects everyone in a “nonhierarchical social world” defined by love and good intentions, *Dusty Answer* wallows in a grief that imagines connection but insists on impasse: “[Judith] had nobody now except herself; and that was best” (Berlant 6; Lehmann 348).

Conclusion

Moving back and forth between reader responses and textual readings, this chapter has read *Dusty Answer* as both a text and a literary event. As Wendy Pollard has shown, the critical

rebuttal of Lehmann's sentimental emotional register has caused her to remain a minor figure in the history of modern literature. To this, I would add that even more favorable, recent attempts to position Lehmann within modernist history—those that I discussed above—often focus on her representation of female desire in order to counter emotion with sex. That is, when present-day academic recuperation of Lehmann relies on seeing *Dusty Answer* as a text that reveals female sexual desire, it aligns with the modernist tendency to adopt a “reversal of value” to emphasize “erotic desire, not love” (Clark 1). Readers on both sides, then, agree on the fact that sentimentality is an impasse. Lehmann's sentiment must either be acknowledged and Lehmann disavowed, or sentiment must be looked past in order to recuperate Lehmann from her aesthetic backwardness.

However, in this chapter, I have been less interested in reinforcing Lehmann's minor status or rescuing her from it than in investigating sentimentality itself for what it can show us about the relationship between feeling and sexuality in the modern period. Mobilizing the sentimental sexuality of *Dusty Answer*, I have sought to “feminize” the history of sexuality. By “feminize” I do not mean to imply that there is something essential about female sexuality that Lehmann might help us to understand. Rather, I mean to illustrate how femininity enables us to question the history of sexuality's focus on libidinal desire and the instinctive subject. In this way, “to feminize” is a methodological stance that helps us to clarify what we think we know about sexuality in the past and how it is that we know it.

Lehmann's sentimentality renders her first novel's emotional, artistic, and sexual truths suspect. Judith's confessions are too sentimental to be heard as true confessions; her grief is too bodily to be read as modern grief. Critiques of the novel's sentimentality call into question the importance of the story and its believability. They question its universal applicability to the lives

of those not already marked as feminine, immature, and Victorian. They question its viability as a story unknown and deserving of communication. An effective confession of the truth of the sexual self is not just titillating but also emotionally credible, meaning that the truth of the self is not just sexual but affective even if that affect remains unmarked. While there is nothing particularly radical about Judith's conventional femininity as a gender identity, the sentimental rendering of her sexuality renders her out-of-time and calls attention to the discourses of psychoanalysis and modernism that place sexuality within the self. Sentimentality undoes the relationship between confession, feeling, and sexual truth in the modern age and offers a position from which to think through femininity's uneasy relationship to sexuality.

Chapter 3

Weak Will: Feminine Influence in E.M. Forster's *Howards End*

“Why, it’s only in pencil! . . . Pencil never counts.”

—*Howards End*, 74

In E.M. Forster's *Howards End* (1910), Margaret Schlegel and Ruth Wilcox have an “acquaintance” (60). That much is certain. Left alone by their families in London during the weeks before Christmas, the two women spend some afternoons together. They talk. They go shopping. They plan a trip to visit Ruth's home at Howards End, but it never comes to pass. Overall, they are an odd couple. Margaret is young, single, and in favor of women's equality and suffrage. Ruth is a mature matron “whose life had been spent in the service of husband and sons” (56). Their attachment is, according to the novel's narrator, “singular rather than intimate” (60). Surprisingly, only a quarter of the way into the novel, Ruth dies and leaves her ancestral home to Margaret, site unseen.

Upon Ruth's death, her family receives an informal note: “I should like Miss Schlegel (Margaret) to have Howards End” (72). To her survivors, everything about the Ruth's request is suspect. Despite the fact that a family home is an impressive gift to bestow on an “acquaintance,” the note lacks both energy and detail. It lacks the performative pomp typically associated with a person's last will and testament: Ruth “should *like*” Margaret to have the house (emphasis added). Written “only in pencil,” the will strikes her family as “unbusinesslike” (74). Moreover, the sentiment expressed by the bequest is at odds with the family's understanding of Ruth's character: “Mother believed so in ancestors too—it isn't like her to leave anything to an outsider”

(74). The whole business gives the Wilcox family reason to question “the invalid’s condition at the time she wrote” (72). Irrational, “flimsy,” and “contrary to [Ruth’s] very nature,” Ruth’s will is ignored wholesale by her husband and children (73).

Mrs. Wilcox’s will is *weak*. And yet, Margaret concludes the novel, some thirty chapters later, married to Ruth’s widow, Henry, and designated as the owner of Howards End. Dolly Wilcox, Ruth’s outspoken daughter-in-law, informs Margaret that this is not the first but the second time that she has inherited Howards End: “It does seem curious that Mrs. Wilcox should have left Margaret Howards End, and yet she get it, after all” (242). The “uncanny” revelation of Ruth’s wishes disturbs Margaret: She “was silent. Something shook her life in its inmost recesses, and she shivered” (242). Despite the fact that “pencil never counts,” Ruth’s will found a way (72).

If Chapter 1 in this dissertation discusses between-women relationships in an effort to theorize weak feeling as a form of attachment *between subjects*, this chapter returns to figurations of female friendship to investigate how weak feelings shape attachments between subjects and nonhuman objects—specifically, political ideals and the material forms they take. The chapter begins with an overview of how feminist and queer readers ascribe political power to the intimate bonds represented within the fictions of E.M. Forster. Through an interrogation of the political knowledge produced around and through *Howards End* (1910), I argue that a focus on Forster’s representation of love (as known as friendship or comradeship) equates political change with the sublimation of libidinal desire and, thus, reinforces the psychoanalytic tendency to equate properly channeled libidinal energy with civilization’s advancement.

From here, the chapter shifts to advance a surface reading of *Howards End* that sets libidinally-infused love aside to pursue what I term “influence.” Zeroing in on the opacities of

Ruth Wilcox's weak will, I argue that feminine influence bewilders both political efficacy and the relationship between libidos and motivation. As a counterdiscourse to love, influence signifies as a form of political will that shrugs in the face of the future and the past to focus what can be done in the present. The chapter ends with a discussion of how the religious movement Spiritualism acts as a historical source for knowing libidinally weak forms of connection and power.

The House That Love Built

How does one make sense of the "singular" relationship between Margaret and Ruth (60)? Feminist reader Elizabeth Langland reads Margaret and Ruth's intimacy as a kind of problematic, pre-oedipal mother-daughter bond. Similarly, Richard K. Martin reads Margaret and Ruth as a queer instantiation of the mother-daughter dyad. The novel, Martin argues, offers a "reorganized vision of human relations in order to allow continuance without physical conception, to provide continuity without heterosex and without nuclear family parenting" (Martin 256). These critical readings politicize the narrator's poetic suggestion that "passion" may be "transmitted where there is no bond of blood" (73). While other readers have questioned the success of the symbolic significance attributed to the first Mrs. Wilcox, they likewise agree that the novel grants her "mythic status" amongst otherwise mortal characters (Armstrong 314).

These interpretations of Ruth depend primarily on what is said about her rather than what she says. Perhaps because Ruth is only "alive" for the first third of the book, most readers focus on what the narrator and Margaret relay about her presence and character. It is with the narrator's authority that one turns the gift of Howards End from a mere house to a representation of Ruth's spirit. Commenting on her family's decision to ignore the "personal appeal," the narrator opines, "To them Howards End was a house: they could not know that to her it has been a spirit, for

which she sought a spiritual heir” (73). Readers tend to take this commentary as the confession of Ruth’s soul despite the fact that it comes from a narrator that is often “elusive,” even ironic, in his pronouncements: “He invokes the powers of narrative authority even as he undercuts them” (Armstrong 307). Even within this consideration of Ruth’s informal will, the narrator seems slippery. One moment, he asks, “Ought the Wilcoxes to have offered their home to Margaret? I think not.” Seeming initially to support the Wilcoxes in their decision, his commentary is actually peppered with contempt for them. He declares that the Wilcoxes ought “not to be blamed” since “the problem is too terrific” but insults their intelligence by saying that “they could not even perceive a problem” (73). Does this paragraph reveal Mrs. Wilcox’s true motivations? Or does this occasion provide the narrator yet another occasion to ridicule the emotional ineptitude of the Wilcox clan? After all, the narrator’s digs at the Wilcox family’s ability to “[dodge] emotion” could be hurled easily at Ruth herself (73). Ruth told no one of her illness and took her family by surprise by leaving her family home to someone she barely knew.

Readers may take the narrator seriously on this count because Margaret likewise positions herself as Mrs. Wilcox’s spiritual heir. Although the narrator acts as a character in and of himself, Forster also employs the narrative voice throughout the novel to represent Margaret’s consciousness.⁴⁷ At Ruth’s funeral, the reader is privy to Margaret’s reverential musings in which Margaret claims that, through “the death of Mrs. Wilcox,” she will be granted a clearer vision of “what a human being is, and to what he may aspire” (76). Remembering Ruth in this way, Margaret resolves to form “truer relationships” and sets her sights on repairing the opposition between the Wilcox and Schlegel families (76). Before Ruth’s death, Margaret

⁴⁷ For an account of the narrator and her focalization through Margaret via free indirect discourse, see Kathy Mezei, “Who is Speaking Here? Free Indirect Discourse, Gender, and Authority in *Emma*, *Howards End*, and *Mrs. Dalloway*,” *Ambiguous Discourse: Feminist Narratology and British Women Writers*. University of North Carolina Press, 1996.

seemed to believe in the superiority of her kin; the Schlegels rightly emphasized the “unseen” to the Wilcox focus on the “seen” (77). But after Ruth’s death, she warms to what the Wilcoxes have done for “civilization,” how they foster such admittedly “second rank” character traits such as “neatness, decisions, and obedience” (76). She immediately dispatches a letter to her sister in which she alights on the task of unification despite difference: “Don’t brood too much . . . on the superiority of the unseen to the seen . . . Our business is not to contrast the two, but to reconcile them” (77).

In her attempt at reconciliation, Margaret eventually settles on a central feeling: love. While Margaret clearly sees love to be a potent and capacious “binding force,” the exact meaning of this feeling, and what it can bind together, is more elusive. In its specific use, love is what Margaret feels (or decides to feel) for Henry and the emotion that promises to bring together the Wilcox and Schlegel families after Ruth’s death. In its more voluminous capacity, love morphs variously into “connection,” “affection,” and “comradship” and seems to be what Margaret believes will resolve the tensions for which those families stand. The novel expands on a philosophy of love that might bridge the differences between men and women; bourgeois and proletariat; art and business. And Margaret hopes that “love [will] be equal to the task!” (186). As several readers have pointed out, Margaret’s vision of what love may do follows Forster’s own (at times, shaky) investment in a form of political liberalism that invests in ideas of “progress, collectivism, and humanitarianism” (328). In his thematization of human connection across difference, Forster often enacts a metonymic slippage from individual connection to larger categories of political salience.⁴⁸ Love is both an individual and a communal feeling, obscuring the boundaries between the personal and the political.

⁴⁸ For the theme of connection as it relates to liberalism in Forster, see Daniel Born, “Private Gardens, Public Swamps: ‘Howards End’ and the Revaluation of Liberal Guilt.” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 25.2 (1992): 141–159;

This slippage between interpersonal and world-changing love is enabled by Margaret's repeated conceptualization of love as beyond corporality, even transcendent. Martin argues, "Forster seems to have meant to celebrate a sexuality that went through the sexual toward a transcendence that was still based in the body" (269). But it seems that Margaret's transcendent love is figured as more hierarchically superior than this reading allows. Forster compares Margaret to "a mountain peak, whom all might tread, but whom the snows made nightly virginal" (132). Moreover, on several occasions, Margaret minimizes what she calls "the call of sex to sex" in favor of some more crucial bond like "tenderness" (172). At the end of the novel, Margaret quietly judges her sister Helen for having sex with Leonard Bast—not because it was adulterous but because she sees her sister as choosing to lose herself "in sex" instead of attempting "to lose sex itself in comradeship." Margaret's love, she assures us, is superior to Helen's "instincts" (221). Thus far, this dissertation has considered the libido primarily as the sexual instinct, but for Freud, the libido was the instinct not just for sex but also *for everything*. This chapter takes up the universalizing conception of the libido as the drive that makes things happen. Despite the fact that Forster distanced himself from turn-of-the-century theories of sexuality, especially psychoanalysis, he likewise collapsed the energy for sex into the energy for everything.

Overall, Margaret's love signifies as a sublimated form of libidinal desire for Forster's readers, making for a difference of degree rather than kind. Margaret sees it as the diversion of the sexual instinct to superior aims, but like libidinal desire, love is a "binding force" that is energetic and intense. As many readers have noted, the novel's allegorical conclusion gestures

Lauren M. E. Goodlad, "Where Liberals Fear to Tread: E. M. Forster's Queer Internationalism and the Ethics of Care." *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 39.3 (2006): 307–336; and Leslie White, "Vital Disconnection in 'Howards End.'" *Twentieth Century Literature* 51.1 (2005): 43–63.

toward the unification that love may bring both interpersonally and politically. Though sparked by the tragedy that is Leonard's death and Charles Wilcox's imprisonment, Margaret's love for both Helen and Henry creates a kind of microcosm of society. In the house at Howards End, a place that is "neither one thing nor the other," Margaret "settle[s] [them] all down," bringing her sister and husband together under one roof with Helen and Leonard's child. Margaret is hopeful for the child and for the future: "To what ultimate harmony we tend she did not know, but there seemed great chance that a child would be born into the world, to take the great changes of beauty and adventure that the world offers" (234). The novel ends on a cautiously optimistic note. Displacing literal reproduction upon Helen and Leonard Bast, the novel enables Margaret to accomplish the (re)productive force of the libidinal drive without its material embodiment. In this way, the reconstituted family living in Howards End could be seen as queer. Furthermore, as the son of Helen and Leonard, the child of this collective arrangement straddles both the upper and the lower class and, thus, gestures towards a greater reconciliation as the future inheritor of Howards End.

At the same time, love, even queerly directed, places its political faith in what Lee Edelman calls the politics of "reproductive futurism" (2). Margaret hopes to "forg[e] . . . some more perfect social order" under the roof of Howards End, and Helen and Leonard's child acts as "the emblem of futurity's unquestioned value and purpose" (Edelman 4; 11). Despite the fact that, as Martin argues, the book depends upon a form of "elective inheritance" rather than "physical conception," Margaret's notion of love nonetheless depends upon the discursive slippage between love, libidinal desire, and political change that underwrites reproductive futurism (Martin 273). The "child" provides access to "Imaginary wholeness" and a better future in which community prevails (Edelman 10).

Edelman sees political alignment with reproductive futurity as essentially a form of heteronormative politics positioned against “feminists, queers, and those who support the legal availability of abortion” (22). In historical context, however, Margaret’s mobilization of love in the name of the future is not an abandonment of feminist politics but rather a form of those politics. Beginning with the political ruminations at Ruth’s funeral, Margaret incorporates Ruth into her rhetoric of love, transforming her departed friend from a mother in the private, domestic sense to a politicized “mother” of the movement. In so doing, Forster draws on one of the feminist discourses of his time, what Joan Scott argues is one of women’s history organizing icon: the “feminist maternal fantasy” that “envisions the end of difference” as a “utopian fantasy of sameness and harmony produced by maternal love” (293). English suffragists such as Emmeline Pethick Lawrence “envision[ed] the end of difference, the recovery of ‘a lost territory’ and the end of divisiveness, conflict and alienation associated with individuation” through the power of “communal love” (293; 298). Love, as a feminist ideology, places its faith in reproductive futurism but centers the mother rather than the child.

Love Lost

The problem with this story of love is that no one really believes it. Many readers leave *Howards End*, unconvinced by its optimism and pointing to Forster’s ambivalence about liberalism and the possibility of political reconciliation. The novel seems to operate on several levels at once, asserting one thing on one page only to deny it on the next. For instance, if *Howards End* symbolizes hope for a better future, an insidious “red rust” from London creeps in on its suburban peace within the final pages, symbolizing all manner of environmental threat and perhaps revealing Forster’s own classist distaste for the city (240). If its political message is ambiguous, its formal properties follow suit. Reading *Howards End* in 1927, Virginia Woolf

criticized it for its bumpy style: “The poet is twitched away by the satirist; the comedian is tapped on the shoulder by the moralist” (394). After some equivocation, she declares, “We feel that something has failed us at the critical moment; and instead of seeing . . . one single whole, we see two separate parts” (393).

Central to this duality in the text is the house itself and, by extension, the relationship between Margaret and Ruth. On the one hand, Forster seems to imply that Margaret and Ruth are transcendent soul sisters, united in their feelings, thoughts, and actions. On the other, the novel ends with the suggestion that their relationship is more complicated than it initially seems. Throughout, Margaret seems to feel her oneness with the first Mrs. Wilcox as a form of spiritual kinship that Forster figures as benevolent haunting. As Margaret embarks on her love quest, she thinks of Ruth as “stray[ing] in and out, ever a welcome ghost, surveying the scene . . . without one hint of bitterness” (120). Although Margaret feels Ruth’s guidance in matters of love, Margaret sees herself as ultimately in control of herself and her actions. But at the end of the novel, Margaret learns of Ruth’s extralegal will which was dismissed by her family and feels that the strange turn of events which landed her at Howard End results from the fact that, as Margaret confides to Helen, they all “are only fragments of that woman’s mind” (222). The “uncanny” revelation of Ruth’s wishes disturbs Margaret: She “was silent. Something shook her life in its inmost recesses, and she shivered” (242). Forster’s original manuscript made Margaret’s recognition of Ruth’s supernatural will even more apparent, repeating her earlier phrase of impotency: “We are nothing—nothing but parts of some one else’s mind” (265).

Readers of Forster tend to interpret his representations of same-sex intimacy as dependent upon nineteenth century models of male friends. Rather than turn to psychoanalytic theories of homosexuality at the turn of the century, Forster was “deeply suspicious of explanations for the

cause of homosexuality” and resistant to new models of gay identity (Moffat 70). He rejected “the pigeonhole of medical labels” and turned to the idealism expressed by Walt Whitman and within Edwardian homophile discourses epitomized by John Addington Symonds and Edward Carpenter. These writers minimized the importance of bodily contact (less so in the case of Whitman) and glorified friendship between men as a democratic and egalitarian relationship. As I mentioned above, one can connect these idealizing views of friendship to Forster’s tendency to employ typically male same-sex intimate relationships metonymically for the challenges, pitfalls, and promises of liberal politics. Attending to the metaphysical love and kinship between the women in *Howards End*, Forster’s representation of Margaret and Ruth (as well as Margaret and Helen) has most often been taken to be a rare occasion in which Forster employs female same-sex intimacy in his glorifying representations of friendship.⁴⁹

But the “shiver” at the conclusion of the novel suggests that the relationship between the two Mrs. Wilcoxes is less straightforward and equitable than these transcendental readings imply. Alongside Forster’s representation of Margaret and Ruth as romantic friends, the novel mobilizes a gothic mode that offers a counter-discourse to the idealization of love both as the binding force of their intimacy and the political feeling that Margaret employs to bring about change.

Bricks and Mortar

Whether or not readers find the unification at the resolution of *Howards End* convincing, Ruth’s characterization as a primarily symbolic presence has been taken as an almost universal truth of the novel. But, as I noted in the previous section, these interpretations of Ruth depend primarily on the narrator and Margaret’s understanding of her character. How might we

⁴⁹ See Robert K. Martin, “Introduction,” *Queer Forster*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997 and Goodlad’s “Where Liberals Fear to Tread” for the gender politics of Forster’s representations.

distinguish between Margaret's attachment to Ruth and Ruth's attachment to Margaret? And is it possible that Ruth, so often taken as the novel's symbolic locus of transcendent power and affection, offers a form of intimate and political attachment *contra* love?

After Ruth's death, the narrator and Margaret collapse the first and second Mrs. Wilcox into one and, in so doing, imply that their motivations, beliefs, and attachments are the same. Prior to her passing, however, the women are not united in their political views. Most obviously, Ruth and Margaret disagree on feminist politics—women's suffrage, specifically, and women's equality, more generally. During their short acquaintance, Margaret invites Ruth to lunch with her bohemian friends. When the reticent Ruth is pressed to give her opinion on political matters, she brings hush to the table by declaring, "I sometimes think that it is wiser to leave action and discussion to men" (58). This not only directly contradicts Margaret's stated belief in women's equality but also disagrees with her assertion that "discussion" is vital to interpersonal as well as political life. When Ruth declares that she "never discuss[es] anything at Howards End," Margaret replies, "Then you ought to! . . . Discussion keeps a house alive. It cannot stand by bricks and mortar alone" (58). Mrs. Wilcox surprises everyone when she retorts, "It cannot stand without them" (58).

Setting aside for a moment the feminist politics of equality that are under discussion, this scene offers a means of distinguishing spiritual mother from spiritual daughter and contradicts Ruth's (and her house's) usual characterization as a symbol of spiritual union via love. Part of Ruth's disagreement with Margaret hinges on that fact that Ruth sees Howards End not as a symbol for anything but as a physical space. It is, she retorts, a building made of "bricks and mortar"; that is how it "stand[s]" and, in her mind, what it stands for. If Howards End will become, by the end of the novel, a symbolic location for a "utopian social community," it is, at

the beginning, a realist house (Jameson 455). While Margaret interprets the house as Ruth's "passion" and spirit, Ruth's dialogue before her death suggests that she sees it as a place in which to be born and to die; "to sleep"; and to "[sit] in the sun" (64). The narrator (perhaps focalized through Margaret) sees Ruth's behavior at the lunch as indicative of her distance from "daily life," her possession of "a personality that transcended her own and dwarfed their activities" (57). But Ruth's dialogue reveals a resistance to the tug of abstraction that the novel exerts on its key symbol. If one resists Margaret and the narrator's urge to read the house deeply, *Howards End*, as much as any house in a piece of fiction can be, seems like a literal house. Unlike his attention to Margaret's internal life, Forster denies the reader entry into Ruth's consciousness, but attention to Ruth's reported speech offers insight into how *Howard End* might not only play a symbolic role in the novel but also a phenomenological one.

While this snippet of dialogue might seem like paltry evidence for a realist understanding of *Howards End* as much as a material place as a literary symbol, other aspects of Ruth's dialogue prior to her internment bolsters this surface reading. Despite Margaret's image of Ruth as above worldly concerns, the first Mrs. Wilcox's dialogue indicates a decided investment in the corporeal, even the trivial, side of life. When they first meet in London, Ruth bores Margaret with "too minute an account" of her family and their moments (54). Ignoring the "conversational hare[s]" that Margaret and her friends chase throughout lunch, Ruth prefers to "deplore the weather" and inquire twice about Helen's wellbeing during her travels away from London (56). At the beginning of the novel, when depicted ambling around *Howards End*, Ruth carries a "wisp of hay in her hands" (18). This image of Ruth resurfaces several times, and readers have taken the image as evidence of "transcendent relationship to her house" (Hegglund 403). But it might just as well indicate Ruth's propensity for touch in all its embodied aspects.

Unlike Henry who is uncomfortable with his (sexual) body and, thus, has difficulty showing physical affection for Margaret, Ruth casually holds Margaret's hand not once but twice. Overall, Ruth seems more aligned with a phenomenological take on life than most critical readers interested in her post-death symbolic characterization have recognized. Ruth doesn't really have a way with words, but she does have a way with things.

Moreover, even as the end of the novel designates Howards End as symbol of unification, Forster also renders the house as a "concrete place" apart from Ruth's occasional statements about it (Jameson 455). The novel opens with a letter from Helen to Margaret that contains a lengthy description of the house as a material space:

[Howards End] isn't going to be what we expected. It is old and little, and altogether delightful—red brick. We can scarcely pack in as it is, and the dear knows what will happen when Paul (younger son) arrives to-morrow. From hall you go right or left into dining-room or drawing-room. Hall itself is practically a room. You open another door. In it, and there are stairs going up in a sort of tunnel to the first-floor. Three bedrooms in a row there, and three attics in a row above. That isn't all the house really, but it's all that one notices—nine windows as you look up from the front garden. Then there's a very big wych-elm—to the left as you look up—leaning a little over the house and standing on the boundary between the garden and meadow . . . I must get on to my host and hostess. I only wanted to show that it isn't the least what we expected. (5)

The letter gives one the feeling of walking through Howards End, of taking in the rooms, the house, and the yard. It emphasizes the house as a place to hold people, as a shelter that will "scarcely" be able to accommodate the entire family. Despite the fact that the description is

given via Helen, the phenomenological take on the house departs from the modernist tendency to filter objects through a central human consciousness. In fact, Helen warns Margaret that the house “isn’t going to be what we expected,” emphasizing the disjuncture between their perspective—“all gables and wiggles”—and the reality of the house (5). Helen’s caution suggests that the Schlegels may have misjudged the Wilcox family, particularly Ruth. More generally, however, the letter emphasizes from the outset how the materiality of the house, paradoxically, makes it an opaque symbol. The translation from the material to the symbolic, from the physicality of the house to its meaning, is more difficult than assumptions allow. Ruth and her house are mysterious not because of their ability to transcend the material world but due to their association with it.

After Ruth dies, it becomes possible for Margaret to collapse the difference between herself and her pseudo-mother, but attending to the representation of Ruth as a fleshy character prior to her death makes the assumption of the women’s spiritual union more of a question than a fact. Moreover, recognition of the differences between Margaret and Ruth prompts a second look at Ruth’s motivations for bequeathing her home to Margaret. As I discussed in the previous section, after Ruth dies, the narrator explains the willing of her house to Margaret through the rhetoric of spiritual continuation which renders the house as more than a house. Yet, when one considers Ruth’s alignment with physical feeling rather than exclusively spiritual feeling, Henry’s commentary on the unofficial will is surprisingly insightful. When the Wilcox family learns of Ruth’s “treachery,” Henry puzzles over Ruth’s decision with his characteristic attention to worldly considerations: “The whole thing is unlike [Ruth] . . . If Miss Schlegel had been poor, if she had wanted a house, I could understand it a little. But she has a house of her own. Why should she want another? She wouldn’t have any use for Howards End” (74). Ironically, the

reader knows that, in fact, Henry's explanation is a plausible reason for Ruth's deathbed decision. Only a few pages earlier, Margaret informs Ruth that she will not have "a house of her own" because her family will lose Wickham Place within the next two years due to a changing real estate market in London which will make it too expensive for the Schlegels to keep. The news prompts an outcry and a quick invitation to Howards End from Ruth. While Henry's business-minded emphasis on material realities prompts him to stockpile money and houses (he owns several by the end of the novel), Ruth's materialism emphasizes use, occupation, and phenomenological experience. As the novel draws to a close, it becomes apparent that Margaret shouldn't just have Ruth's house but live there.

What do we gain from this surface reading of *Howards End*? Why read this novel for its materiality rather than its symbolic meaning? Reading a house as a house evacuates the novel's central metonym of connection, continuation and love, thus, undermining the political message of Forster's text. But can a surface reading enable a different interpretation of political change within the novel? And if one privileges Ruth's weak feeling for Howards End over the novel's emphasis on love, how does that change our understanding of attachment within the novel, both between women and between women and their things? Forster's treatment of Howards End as a material space may be related to the fact that the house is based on the estate (Rooksnest) upon which he lived as a child. But, more importantly for my purposes, this emphasis on the materiality of Howards End enables a surface reading of an object as an object and, thus, undermines the tendency to circumscribe objects of attachment psychoanalytically as fetish objects.

In psychoanalytic theory, the fetish is primarily a substitute, an object that metonymically stands for something greater than itself. Freud saw fetishism as a specifically male perversion

that was the result of an encounter between a boy and the sexual difference of the mother. To deal with the castration anxiety that would necessarily occur upon witnessing the mother's "castration," the fetish object would steel the ego against castration anxiety caused by sight of the mother's "castration" by becoming a penis "substitute" ("Fetishism" 153). Freud argues that through the process of disavowal, the boy holds both the knowledge of the mother's "castration" and retains the belief in the maternal phallus with the aid of the fetish object. While Freud owns that the fetish object could be anything or an object that is particularly reminiscent of the phallus, he argues that usually "when the fetish is instituted some process occurs which reminds one of the stopping of memory in traumatic amnesia" so that "the last impression before the uncanny and traumatic one is retained as a fetish" (154). This partial memory accents the moments before the disavowed sight of the female lack, explaining why the foot, the shoe, fur and velvet (textural metaphors for pubic hair), or underclothing are found to be typical fetishes. For the little boy, the sight of pubic hair or the last pieces of clothing in the process of undressing "should have been followed by the longed-for sight of the female member" but instead become fetish objects that work paradoxically as a sort of talisman—warding off fear inspired by the female genitals by harkening back to the moments prior to their uncovering—and as a "memorial" to the traumatic event (154). Thus, the fetish "in every instance" amounts to "a substitute for the penis" (151). The fetish acts as an appendage which enables "sexual satisfaction" in the face of the castration anxiety, but, for Freud it also acts as a clue to the perverse patient's psychological history. The specific form that the fetish takes matters because it stands as a referent to the moment in which the boy confronts the knowledge of sexual difference. Freud reroutes the object through memory thereby translating materiality into memory. Feminist readers of fetishism have critiqued Freud's assumption that fetishism is exclusively a male perversion, but might Freud's idea that women

are not fetishists be taken up as an opportunity to read women's attachments via objects differently? Femininity's divergence from Freudian discourses of sexuality opens up the possibility of reading the house *as a house* and of displacing libidinal desire as the hermeneutic key to interpreting relationships between people and things.

Moreover, a focus on Ruth's character in *Howards End* enables a different conceptualization of the novel's representation of feeling writ large. Unlike Margaret's powerful belief in love's ability to make meaning, Ruth's feeling for her house frustrates the attempt to translate "brick and mortar" into a specific form of significance. In contrast to the novel's focalized narration of Margaret's thoughts and emotions, Ruth's feelings are opaque and de-psychologized, rendered tactile. As Margaret looks for how love might change people and change the world, Ruth's attachment to Margaret seems to involve a simple wish for her house, as Miss Avery phrases it, to not "stand empty any longer" (193). Finally, whereas Margaret draws on the sublimated power of the libido to magnify her interpersonal attachments into larger hopes for the future, Ruth's feeling for her estate seems to stem from something less future-oriented than libidinal desire or love. But nor is Ruth's position against reproductive futurity as Edelman conceptualizes the queer as a figure of the death drive in opposition "to every form of social viability" (9). When Edelman figures the queer as a representation of the death drive, he maintains the psychoanalytic focus on the libido to privilege its inversion. Rather than the libidinal drive for life, for reproduction, for sex, the death drive is "the destabilizing force of what insists outside or beyond" (9). In so doing, Edelman undoes the ways in which this dissertation defines the libido as object-oriented but maintains its energy and forcefulness. A surface reading of *Howards End* sets this energy aside. Margaret's house is a house in the name of the future. Edelman's house is one with no future. Ruth's house is just one to be lived in.

Uncanny Influences

Margaret and Helen both argue that the politics of connection depend on the ability to take responsibility for one's actions. Despite the fact that Margaret's marriage to Henry leaves the sisters feeling more detached from one another than is usual, both of them berate Henry on his inability to "say I." When Henry refuses to take "personal responsibility" for Leonard's loss of work at the insurance company, Helen explains to Leonard that this is because Henry "can't say 'I'" (168). Henry, she declares isn't an "egoist" because he is all instinct with no subjectivity: "'I want' must lead to the question, 'Who am I?'" and so to Pity and Justice. He only says 'want.' 'Want Europe,' if he's Napoleon; 'want wives,' if he's Bluebeard" (168). Similarly, Margaret castigates Henry for being unable to "connect" his adultery committed against Ruth to Helen's extramarital sex with Leonard: "You shall see the connection if it kills you, Henry! . . . Only say to yourself, 'What Helen has done, I've done'" (219). The problem with Henry, according to the Schlegels, is that he is all action, no reflection; all instinct with no self-consciousness; all libido, no love.

At the end of the novel, Margaret turns to a less optimistic version of personal will to explain the tragic events that take place. Margaret and Helen, now pregnant, spend the night at Howards End against Henry's wishes. Just when Henry sends Charles over to remove the women from the house, Leonard shows up and Charles attacks him with the sword, resulting in his death. Crediting everyone's actions to their natures, Margaret sees this series of events as instinctual: "It was natural that Henry should do this and cause Helen to do that, and then think her wrong for doing it; natural that she herself should think him wrong; natural that Leonard should want to know how Helen was, and come, and Charles be angry with him for coming—natural, but unreal. In this jangle of causes and effects what had become of their true selves?" (234). Everyone acts from instinct rather than reflection, and Margaret seems troubled by the inability of the

transcendent “true self” to be reconciled with the animal instincts that bring about a “jangle of causes and effects.”

With the discovery that Ruth originally willed Howards End to Margaret and that, through this series of strange events, she has come into possession of it, however, there is something “uncanny” that exceeds Margaret’s story of instinctual cause and effect. What does this invocation of the uncanny mean?

Freud’s “The Uncanny” (1919) departs from the other psychoanalytic essays considered by this dissertation because, within it, Freud chooses *not* to explain all of his many examples of the uncanny through the explanatory power of a diseased libido. As I have shown throughout this dissertation, Freud tends to see sexual life as holding the key to an individual’s pathologies and the libido has both causative and explanatory power. Framing his remarks on the uncanny as a rare moment in which he, as a psychoanalyst, “feels impelled to investigate the subject of aesthetics,” Freud relates the uncanny to castration anxiety but also includes a discussion of doubles, haunted houses, “animism, magic and witchcraft, the omnipotence of thoughts, man’s attitude to death, [and] involuntary repetition” that lacks a characteristic focus on sexual pathology (14).

What Freud does bring to his discussion of the uncanny that one also finds in his studies of sexual pathology is his bent for demystification. As Freud puts it, psychoanalysis is “concerned with laying bare . . . hidden forces” (14). Like his treatment of neurosis or hysteria, Freud “treats [the uncanny] as a manifestation or symptom, a façade concealing the latent realm of the unconscious” (Schur 106). His purpose is to explain not only what the uncanny is but also to reveal what the feeling—as both a symptom of deeper problem and a psychological mechanism bent on hiding this problem—simultaneously signals and represses. The uncanny, Freud argues,

might seem like the natural fear of the unfamiliar but is actually the affective response to “something familiar and old . . . that has been estranged only by the process of repression” (13). Freud relocates the source of the uncanny, moving it from the supernatural realm to the interiors of the self. For Freud, the ghost isn’t in the house; it’s inside you.

If one brings Freud’s notion of the uncanny to bear on *Howards End*, one might read Margaret’s shiver at the conclusion of the novel as an indication that something has been repressed—Margaret’s femininity, her lesbianism. But the novel circumvents this depth model of the uncanny through its mobilization of the gothic mode and literalizes Forster’s emphasis on feeling, bringing out the affective and embodied properties of house inheritance.

Spirits that Matter

About midway through *Howards End*, a minor character says a minor thing. Cousin Frieda Schlegel declares, “One is certain of nothing but the truth of one’s own emotions” (123). The comment, “not an original remark,” falls “damply on the conversation” (123). But Helen Schlegel hugs her cousin after she pronounces this opinion, “liking her the better for making” such a statement because it “betray[s] that interest in the universal,” the belief in “the good, the beautiful, the true” (123). The narrator, after the initial hesitation, also approves of the remark. Frieda’s banality, the narrator claims, comes close to the “supernatural,” springing from “idealism” that “stir[s] the soul” (124).

What does it mean to be able to know “one’s own emotions” to be true? Forster’s narrator declares Frieda’s casual philosophy to be a universal truth, but the idea that one’s feelings are one’s own is an individualizing statement. Frieda conceptualizes feeling as a closed system in which emotions are “one’s own,” a form of property possessed with certainty that they do not belong to everyone else. Amongst all the mysteries of life, emotions are the only “truth,”

that which is clearly known and knowable. They are the key to identity and the key to knowing oneself as in possession of an identity. Caught in a tautological feedback loop, we know our emotions and our emotions allow us to know ourselves.

By the next paragraph, Frieda's casual philosophy of feeling reveals itself to be "bad preparation" for what comes next in the novel: namely, the moment in which Margaret Schlegel announces that she will marry the recently widowed Henry Wilcox (124). Helen finds the prospect of her sister marrying the brutish Henry unthinkable so Margaret sits down with her to think her feelings through, looking deep for "the secret of her own heart" but finding instead a remarkable amount of uncertainty (125). When Helen asks, bewildered by the sudden turn of events, if Margaret loves Henry, Margaret first replies in the negative only to backtrack and say that she is "pretty sure" that she will and that she thinks that she "began the moment he spoke to" her about marriage (126). In contrast to Frieda's feelings, Margaret's feelings are not transparent to her or to anyone else, and she waivers as she tries to assess them. While Frieda sees the origin point of feeling within the self, Margaret's experience prompts her to look for the origin of her (mostly nonexistent) feeling. If the feelings one feels are not one's own, to whom do these feelings belong?

Through its mobilization of the gothic mode within an otherwise realist text, Margaret is often figured not just as Mrs. Wilcox's chosen daughter but also as her double. As I argued in the previous section, Margaret sees herself as taking up Ruth's faith in love as a political cause. Forster implies that Mrs. Wilcox is not just metaphorically guiding Margaret but also "stray[ing] in and out, ever a welcome ghost, surveying the scene . . . without one hint of bitterness" (120). Like Ruth, Margaret marries Henry. When Margaret finds out that Henry cheated on Ruth with Leonard's wife, Jacki, Margaret feels as if "Mrs. Wilcox's wrong was her own" (174). In one of

the novel's most gothic scenes, Miss Avery, a mysterious local who tends to Howards End, mistakes Margaret for Ruth "in fancy, of course—in fancy" (145).

Within *Howards End*, Forster hints that the uncanny relationship between Margaret and Ruth might be more like thought transference than a return of the repressed. The novel's gothic ending leads us to read the women's doubling as less metaphorical than literal, less like an identification or a repression than a possession. The novel's conclusion, with its emphasis on the possibility that Ruth's supernatural will had found a way to bestow Howards End on Margaret, reverses the common structure in supernatural tales in that it concludes with a re-mystification rather than a de-mystification.⁵⁰ Typically, gothic novels end with a nod toward enlightenment. Preternatural happenings have real world explanations. Secrets out. The veil falls. Margaret's feelings might literally be Ruth's.

Throughout the novel, Forster makes specific references to spiritualism's relationship to mystification. Before their marriage, Henry is disturbed when Margaret jokes with him about "scrub[bing]" her "[aura] for hours" (112). He censures the irrationality of believing in an "astral plane" (the location in which spirits are said to dwell within mystically-minded religions) and wants Margaret to renounce the very idea. Despite the fact that she recants her interest in spirits during their conversation (perhaps only to please him and turn the conversation to another topic), Margaret is later depicted reading a book about "Theosophy," a branch of spiritualism that focused on communication with gods and other deities (186).⁵¹

⁵⁰ See Adela Pinch, *Strange Fits of Passion: Epistemologies of Emotion, Hume to Austen*. Stanford University Press, 1996, on Ann Radcliffe for an analysis that finds de-mystification in the gothic novel and argues for its disruption through Radcliffe's use of memory.

⁵¹ For an account of the relationship between spiritualism and theosophy, Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England*. University of Chicago Press, 2004, 136.

Forster places this interest in spiritualism and mystification specifically against medical (potentially sexological) intervention. At the end of the novel, Henry brings a “doctor” named Mansbridge to Howards End to intercept Helen. Henry and Margaret do not know that Helen is pregnant and hiding this information from them so Henry believes that she might be experiencing “nervous” collapse (205). The doctor asks if Helen is “normal”—if there is anything “congenital” that could be wrong with her—and Henry claims that Helen is just “highly strung” with “a tendency to spiritualism” (205). Margaret is enraged that, “under the name of science,” these men attempt to “label her sister.” Later, the narrator, focalized via Margaret complains, “Science explained people, but could not understand them” (205; 234). This dismissal of scientific methods of comprehending human psychology depends on the idea that science can explain—or reveal the facts about something—but it cannot capture the larger meaning of human life.

This scene captures the novel’s skepticism about demystification and psychoanalytic pathologization of the belief in what the novel calls the “unseen.” In his essay on the uncanny, Freud’s project of demystification takes specific aim at spiritualism, a religion that popularized the notion that one can communicate with the dead. Placing his faith in science and psychology, Freud chastises religions that “dispute the undeniable fact of death . . . to postulate a life after death” and claim “that one may commune with the souls of the departed” (13-14). Because Freud was eager to legitimate psychoanalysis as a science, he often purposefully distanced himself from the turn-of-the-century “craze for spiritualism” (Thurschwell 23).⁵² Although the British Society for Psychical Research attempted to verify the existence of spirits through scientific

⁵² See Pamela Thurschwell, *Literature, Technology and Magical Thinking, 1880–1920*. Cambridge University Press, 2001, for an in-depth investigation of Freud’s relationship with spiritualism and a discussion of the physical properties of spirits in turn-of-the-century Europe.

experiments, many of their efforts were discredited. The Society invited Freud to visit them, but he turned down the invitation due to his specific concern about the Society's interest in thought and emotional transference.

Freud worried that the transmission of thought and feeling involved in telepathy would be confused with transference in psychoanalysis. As Thurschwell summarizes it, transference in psychoanalysis involves the idea that "the patient reacts emotionally to the analyst only as a substitute for other more primary affective bonds" (131). Transference was a form of remembering another attachment through the patient-analyst relationship; it took place within the mind of the patient. Telepathy, or thought transference, according to spiritualism, imagined a more material effect of one mind upon another. In spiritualism, mediums would receive messages from those dead or read the mind of others, suggesting that the boundaries between minds were more plastic than Freud's model of the psyche—and of talk therapy—proposed. Psychoanalysis requires a (at least somewhat) stable subject which telepathy's horizon of shared thought problematizes" (131). If psychoanalytic transference resembled thought transference too closely, the "discoveries" about the psyche made by Freud during talk therapy would be tainted with the possibility that he had, quite literally, put them there. Thought transference, according to spiritualism, is a paradoxically physical phenomenon; the body becomes a conduit for information rather than a text to be read.

Conclusion

In the summer of 1904, E.M. Forster spent a day wandering around the countryside in Wiltshire. Coming upon the Figsbury Rings, an Iron Age fort near Stonehenge, Forster met a "shepherd boy" and talked with him for about "a quarter of an hour" (Moffat 73). The shepherd offered him a drag from his pipe; Forster declined it because he didn't smoke. They went their

separate ways, but the encounter affected Forster deeply. That night, he recorded in his journal that he felt as though he had “caught fire” from the boy. What he took to be the shepherd’s purity and kindness touched him “in that junction of mind and heart where the creative impulse sparks.” He imagined the shepherd as the “spirit” of England and felt inspired to become “a father to his fiction” (qtd. in Moffat 73).

The next day, however, Forster felt embarrassed by his behavior toward the shepherd. He pinked at how he had offered the boy a tip at the conclusion of their conversation. He worried over the possibility that what he had felt for the stranger was lust and tried to assure himself of the innocence of the encounter. He went looking for the shepherd again, but he had already disappeared with his flock to a field six miles away.

As this anecdote suggests, Forster had a complicated relationship to materiality. Looking for spiritual connections, the writer would be troubled by what he saw as more base concerns. His anxiety around matters of matter, many readers claim, stemmed from his complex relationship to his sexuality. Born in 1879, Forster was privy to both the Victorian idealization of masculine friendship and the criminalization of same-sex desire during the trials of Oscar Wilde. Caught between these divergent models of sexuality, Forster struggled to reconcile his longing for “intimacy, love, and domesticity” with his erotic desire for (typically working class and/or racialized) men. For years, Forster abstained from sex, attempting to “make copy” instead of “make love” (Moffat 73). While early readers saw Forster’s elevation of the soul at the expense of the body as evidence of Forster’s internalized homophobia, recent scholars of Forster have sought to understand this tension more generously. Historical work examines Forster’s status as a liminal figure during the moment in which gay identity arguably emerged while queer studies of

Forster attend to the “spirit of contradiction” within Forster’s texts to problematize the neat historical models that locate a shift from behavior to identity, friendship to sex (6).

What unites these various readings of Forster and his fiction is a focus on the history of sexuality as it is refracted through men and masculinity. More often than not, scholars interpret Forster’s fictions alongside sexological theories of male homosexuality; writings by turn-of-the-century homophile activists; or the transcendental poetry of Walt Whitman. In so doing, these queer and sexuality scholars read the body in its relation to sex or its lack, linking it to libidinal desire or the sublimation of desire to higher aims of love and friendship. Matters of matter are always matters of sex.

Shifting the focus from between-men to between-women intimacy, this chapter has explored the tensions between the material and the immaterial in Forster’s *Howards End* alongside turn-of-the-century spiritualism. A religious movement centrally concerned with fostering communication between the dead and the living, spiritualism undoes body/spirit dualism by claiming that *spirits matter*—that spiritual life is a physical phenomenon. In contradistinction to psychoanalysis, which sees a feeling of the uncanny as evidence of repression, spiritualism takes seriously the possibility that not all is known about this world or the next. My point has not been to make an argument about the existence or nonexistence of ghosts but rather mobilize spiritualism’s emphasis on mystification for thinking about attachments between women that simultaneously embodied and opaque. The connection between Margaret and Ruth is spiritualist rather than spiritual, influential rather than transcendental.

Chapter 4

Weak Knowing: Epistemologies of Interest in Henry James's *The Awkward Age*

When I think indeed of those of my many false measurements that have resulted, after much anguish, in decent symmetries, I find the whole case, I profess, a theme for the philosopher. The little ideas one wouldn't have treated save for the design of keeping them small, the developed situations that one would never with malice prepense have undertaken, the long stories that had thoroughly meant to be short, the short subjects that had underhandedly plotted to be long, the hypocrisy of modest beginnings, the audacity of misplaced middles, the triumph of intentions never entertained—with these patches, as I look about, I see my experience paved: an experience to which nothing is wanting save, I confess, some grasp of its final lesson.

—Henry James, *Preface to The Awkward Age*, 4-5

Between 1907 and 1909, Henry James collaborated with Charles Scribner's Sons to publish a 24-volume *New York Edition* of his collected works. For the project, James handpicked and edited short stories, novellas, and novels from his oeuvre and composed a series of prefaces to introduce his selections. During the course of the twentieth century, James would become known as a “master” of the modern novel, and it is in these prefaces that James begins to construct himself as such. In his introduction to *The Awkward Age* (1899), for example, James identifies himself not as a *mere* fiction writer but as an artist, “an ambitious workman” who “linger[s]” on his pages “with pride” (3). Simultaneously performing the position of visionary and aesthetic tastemaker, James employs his prefaces to petition for his place in the history of literature as a professional writer of complex fiction worthy not only of reading but also critical

interpretation.⁵³

Against this picture of a self-possessed and self-promoting “master” of the modern novel, however, are passages in the *New York Edition* prefaces such as the epigraph cited above. In this passage, also taken from his opening remarks on *The Awkward Age*, James assumes a diffident posture. Confident in the aesthetic value of his novels and his authority as a reader of his own work, his reflection on his “experience” with writing prickles with uncertainty; his pause-ridden syntax creates a sense of trepidation. Looking back over a career defined as much by difficulty as success, James confides that he lacks “some grasp of its final lesson” to satisfy either himself or his readers. About the writing process, James has no climatic advice to give, only a sense of his own struggle as messy and littered with false starts, “misplaced middles,” and “intentions never entertained” (5).⁵⁴

This brief anecdote certainly conjures an image of James a struggling but ultimately successful author, thus adding to his self-characterization as a “master” in the making, but James also mobilizes the autobiographical here to pedagogical effect. A sober teacher looking back on his own experiences, James warns his reader-students about the trials of authorship, something that he knows about first-hand thanks to the commercial failure of his play, *Guy Domville*

⁵³ See Jonathan Freedman, *Professions of Taste*, for a detailed account of James’s attempt to professionalize the authorship of fiction. During a time of mass commodification of the novel and short story form, James struck up a relationship between artistic fiction and modern visual art in order to lend his writing aesthetic seriousness.

⁵⁴ In “Shame, Theatricality, and Queer Performativity: Henry James’s *The Art of the Novel*” in *Touching Feeling*, Eve Sedgwick insists that James performs a kind of shame/pride circuit within the prefaces as he attempts to negotiate the relationship between himself and his “younger self, younger fictions, [and] younger heroes” (40). Jarring our expectations of filial, inner subjective, and aesthetic relationships, James addresses his fictions and the former self who created them through “pederastic/pedagogical” metaphors to highlight “the writing subject’s seductive bond with the unmerged but unrepuated ‘inner child’” (44). Both James’s address to his past self and Sedgwick’s reading of it is, in her own words, reparative: James’s “recognize[s] his progeny even its oddness” and how he comes to “love” his former work/self “both in spite of shame and, more remarkably, through it” (40). Sedgwick’s reading of James’s erotic and identificatory relationship is incredibly suggestive as it draws out how affects like shame offer new way to conceptualize the relationship between identity and shame. My reading in this chapter, however, departs from Sedgwick’s to attend less to James’s performative identifications and more to his figuration of knowledge relations.

(1895).⁵⁵ Moreover, James's rumination on the writing process foreshadows the difficult lessons offered by the novel that follows this particular preface. If James claims trouble summarizing the "final lesson" of his writing career in his preface, he passes this slippery relationship to knowledge along to the readers who continue on to read *The Awkward Age*. Like the anecdote of James's writing career, *The Awkward Age* teases with slippery meanings and unanswered questions; like many of James's late works, the narrative is filled with ellipses, silences, ambiguous figuration, and dangling referents. Poised to offer the story of what Nanda Brookenham (a young woman on the London marriage market) knows about the world, James's novel leaves the content of her knowledge more inconclusive than "final." Much like James's description of the writing process that he may live but cannot quite summarize, James promises that his novel "remain[s] shut up in its own presence" (12). He taunts his reader with this promise of opacity: "You can analyze your way in, . . . ; but you can't disintegrate my synthesis" (12; 16).

To those looking to learn "lessons" from this text, James's declaration might sound like an obstacle to be navigated through the various means by which we make meaning from stubborn texts. In this chapter, however, I want to explore how James's insistence on opacity, on a lack of "final lessons," is as much an invitation as an obstacle—as much a way of knowing as a resistance to knowledge formation. If James's preface fails in the genre's customary disciplinary imperative to provide readers with axioms about the writing process or the novel's system of meaning, it simultaneously models a pedagogical relationship that "confront[s] some of the ways it is possible *not to know*," to remain ignorant, to be frustrated or confused (Traub 4). Tracing the means by which James offers alternatives to knowledge-as-truth formations, this chapter

⁵⁵ See Sedgwick, "Shame, Theatricality, and Queer Performativity: Henry James's *The Art of the Novel*," for an account of the failure of this play on James's psychological and professional life.

leverages *The Awkward Age* in order to theorize what I will call “weak knowing” as a counter-discourse to the epistemological relations prompted by libidinal desire. Shifting the queer focus from James’s representations of between-men relationships to those between women and between men and women, I explore how a specific weak feeling—interest—acts as the motivation for knowledge without final lessons and organizes the knowledge relations of *The Awkward Age*. Building on Sianne Ngai’s theorization of interest, Jamesian interest acts as a weak form of knowing that acts as a counter-discourse to the epistemologies motivated by libidinal desire. I argue that interest coalesces into a form of “weak knowing” that counters the libido’s paradoxical disinterest in the specificity of its desired objects in order to attend to what James calls “the object itself” (76). Against the substitutive logic of libidinal knowing, which holds only one object in the mind at a time and sees that object in its utility to the self, “interest” depends on a comparative form of knowing that envisions objects *in relation* to objects other rather than the self. Unlike the dyadic structure of libidinal knowing, interest only catches glimpses of “the object itself” through conceptual networks, juxtapositions, and what the novel figures as “exposure” (8; 53; 72; 122; 210). As a non-libidinal knowledge relation, interest offers an epistemological position that confounds subject/object dichotomies and depends upon proliferating associations of inattentiveness.

In theorizing the epistemological dimensions of affect, this chapter elaborates on methodological stakes of weak feeling. Setting aside concern for the (missing) content of James’s representations of knowledge, I attend instead to the pedagogical relationships indicated by James’s text—those between characters; between James and his reader; and between queer critics and their objects of study. In so doing, I follow Valerie Traub’s method in *Thinking Sex with the Early Moderns* (2015) for “thinking sex” by subordinating subjectivity—“what people

(or literary characters) want”—to focus instead on “the knowledge relations [those people and characters] inhabit and perform” (4). Like Traub, I concentrate on describing and analyzing the methods, categories, and concepts through which James imagines sexual knowledge relations, particularly focusing on “what eludes or baffles as ignorance” or, in James’s phrasing, a lack of “final lessons” (Traub 5; James 5).

Given the fact that Traub, as the title of her monograph declares, primarily thinks sex alongside and through early modern texts and histories, it might seem out of place to use her methods to read fiction from the turn of the twentieth century. Traub’s capacious attention to and citation of feminist and queer studies from various disciplines and time periods makes her method extremely portable for scholars interested in women, gender, and sexuality. I take up Traub’s method for two specific reasons. First, her emphasis on reading sex as an epistemological question—instead of as an entry point from which to access subjectivity—helps make sense of the unexpected and untimely form of James’s novel. Unlike much of James’s work, *The Awkward Age* obfuscates the modern novel’s customary focus on subjectivity and consciousness to offer a representation of social relations more often associated with the materiality of literary realism or theater. While David Kurnick understands James’s formal choice to be a queer one that positions sexual “pleasure” against the disciplinary regime of modern sexuality, Traub’s emphasis on reading opacity, ignorance, and frustration as forms of instruction enables me to draw out the sexual pedagogies that James’s novel provides other than pleasure.⁵⁶ Second, I take up Traub’s methods because, as her work so often illustrates, attending to “ignorance” is especially useful for analyzing women’s relationships to sexual knowledge.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ David Kurnick offers a compelling and detailed argument about the realism of *The Awkward Age* and places this in the context of James’s literary career.

⁵⁷ Traub traces how “knowledge relations, particularly those involving women, . . . remain eccentric to” the typical forms through which queer studies understands pedagogical transmission: namely, *scientia sexualis* and *ars erotica*.

Like several of Traub's early modern examples, Nanda is subject to the historical-cultural imperative that young women remain ignorant to matters of sex until marriage. In proliferating the meaning of "ignorance," however, Traub's methods enable us to see *what and how* one learns even when one supposedly learns nothing at all.

This chapter asks: what are the ways in which sex is known in *The Awkward Age*? By considering how our ability to know sex in this novel is contingent upon the ways in which we know gender, my first section argues that the novel offers a counter-discourse to the confession—according to Foucault, a primary technique of the modern disciplinary system of knowing sexuality—not through queer study's emphasis on pleasure but through *indifference* to self-produced sexual truth. From here, the chapter posits that indifference to sexual truth does not result in a wholesale lack of knowledge about sexuality; accordingly, it elaborates on "exposure" as a form of indifferent sexual pedagogy. Understanding exposure as a form of pedagogy attendant to "the object itself," the chapter then connects such pedagogy to interest—the novel's central method of organizing weak knowledge.

Occurring over one hundred times within the novel, "interest" and its grammatical relatives, "interesting" and "interested," cluster around scenes of knowledge production that are defined by a lethargy of pursuit and lack of final lessons. If, as I will argue, the characters in James's novel don't desire and don't desire to know, they do want to feel *interested*. While libidinal desire typically motivates truth-seeking, object-directed forms of knowing, interest instead propels knowledge relations that: 1) obscure final lessons in favor of associations and arrangements; 2) are dependent on leisure rather than the energy of the libido; and 3) are comparative rather than substitutive. Throughout the chapter, I consider how the novel's

See especially Chapter 5, "The Joys of Martha Joyless." Instead of seeing women's (lack of) connection to these disciplinary technologies as exclusionary silencing, I follow Traub in her "recognition of the analytical purchase of sexual ignorance" and its "potentially positive effects" (310-11).

representation of knowledge production enables weak methods of knowing that eschew libidinal desire's relationship to knowledge.

“Like That”? Queer Studies and the Open Secret

At the resolution of *The Awkward Age*, Nanda and her mature friend and benefactor, Mr. Longdon, come together in Nanda's rooms to scrutinize why she did not marry their mutual friend, Mr. Vanderbank (known also as Van). Around the halfway point of the novel, the wealthy Longdon makes a promise to Van that upon Van's marriage to Nanda, she will come into a handsome inheritance. Despite this enticing contingency and its promise of financial freedom (because Van is an impoverished aristocrat who works as an unspecified bureaucrat in London), Van neither proposes nor explains himself to Longdon. Van, in fact, does nothing at all. By the end of the novel, Van has managed to avoid all declarations on the subject, suspended forever between a will and a will not.

The repartee between Nanda and Longdon promises to be an opportunity for explanations, a final word on the subject of Nanda's future, but it ends up being more ambiguous than clarifying. Longdon and Nanda speak in a series of ellipses and inferences, and the conclusion of their opaque talk—and of the novel—circle around what Nanda is “like” (309). We learn that Vanderbank cannot marry Nanda because she is “like that,” and Nanda confirms the charge: “I am *like* that” (310). But what exactly is Nanda “like”? What is it that leaves her unmarried and unmarriageable? Set up to believe that we will be given some final word on the subject of Nanda Brookenham, we are left instead with a most *indefinite* definite article: Nanda is “like that.” As an article, “that” signals something that an interlocutor already knows, something that need not be defined because it is so obvious. But does Longdon know? For that matter, do *we* know? Are we supposed to be in “the know”? Or are we left at the conclusion to flip back through pages and

wonder what we could have missed?

Harnessing the interpretive power provided by historical and psychoanalytic methods, critical readers often strive to outsmart James's opaque signification to interpret the Nanda enigma and locate the meaning of its empty content. One compelling strand of feminist and queer criticism on *The Awkward Age* sees the novel's enigmas as central to James's mobilization of or resistance to what Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1* famously terms *scientia sexualis*—"the distinctively modern, Western disciplinary apparatus, based on confession, which elicits and produces knowledge of sexuality in order to administrate it" (Traub 113). According to both the logic of this disciplinary system and to many of James's present-day critical readers, Nanda's secret is always already a sexual one; that is, her secret is really an "open secret," one couched as a mystery but widely acknowledged to be sexual in content. Unfolding the novel's open secret, for instance, Kaja Silverman applies psychoanalytic methods to Nanda's confessional ambiguity to find evidence of repressed homosexuality, specifically of James's own closeted desires present between the lines of his fiction. Less concerned with stabilizing male same-sex desire as the hidden content of the novel, Lloyd Davis and David Kurnick nonetheless interpret the novel's secret as a sexual one. They depart from Silverman to read against psychoanalysis and, thus, to politicize James's illusiveness as a purposeful upending of disciplinary systems of sexuality coming to the fore at the turn of the twentieth century. For Davis, James mobilizes moments of ambiguous content in order to evade the disciplinary actions increasingly taken against forms of illicit sexuality at the end of the century by the British medical and judicial systems. Similarly, Kurnick reads James's resistance to confessional scripts as part of the novel's "intent not on extracting identitarian information but on vibrating pleasurably at the scene of sexual possibility" (125). In his view, the novel enacts a kind of queer

“utopia” in which “erotic permission” is the outcome of “a cultivated disinterest in questions of psychological depth and sexual truth” (110).

Despite disagreements concerning the exact significance of James’s deployment of Nanda’s final (non)confession, these readers, whether psychoanalytic or resistant or queer, agree that the “gap of meaning” in the novel represented by Nanda’s secret “is far from being a genuinely empty one” (Sedgwick 201). In so doing, Silverman, Davis, and Kurnick echo Eve Sedgwick’s paradigm-shifting assertion in *The Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) that Jamesian secrets, despite their “stylish” denial of content, are best interpreted in terms of their inextricable relationship with sexuality (201). While Sedgwick, Davis, and Silverman all specify this sexual content as *homosexual* content, Kurnick declares that the novel is composed of “a veritable roll call of late-century deviance including homosexuality, fetishism, masochism, pedophilia, nymphomania, gender inversion, exhibitionism, scopophilia, and prostitution” (115). Although Kurnick refuses to specify the secret’s exact content—emphasizing its queer ambiguity—he is in fundamental agreement with other readers who see James’s novel as both revealing and concealing sex and desire.

I play out the specifics of this critical conversation about what exactly resides at the heart of James’s open secret because it gestures toward a tension within queer literary and historical scholarship writ large concerning how we create knowledge about sex in the past. On one side of this tension, the attempt to locate sexual content within James’s work acts as a rebuke to the “repressive blankness” and “homophobic misreadings” within literary criticism of James prior to 1990 (Sedgwick 197). This position summarizes the revelatory project that compelled Sedgwick to declare, “[T]o the extent that Marcher’s secret [in James’s “The Beast in the Jungle”] has a

content, that content is homosexual” (197, emphasis in original).⁵⁸ On the other side of this tension, with the increasing institutionalization of queer theory within the academy since the 1990s, many queer readers express hesitancy in reenacting the disciplinary quest for the truth of sexuality, even as that quest attempts to fill the gaps and silences created by homophobia.⁵⁹ As Traub summarize the conundrum, “Insofar as the will to knowledge is allied with the will to power, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, implies that our desires for knowledge may be inseparable from the modern disciplining . . . of sexuality” (303). Ironically enough for an academic discipline, to know or not to know has become a central question in queer studies.

Faced with this dilemma, queer scholars often seek ways to produce knowledge about sex that resists the power-knowledge dynamics of confession and revelation. Within studies of James, Kurnick’s essay offers a potent example of this queer method. In his emphasis on “pleasure,” Kurnick attempts to unearth James’s resistance to knowledge production as an example of “sexual possibility” instead of sexual truth. But, as Traub’s gloss on the paradoxical position of knowledge production in queer studies suggests, Kurnick’s method of (un)knowing still operates as a kind of knowledge production—that is as an implicit epistemology. Against the disciplinary impulse to confess and to name, Kurnick’s queer epistemology equates non-identitarian sex with transformative power but, in so doing, reaffirms the underlying logic of the open secret: ambiguous content is always already sexual content. Replacing dominant methods of knowing sex as self-disclosed identity, Kurnick organizes sex under the conceptual rubric of “pleasure,” following Foucault in holding forth pleasure as a counter-discourse to the disciplinary impulse

⁵⁸ Sedgwick’s account of the open secret in *Epistemology of the Closet* is somewhat difficult to nail down. At times, it seems that she is locating homosexual content in an attempt to fill the gaps created by homophobic readings of James’s bachelors. Other times, it seems that she is critiquing the open secret for its homophobic structure.

⁵⁹ Despite Sedgwick’s status as the theorist, alongside D.A. Miller, who researched the connection between homosexuality and the open secret, Sedgwick herself has written in her later work against the urge to demystify in the name of resistance. See *Touching, Feeling*, especially “Paranoid Reading/Reparative Reading.”

for identity-truth. But, as a transformative method of queer knowing, is it possible that has pleasure become its own modern disciplinary system? How many articles must be published and how many books must be written before the counter-discourse of pleasure hardens into its own disciplinary technology?⁶⁰

Like What? Inattentiveness and the Weak Secret

To sidestep this double-bind of knowing and unknowing in queer studies, I shift the focus from readings of and debates about the secret's *content*—whether that be homosexuality, queer pleasure, or something else—to the methods and dynamics of (un)knowing explored by James's text. What happens to our reading if we shift our focus from *what* Nanda is (not) confessing to *how* she is (not) confessing. What are the conditions of her confession as a method of knowledge production and how is Nanda (not) heard?

Silverman, Davis, and Kurnick understand James's novel as either playing by or resisting the rules set up by the confessional dynamics of sexology and psychoanalysis. Although the scene imagines a cloistered tête-à-tête like that between an analyst and analysand, the tone and pacing of Nanda and Longdon's conversation is unlike Foucault's description of the "perpetual spirals of power and pleasure" between priests and their confessors, doctors and their patients, adults and their children (45). In contrast to Longdon's self-characterization as an "absolutely

⁶⁰ As Annamarie Jagose has pointed out in *Orgasmology*, pleasure already seems to organize only around certain kinds of non-normative bodies and sexual practices. Kurnick's emphasis on James's resistance to sexuality's identificatory practices parallels what Jagose describes as Foucault's definition: "Where desire is concerned with psychologization and the deep attachment of an interiorized sexual subjectivity to the classificatory categories of sexology, pleasure is concerned with intensification and the temporary dissolution of the subject. As Foucault puts it, 'Pleasure has no passport, no identification papers.' For Foucault, intense sexual pleasure, particularly that which reorganizes the body's erogeneity, is productively impersonal in so far as it has the capacity to reorder momentarily the subject's sense of self, to detach the individual from the stable, coherent identity through which modern sexuality is administered and regulated" (187). In her reading of fake orgasm, Jagose points out that this definition of pleasure has hardened over time into a few practices that queer studies understands as pleasurable sex—such as fist-fucking—and that this contravenes the cautionary tale that Foucault offers against any clear notion of sexual "liberation."

passive thing” in front of Nanda (James 304), Foucault’s prose marshals the intensity of object-directed, revelatory libidinal energy to describe those who would extract information from sexual subjects:

The power which thus took *charge* of sexuality set about *contacting* bodies, *caressing* them with its eyes, *intensifying* areas, *electrifying* surfaces, *dramatizing* troubled moments. It wrapped the sexual body in its embrace. There was undoubtedly an increase in effectiveness and an extension of the domain controlled; but also a *sensualization* of power and a gain of pleasure. (44, emphasis added)

One of the central revelations of Foucault’s theory of sexuality is that libidinal desire comes into being through the scientific, juridical, and religious institutions that promise to discipline it. The vivacity of his description and the activity of his verbs rhetorically expose the prurient interests of power as he reveals discipline to be a potent expression of sexuality.

Against Foucault’s energetic personification of power, Longdon figures as lethargic in the extreme. When Longdon arrives in Nanda’s rooms at the conclusion of the novel, he impatiently declares that he wants her to join him at his country home in Beccles, but his worries limit themselves to Nanda’s physical presence—where she will go, who she will see, what she will do next—rather than the state of her soul and its “secret.” Faced with Nanda’s declaration that she is “like that,” he asks for no clarification and listens with “with an *odd fatigue* in his tenderness” (310, emphasis added). Neither out to discover or discipline anything, Longdon informs her, “I don’t see anything for myself, and I beg you to understand that it’s not what I’ve come here today to do” (304). Moreover, when Nanda promises to explain Van’s actions, he tells her that he doesn’t “care” to hear about it. Expecting some bodily expression of his surprise upon

hearing her explanations, Nanda preemptively begs him to stay seated, but Longdon is unmoved: he “never budged” (305). As Nanda unravels her opaque revelations, Longdon merely recites her expressions with “an air of final indoctrination”; like a bored schoolboy, Longdon repeats but rarely replies (310). It is not that Longdon, who “might *almost* have been a priest,” ignores Nanda completely, but rather that he lacks the energy to listen attentively to her suggestive explanation of herself (20, emphasis added).

At the beginning of the novel, James misleads his reader, suggesting that Longdon will occupy the position of disciplinary investigator—an outsider perspective that James cultivates to a more energetic effect in *The Ambassadors* and *The Sacred Fount*.⁶¹ Within “Book I,” Longdon informs Van, “I think I ought to let you know I’m studying you.” Yet, as readers progress through the narrative, Longdon emerges as a comparatively weak observer of London society. He is reticent, dismissive, “ancient,” and “fussy” (191). Prone to blushing, wincing, and murmuring, he often deserts his interlocutors in the middle of particularly piquant conversations. Admitting that he feels “literally dug up from a long sleep,” Longdon compares himself to “Rip Van Winkle” and, like this figure, is in no hurry to catch up on all the changes to life in London that he missed during his years at the comparatively slow-paced Beccles (22; 136). Longdon would rather skip lengthy and complex explanations, what he refers to as London’s “modern shades,” and informs Mitchy that he is too old for this kind of “pursuit”: “I’m not an observer. I’m a hater” (165; 83). By the end of the novel, however, Nanda draws neither Longdon’s detached observation nor his prejudiced vision. Longdon has grown tired of hearing about it. All of it. Whatever *it* actually is.

Longdon is not alone in his inattention to Nanda’s psychological depths. Throughout the

⁶¹ For a reading of these more energetic outside investigators, see Judith Roof, “The Perfect Enigma,” *The Men Who Knew Too Much*.

novel, characters who claim to be fascinated by Nanda's internal life actually ignore her attempts to confide and, thus, solve her mystery. Despite her centrality to the novel's marriage plot, Nanda's appearance is withheld for almost a third of the novel. When she finally arrives in the narrative "flesh" at Van's house for tea, the reader has already heard second-hand allegations (from the Duchess) that her friendship with Tishy Grendon, a married woman, is inappropriate for an unmarried "girl." Facing the gossip about her friendship with straightforward seriousness, Nanda offers to tell Longdon, Van, and Mitchy everything she knows about the supposedly "awful" situation (90). Before she can admit precisely what she knows, Van declares, "I don't imagine, Nanda, that you really know," and the conversation turns to other topics (90). Ironically, the adults so interested in the abstract question of Nanda often neglect her actual presence and stifle her own expressions of interest in the lives of others.

If Longdon and Nanda's other interlocutors are apathetic about her secret, Nanda herself fails to embody the Foucauldian image of the energetic confessor. Complementing "the pleasure that comes of exercising a power that questions, monitors, watches, spies, searches out, [and] palpates," Foucault also describes "the pleasure that kindles at having to evade this power, flee from it, fool it, or travesty it" (45). In contrast to this coquettish confessor, Nanda is often described as "serious" and "without levity": Van declares, "Nanda doesn't joke" (87; 91; 96). Nanda wants to confess, tell her secrets, without tantalizing. At one point, Van declares her to be not "of the least disposition to flirt" (199). To which Nanda "quietly" replies, "Thank you most tremendously" (199). All in all, Nanda's confessional posture lacks the seductiveness typically associated with this form of sexual knowledge production.

At first glance, inattentiveness to Nanda may seem to align with how contemporary critical readers of James read Nanda as an open secret—as expressive of a meaning that

everyone knows but will not admit. Yet, upon closer inspection of the tone of this knowledge relation, Nanda's situation appears to lack the fervor and intensity of the open secret. Within queer studies, open secrets often figure as notorious and act, depending on your perspective, as either evidence of sexual repression (Silverman, Davis) or queer transgression (Kurnick). Open secrets thrive on paranoia and bristle with a revelatory potency that the indifference surrounding Nanda falls short of capturing.⁶² We might, then, better describe Nanda's secret as *weak* rather than open. Nanda's secret is weak because of its lack of clear content and because it is often not even *about* her. Rather, Nanda's secret is often seen as the key to unlocking other people's secrets—either those of the characters surrounding her, or of James, her creator. Most especially, Nanda's secret is weak because of the *tone* through which James and his characters approach it. If Longdon meets Nanda's "secret" with a languor and inattention it is not because Nanda's confession is being repressed or because it is too transgressive but because no one *cares* about it.⁶³ During a conversation with Van, Nanda calls herself a "hack," seemingly acknowledging that she inspires more performative energy than libidinal pursuit.

James's reference to the novel's "light irony" further suggests the lethargic posture

⁶² There are, of course, many explanations for why no one cares to hear from Nanda. On the one hand, Longdon and the rest of the London set may be silencing Nanda, censoring the truths that, paradigmatically, come from the mouths of "the innocent." It may be that Longdon figures for James as a hypocritical prude, one who takes pleasure in a young girl's company but will not face the potentially scandalous aspects of the relation. Might he be shutting Nanda up to avoid his own implication in her initiation into sexual knowledge? At one point, speaking too plainly of the Duchess's relationship with Lord Petherton, Nanda pushes Longdon into a "mute" and pregnant pause. She apologizes, admitting that she knows that she "put[s] before [Longdon] too much—too much for [his] liking it—what [she] know[s] and see[s] and feel[s]" (141). Nanda's "frankness" about how little Longdon actually wants to know about her receives no answer. On the other hand, Longdon could ignore Nanda's confession not out of an unconscious repression or willful silencing but out of an attempt to keep the flames of his desire stoked. Desire has an ironic relationship to its object because desire may only be sustained through the constant interruption of its own satisfaction. As Diana Fuss writes, "To possess the object of desire . . . would be simultaneously to take away the motivation for the desire and thus desire itself" (722). To put this in the novel's terms: to have Nanda finally explain herself would spoil the mystery of Nanda; to know her would ruin the game of trying to know her. My argument about the weakness of Nanda's secret, however, sets aside these familiar feminist/queer explanations in an attempt to capture the tone of James's novel, its lack of intensity and its languor.

⁶³ Here, I follow Traub's analysis of how no one cares to listen to Martha Joyless's confession: "It is striking that Martha's confession is one that *no one wants to hear*" (114).

adopted towards Nanda's secret (8). In his preface, James warns us that his story is "small" and must be treated as such, with "levity" and "light[ness]" (1;8). "Light irony" can be distinguished from the campy irony that sometimes clusters around open secrets—what Sedgwick refers to as the open secret's "conjunction of an *extravagance* of deniability and an *extravagance* of flamboyant display" (165, emphasis added). While the characters in the novel can be performatively and extravagantly ironic, they just as often do things "mildly"; they "mildly observe," "mildly wail," even "mildly joke" (190; 271; 188). The process of uncovering Nanda's secret, her knowledge, is only one of the many things these characters do "mildly."

Much like the vacationing characters in Bowen's *The Hotel* discussed in Chapter 1, most of James's cast consists of degenerating aristocrats, lazy bureaucrats, and new millionaires intent on practicing leisure and lethargy. The characters in *The Awkward Age* sit, snack, talk, and travel. Several of them snooze or, at least, inhabit a trance-like state between sleep and wakefulness. As the novel's arguably most animated character, the histrionic Mrs. Brook is known for her capacity to speak with "utter detachment" and to spend long hours staring into space with the blank and often silent Lady Fanny at her side (42). Rarely do James's characters express agitation; more often they sigh, mutter, or shake their heads and feet. Although the "action" of the novel consists of characters planning different outcomes for Nanda's time on the marriage market, none of the plans come to fruition. Characters "arrange" everything from pillows to marital partners, but rarely do these arrangements materialize into permanent décor or decisive action. Longdon offers the firmest arrangement in the novel—money for Van if he marries Nanda—but the deal remains more speculative than real because Van declines to hear any details.

Even the scene in the novel that strikes contemporary readers as the most scandalous depends on a tone of mild amusement. Near the conclusion of the novel, Mrs. Brook "outs"

Nanda as having read an unnamed but apparently “revolting” book with an “awful subject” (251). Several readers cite this scene to capture the cruelty of Mrs. Brook’s relationship to her daughter and comment on how the moment effectively sabotages Nanda’s chances with Van, but this scene reveals nothing specific nor even particularly new.⁶⁴ Throughout the novel, Nanda’s mother broadcasts the fact that she is raising a “modern daughter,” “sensible” enough to know what is going on around her (106; 50). Many pages earlier, Mrs. Brook declares Nanda’s “blankness of mind” to be a “preposterous fiction” in front of Van, an admission that takes the revelatory bite out of this culminating moment (170). The tone of the scene is less notorious and revelatory about Nanda than embarrassing. We leave the scene uncertain about not only *what* has just been revealed but also *who*. Should Nanda be ashamed for reading “an impossible” book or should Mrs. Brook be embarrassed for moral posturing and extravagant display (197)? James’s description of Mrs. Brook during the scene emphasizes the mother’s histrionics more than the daughter’s sin. Mrs. Brook’s attitude is one of “drollery”; she “smile[s]” and “wail[s],” as she has throughout the novel (251). Mr. Cashmore, the novel’s dimmest and most vulgar character (as his name implies), seems to be the only soul who finds this conflict “hilarious” while Nanda answers her mother’s questions with characteristic forthrightness and Van passes it all off “good-humoredly” (251). Longdon seems to be the most agitated by the revelation—leaving immediately after the scene—but even he holds the “impossible book” in a “relaxed hand” (251). This is not the “shock” promised by modernist encounters with the new, but rather the “dialing down of one’s affective response to novelty,” in this case the novelty of Nanda as the modern daughter and new woman (Ngai 22).

In terms of motivational affect, while (the) desire (to know) motors the open secret, the

⁶⁴ For an overview of how Mrs. Brook’s contest with her daughter has been interpreted, see Kurnick, “Horrible Impossible” (117-118). For readings of this particular scene, see Michael Trask, “Getting into it with James” (132-33); Mizruchi, “Reproducing Women in *The Awkward Age*” (104); as well as Kurnick’s essay.

coolness of interest decelerates the weak one. It is not surprising that Nanda's secret fails to garner the heat of libidinal energy because Nanda herself isn't, in fact, represented as desirable; she is, as Van, Mitchy, and Longdon repeatedly declare, "interesting" (161; 164; 287). Even James in his preface defines Nanda as "interesting," the key "interesting object" from which the rest of the novel unfurls (5). Unlike the supposedly instinctual dynamism of libidinal desire, interest is a "low, often hard-to-register flicker of affect," a weak feeling that motivates an indecisive aesthetic judgment rather than passionate pursuits (Ngai 18). While Freud imagines that sexual desire may be sublimated into aesthetic creation or other cultural pursuits, interest undoes Freud's hierarchy of body and mind as it sits ambiguously between categories of feeling and thought. James draws upon ambiguity of interest's status, for instance, when he has Van criticize how the London set, especially Mrs. Brook, treats Nanda with interest: "Only what stupefies me a little . . . is the extraordinary critical freedom—or we may call it if we like the high intellectual detachment—with which we discuss . . . the idea of Nanda's happiness" (182). Van implies that interest is only a matter of rationality—an intellectual rather than an affective posture—but Mrs. Brook's reaction to his criticism is "a little rattle of emotion" (182). Coming on the heels of the affective and cognitive "detachment" Van accuses her of displaying toward her daughter, Mrs. Brook's embodied and emotional display suggests the inextricability of body and mind when it comes to one's interests.

Moreover, while libidinal desire, at least in Freudian terms, is about (pro)creation or (re)production, interest, as Ngai has convincingly argued, clusters more often around scenes of consumption. Libidinal desire is hyper-centered on one object and goes to great pains to keep only one object in its vision at a time. In contrast, interest accompanies a consumer posture that likes to keep its options open and defer its decisions. Ngai argues that interest, historically, has

been isolated as the feeling one gets when recognizing “minor differences from a norm”: “The interesting . . . is an aesthetic about [the] very tension between difference and typicality—or standardization and individuation—in capitalist modernity writ large” (18; 147). At the beginning of the novel, Van convinces Longdon that Nanda is “interesting” precisely because she is slightly different from other girls in London by drawing on a metaphor that epitomizes the reproduction and standardization of normative femininity: advertisement. London, Van argues, prefers female beauty to be “as plain as a poster on a wall, an advertisement of soap or whiskey”; Nanda, in contrast, has a look that is “latent and lurking” (32). What makes Nanda interesting is how she differs *but just a bit* from the norm, thus opening up an opportunity to ruminate on those differences from the standard: Does Nanda have “no *features*” or “two or three too many” (31, emphasis added)?

Unlike libidinal desire which shies away from the fact of its mediation (Freud considers it a naturally-occurring state of the biological body), interest as conceptualized by James is performative of its socially embedded status. What makes an object interesting to the characters in *The Awkward Age* is not the fact of its essential interest but rather the social circulation of a discourse that produces and circulates it as interesting: “[Mrs. Brook’s drawing room] was a place in which, at all times, before interesting objects, the unanimous occupants, almost more concerned for each other’s vibrations than for anything else, were apt rather more to exchange sharp and silent searchings than to fix their eyes on the object itself” (76). Like the “interesting object” that James describes in his preface, objects of interest within the novel are rendered interesting through their “possible relations and extensions,” the “vibrations” of interest that flow within intellectual atmospheres (5; 167). At the beginning of the novel, for instance, Longdon grows in his “interest” for Van because of Longdon’s “interest” in Nanda, an interest that Van

creates through his judgment that Nanda is worth attention despite that fact that she is neither beautiful nor rich (31).⁶⁵

....

Nanda's secret is a weak one, surrounded by interest rather than desire. Like all the other topics of conversation in the novel, the London set treats Nanda with inattention and mild humor. The revelation of her secret lacks both culminating signification (in terms of content) and seriousness of tone. James's present-day readers may wonder what exactly Nanda is finally and deeply "like," but the characters in his story take Nanda's character for granted. In doing so, James's characters effectively silence her; Nanda is repeatedly cut off, ignored, and only half-listened to. During the final interview with Longdon, Nanda breaks down momentarily into "a torrent of tears," her most acute affective display (308). Critics see read Nanda's "sob[bing] in a passion as sharp and brief as the flurry of a wild thing for an instant uncaged" as an expression of her love for Van or as a symbol of James's frustration at the will to sexual identification (308).⁶⁶ But it might just as well be tears of frustration—her frustration at the fact that no one, not even her friend Longdon, will listen to her. Longdon has just asserted that Nanda loves Van, and Nanda manages to offer one clear statement before again falling silent: she blurts, "Ah but I don't—please believe me when I assure you *I don't!*" (308). If Nanda's assertion falls on Longdon's deaf ears, it is also ignored by the many readers who assume that Nanda does, in fact, love or desire Van.⁶⁷

This inattentiveness to Nanda's revelations could be understood as a form of politically suspect ignorance, a kind of "weighty and occupied and consequential epistemology space"

⁶⁵ As Ngai summarizes this idea, "Judging something 'interesting'—the act of singling it out as somehow worthy of everyone's attention—is often the first step in actually making it so" (41).

⁶⁶ Kurnick, "Horrible Impossible," (117-118) makes this argument about sexual identification and Nanda's forced confession.

⁶⁷ See Kurnick (117) for a review of these readers who see Van as Nanda's love object.

(Sedgwick 77). Indifference to Nanda could be seen as the result of her place on the marriage market and her status as an object for exchange. And yet, as a result of paradoxical nature of sexual knowledge production, the weakness of Nanda's secret also depathologizes her. As a counter-discourse to the open secret, the weak secret not only diminishes the importance of the secret—its seriousness, its notorious nature, the paranoia with which it is pursued—but also unmoors the secret's lock-step relationship with sexuality and identity. In its weakness, Nanda's secret never quite coalesces into a confession because no one cares to listen hard enough and long enough to hear it. Nonetheless, in a paradoxical way, Nanda is heard. Her declaration that she doesn't love Van isn't a declaration that she does love someone else—whether that be Longdon, her mother, Tishy, whomever—but rather that she isn't a subject motivated by identity-defined and desirously-driven libido. Her depathologized frustration, thus, becomes an expression of her attachment in and of itself. Nanda's attachment *is* frustration, not something hidden underneath the veil of frustration; her secret is weak not because it is repressed or silenced, but because it stems from weak feeling.

Following Traub's suggestion that we “confront some of the ways it is possible *not to know*,” I have been arguing for a new way to conceptualize silence in James's fiction and—by extension—in representations of modern female adolescence. In dwelling on the difference between the widely used queer category of the open secret and what I have posited as the weak secret, I mean to offer an epistemology of weak feeling, a way of reading Nanda's frustrated confession as an expression of attachment rather than as evidence of its silencing or of a transgressive elsewhere of pleasurable sex. In the next section, I focus more closely on Nanda's frustration to explore how James's insistence on epistemological opacity and indifference to confession makes space for a weak form of sexual pedagogy. By what methods other than

confession is sex (un)known in the fictional life of a young, female adolescent at the turn of the century? What other kinds of knowledge relations are possible when secrets aren't in need of confessing? Kurnick sees the epistemological opacity of Nanda's secret as evidence of "pleasure," a kind of screen that allows for non-normative sex to flourish unencumbered by discipline and regulation. But pleasure may harden into its own form of discipline and an emphasis on sex as utopic pleasure fails to account for Nanda's frustration and, thus, misreads the opacity through which sex is known in the novel. Indeed, James's alternative to the disciplinary system of sexuality is not the knowingness of pleasure but the opacities of experiential ignorance and "exposure."

"Throwing me into the world": The Pedagogy of Exposure

Early in *The Awkward Age*, James stages a curt conversation between Mrs. Brookenham (usually known as Mrs. Brook) and the Duchess concerning the best methods for mothering young women. Drawing on her experience with her adopted daughter Little Aggie, the Duchess advocates the continental style of child rearing, what she calls "the immemorial custom" of her late Italian husband of sheltering girls from knowing what they should not learn until "the proper time"—that time being their wedding day (47). The Duchess deplores what she refers to as Mrs. Brook's "English method." While the Duchess or Little Aggie's governess, Miss Merriman, stands guard over the "little shivering shorn lamb," Mrs. Brook refuses either to protect her daughter's "innocence" or, as the Duchess urges, "simply to marry her—and to marry her soon" (49).

The Duchess is the first in a long line of critics of Mrs. Brook's mothering: she claims that she is "stupefied at [Mrs. Brook's] not seeming to recognize either [her] interest or [her] duty" (49). Following in her critical footsteps, present-day readers of James similarly argue that Mrs.

Brook is either a neglectful mother or a competitive one, a mother who, by all accounts, leaves her daughter to fend for herself against the “terrors” of the London social scene (Kurnick 32).⁶⁸ When readers do attempt to redeem the often-repudiated Mrs. Brook, they turn from a characterological consideration of her motivations to reading her—and James’s novel—as a statement of resistance to conventional motherhood. For instance, Susan Mizruchi argues that Mrs. Brook’s character works to “reveal culture’s ritualized constraint of women” as objects of sacrifice to men without financial or psychological liberty (121-2). Similarly, Sarah Bilston insists that while Mrs. Brook herself might be beyond repair, the novel itself is “forward-looking” in its feminist politics because it ends with Nanda living a life liberated from the demands of the marriage market (222).⁶⁹

Both the Duchess and the readers who follow her lead, however, neglect to categorize Mrs. Brook’s technique of bringing up her daughter; they move from the perception of Mrs. Brook’s mothering as a question raised by the novel to an ethical or political judgment of its worth—either for the project of reproducing feminine innocence or feminist experience—without exploring Mrs. Brook’s actual pedagogical methods. Setting aside for the moment the moral or political evaluation of Mrs. Brook’s mothering, what are the methods she adopts to teach Nanda, specifically the methods through which she initiates her daughter into a social world structured by sex, gender, and sexuality? While the Duchess sees Mrs. Brook as utterly lacking in method and in need of the Duchess’s didacticism on the subject—what Mrs. Brook calls her “old song” (50)—contemporary readers see Mrs. Brook’s tactics as either predetermined by or resistant to

⁶⁸ See Kurnick for an overview of this way of approaching Mrs. Brook.

⁶⁹ Moreover, as Susan Bilston argues, James casts serious doubt on the alternative to Mrs. Brook’s methods when he subjects the Duchess’s style of child rearing to scrutiny. When Aggie marries Mitchy and is revealed to be “perfectly bred and deliciously clever” rather than innocent, the Duchess’s proclamations about her superior form of child rearing take on an ironic shade (James 248). In light of this reversal of the Duchess’s morality as a kind of business savvy, Mrs. Brook’s methods of bringing up her daughter take on a more neutral tenor.

cultural expectations about knowledge, marital status, and virginity. But of what does that complicity or resistance consist?

Almost everyone—Mrs. Brook herself, the Duchess, and James within his preface to the novel—refer obliquely to Mrs. Brook’s pedagogical methods as an “exposure” of Nanda (8; 46; 123). Readers have largely taken James’s use of the term “exposure” as a testament to Mrs. Brook’s pedagogical failure. They point to how Mrs. Brook’s exposes her child to age-inappropriate “talk,” that is, the conversation in which the characters engage within the confines of Mrs. Brook’s drawing room (in its status as a sort of unofficial salon) and in other domestic scenes (Rivkin 168). In its negative usage, “exposure” characterizes Mrs. Brook’s endangerment of Nanda’s morality, her ability to marry, and her supposed innocence. James, however, also seems to draw on the more physical sense of the word “exposure.” Mrs. Brook is often shown casting Nanda—as well as her son, Harold—literally “out of doors,” insisting that her children find shelter elsewhere than her home at Buckingham Crescent. In 1851 “exposure” took on the modifier “indecent” to describe, tautologically, “the action of publicly exposing one’s body in an indecent manner” (*OED*). Although several of the entries in the *OED* imagine a male actor of indecent exposure, Nanda’s fully clothed presence in the streets of London and within married women’s homes without a chaperon strikes the Duchess as an inappropriate, even obscene, presentation of Nanda’s body, a body that should be guarded until properly attached to a husband.

But is Mrs. Brook’s mothering unambiguously a failure? And is James’s use of “exposure” unambiguously negative in the sense of endangerment and denial? Unlike the usually silent Little Aggie, Nanda offers an explanation for her mother’s unusual pedagogical choices: “Mother didn’t come because she wants me now, as she says, more to share her own life . . . She wants me to not, any more, to see only with her eyes. She’s throwing me into the world” (88; 93).

Nanda sees a purpose in her “exposure,” in her mother’s nudging of her daughter from the domestic “nursery” (6). Nanda declares that she “wants to hear all the talk” (97). An eager student, Nanda sees the development of her own perspective as dependent upon immersion in a social world.

As glossed by Nanda, Mrs. Brook’s pedagogy of “exposure” anticipates a focus on experiential learning in the twentieth-century progressive education movement. Rather than rely on didactic lessons and sheltering, Nanda’s education is an “active pursuit that makes use of [her] native curiosity” (Dewey, qtd from Tupper 123). While Little Aggie *reads* about modern life as a student in “Mr. Garlick’s class in Modern Light Literature,” Nanda *lives* a modern life (James 44). She walks. She visits the South Kensington Museum. She takes things in “at [her] pores.” She declares that she doesn’t only know “what people tell [her]” but also what she has experienced first hand (197). In this way, Mrs. Brook’s pedagogical model prefigures the teaching philosophies of John Dewey, Jean Piaget, and other progressive educators “for whom knowledge gained by ‘doing’ rather than ‘learning’ was deemed more memorable, rewarding, and valuable” (Tupper 123).⁷⁰

Attending to Mrs. Brook’s pedagogy of “exposure” as a form of education via hands-on experience enables us to apprehend James’s consistent attention to how Nanda “literally” *feels* through the reoccurring image of Nanda’s physical touch. Throughout her initiation into the social life of London, Nanda’s sensitivity to her environment is intellectual and emotional but also a matter of bodily practice. As Nanda talks, reads, listens, and sees, she also “caress[es],” “finger[s],” takes, and otherwise touches, employing physical contact as the method by which she positions herself in the world (189; 129; 197). Moreover, James wields this attention to touch

⁷⁰ For James’s understanding of cognition as dependent on “doing” as well as seeing, see John Attridge, “The Lesson of the Master: Learning and Cognition in *What Maisie Knew*.”

during scenes in which Nanda claims knowledge, thus, creating an impression of an epistemology of touch. In one scene, Nanda takes Longdon's hand and informs him, "You *are* good . . . I see already how I shall feel it" (100). Uncharacteristically, James stresses the physicality of his metaphor. Nanda strikes Longdon "as literal"; "her touch" tries to "express" her feeling to Longdon (97; 101). In another instance, Van instructs Nanda to act casually, to "feel" as she normally does with Longdon (129). She takes him as literally as possible, snatching up his silver cigarette case to feel it with her hands, even "rub[bing] her cheek an instant with the polished silver" (129). In Nanda's fictional universe, to "feel" signals a physical sensation, a surface, an affect of the body—Nanda's cheek against cool silver—rather than only an emotional state or the "atmosphere of the mind" as "it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations" (James, "The Art of Fiction"). Reflecting on his novel, James's preface likewise stresses the epistemological aspects of feeling: "[O]ur only way, in general, of knowing that we have had too much of anything is by *feeling* that too much" (17). In light of both Nanda's touch and his own emphasis on the "experience" of writing, James plays up the tension between feeling as psychological/emotion and feeling as bodily affect, thus, offering forth a representation of embodied knowledge that is simultaneously cognitive and affective.

Standing apart from James's many optically perceptive characters—from Isabel Archer in *Portrait of a Lady* to Lambert Strether in *The Ambassadors*—Nanda explores her world just as much with her hands and skin as with her eyes.⁷¹ In its figuration of the body as a conduit for knowledge production, *The Awkward Age* is eccentric to the "psychologizing thrust [James's] career" is taken to represent in literary studies (Kurnick 110). Known for his depiction of consciousness and his allergy to representations of physical bodies, James's representation of

⁷¹ Jonathan Freedman, "Hands, Objects, and Love in James and Hitchcock," *The Men Who Knew Too Much*, discusses the emphasis on the relationship between knowledge and vision in criticism on James and offers a perceptive reading of touch and knowledge in *The Golden Bowl*.

Nanda's education via exposure amplifies the materiality of his metaphors, a materiality that critics tend to assume is absent from James's aloof prose.⁷² Composed primarily of banter-filled dialogue and little narrative exposition, the novel's emphasis on Nanda as a "feeler" rather than a visionary or solo consciousness represents a formal rarity in the late James canon. Notable for, as James himself puts it in the novel's preface, "an imposed absence of . . . 'going behind'" characters and scenes, this novel enacts a prohibition on the "explanations and amplifications" of the free-indirect narration for which its author is so well-known (12).

This attendance to the-body-that-knows rather than, as Virginia Woolf phrases it, "the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall" mobilizes literary realism not for transparent mimesis but in the service of opacity ("Modern Fiction" 155). Nanda's bodily knowledge remains opaque, cloaked in the objectivity of realism rather than revealed by the subjectivity of modernism. Throughout the novel and in lieu of a narrator, James provides an unnamed and hesitant "spectator" who observes the action, often to underline the fact that the bodily experience of another is no more self-evident than their thoughts: "Our spectator would have possibly found too much earnestness in her face to be sure if there was also candour" (189).⁷³

Nanda employs her body as a method of knowledge production, but what it is that she learns from this experience never coalesces into "final lessons" for the reader (either through the descriptions provided by an omniscient narrator or the character's confession) or even for Nanda. When her mother interrogates her at the end of the novel about what it is that she gleaned from

⁷² Jennifer Flessner, "Henry James's Art of Eating," argues that many readers of James assume that his prose strives to take us away from the body's physicality. She counters this argument with her astute reading of James's aesthetic and gustatory understanding of taste.

⁷³ For an in-depth exploration of how "perceptual experience . . . lost the primal guarantee of knowledge" in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, see, for instance, Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (12).

reading “the impossible book,” Nanda responds in such a way as to underline the murkiness of her experiential education: “One hardly knows now, I think, what is and what isn’t” (251).⁷⁴ In another instance, she assures Mitchy that she “know[s] everything,” (299). As he joyously shouts, “You know, you know,” she restricts this “everything”: “Of course I know . . . everything . . . but what you’re talking about” (299).

Unlike the progressive educators of the twentieth century who often saw experiential education as having clear learning goals and explicit outcomes, Mrs. Brook’s method of exposure lacks “final lessons” even as it serves as the method by which Nanda is initiated into the London social scene. That is, if Mrs. Brook’s mothering does indeed, as the Duchess implies, leave her daughter unmarried and unmarriageable, it does prepare her to be a member of the London set. Like Nanda, Mrs. Brook’s friends often find themselves frustrated, left without a final lesson, and told to “find out” for themselves (56; 62; 68; 99; 258). Mrs. Brook’s abandonment of Nanda might, then, be re-imagined as an opaque pedagogy in which the contents of knowledge are not known in advance or, for that matter, at all by either the student or the teacher. As Mrs. Brook herself declares, “I’m too torturous for you to know what I’d be at!” (244).

Mrs. Brook’s pedagogy of exposure, it turns out, aligns with the pedagogy of James’s preface. Taking up a pedagogical posture similar to Mrs. Brook’s, James aligns his reader with Nanda and the rest of the London set, warning us of a lack of “final lessons” to be drawn both from his life as a writer and from his novel about what a young woman knows (about sex, intimacy, life, writing). James and Mrs. Brook both seem to insist that opacity is *a way to know* as much as it is a resistance to knowledge formation. “Experience” and “exposure” (to sex, to

⁷⁴ I am assuming throughout that the process of reading is not a disembodied process.

writing) offer lessons that don't always add up to knowingness; and conversely, non-knowingness is not a failed form of knowledge but a kind of knowledge, one that takes methods other than confession or "going behind" to pass on.

Although we never quite know *what* it is that Nanda knows (or doesn't know) about sex, James's novel offers a counter-discourse to our ready-at-hand epistemologies of it. Knowledge about Nanda's sexuality and Nanda's knowledge about sex come neither from the self-reflection of confession, the result of sex as "a new object of [scientific and medical] knowledge," nor from what Foucault calls *ars erotica*—the "practices of initiation, secrecy, and mastery" through which sex is treated as a means of pleasure (Jagose 84; Traub 113). Nanda's knowledge comes from "exposure," an opaque form of affective/bodily experience that is both illuminating and frustrating, not always pleasurable or utopic or even definitely erotic. Rather than internalizing sexuality as an internal state to be expressed, James's novel externalizes it, rendering it a matter of inattentive pedagogy and uncertain experience. An indifference to sexual truth, to Nanda's confession, is not a lack of knowledge about sexuality or even exactly a silencing of Nanda as an unmarried, adolescent woman but a method of sexual knowledge production in and of itself.

Emphasizing that embodied knowledge about sex and sexuality is neither wholly pleasurable nor transparent, I have challenged the notion that the body can offer unmediated or liberated access to sexual knowledge: Nanda's touch is textual, her embodiments metaphorical. As post-structural scholars of the body have argued, the body is a site shaped by discourse and, as I have tried to argue, knowledge produced via touch and feeling is not free from confusion, disorientation, and attempts at confession.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ For some examples of post-structural accounts of the body, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter*; and Annemarie Mol, *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice*. Similarly, Traub stresses that embodied knowledge is a matter of intellection, and here, I mean to echo her stress on the opacity of bodily knowledge (307).

Still, my attention to Nanda's and James's shared method of embodied knowing risks obscuring the other methods of intellection that James imagines as part of the process of (un)knowing sex and sexuality. That is, most of the characters in James's novel *don't* know through feeling and touch; sexual knowledge is not just a matter of bodies encountering one another through surfaces linked to affects. The other characters favor talk; they observe; they appear lost in thought. In fact, Nanda is exceptional in her access to this pedagogy of exposure. I now turn to Longdon's methods of knowledge production, for, even if Longdon isn't out to unearth secrets that doesn't mean that he isn't in a knowledge relation with Nanda. Through analyzing how Longdon "likes" Nanda, I explore the methods of sexual knowledge production that are available to subjects motivated not by libidinal desire but by interest.

Epistemologies of Interest

One of the central aspects of Nanda's epistemology of touch is how her haptic knowledge enables a focus on the material surfaces of objects rather than the meaning that object has for its human owner. In the scene with Nanda, Van, and the cigarette case discussed above, James employs his representation of Nanda's skin and touch to focus on the object itself rather than Nanda's consciousness of that object or its symbolism for Van or its implications for understanding Van's character. The focus, throughout, is on the case's surface, its cool silver exterior. After Nanda "rub[s] her cheek [for] an instant with the polished silver" of the case, she turns it over in the hands to press both sides to her face "without . . . profiting by its contents" (129). If we can read this as James's implication that he means to divest the object of its content, the scene goes further to suggest that the case also has no origin story to locate it within human history. When Van offers to give up the cigarette case to his friend, Nanda assumes that the case is a present from a forgotten donor since Van offers to give it away so quickly and simply. Van

concedes, “Its origin is lost in the night of time” (129).

Rather than focusing on what the cigarette case means—its origin, its (lack of) emotional value for Van, the kind of intimacy that led to the gift, how it might symbolize Van and Nanda’s relationship—James centers his scene on the case’s status as a thing, a physical object. Both realist and modernist fiction tend to employ objects to provide insight into human character, either through metaphor/metonym or through the rendering of an object at the moment of human perception.⁷⁶ In contrast, James’s lack of an omniscient narrator or use of free indirect discourse supplies the reader with a cigarette case stripped down or, at least, purged of many possible meanings in an attempt to represent subjects and objects as discrete entities. In other words, minimizing the focus on human perspective (for which James is famous) suggests the idea that an object might have its own integrity and presence outside of subjective experience.

This attention to the materiality of the cigarette case undoubtedly has implications for those interested in material culture, thing theory, and object-oriented ontology.⁷⁷ Rather than take up this debate about the existence of an empirical reality and how best to approach it, however, I want to link James’s attention to “the object itself” to sexual knowledge relations at the turn of the century. In contrast to those knowledge relations deployed under the name of *scientia sexualis*, Nanda’s epistemology of touch, which treats objects as objects, offers a non-libidinal form of knowing that also decenters the subject in favor of moments of exposure and encounter. If Nanda attends to “the object itself” via touch, what other methods of knowledge production does James’s offer to undo the supremacy of the subject within narratives of sex and sexuality?

⁷⁶ On the relationship of non-human things to human subjectivity, see Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature*.

⁷⁷ For a philosophical think-piece on object-oriented ontology, see Graham Harman, “The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer: Object-Oriented Literary Criticism.” See also, Brown, “Thing Theory.” While OOO is interested in the philosophical idea of an empirical reality outside of human subjectivity, I am interested in what things offer to our understanding of the political and epistemological efficacy of a non-libidinal subject position.

...

If Longdon grows tired of attending to the “modern shades” of London society and isn’t out to solve the mystery of Nanda, why does he remain so long apart from his beloved home at Beccles? The most obvious answer is that Longdon finds himself caught up in the lives of the Brookenhams because Nanda reminds him of her deceased grandmother, Lady Julia, to whom he was devoted. Throughout the novel, Longdon’s relationship with Lady Julia triangulates his attachment to Nanda. Although Longdon does not want to hear Nanda confess, he does take her up as an object of contemplation and conversation in light of this triangulated attachment. Specifically, he spends much of his intellectual and conversational energy *comparing* Nanda and her grandmother. When looking at Nanda in a photograph at Van’s apartment before he sets eyes on Nanda herself, Longdon declares her to be “much more like the dead [Lady Julia] than like the living” (31). This comparison primes his attachment to Nanda in the flesh. When he first lays eyes on the granddaughter, he is overcome with “sacred awe” and calls her “an absolute revival” of Lady Julia (95). Nanda, however, cannot completely replace Lady Julia. Although she looks like her grandmother—due to “the miracle of physical heredity”—Nanda’s modern air sets her apart from Longdon’s nostalgic vision: “Nothing could be less like her than your manner and talk,” he declares (99).

Longdon cannot erase the differences between grandmother and granddaughter—nor does he seem inclined to do so. The relationship between Nanda and Longdon continues not in spite of her differences from her grandmother *but rather through them*. Longdon eventually loses all sense of Nanda’s “likeness” to her grandmother, “accept[ing] [Nanda] at last as different,” but as he continues to spend time with her, he also continues to compare the two women (193; 131). Indeed, he enumerates and specifies his comparisons, discussing his observations with Van, Mrs.

Brook, Mitchy, the Duchess, and Nanda herself. Longdon, thus, “likes” Nanda in two senses of the word. He finds her agreeable and enjoys his relations with her, but he also “likens” her to her grandmother. James draws out the archaic sense of Longdon’s liking in which “to like” means “to represent as like to; to compare to” (*OED*). Turning to the explicit comparison provided by the grammatical structure of the simile, he uses “like” to compare Nanda and Lady Julia and, in so doing, typically keeps his two objects within his vision. Only once and only for a brief moment does he suggest their complete identity and substitute one for the other: “It’s she again” (94).

Although Longdon initially uses Nanda as the substitute love object for Lady Julia, his attachment to her fails to be substitutive in the way prompted by libidinal desire. In addition to its energetic aims and motivational fervor, libidinal desire can be defined by its recursive relationship to past objects, to its tendency to circle back to a primary and lost loved object.⁷⁸ In his essay “The Transformation of Puberty,” Freud declares, “The finding of an object is in fact the refinding of it” (88). All substitute love objects after this pre-oedipal “fantasized symbiosis with the mother” pale in comparison with the original object, resulting in a “lack-in being” (Traub, *Desire and Anxiety* 53). When Lacan reformulates Freud to explain not just the formation of the psyche but also the subject’s entry into language, he reads desire as that which “proceeds out of . . . [this] lack and seeks to cover it by generating an endless metonymic chain of substitute signifiers” (Muller and Richardson 321). Unlike the lack-defined subject who inscribes “their alienation into language” and, thus, seeks to cover this psychic castration, Longdon does not repress the differences between Nanda and her grandmother, preferring rather to face them head on (Traub, *Desire and Anxiety*, 54). Longdon’s loss of his “original” object is not deferred or disavowed but analyzed and discussed. In its laser focus, libidinal desire powers a

⁷⁸ For Freud, this first love object is the mother’s breast and the ideal love relationship it represents.

subject that cannot hold more than one idea at once, thus, necessitating the substitution of metaphor or metonym. In contrast, Longdon's liking, his weak attachment and weak knowing via comparison, aligns more with the explicit comparison involved in simile. The novel even questions the idea that there can be an original love object that prompts the fixation of libidinal energy. Longdon, it turns out, was always interested in comparison and simultaneity than substitution. In his youth, he was apparently devoted to *both* Lady Julia and Van's mother, but all he felt was "that dreadful consolatory 'liking'" (34).

Longdon's comparison of Nanda and Lady Julia offers an opportunity to intervene in the way that canonical feminist theory theorizes attachments between men and women through the logic of substitution. Anthropological and economic models, such as Gayle Rubin's touchstone essay "Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex" (1975), describe marriage markets as exchange economies in which one interchangeable woman is exchanged for another. Heterosexuality (as defined by marriage) is not the desire for one specific, embodied woman, but an occasion to extend and cement patriarchal or homosocial bonds. In her influential *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), Eve Sedgwick takes up this idea of the interchangeability of women and the mediated nature of desire to postulate that women in literature act as a kind of fulcrum between men, through which homoerotic desire is both deflected and expressed. Again, the specificity of the woman is secondary to her ability to offer a substitute and screen for an illicit desire. And substitution anchors feminist psychoanalytical models of heterosexual desire such as that theorized in film theory, in which substitution via fetishization works to ease castration anxiety inspired by the female body.⁷⁹

In their attempt to account for patriarchal culture, these feminist theories of substitution,

⁷⁹ For instance, See Laura Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity*. Indiana University Press, 1996, and Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s*. Indiana University Press, 1987.

both literal and figurative, place the masculine psyche at their center and imagine women as infinitely exchangeable by men.⁸⁰ As Barbara Johnson summarizes it, “One of the founding insights of feminist criticism has been to point out that the idealized beloved woman is often described as an object, a thing, rather than a subject” (95). Despite its displacement of gender in favor of sexuality as an analytical lens for approaching attachment, queer theory similarly characterizes libidinal desire as disinterested in the specificity of its desired objects. Expanding feminist arguments to offer a de-gendered account of desire’s economies, queer theorists have shown that desire operates to reduce the world, in Leo Bersani’s formation, to a mere “reflection of the desiring subject” (401). Libidinal desire objectifies its attachments, taking up objects as opportunities for psychic projection, egotistical aggrandizement, psychic repair, or exploitation. For Bersani, the inability to ever truly know the loved object is not a blameworthy subject position, but part of the very grammar of libidinal desire.

In contrast to the substitutive economy of the marriage market described by these feminist and queer theorists, James’s marriage market is not defined by the interchangeability of women.⁸¹ In addition to the comparison between Nanda and her grandmother, Nanda and Little Aggie (as the novel’s bachelorettes) are subject to numerous comparisons; their beauty, their knowledge, their “innocence,” and their conformity to gender ideals are all subjects of discussion and contrast. What is remarkable is that, for the most part, the novel evacuates these comparisons of moral judgment, mobilizing the language of rivalry and competition between women but coupling it with analytical distance and a coolness of tone. As Mitchy declares, “There [are] many different ways [for] a woman [to] be interesting” (76). In short, the marriage market of *The*

⁸⁰ See Sharon Marcus, *Between Women*, (5; 195) for a critique and revision of feminist theories of the marriage market.

⁸¹ Since at least the 18th century, many novels strive to differentiate women in the marriage market. See Sharon Marcus.

Awkward Age, lacking the energy of one powered by libidinal desire, allows for a difference in its “objects” that makes those entities non-interchangeable, thus undermining their status as “objects” at all.

Mitchy’s assertion that a woman might “be interesting” in a number of ways seems at first to be a facile description, but his criteria for thinking about women—and other subjects—as “interesting” is key to the comparative method of object relations James offers. In contrast to the egotism of a libidinal desire to know and thus yield power over the other, interest is motivated by sensitivity to the object, one attuned to what James calls “the object itself.” Accepting the improbability of ever apprehending something “objectively,” or without subjective bias, James’s novel, nonetheless, offers a method of knowledge production less invested in subject creation, and more sensitive to the properties of objects by seeing objects in relation *to objects other than the self*. Interest is object sensitive, not because of its ability to isolate an object or attend to its essence, but because of how it places objects in a (social) field of comparison. As James puts it in his preface, “[T]he *relations* of a human figure or social occurrence are what make such objects interesting,” but this is also what makes them “difficult to isolate, to surround with the sharp black line, to frame in the square, the circle, the charming oval” (5).⁸² It is the process of comparison—of expanding on one thing’s relationship to another, of seeing one thing *within a network of similar yet ultimately different things*—that yields interest. Thus, to know something comparatively is to try to know it for itself; but it is also to access its specificity *weakly*, within a constellation of its terms and associations.

⁸² Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, expands on the relationship between comparison and interest, drawing on numerous thinkers including James to argue, “what is interesting is never inherently interesting but only so in comparison with something else” (25).

Conclusion: Final Lessons?

This dissertation has located and recuperated weak feelings otherwise pathologized in the age of libidinal desire. I have argued that abandoning sex as it is understood in relationship to the libido re-frames the problem of feminine desire as a methodological opportunity to account for how weak feeling clusters around representations of women in the modern novel. Through readings of Elizabeth Bowen's *The Hotel*, Rosamond Lehmann's *Dusty Answer*, and E.M. Forster's *Howards End*, I have troubled the assumption that libidinal desire is the only or inevitable "glue" of modern attachment. Despite the solidification of sexuality as a conceptual category in modern Western medical and psychological discourse, the fictions dissected by this dissertation imagine femininity apart from libidinal desire, and in relation to a constellation of weak affects including liking, susceptibility, influence, and interest.

This final chapter concludes the dissertation's larger project by taking up the libido's paradoxical disinterest in the specificity of desire and offering a counter-epistemology of "weak knowing." Exploring this idea of weak knowing, this chapter considers how weak feeling can reorient the study of sexuality to account for it as a knowledge relation intent on apprehending objects instead of creating subjects. In a sense, through James, I return to sex, but "sex" seen askance because James problematizes both what we know as sex, sexuality, and gender and how we go about knowing it.

Epilogue

Whether in the mode of dialectical materialism, deconstruction, feminist standpoint, critical race, or queer reading, critique has been alluring because of the promise it makes, which is that through the routes and rhetorics of knowledge production we can travel the distance from speculation to truth, from desire to political comprehension, from wanting a different social world to have the faith that we can make it so. To be sure, critique can also be repetitious and exhausting, self-congratulatory and self-absorbed, but the narcissism it cultivates is nothing if not thrilling.

—Robyn Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, 34

“Inexperience,” repeated Margaret, in serious yet buoyant tones. “Of course, I have everything to learn—absolutely everything.”

—*Howards End*, 55

At the conclusion of this dissertation, I recall that it and I—since I can hardly separate it from the “me” of its making—have been of two minds. On the one hand, I have sought to offer what Robyn Wiegman calls the “promise” of critique. In my paranoid readings of psychoanalysis, queer studies, and feminist theory, I have been “repetitious and exhausting” in my attempt to ferret out certain provisional truths, to move “through the routes and rhetorics of knowledge production . . . to political comprehension” (34). On the other hand, through my adoption of surface reading techniques and my speculations about attachment without sexuality, I have tried to remain open to the lessons that the past, as it is reflected in a handful of literary texts, might teach me. I have tried to remember that—like Margaret in *Howard End*—“I have everything to learn” and that my lessons might be more irregular or opaque than the rhetorical certainty of

“thrilling” critique allows. Staying with the pedagogical mood of Chapter 4, I want to ask in this epilogue: what lessons have I learned from the dual impulses of this project? What are its key insights? And what questions remain?

In terms of critique, the message of *Weak Feelings* should be, by now, loud and clear and, if I have done my job, “alluring” (34). To recount, the preceding pages evidence my fatigue with the libido as a hermeneutic device for twentieth century sexuality in modernist fiction and psychoanalysis. Despite the fact that Michel Foucault promised to put to bed the notion of a naturally occurring sexuality, my research shows that the assumption of libidinal energy still plays a role in both what we know about sexuality and how we go about knowing it. In a paranoid frame of mind, I have taken up various pieces of interdisciplinary wisdom in order to interrogate these theories as sites of knowledge production. I have ferreted out the status afforded to libidinal desire in selections from psychoanalysis, queer theory, feminist theory, and the history of sexuality. Moreover, each chapter stands as a chronicle of the encounter I have had with libidinal desire as a kind of “lightning rod” for literary reading. In the case of all four novels under study, I found that libidinal desire conducts the electricity of textuality into predictable channels, ones that fail to imagine the possibility that the libido isn’t universal and inevitable. In this way, my paranoia crosses disciplines and time periods. In this respect, it is capacious in its reach and bold in the “faith” it places in the act of exposure (Wiegman 34).

If I began this dissertation with the hypothesis that libidinal desire shapes interdisciplinary knowledge production in ways that dismiss the possibility of libidinal indolence or lack, I end it with more specific insights about the shortcomings of a libidinal hermeneutic. Chapter 1 reveals how the assumption of libidinal energy in some instantiations of queer theory pigeonholes femininity as the failure of lesbian desire. Juxtaposing lessons from the history of

sexuality alongside the theorization of sentimentality, Chapter 2 illustrates how attention to femininity destabilizes a central insight from sexuality studies—“that modern Western culture has placed what it calls sexuality in a more and more distinctively privileged relation to our most prized constructs of individual identity, truth, and knowledge” (Sedgwick 3). This chapter offers a suggestive example of how the study of affect and emotion might discompose the relationship between sexuality and truth. Reading *Howard Ends* alongside queer theories of the future, Chapter 3 troubles the relationship between libidinal desire and political desire through an analysis of feminine influence. Finally, Chapter 4 critiques the emphasis on confession within theories of sexuality to analyze the opaque ways that women encounter knowledge around sex, gender, and sexuality in the past.

Overall, these chapters demonstrate my dedication to sticking with the impasses within critical methods of knowing sexuality afforded by placing femininity at the center of one’s investigations. In so doing, this project assumes that femininity is not only an occasion for identification and/or desire but also a site of epistemological trouble for critical theory. The preceding pages have not necessarily corrected any “lack of knowledge about women’s relationships” or their identities so much as they have marshaled the opacity of certain instances of textual femininity to assess the stakes and methods of performing the project of knowing (Marcus 258). If I began this project with the recognition that queer studies suffers from what Susan Lanser has called a “gender imbalance,” what I have found is that femininity, in particular, has not been ignored *tout court* by study of sexuality (4). The problem, rather, is that femininity tends to signify within queer studies—as well as other methods common within literary studies—in ways that leave libidinal desire intact. By operating within (rather than against) ideologies that equate femininity with libidinal weakness, this project offers a fresh take on

femininity that might (or might not) be portable to other historical periods and applicable to familiar figures in the history of sexuality. How might weak feelings change, for instance, the way we see the romantic friend; the femme; nuns; twenty-first-century asexuals?

If femininity and its association with libidinal weakness have been central to the critical work of this dissertation, femininity has also played a key role in its recuperative project. Equipped with surface readings methods that sidestep the hermeneutic of libidinal desire, each chapter argued for the depathologization of women's weak libidos and offered an example of what such depathologization might afford in the form of a textual reading. Seeking to recover and resuscitate subject positions and attachments that are subsumed within a libidinal framework, this dissertation moves from the work of critique toward speculative readings of feelings that operate athwart the libidinal model. In recuperating these feelings and the femininity around which they cluster, my point has been less "to restore [them] to health and vigor" than to acknowledge them; to look *at* rather than *through* them; to see them as suggestive rather than symptomatic (OED). The surface readings, brief histories, and theorizations of liking, susceptibility, influence, and interest found in the preceding chapters are meant to gesture toward, not to complete, that recuperative endeavor. Future research would expand my investigation of these terms beyond early twentieth-century psychoanalysis and literary texts. As only a cursory glance at the twenty-first century phenomenon of Facebook indicates, "liking" is certainly not confined to the pages of Bowen and James. Is it possible to more fully historicize a feeling so ubiquitous as "liking"? Moreover, I am by no means certain that these feelings would remain weak (as opposed to libidinal) in every context and time period. Does "interest" go from a category of weak knowing to an appendage of libidinal desire in the context of, say, economics or evolutionary Darwinism?

If there is one key takeaway from my research on these feelings, it is this: weak feelings are “different from each other” (Sedgwick 22). That is, weak feelings are not all weak in the same ways. If my research intends to recoup the allegation of weakness much as queer theory revalued the epithet of “queer,” it does not do so in order to offer an all-encompassing, one-size-fits-all theorization of weakness. There is a clear difference between the non-libidinal state of affective susceptibility (with its energetic displays of momentary feeling) and the icy quality of interest and liking. Moreover, the preceding chapters demonstrate that weak feelings can be distinct not just in their tenor but also in their relational syntax or structure. When I first began this project, I imagined that I would employ weak feeling to describe and analyze the attachment *between subjects*—particularly between women, as is evidenced by my discussion of Sydney, Mrs. Kerr, and liking in Chapter 1. But as the project developed, I found that liking, susceptibility, influence, and interest also named the connective tissue between subjects and nonhuman objects (houses and political ideals in Chapter 3) and between subjects regardless of their figurative gender (between women and men in Chapters 2 and 4). In retrospect, I also recognize that although I employ weak feelings to describe attachment as a means of bonding or fastening, I sometimes call upon them to name not the connective tissue *between* things but the state or position from which one could attach . . . or not (such as in the case of susceptibility in Chapter 2). I have also found that those affects which commonsense would tell us are the absence of attachment—such as the (dis)interest of *The Awkward Age*—are forms of connection worthy of investigation precisely because of their emphasis on their own detachment or superficiality. Even disconnection, it turns out, can be a form of connection.

Finally, it has become clear that one more form of object relations plays a vital role in the investigation of weak feeling. Most transparently, the relationship between subjects and

knowledge galvanized my reading of *The Awkward Age* in Chapter 4. Here, I investigated the way knowledge shapes relationships between characters; between narrators and readers; and between the Henry James of the Prefaces and the Henry James who wrote *The Awkward Age*. Looking over the previous chapters in light of Chapter 4's central insights, I see the relationship between subjects and knowledge as a key through-line in the theorization of weak feeling. If Chapter 1 is about liking as an alternative to the intensity and psychological depths of libidinal attachment, it is also about how Mrs. Kerr and Sydney, in Bowen's emphasis on their surfaces, are difficult to know; they remain opaque to each other, to other characters, to the narrator, and to the reader. While Chapter 2 is about how Judith's susceptibility to affective encounter operates as a counter-discourse to the libidinal subject, it also probes the relationship between both popular and academic readers and the knowledge *Dusty Answer* (doesn't) deliver about sexuality. And although Chapter 3 focuses on influence as an alternative to libidinally-infused love, it also emphasizes how both Ruth and her house remain obscure in their meanings. In these novels, the finality and clarity of knowledge production shifts into the murky realm of pedagogy without any final lessons.

Perhaps here, at the conclusion of this phase in my intellectual journey, it is the relationship between one particular subject and knowledge that remains to be remarked upon. Is this the time to fess up that I certainly didn't begin this project out of any motivation that could be called weak? Sleepless nights, anxiety, nail biting: these are a few of the manifestations of my desire to "travel the distance from speculation to truth" or, to put it in less hallowed terms, to figure *something* out and to finish (Wiegman 34). In fact, this project ended up mobilizing the discomfort I initially felt (and perhaps future readers of this dissertation will feel) about surrendering that which a younger version of my self (aided by 1990s feminist popular culture

and undergraduate Women's Studies courses) fought for so intently: the ability "as a woman" to *desire* energetically and without apology. Despite the lessons of decades of Foucauldian theorization and critique, desire can be a desirable thing and, thus, a difficult thing to set aside. But what this project taught me—or began to teach me, for it is probably a lesson that must be learned over and over again—is that the objects of my desire might refuse to give me exactly what I want or, more weakly, shrug in the face of my desire to know them. Surface reading enabled me to feel weakly about texts. From here, I move forward, hoping that other researchers might devise more ways to feel weakly about the objects of their inquiry, and wondering what lessons those projects will hold. Most of all, I wonder how future objects might influence or interest me; how I might be susceptible to them rather than seek identification with them; and how I might like them rather than desire them.

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