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Modernism, Responsibility, and the Novel

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by

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Abstract

Through formal innovation and experimentation—and through a renewed commitment to human subjectivity—many modernist writers consciously disrupted traditional modes of narration. In doing so, their writing simultaneously engaged ethical questions about responsibly representing the alterity of the other. With particular attention to narrative fragmentation, I claim that reading modernism in terms of responsibility yields an uncommon yet critical understanding of its practitioners as deeply invested in ethical problems related to representation. I argue that in the context of British modernism, particularly in the decade following the Great War, many writers developed narrative strategies that anticipated, welcomed, and responded to the irruption of “the new” into a world of repose, order, and complacency. This dissertation therefore explores the concept of ethical responsibility as it relates to representation and self-other relationships in the three British modernist novels: Virginia Woolf’s *Jacob’s Room* (1922), D. H. Lawrence’s *Aaron’s Rod* (1922), and E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* (1924). I draw on the work of Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida to show that while modernists mindfully broke with representational practices of the past, they also felt themselves beset by the terrible burden of “making it new.” I demonstrate that this burden, or anxiety, is experienced by modernist narrators, characters, and readers.

Dedication

For my family.

Your love and sacrifice know no bounds.

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Chapter One

Modernism, Responsibility, and the Novel

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation claims that reading the British modernist novel in terms of ethical responsibility yields an uncommon yet critical understanding of its practitioners as deeply invested in questions about the ethics of narrative representation.¹ In the Preface to *What Maisie Knew* (1897), for instance, Henry James broadly casts the responsibility of writing fiction in terms of responding to the tumultuousness of modern life. He writes, “[t]he effort really to see and really to represent is no idle business in face of the constant force that makes for muddlement. The great thing is indeed that the muddled state too is one of the very sharpest of the realities, that it also has colour and form and character, has often in fact a broad and rich comicality, many of the signs and values of the appreciable” (149). Attention to this “muddled state” for James—as well as for many of the next generation of writers who would both extend James’s theory of the novel and develop their own—would not only result in a wholesale revision of formal narrative techniques but also in a new thematic approach to life’s “colour and form and character.” The ethical approach to modernist writing undertaken in this project seeks to illuminate modernists’ response to the undeniable yet “hard-to-explain commitment to the new, to what [was] coming into being” in the early decades of the twentieth century (Attridge, “Innovation” 27). This “commitment to the new,” I claim, entailed more than a gesture of affirmation—it necessitated a creative response that ultimately disrupted conventional practices of representation as well as challenged many sociopolitical norms and values. For modernist writers, then, such response

¹ For the purposes of this dissertation, I restrict my analysis to narrative and the novel, though critical questions about ethics and representation persist in and about modernist poetry, drama, and essays.

meant innovating existing structures of representation in addition to employing unfamiliar and radical formal techniques of storytelling. I argue that in the context of British modernism, particularly in the decade following the Great War, many writers developed narrative strategies that anticipated, welcomed, and responded to the irruption of “the new” into a world of repose, order, and complacency.² And as Britain (and the European continent) experienced radical socio-political transformation, British writers found themselves consumed by a sense of urgency to articulate their immediate experiences inasmuch as they felt compelled to represent “what [was] coming into being.”

In this study, I cast modernist responsibility in terms of a conscious disruption of traditional conventions of representation. At the same time, as I will demonstrate, modernists often seemed disquieted by the prospect of disrupting customary and established methods of representation. In other words, while modernists ostensibly reveled in a newfound sense of liberation from earlier conventions of fiction, they in fact expressed a profound uncertainty and anxiety about breaking with the past. What accounts for modernism’s well-known “crisis of representation” (Lewis xviii), I claim, results less from an exuberant expression of freedom than it does anxious indecision about developing radically new theories of representation and employing untried representational techniques. That critics have often conflated modernism with the practices of avant-garde—whose artists, “[b]y violating the accepted conventions and proprieties, not only of art but of social discourse, [...] set out to create ever-new artistic forms and styles and to introduce hitherto neglected, and sometimes forbidden, subject matter” (Abrams 168)—only bespeaks its

² Perhaps one of the most remarkable novels to chart the widespread cultural changes in Britain from the late nineteenth century to the years following the Great War is Ford Madox Ford’s tetralogy, *Parade’s End* (1924-28).

practitioners' insistence upon "making it new," to use Pound's phrase.³ But what recent ethical critics of modernism have yet to discuss involves the anxieties and uncertainties inherent in the responsibility of abandoning traditional foundations of narrative representation—particularly as these anxieties and uncertainties register in the narrative forms of many modernist novels. This dissertation, therefore, explores *how* British modernists grappled with their sense of responsibility as expressed in their major fiction, critical essays, and theories of the novel. I show that modernist writers found themselves beset by a host of ethical questions related to narrative practices, that is, to the demands of "making" and representing new subject matter. Moreover, I assert that modernism's deliberate attempt to intervene in matters of literary representation is responsible precisely because it engages ethical demands related to otherness and alterity demanding response. The response itself, I claim, is an act of responsibility *as* disruption.

My approach joins a collection of recent scholarship that views modernism as a fundamentally ethical project. The prominent landmarks in this collection are Jil Larson's *Ethics and Narrative in the English Novel, 1880 – 1914*, Martin Halliwell's *Transatlantic Modernism: Moral Dilemmas in Modernist Fiction*, and Lee Oser's *The Ethics of Modernism: Moral Ideas in Yeats, Eliot, Joyce, Woolf, and Beckett*. These studies have been paramount to opening a critical space for raising ethical questions about literary modernism, particularly in light of the many problems it addresses regarding human agency and identity, narrative representation and experimentation, and moral ideology and values. Other critics—such as Derek Attridge,

³ It should be noted that both the Poundian injunction to "make it new" and modernism's broader ethical commitment to "the new" relate to the Derridean notion of invention, which, Attridge explains, "may be a new device or program, but the action of invention is a mental feat that makes possible both the manufacture of the new entity and, perhaps more important, new instances of inventiveness" ("Innovation" 23). Responsibility as it connects to invention involves risk and answerability for something other than oneself, whether it be the creative act of invention or the created object (such as the text). It also extends to the "singular otherness of the other person"—generalized here as "the other"—and requires "respond[ing] to his or her singularity" (24).

Stephen Ross, Dorothy J. Hale, and Melba Cuddy-Keane—have emphasized the connection between modernist aesthetic practices and contemporary ethics. Specifically, they have recruited the influential work of poststructural French philosophy in order to suggest that modernists’ insistence on developing radical formal narrative techniques and style partakes in an active, ethical recognition of otherness. Cuddy-Keane explains that “[e]thics [...] is predicated on some notion of compulsion, some concept of obligation, some demand for response in the way we live” (“Ethics” 208). To this end, it might be said that modernism’s ethical response to “the way we live” disrupts the various narratives constituting our own lives and provokes a conscious awareness of what lies beyond them. Indeed, modernist ethics involves responding to life but to the life that resides outside or on the boundary limits of familiarity.

TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

In this section, I shall provide preliminary definitions of ethics, responsibility, and undecidability. Together, these concepts will help to illuminate how modernist innovations of narrative representation can be read in terms of ethical responsibility—and how responsibility itself, in the different ways I am using the term, always already involves undecidability. Additionally, I briefly discuss how these concepts also apply to the individual actions and experiences of narrators and characters in modernist novels. Finally, by attending to responsibility as an ethical concept, this project does not directly address issues related to politics, culture, gender, race, class, sexuality, or media. Indeed, I am focused on the problem of responsibility as something that animates these socio-historical categories—animates in the sense that (ir)responsible decisions engender action and events.

Ethical Responsibility

In the context of this project, and at its most abstract, ethics involves respect for and openness to the absolute other.⁴ This conception of ethics comes from the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas—and it entails an implicit critique of the rational, self-determining, autonomous, moral subject who seeks to reduce the alterity of the other to the Same, to the familiar, to itself. As Simon Critchley writes: “ethics occurs as the putting into question of the ego, the knowing subject, self-consciousness” (*Ethics* 4). Neither a practice nor a method, ethics “happens” or begins when the other disturbs and disrupts the autonomy of the subject by placing on it an exorbitant and inescapable demand for justice. Further, as Levinas claims, this demand institutes the subject’s responsibility for the other to such an extent that “I am responsible for his very responsibility” (*Ethics and Infinity* 96). In this sense, ethical responsibility for the other does not begin in the subject’s freedom to act: instead, the other’s endless demand predisposes the subject to the welfare and protection of the other. To put it crudely, the subject’s identity begins in its subjection to the other, that is, in an asymmetrical relationship that binds the subject to the imperious claim of the other. More radically, the subject’s response to the urgency of the other’s demand cannot be prepared for ahead of their encounter. If ethics unfolds with the disruption, it simultaneously occurs with undecidability. For the subject can prepare only so much to make a decision; and when it is

⁴ I follow Richard Kearney’s succinct definition of the other in *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters* as that who “surpasses all our categories of interpretation and representation” and yet who is “worthy of reverence and hospitality” (67). Kearney ultimately goes on to critique this notion of the other—developed by Levinas and Derrida—because it does not distinguish between a benign other (for instance, one who seeks political refuge from a totalitarian state) and a malevolent other (or one determined to cause harm or violence to a political adversary). It would seem that Kearney misses the point and reinscribes alterity in a binary opposition that both Levinas and Derrida would criticize. For both philosophers, one must be willing to sacrifice everything—even if it means violence, even if it results in one’s death—if there is to be justice. The very act of discerning between a “good” and “bad” other means a return to a metaphysics of presence. The point is that the other presents a kind of metaphysical precariousness that disrupts our common methods and modes of narrative representation.

time to decide, the subject realizes that a responsible decision must be heterogeneous to knowledge and traditional morality.

One of the central problems Levinas identifies in his ethical philosophy concerns the intelligibility of the other. In “Meaning and Sense,” for instance, he worries that artistic representation renders the other as “part of the ontological order itself” (82). Put another way, representation robs the other of its uniqueness (radical alterity) by fixing and transforming it into something recognizable, knowable. Even before the subject becomes aware of its responsibility for the other, it strives to transmute otherness into “the imperialism of the same” (“Trace” 347). For Levinas, Western philosophy bears the burden of having converted and appropriated the other as such: “[f]rom its infancy philosophy has been stuck with a horror of the other that remains other [...]. It is for that reason that it is essentially a philosophy of being [sameness], that the comprehension of being is its last word, and the fundamental structure of man” (346). It might be said that Levinas’s critique of philosophy complicates the subject’s responsibility for the other—that is, by acknowledging the other in order to do justice, the subject must simultaneously refrain from saturating the other with meaning.

A final point must be made. Ethics in the context of Levinasian philosophy cannot be reduced to a set of moral precepts or foundations. Conceived in this way, ethics presents a challenge to traditional ideas about the study of morality and moral behavior. In other words, Levinas’s formulation of ethics does not ground ethical relationships or action in normative practices and commitments. Rather, Levinasian ethics occurs from a spontaneous, unexpected encounter with the other. The other’s disruption of “the knowing ego” involves arresting the subject’s spontaneity and freedom in such a way that the subject often acts in a

manner that seems a/immoral and irresponsible from a normative viewpoint (Critchley, *Ethics* 6).

Responsibility and Undecidability

In light of Levinasian ethics, I define responsibility in this project in terms of maintaining a fidelity and openness to the other. This duty extends to modernist writers, who, conceiving of representational strategies that refrain from appropriating the other into the sphere of intelligibility, seek do justice by recognizing and giving voice to the other; to narrators who, charged with the task of telling and shaping stories, seek to also ensure that no representative violence will come to the other—particularly as readers attempt to ascribe meaning to the text; and to characters who, as they engage other characters (often marginalized or silent) in the text-world, seek to find ways to exist alongside those who threaten their autonomy and moral-political authority. I argue that each of these modernist entities—or, ethical subjects—find themselves burdened by an unconditional, inexorable “call” to responsibility that that often results in a double bind. This call to responsibility has no foundation other than the absolute other itself. In other words, the other’s demand for justice serves as the only source for the subject’s decisions and actions. Yet it might be said that these modernist ethical subjects find themselves distressed by uncertainty and indecision. Such undecidability originates in a double bind. For modernist writers and narrators, undecidability entails a “terrible experience” in that at some point “I [the ethical subject] have to take responsibility which is heterogeneous to knowledge” (Derrida, “Hospitality” 66). A decision how to represent the other, that is, “first of all has to go through a terrible process of undecidability, otherwise it would not be a decision” (66). For many modernist characters, specifically those depicted during and after the Great War, undecidability involves

the absence of moral or epistemological certainty to guide their actions and decisions. Symptomatic of their undecidability are characters' listless and aimless wanderings, their moral transgressions, their search for community and a common good, and their unstable if not neurotic personalities. Unlike modernist writers and narrators, these characters remain unaware of their call to responsibility, though as they encounter multiple others they often feel compelled to engage, know, aid them. Thus, many modernist characters—as ethical subjects of responsibility—experience undecidability because they feel torn between self-interest and a genuine desire to help the other.

NARRATIVE FRAGMENTATION

Modernist responsibility involves what critics commonly describe as the fragmentation of form. Understood pejoratively, fragmentation connotes breakdown, exhaustion, crisis—even destruction. It signals an end of sorts, though perhaps not in terms of apocalypse but instead as a culmination of a particular historical epoch and way of life. In the more restricted literary sense, however, fragmentation suggests a “willed interference with the transparency in discourse [...], allied to a new comprehension of the claims of otherness, of that which cannot be expressed in the discourse available to us” (Attridge, *J. M. Coetzee* 4). In other words, the modernist decision to fragment narrative form—through a variety of techniques aimed at blurring conventional discursive modes of representation—can be read ethically. It might thus be said that modernist fragmentation, and its attendant strategies of disruption, constitutes an ethical (re)invention of literary form that is disposed to welcoming and responding to the absolute singularity of the other. This other, as I discuss in the subsequent chapters, exceeds total knowledge, expectation, categorization—even

representation. Part of my discussion in this project therefore involves a close analysis of the different ways modernists “fragment” narrative as a willed, conscious, *and* ethical act of responsibility. Virginia Woolf, one of modernism’s most prolific writers who contemplated ethical questions about formal experimentation, insisted that modernists ought to actively violate the many protocols and conventions of earlier fiction in order to represent that which had been traditionally excluded from serious literature. She, like James, probes life—that “muddled state”—in its variations and multiplicity. From her early experimental short stories such as “The Mark on the Wall” and “Kew Gardens” to her mature novels *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*, Woolf complicates, frustrates, and fragments narrative representation. Her continuous rethinking of narrative, exhibited not only by her fiction but also evidenced throughout her critical essays and book reviews, discloses a writer engaged with ethical problems surrounding narrative representation. More so, Woolf is emblematic of the concerns, the anxieties, the thinking, even the sense of failure that many modernist writers harbored about their own work. To read Woolf in this manner—that is, as a writer propelled by a self-imposed imperative to find new ways to represent otherness and beset by a desire to break with past conventions of representation—underscores her responsibility as a modernist writer. Her commitment to multiple modes of being prompted her to seek out and develop new means of representation, though not without some hesitation or misgiving. Thus Woolf’s novels, like many modernist texts, push the possibilities of representation to their discursive and formal limits that clear a space for the other. The chapters that follow address the ethics of modernist fragmentation, that is, with the view that fragmentation does not function in the same way across the spectrum of modernist narratives.

Reading modernism as an ethical project entails questioning humanism’s faith in a

moral, autonomous human subject. As I will discuss, modernists largely rejected the humanist moral subject in favor of the ethical subject who finds itself compelled and constrained by the demand of the other. This demand requires, as Attridge claims, a full response “to the singular otherness of the other person” which further necessitates “creatively refashion[ing] the norms whereby we understand persons as a category and in that refashioning [...] to find a way of responding to his or her singularity” (“Innovation” 24). I would argue that the responsibility of response applies to both modernist writers and their narrators: that is, through their narrators, writers of the early twentieth century struggled with imaginatively shaping a unique response to an often unknown and unidentifiable other. Their strategies of welcoming and representing the singularity of the other resulted in narrative fragmentation. As Cuddy-Keane argues, “the ethical *modernist* subject must take a step further [than the humanist subject] [by] actually preserving uncertainty and ambiguity in order to act in ethical ways” (210). In this way, a proper response to the other by modernist narrators, at least in Cuddy-Keane’s view, would mean a conscious resistance to narrative closure and an indefinite perpetuation of “metaphysical uncertainty” (210). For Cuddy-Keane, to do justice to the other means responsibly responding in a way that results in undecidability.⁵ Thus a contradiction becomes apparent with regard to modernist responsibility. On the one hand, according to the definition of writerly responsibility discussed above, modernists felt compelled to fully respond to the demand of the other through an act of creative representation. But, on the other hand, modernists also refused *total* representation of the other in order not to violate its singularity.

⁵ Cuddy-Keane writes, “[a]nswerability requires ethical response, yet the questionableness of that response must be preserved to avoid doing violence to alternative ethical routes” (211).

The problem here—one that burdens many modernist writers—is knowing if and when representation has gone too far in appropriating the other into the order of familiarity.

In contrast to the responsibility of modernist writers, modernist characters' responsibility generally involves concern for themselves and their actions. In other words, whereas modernist writers self-consciously respond to the other's demand through narrative fragmentation, their protagonists struggle to take responsibility for anyone outside their own immediate needs and interests. Indeed, their decisions and actions—their motivations and responses—emanate from a vague and barely conscious demand to engage, help, even respond to others.⁶ Their self-interest, rather than care for the other, informs their conduct. As a result, many modernist protagonists grope their way through their worlds and fail in their individual quests, which, as I will discuss throughout this project, is necessary to their ethical subjectivity. This experience of failure too becomes that of modernist narrators, who must be rigorously separated and understood apart from their creators as well as the characters they shape. Unlike narrators in the past, modernist narrators “replace” their authors—or, differently, these narrators intervene between an authorial agent and the created text. This intervention signals modernist writers' attempts to disrupt narrative authority, that is, to “preserv[e] uncertainty and ambiguity” by undermining an absolute “ground” from which to derive and secure meaning. In this way, modernist writers might be regarded as behaving irresponsibly—for they neither employ omniscient, reliable narrators nor produce stable, transparent texts. I want to argue, however, that modernist responsibility can be viewed as a necessary act of irresponsibility in the sense that it confounds, challenges,

⁶ Desire in this sense does not mean, however, psychosexual impulses of psychoanalytic study. Rather desire here registers a primordial albeit repressed commitment to the welfare and wellbeing of the other.

disrupts the familiar narrative structures through which “life” gets mediated and familiarized. In other words, modernists make visible the fact that narrative is a process of mediation, not transparent or inherently true.

This project, therefore, sets out on a number of interrelated fronts: 1) to examine how modernist narratives—specifically the novel—formally as well as substantively conceptualize responsibility in a world without moral certitude; 2) to understand how modernists’ recasting of the humanist moral subject as an ethical subject reshapes our understanding of responsibility; 3) to think how a new conceptualizing of the modernism as an ethical project affects older conceptions of it as primarily an aesthetico-political reaction to radical changes in European culture; and 4) to question how modernist writers developed an ethics of responsibility that anticipated, if not influenced, current developments in ethics. Reading the modernist novel in these ways enhances our critical understanding of early twentieth-century literature as engaging similar problems to those raised in contemporary literary theory related to ethical subjectivity and moral conduct. In this way, I am positioning myself alongside Stephen Ross when he states, in his *Introduction to Modernism and Theory* (2009), “[m]odernist writing thinks theoretically and theory writes modernistically; they are not simply interestingly coincidental phenomena, but mutually sustaining aspect of the same project” and “[t]heory continues modernism’s concerns, aesthetics, and critical energies” (2).⁷ In fact, it might be cautiously asserted that present-day ethical theory was borne in part from modernism’s commitments and practices. This includes how critics and philosophers have gone about discussing ethics. They have seen it primarily as a willful disruption of the “truths

⁷ Similar claims have been made by critics before the ethical “turn” in literature. David Parker, for instance, states, “[t]heory, in short, needs imaginative literature, at the very least as much as literature needs theory, and any tendency for one to bury the other should be viewed with great suspicion” (42).

which we have forgotten are illusions” (Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lies” 455).

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One of the difficulties that arises from an ethical reading of British modernism is that modernists themselves did not explicitly muse on ethics as such. Perhaps Woolf comes closest when she briefly discusses “the duties and responsibilities” of modern writers at the end of “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” (211). As we will see in the subsequent chapter, Woolf insists that modernist writers must not only invent new means of representation but must also reestablish trust between themselves and readers. In my view, an understanding of modernist responsibility can only be ascertained by closely examining modernist representational practices as well as situating modernism within the temporal coordinates of its historical “moment.” Today, it seems almost commonplace to regard modernism “as a reaction to the carnage and disillusionment of the First World War and a search for a new mode of art that would rescue civilization from its state of crisis after the war” (Lewis 109). Indeed, many modernists seemed preoccupied by the War’s moral, social, and historical fallout. But, in fact, the “search for a new mode of art” had begun much earlier during the later decades of the nineteenth century when writers, artists, and philosophers sought order and structure in response to a world increasingly different from the past. As Susan Stanford Friedman observes, “[t]he starting point of modernism is the crisis of belief that pervades twentieth-century western culture: loss of faith, experience of fragmentation and disintegration, and shattering of cultural symbols. At the center of this crisis were the new technologies and methodologies of science, the epistemology of logical positivism, and the relativism of functionalist thought” (97). It might be said, then, that the war only intensified uncertainty about the stability and direction of civilization, particularly as the power of

“traditional religious and artistic symbols” waned while advances in technology progressed and the spread of materialism began to dominate. Therefore, the moral ambiguity—what might be broadly characterized as the domain of ethics—in the postwar period induced a sweeping reassessment of the existing values in the modern world.

With this reassessment came scrutiny of individual responsibility as such. For example, in D. H. Lawrence’s *Kangaroo* (1923), readers encounter an impassioned yet brutal assessment of the Great War’s impact on British society. Lawrence writes: “Once the human consciousness really sinks and is swamped under the tide of events—as the best English consciousness was swamped, pacifist and patriotic alike—then the adventure is doomed. The English soul went under in the war, and, as a conscious, proud, adventurous, self-responsible soul, it was lost. We all lost the war: perhaps Germany least” (246). This short passage not only points to the sense of despair that many modernists and intellectuals felt in the War’s immediate aftermath but it also proclaims the sense that individual responsibility had been lost. Lawrence’s narrator expresses the fear that the moral order of the past—the metaphysical certainty that authorized “the self-responsible soul”—had been swept away as a result of the conflict. The War’s impact also registered with other thinkers and writers across the Europe. In “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death” (1915), Sigmund Freud would record his own sense of disillusionment during the early acts of the war, positing that all of civilization itself was at stake: “[i]t tramples in blind fury on all that comes in its way, as though there were no future and no peace among men after it is over” (159). And, nearly twenty years hence, Walter Benjamin would offer his assessment of the Great War’s impact on the modern world: “our image not only of the external world but also of the moral world has undergone changes overnight, changes which were previously thought impossible.

Wasn't it noticeable at the end of the war that men who returned from the battlefield had grown silent—not richer but poorer in communicable experience?" ("The Storyteller" 143 – 44). Benjamin's complaint, not unlike Lawrence's, registers a loss of individual's capacity to share his innermost experiences. For the private "moral world" of the individual, Benjamin suggests, has been just as divested of meaning as has the "external world" of history. That those who came home from war could not communicate their individual experiences additionally suggests the loss of a responsibility by the individual: to connect with others through the art of storytelling. Thus, modernists took it as their responsibility to tell stories even when others could not tell them (such as returning soldiers from war). But, as I will suggest, this responsibility beset modernists with anxiety and uncertainty about representation itself.

Together, the observations of Lawrence, Freud, and Benjamin register the moral vacuum felt by modernist writers in the wake of war. However, as already noted, this felt sense that "the moral world" was in the process of collapsing had been already glimpsed in the late nineteenth century. In an oft-cited fable from *The Gay Science* (1882), for instance, Friedrich Nietzsche seems concerned that without a stable metaphysics—made uncertain by the interrelated processes of the social secularization and the scientization of knowledge—human action would no longer have a basis in moral responsibility. Nietzsche's fable depicts a madman who suddenly appears in a crowded marketplace and proceeds to berate his onlookers, described by the narrator as atheists, for failing to realize the "death" of God. More so, he accuses them of neglecting to recognize their complicity in the act, that is, that they themselves have killed God. Of the various rhetorical questions the madman spews at the crowd, one in particular resonates with the loss of moral certitude God represents:

“What did we do when we unchained this earth from its sun?” (95). This question not only suggests that humanity, without a metaphysical certainty on which to ground morality, is condemned to freedom. It also asserts that humanity has not been sufficiently prepared to take responsibility for its actions—most important of them, God’s murder. The answer to the madman’s question never comes, and he falls into a state of bewilderment as he roams among churches and sings a hymn commemorating the death of God. The crowd’s non-response to the madman’s provocation only bolsters the problems Nietzsche attempts to highlight in this story. Namely, the absence of a metaphysics renders individual moral action inert and hints at a broader cultural paralysis. In many modernist novels, responsibility devolves from a character’s active engagement in the world—that is, when one “takes” responsibility for his decisions and actions—to a solipsistic self-obsession that abdicates engaging and communicating with others.

Modernists’ response to the cultural transformations and moral paralysis of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe echoes in many ways the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. It might be said, on the one hand, that modernists fashioned themselves in the mode of the madman. Their works bear witness to the collapse of meaning in modern culture—what some have gone so far as to describe as nihilism.⁸ On the other hand, modernists did not simply hold up a mirror to their felt sense of meaninglessness and despair in the world. Instead, in a spirit akin to the philosophical task pursued by Nietzsche, many modernist writers and artists actively resisted nihilism by developing an aesthetics that

⁸ According to Simon Critchley, “[n]ihilism is the breakdown of the order of meaning, where all that we previously imagined as a divine, transcendent basis for moral valuation has become meaningless. Nihilism *is* this declaration of meaninglessness, a sense of indifference, directionlessness or, at its worst, despair that can flood into all areas of life” (*Infinitely Demanding* 2). Perhaps one of the best expressions of modernism’s attestation to nihilism is T. S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.”

“meets the question of how to live in a questionable world with a paradoxical conjunction of metaphysical uncertainty and individual answerability” (Cuddy-Keane 210). To “meet” this question, however, would require not only a wholesale rethinking of literature’s aims and strategies but a serious commitment to reexamining the values constituting modern life (as noted above). In other words, it would mean intensive self-scrutiny, including a new, honest assessment of experience as it relates to ethical decision-making. In this way, modernist writing can be regarded as a stage wherein ethics is performed—and where we can see questions of responsibility being played out. Responsibility, as I conceive it, requires a temporary and necessary refusal of total knowledge that would allow a traditionally moral subject to make a decisive judgment either about the meaning of a text (in the case readers) or his experience in the world (in the case of characters). I will thus suggest that modernist responsibility in the context of ethics depends upon suspending judgment about the decidability of a text as coherent whole. As a consequence, the self-reflexivity of the modernist text—often read in terms of an emotional and/or cultural paralysis—is analogous to that of the ethical experience of readers and of characters. In other words, it speaks to the experience of undecidability at the core of ethical responsibility. At this juncture, therefore, a more robust account of contemporary ethical theory needs to be made before further exploring modernism and responsibility.

TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF MODERNIST ETHICS

Until recently, ethical readings of modernist fiction have taken a backseat to cultural, historical, and political approaches. Indeed, it is only in the past two decades that a renewed effort to “to describe and give shape to what has always existed” in literature has emerged at

all in contemporary critical discourse (Davis and Womack ix).⁹ The so-called ethical “turn” in criticism is concerned with a host of problems ranging from “the close reading of the text itself [...] to the ethical questions that the story raises in the reader’s own life beyond the margins of the text” (x).¹⁰ This description of ethical considerations in literature should not, however, be viewed as two mutually exclusive investigations. Critics engaged in ethical analysis concentrate on the formal and stylistic features of the text inasmuch as they examine how readers react to narrative plot. Put another way, ethical criticism explores the relationship between narrative form, thematic content, and the reader’s response to the “performance” and determination of textual meaning. For, as Daniel R. Schwarz claims, “[t]exts demand ethical responses from their readers in part because *saying* always has an ethical dimension *and* because *we* are our values, and we never take a moral holiday from our values. We can no more ignore the ethical implications of what we read than we can ignore the ethical implications of life” (“Humanistic” 5). This critical connection between art and life assumes that “[l]iterature provides surrogate [ethical] experiences for the reader” (5). Critics thus investigate how and in what ways the reader subscribes to or resists the ethical implications of narratives, despite begin vaguely aware of these implications. Specifically, literary critics explore how stories simultaneously reaffirm, disrupt, and overturn individual and cultural values. They particularly aim to understand how various narrative structures

⁹ The editors of *The Turn to Ethics* correctly observe that “[t]here was a time [...] when ‘ethics’ was regarded in the realm of literary study as a ‘master discourse’ that presumed a universal humanism and an ideal, autonomous, and sovereign subject. To critics working in the domains of feminism, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, semiotics, and Marxism, this discourse became the target of critique: the critique of humanism was the exposé of ethics” (viii).

¹⁰ Davis and Womack additionally explain that some critics remain wary of ethical considerations of literature for fear that it will lead “to return to a dogmatically prescriptive or doctrinaire form of reading” (x). However, they appear optimistic that ethical criticism “appears to be moving, in all its various forms, toward a descriptive mode, a dialogue between what has occurred in the past and what is alive and in process at the present” (x).

produce truth and reality—and, further, how these affect consciousness and identity.

Part of the difficulty of understanding ethical approaches to literature for critics derives from competing definitions of the term “ethics.”¹¹ In some quarters of contemporary theoretical practice, it has come to connote an alternative mode of action at variance with the strictures of moral law. Gilles Deleuze, for instance, elaborating on Michel Foucault’s distinction between morality and ethics, explains: “[t]he difference is that morality presents us with a set of constraining rules of a special sort, ones that judge actions and intentions by considering them in relation to transcendent values (this is good, that’s bad...); ethics is a set of optional rules that assess what we do, what we say, in relation to the ways of existing involved” (*Negotiations* 100). The contrast seems simple enough: morality means an inflexible conformity to universal law; ethics, as a “set of optional rules,” signifies openness to possibility, which can result in deviation from or subversion of morality. In another way, it might be said that morality exists as a set of formal procedures that originate and operate in the objective world—that is, they are produced, deployed, and reified by ideological structures (government, schools, museums, family, marriage, science, and so forth). By contrast, ethics can be understood as a *subjective set of practices* that disrupt, counter, challenge, interrogate, subvert not just moral law but the dissimulating effects of ideology as such. Crucial to this conception of ethics is its relationship to “the ways of existing,” to the

¹¹ Etymologically, “ethics” comes from the Greek word *ethike* and is related to the term *ethos*, which means “[t]he characteristic spirit of a people, community, culture, or era as manifested in its attitudes and aspirations; the prevailing character of an institution or system” (“Ethos”). In its second sense, *ethos* refers to the representation of “character”—and its attendant values, such as virtue, morality, righteousness—in an art work. In the strictest sense, then, ethics means the science or study of morals, which often results in the conflation of the two terms. In this way, to behave ethically in the proper sense of the word denotes adherence to, conformity with, and practice of the dominant moral ideology within a particular culture. To understand morality “objectively”—that is, from a kind of outside perspective—would mean engaging ethics, a field of study within the discipline of philosophy and traditionally the subject of thematic criticism in art and literature.

procedures of living produced in and by ideology. Here, Deleuze seems to mean *a priori* modes of the “movement through which individuals are subjugated in the reality of a social practice through mechanisms of power that adhere to a truth” (Foucault, “What Is Critique?” 194). Morality and ethics, I am therefore suggesting, might not be simply regarded as oppositional terms but instead might be considered dialectically: whereas morality seeks to objectify behavior and decision-making, ethics challenges morality on the grounds of possibility, of difference, of alterity. To say it differently, ethics produces an aporia in relation to the “mechanisms of power”—an aporia that threatens the “constructed” world of ideology and attempts to liberate the subject from subjugation.¹²

In *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature* (1980), Julia Kristeva makes similar claims about ethics. However, as the passage below suggests, she appears to associate ethics with a project similar to deconstruction rather than with the materialist critiques of Deleuze and Foucault:

Ethics [or, morality, in the sense that I am using it] used to be a coercive, customary manner of ensuring the cohesiveness of a particular group through the repetition of a code—a more or less accepted apologue. Now, however, the issue of ethics crops up wherever a code (mores, social contract) must be shattered in order to give way to the free play of negativity, need, desire, pleasure, jouissance, before being put together again, although temporarily and with full knowledge of what is involved. (23)

In Kristeva’s view, contemporary ethical practice “shatters” and upends sedimented codes,

¹² As I will suggest in the following paragraph, the materialist critique should not be conflated with deconstruction, though here we can see such affinities between Foucault’s project of emancipation and deconstruction’s “move” to denaturalize what is not natural.

or social mores, as a matter of possibility for “free play.” Located somewhere between “law and its transgression (23), in other words, this new ethics disrupts accepted social codes in an effort to provisionally break free from them, to open them up to critique, to re-envision their possibility. Kristeva points to Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud as the progenitors of “the outbreak of something quite new within Western society and discourse” in the nineteenth century, noting that “their primary goal has been to reformulate ethics” (23). Building on their work, Kristeva positions her conception of ethics in the context of poststructural theory and deconstruction, which Derrida succinctly describes as “a strategy of rupture” (“Force of Law” 28). Thus ethics, as Kristeva conceives it, acts to decode or denaturalize what appears as truth and morality in the socio-political world. Shuttling between the severe limitations of law and the radical openness of transgression, ethics upends commonplace standards of conduct and everyday belief. To this end, I would argue that the social codes Kristeva refers to here can also be read at the level of narrative—both structurally and substantively.¹³ For narratives too achieve “cohesiveness” and acceptance through strategic repetition (of codes, of language, of symbols, of formal elements), institutional learning, and cultural immersion. In this way, narratives become familiar, all-too-familiar to a general public—specifically an astute, educated reading audience—the same way social codes do.

My analysis of modernist writing practices and techniques focuses on the various set of strategies that modernist developed to purposefully disrupt traditional narrative form and codes.¹⁴ Yet to view modernists as solely agents of disruption—that is, as engaging

¹³ This claim echoes William J. Scheick’s assertion that “[s]tructure provides certain codes enabling the ideal implied reader to discover/dis-cover the implications (ethical or otherwise) of the content” (xvi).

¹⁴ I am not arguing, however, that modernism and deconstruction are necessarily the same projects, or that deconstruction is the later “realization” of modernism. No doubt, the difference between the two lies in their preoccupations, that is, how they attend to, participate in, and operate within their own disciplines. Literary

disruption for its own sake—would diminish the ethical imperatives or obligations necessitated by the demands of otherness. If ethical practices by modernists prevent “ontological closure [...] [by] disrupting the text’s claims to comprehensive unity and self-understanding,” they do so in order to respond to an unknown, unidentifiable demand “beyond” the contours of the familiar and the established (Critchley, *Ethics* 30). In other words, I claim that modernist ethical practices break up the decidability, in this case, of textual cohesiveness to make way for other possibilities of representation. In Derridean terms, modernists engendered a formal and discursive response to otherness grounded in an openness to that “which is heterogeneous to knowledge” (“Hospitality” 66). The consequences, however, for an ethical reading of modernism reinforce a widely held critical viewpoint that sees modernist writing practices as undermining if not destabilizing definitive meaning. However, I maintain that modernist disruption of meaning is consonant with modernist responsibility. For, as Derrida argues, “there would be no decision [...] in ethics [...], and thus no responsibility, without the experience of some undecidability” (66). Thus, in my view, modernist writing techniques deliberately cause or produce textual undecidability, which, instead of rendering a text meaningless, enacts “what much current ethical theory urges in theory: a dwelling in between questionableness and answerability, between the uncertain and the ‘ought’” (Cuddy-Keane 217). In this sense, I claim that modernist responsibility can be regarded as an ethical practice that denies formal unity, closure, comprehensiveness in order to make way for otherness.

modernism, for instance, challenges realist claims, while deconstruction, on the other hand, disputes ontology as “first philosophy.” Further, the historical exigencies to which both responded and the specific socio-political milieu in which both were conceived suggest enough of a temporal break that we cannot simply appropriate deconstruction for a better understanding of modernism in hindsight. Yet, it would be just as problematic to maintain a rigorous separation between the two. I will make the case throughout this dissertation that deconstruction is modernism’s obverse. For a discussion about the “ethics of deconstruction,” see Critchley, *Ethics*.

THE NEW ETHICS AND THE MODERNIST NOVEL

Dorothy J. Hale has recently weighed in on the emergence of new ethical theory in literary study. She claims “that the return to moral reflection in contemporary literary theory is in fact a double return: the renewed pursuit of ethics has been accompanied by a new celebration of literature, and it is in the imbrication of these endeavors [...] that literary theory and moral philosophy find common ground in the twenty-first century” (“Aesthetics” 896). Indeed, the ethical “turn” in the discipline, though by no means universally embraced, has resulted in a renewed effort to read literary texts in terms of their engagement and enactment of ethical problems related to subjectivity and alterity. Hale’s preoccupation, however, appears less to do with justifying the new ethics than it does with analyzing its consequences for the reader’s engagement with the modern novel. After a lengthy introductory genealogy wading through the developments of contemporary novel theory, Hale arrives at the premise that “reading does not yield a portable list of rules or tips to guide conduct. For the new ethicist, literature does not technically teach us anything at all, unless we understand learning as the overthrow of epistemology by experience, the troubling of certainty by an apprehension that comes through surprised feeling” (903). She goes on to state: “[e]thical knowledge is the experience of irresistible encounter with what one does not try to know, what one cannot but know. It is knowledge that is beyond reason, that is of emotions, and that is so intuitive as to seem a bodily knowing” (903). Here, Hale echoes the notion that ethics is a force of disruption. And for her, the “experience” of ethics “overthrows” the reader’s sense of a cohesive and stable world through an unavoidable encounter with the other. The reader, she suggests, “comes to know more each time his or

her current knowledge is confounded” by confrontation with the text (903). In other words, she describes the reader’s experience of acquiring *ethical* knowledge through reading as an oscillating process between acquisition and loss, surety and ambivalence, renewal and failure. Thus, the “experience of irresistible encounter” for Hale becomes not only a necessary engagement with alterity—an engagement constitutive of the new ethical theory—but an inescapable affair that simultaneously denudes the reader of epistemological certainty. I would add that the reader’s “ethical experience of alterity” (903) directly corresponds to the ethical modernist subject’s responsibility of “preserving uncertainty and ambiguity in order to act in ethical ways,” to recall Cuddy-Keane.¹⁵

Hale credits the development of this “novelistic aesthetics of alterity” to the work of Henry James (899).¹⁶ Both the modern techniques he helped to develop and the novel theory he wrote, she argues, “provide a foundational aesthetics for the novel that underlies [...] the new ethical philosophy that has emerged” (899). Significantly, she explains that ethical theorists have failed to recognize “the achievement of alterity as the novel’s distinctive generic purpose” and that the encounter with the other can “be accomplished through novelistic form” (900). In Hale’s view, the modern novel envisioned by James formally enacts and embodies alterity that, once confronted in the experience of reading, disrupts the reader’s onto-epistemological “ground.” That is to say, reading becomes more than a passive act of consumption, or even something other than an intellectual exercise that produces meaning. In addition to these, it is the experience when “we are self-consciously [made]

¹⁵ This subject, as I discuss in the subsequent chapter, is embodied in the modernist narrator whose detachment from the author complicates the issue of authorial intention and responsibility.

¹⁶ Here and throughout this project, I follow Hale’s idea that “alterity can only be registered positively by our experience of its power to disrupt us, to leave us, in a sense, exasperated, cursing, staring” (901).

aware that our certainty is all hypothetical” if only because “the other [...] surprises us in its intractability, its refusal to conform to what we know” (900). The key word here is “refusal.” For modern novels, by and large, additionally practice an aesthetics that shifts the burden of responsibility—of judgment, choice, and knowing through reading—from the writer to the reader. This burden, in turn, “surprises” or shocks the reader into self-awareness because he passively anticipates “the clarifying authorial judgment we expect and desire,” a judgment that the modern novel denies (900). Hale, citing Judith Butler, describes the consequences of the reader’s responsibility as being “put in a position to ‘understand the limits of judgment and to cease judging, paradoxically, in the name of the ethics, to cease judging in a way that assumes we know in advance what there is to be known’” (900). In this way, the reader “surrenders” to the alterity constitutive of the novel form in order to “know” or be bound to that alterity—to have an ethical experience.¹⁷

While Hale speaks largely in terms of the *modern* novel and its readers, the implications of her work also speak to the ethical experience of undecidability specifically related to modernist fiction and its practitioners.¹⁸ As noted before, with regard to the novel, modernist writing has been read as a radical “break” from the past. Yet the impulse by

¹⁷ Hale goes on to argue that the “ethical lesson [inherent to novel reading] cannot be learned once and for all. Our capacity for undergoing is dependent on our continuing to judge [...]. Our avowal of our epistemological limits is something that must be freshly performed, undergone again and again” (901).

¹⁸ Hale’s discussion of “modern” novel includes modernist writing but also extends to the novel’s development in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. As noted, she attributes modern novel writing and theory to Henry James, whose work influenced a generation of British and American modernist writers. The scale of James’s influence can be gleaned from the following observation by Childs: “James’s reliance on ambiguity, on careful revelation and on neither third-person omniscient narration nor first-person pseudo-autobiographical forms but on centres of consciousness, suggested alternative ways of writing fiction and implied that the novel was less a device for unraveling a story to a reader-as-consumer than a vehicle for conveying mental images to an active intelligence” (83). Hale recognizes this same “reliance on ambiguity” in James, though she reads it in terms of producing an ethical experience in the reader. She argues that through this experience, as has already been elaborated, the reader comes to realize his or her own limits of knowing. But the experience itself would also open the reader up to difference and possibility so that “we might change for the better, that we might actively try to judge less and undergo more” (Hale, “Aesthetics” 901).

modernists to turn away from traditional forms of representation can additionally be seen as tempered by ambivalence, hesitation, uncertainty, and, in the most extreme cases, by the “terrible experience” of undecidability. In other words, modernists appear not to have fully abandoned tradition, as some critics maintain. Instead, it seems they cautiously augmented and consciously improved upon familiar methods of representation in the novel with the view to being more open and welcoming of otherness. In this way, the modernist novel can be seen as a deeply responsible response to what Martha Nussbaum describes as “the world’s surprising variety, its complexity and mysteriousness, its flawed and imperfect beauty” (3). Though Nussbaum’s comment is made about the novel in general, it seems especially relevant in the context of modernism. As many critics have argued, the structure of the modernist novel is porous, fragmented, self-reflexive, nonlinear, dialogic, encyclopedic. As such, it might be said that modernists’ search for new modes of representation—that is, for new strategies of representation open to and respectful of the world’s variety, complexity, and imperfection—discloses their responsibility. For if, as Nussbaum claims, “[s]tyle itself makes its claims, expresses its own sense of what matters” (3), then the various styles and formal techniques employed by modernists in the novel reveal a commitment to alterity—a commitment that simultaneously labors not to violate the other’s singularity. In this way, it might be said that modernists’ refusal to fully appropriate otherness and difference into familiar narrative forms consequently produced an uneasiness not only about past strategies of representation but about their own as well. To be clear, I am not suggesting modernists denied alterity in their work—in their refusal to appropriate—

but rather sought innovative ways to responsibly represent it without doing violence.¹⁹ This search for responsible techniques of representation required constant experimentation—that is, permanent revolution in form and style—that simultaneously caused modernist writers themselves to experience undecidability.

I would argue that the reader experiences something similar, which raises critical questions about another kind of responsibility. If the writer deliberately refuses to provide interpretive certainty of a text, then the reader is left to decide its meaning. Put another way, modernist responsibility in this case occurs as a deliberate act of deferring understanding—that is, of being held accountable for a text’s total interpretation. In this way, through the act of reading, the reader shares the responsibility for the meaning of a text. As Sartre has noted, “reading is a pact of generosity between author and reader” (60). The reader is morally “bound” to the text, that is, the reader finds himself inescapably beholden to an interpretative demand: “the subject is [...] essential because it is required not only to disclose the object [...] but also so that this object might exist absolutely” (Sartre 52). However, modernist novels often exacerbate—in different ways—the impossibility of ever fulfilling this demand. Their style, form, and disruptive strategies of representation work to frustrate the reader’s attempt “to disclose” the text’s decidability. In effect, the modernist novels evade interpretative certainty in order to protect the singularity of the other. In this way, modernist novels divest the reader of “epistemological comfort,” as discussed above,

¹⁹ Such violence does not simply involve misrepresentation, which, in certain cases, might be preferable to realist mimetic practices that strive to grasp and transform difference and alterity into recognizable, knowable forms. Rather, representational violence of the other occurs *whenever* the “procedure of art” attempts to conceptualize the other (Levinas, “Reality and Its Shadow” 3). Whether in language or by image, any effort to think the other does violence to the other’s uniqueness and singularity. I am arguing that modernists were well-aware of the possibility of violence inherent to representation. Thus, their radical, on-going engagement with new strategies of representation both reflects a responsible attempt to do justice to the other as well as reveals an ambivalence and anxiety at the core of ethical experience.

inasmuch as they call into question the reader's "autonomous, self-sufficient, and arelational individual[ity]" (Thiem 10). Thus, the reader becomes an ethical subject who "does not have a secure status or position" that would allow him to naturalize the text that already defies, eludes, disrupts naturalization (Thiem 11).²⁰

By contrast, modernist writers often elude or sidestop *taking* responsibility for their work by employing narrators in their stead. Though by no means a new instrument of storytelling, modernist narrators bear little resemblance to their fictional predecessors. The latter, according to Stephen Kern, "assumed command by telling their story with broad vision, a singular authoritative voice, and seemingly unlimited knowledge" (*The Modernist Novel* 179). Put another way, the "interpretive stability" produced by earlier narrators establishes a sense of credibility that in turn bolsters the reader's trust of the (implied) author and her story (179). Not so with modernist narrators. Neither reliable nor omniscient nor assured, they find themselves disconnected from their creators, as it were, and charged with providing "a new understanding of what can and cannot be seen, articulated, and known" (179). Their anxiety thus originates in the responsibility of having been assigned the duty of telling stories without an authorial foundation upon which to ground them. This sense of detachment, combined with the added responsibility of narrative decision-making, works to compound not only the narrators' terrible experience of undecidability but the reader's as well. So too, then, do modernist narrators assume the role of ethical subjects dispossessed of agency. For storytelling requires invention, that is, "[i]nvention of the other in the same" (Derrida, "Psyche" 11). And this other—"neither subject nor object, neither a self nor a consciousness nor an unconsciousness" (39)—demands commitment (representation)

²⁰ On the issue of naturalization, see Culler.

without the violent betrayal of its singularity. To clarify: as ethical voices intervening between the writer and the text, many modernist narrators undergo a crisis in the sense that they bear the burden of responsible representation that must both respond to the other in an act of invention while simultaneously refraining from appropriative violence.

A similar crisis also registers in modernist characters. As a central problem for modernist writers and their narrators, characters find themselves beset by questions of identity resulting from their own troubled encounter with alterity. Unlike their counterparts in the past, many modernist characters become “conspicuous absences” (Kern 23). In other words, they lack the vitality and fullness that otherwise typify characters in earlier novels. In part, this absence can be explained by the general observation that “[s]tructure and characterization appear to vie for dominance in fiction” (Scheick 19). The “underlying tension” produced by this struggle is especially acute in modernist fiction since so many modernists privileged formal experimentation over character development (Schieck 22). Compounding this problem of character, modernist narrators—assuming the responsibility of representation, as discussed above—must choose between depicting life’s plenitude, heeding the other’s demand, and shaping characters’ lives. In effect, I would suggest that narrative undecidability leads to a disarticulation of characters’ identities. It is as if modernist narrators “throw” their characters into the worlds of their stories who then bear their own burdens of responsibility as they navigate the shared and dynamic world of the text.²¹ Thus, though largely unaware of themselves as ethical subjects, modernist characters exemplify much of the same anxiety and uncertainty as their narrators. For they too seek order in

²¹ This idea of “thrownness,” developed by Heidegger, “is the simple awareness that we always find ourselves somewhere, namely delivered over to a world with which we are fascinated, a world we share with others” (Critchley, “Being and Time”).

worlds that overwhelm them, that make demands which exceed their fulfillment or understanding.²²

THE PLAN

The subsequent chapters in this project focus on three novels published in the early 1920s, a period commonly regarded as “high” modernism. Chosen for their distinct responses to the various socio-political, aesthetic, and ethical crises of their time, Virginia Woolf’s *Jacob’s Room* (1922), D. H. Lawrence’s *Aaron’s Rod* (1922) and E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* (1924) rethink the role of the novel as medium for exploring ethics and responsibility. Though the modernisms these writers practiced vary in each of the novels under consideration, the centrality of responsibility to their respective aesthetic choices demonstrates an underlying ethics that responds to otherness. In the next chapter, I examine Woolf’s conception of responsibility in relation to the unnamed narrator of the novel. Particularly, the analysis of *Jacob’s Room* focuses on the interminable yet necessary experience of undecidability that overwhelms the narrator in her effort to responsibly represent Jacob Flanders. The fragmentation of the narrative structure, I argue, testifies to the impossibility of total representation of the other, that is, of a unique singularity “beyond” the consciousness of the subject. The novel’s form, in other words, seems to be both a reflection of the narrator’s anxiety as she responds to the unendurable demands of representation as well as a deliberate strategy she uses to avoid betraying the singularity of the other. This

²² As Annika Thiem argues, the “self-conscious subject [...] is constitutively and irrecoverably traversed and troubled by the encounter with the other” (98). Whether this self-conscious subject pertains to modernist narrators or their protagonists (or both), the responsibility implied in the encounter with the absolute other always already disrupts, or “troubles,” the assurance of an unfettered, autonomous self. In a certain sense, it might said that the other is a force of disorder, confusion, anarchy that “undoes” the moral humanist subject.

discussion thus yields questions about modernist conceptions of subjectivity—specifically in light of criticism that has charged modernists for retreating inward away from the world in order to focus on problems of selfhood. I make the case that the modernist subject, beset by a primordial demand to respond, finds him- or herself always already constituted by an ethical obligation. In this way, the so-called modernist inward “turn” can only ever be partial, delusional, or result in failure. Modernist responsibility, therefore, problematizes the subject’s desire to abandon the call to duty by the other: he or she learns that escape from it cannot be achieved.

The third chapter continues this line of inquiry but shifts to problems related to ethics and modernist characters. Particularly, I investigate the experience of responsibility through the eponymous protagonist of Lawrence’s *Aaron’s Rod*. Unlike the narrator in *Jacob’s Room*—whose anxiety stems from the experience of undecidability in the act of representation—Aaron Sisson seeks to free himself from the constraints of responsibility. He recklessly abandons his family, gives up his career, and leaves his country in an effort to transcend the many domestic obligations he senses as obstructions to the realization of an unfettered “self.” However, I show that Aaron’s desire to escape the confines of domesticity has its origins in a kind of primordial call to responsibility that ultimately results in his breaking with traditional notions of morality. In other words, Aaron’s response to this ethical call—though he remains largely unconscious of the call as such—requires acts of irresponsibility that disrupt programmatic, dogmatic morality. To act responsibly in this sense means exceeding moral knowledge but also rejecting the various institutions of modern life: family, work, nation. Moreover, I argue that modernist responsibility, insofar as it is conceived in the novel, plays on a certain sense of irony. Whereas Aaron’s existential

struggle seems to originate in his attempt to escape the constraints of his domestic life in search of an authentic “self,” his anxiety really involves the recognition that the self cannot exist apart from others. In fact, except for a very few brief scenes in the novel, Aaron never finds himself alone—that is, he almost always finds himself in the company of others.

My analysis of *Aaron's Rod* therefore builds on many of the problems explored in *Jacob's Room* but it also forecasts the central conundrum explored in the last chapter of this project, namely, modernist paralysis and responsibility. I show that Forster's admixture of modernist and traditional techniques of representation in *A Passage to India* pushes undecidability to its extreme limits. To complement this, I examine both the role of the narrator and the fragmentation of character in the novel—in other words, I look at how Forster's responsibility “works” in both his narrator and characters.. To this end, I foreground the chapter with Derrida's notion of the aporia, or total undecidability, and demonstrate that the novel refuses ultimate comprehension through various narrative strategies of deflection. This problem also occurs at the level of plot in which the central episode—the excursion to the Marabar Caves—results in Aziz's alleged rape of Adela Quested. That the conspicuously absent narrator refuses to provide either the characters or the reader with the necessary information to reach a conclusion about what happened in the Caves reinforces modernist's strategy of disrupting and suspending meaning. In this chapter, I particularly focus on the reader's experience to responsibly make a decision even as it means necessarily imposing meaning on the text to make it cohere.

Chapter Two

Modernist (Ir)Responsibility in Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room*

Often when I have been writing one of my so-called novels I have been baffled by this same problem; that is, how to describe what I call in my private shorthand—"non-being." Everyday includes much more non-being than being.
—Virginia Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past" (1940)

The understanding of the other is thus a hermeneutics and an exegesis.
— Emmanuel Levinas, "Meaning and Sense" (1972)

INTRODUCTION

This study of responsibility and the modernist novel begins with Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room* (1922).¹ In recent years, Woolf's writing has been at the forefront of critical and theoretical debates grappling with questions of ethics in modernist literature.² Her work has been used by critics to investigate such (inter)related ethical matters as gender and alterity, trauma and mourning, and sympathy and intimacy. Woolf today remains a central figure in modernism and literary history.³ For, she not only consciously "reinvented" the nineteenth-century novel—and "so strongly shaped traditions of feminist literary criticism" (Katz 169)—but she also mounted various challenges to modernity that would reverberate with

¹ Virginia Woolf, *Jacob's Room*, ed. Suzanne Riatt (New York: Norton 2007) 3 – 143. I will cite by page number throughout the chapter.

² It is worth noting that comparative studies on ethics and modernist literature often include Woolf as the lone representative, English writer (notwithstanding Joseph Conrad, whose ambiguous status as an Englishman complicates such matters). See Lewis, *Religious*; Oser.

³ Hermione Lee suggests otherwise, claiming that "[n]one of [Woolf's] novels has the stature or scope of Proust or Conrad, of Joyce's *Ulysses* or of Lawrence's *The Rainbow*. She is, like Forster, in the second rank of twentieth-century novelists" (14). However, Lee praises Woolf for recognizing her role in the modernist "movement," and for her astute elaborations on the modern novel. Yet, I would hope that thirty years since Lee's *The Novels of Virginia Woolf* (1977) has meant a reevaluation of Woolf as a first-tier writer whose influence and stature only continue to grow even into the twenty-first century.

later twentieth-century literary concerns and philosophical inquiries.⁴ Moreover, her work has been especially significant to contemporary critics exploring questions about (absolute) otherness. Indeed, Woolf's enduring legacy as a modernist writer might be pinned on her commitment to what Dorothy J. Hale has termed "an aesthetics of alterity," that is, to a set of textual practices "aim[ing] to present a 'vision of life' that is a particular kind of self-reflection: that gives a view of what is outside and beyond the self (other to the self) through the lens of subjective perspective" (13). Woolf's work has thus been additionally crucial in asking critical questions about ethical subjectivity—and about the ethical subject's necessary yet tentative connections to both writing and to the "other to the self." *Jacob's Room* certainly cannot be exempted from such questions. Woolf's "biography of fragments" radically interrogates both the subject *of* writing and the subject *in* writing as much as it intentionally refashions the novel in order to problematize writing itself (Lee 72).⁵ In doing so, I want to suggest, Woolf's first experimental novel elicits further questions about the responsibility of representation. Specifically, in relation to an ethics of bearing witness and affirmation, I will show that narrative responsibility can be thought of in terms of the novel's "undecidability" produced by its formal features and reinforced by its thematic concerns with (the representation of) subjectivity. Because *Jacob's Room* breaks with the traditional conventions of narrative representation, I argue, Woolf must not only reimagine the representation of subjectivity but she must also rethink the responsibility of such representation.

⁴ By "modernity," I mean to suggest the broad developments in the arts, humanities, and sciences since the early sixteenth century that reached their apotheosis in the late eighteenth century in the Enlightenment. For Woolf and many feminists alike, modernity is synonymous with patriarchy, war, imperialism, colonialism.

⁵ By "problematize writing," I mean a rigorous, self-reflexive process of calling into question various textual practices that enable both a producer of texts (writer) and a consumer of texts (reader) to "make" or "find," respectively, "meaning."

Many of Woolf's literary essays call attention to the practice of writing and representation, often resulting in critics of modernism to focus on the formal qualities of her novels. Yet, these same critics frequently overlook "the duties and responsibilities" Woolf herself insisted are necessary to "finding a way of telling the truth" ("Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" 211). A central claim in this chapter is that Woolf's modernism is not only thematically concerned with "life itself" but is intensely preoccupied with the representing life responsibly. Such a claim, however, might seem to contradict many prevailing notions about both modernism and Woolf's own textual practices as radical, as experimental, as revolutionary. As a central modernist figure who champions a rejection of nineteenth-century realism and its early twentieth-century "materialist" progeny (the Edwardians), Woolf undoubtedly experiments with unconventional forms of representation "in order to express more fully the qualities and intensity of conscious experience" (Parsons 1). Experimentation, though, does not come without its consequences. For Woolf, if not for modernist writers more generally, the cost of re-forming the novel meant a potential, wholesale reinvention of literary conventions if not an outright abandonment of past methods and modes of representation. In this way, then, experimentation suggests a risk into the unknown—a "leap of faith" into uncertainty and precariousness—as much as it does a kind of Nietzschean revaluation of the novel. Even Woolf understood the risks inherent in breaking with past conventions and methods, observing that in the attempt to truthfully represent life, "the truth itself is bound to reach us in rather an exhausted and chaotic condition" ("Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" 211). Yet in spite of her own revaluations of the novel, Woolf insists that writers (herself included) maintain what she deems an "attitude toward life" and toward new methods of representation. This "attitude" I interpret as ethos,

or responsible conduct. Even while Woolf exhorts writers to “spring those sleek, smooth novels, those portentous and ridiculous biographies” of the past from their grip, she also urges those same writers to “come down off their plinths and pedestals” in order to conduct themselves responsibly in their texts (and before their reading audiences) (“Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” 212).

In her diary dated Monday, January 26, 1920, Woolf reports that “this afternoon [she had] arrived at some idea of a new form for a new novel” and goes on to state that “the approach will be entirely different this time: no scaffolding; scarcely a brick to be seen; all crepuscular, but the heart, the passion, humour, everything as bright as fire in the mist” (*The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 2 13 – 14). Many critics have used this and similar statements by Woolf to launch their analyses of *Jacob’s Room*. Kathleen Wall, for instance, reads the novel in terms of Woolf searching “to find a ‘significant form’ for her elegy for her brother and for the young generation of men who died in the war” (303). Indeed, thirty years earlier, in *The Novels of Virginia Woolf*, Hermione Lee suggests that “[t]he form of *Jacob’s Room* is the subject: an alternative to false reality of the biography of fact” (72; Lee’s italics). And critics writing about *Jacob’s Room* in the interim between Lee and Wall have certainly focused their attention on the novel’s “crepuscular” form too, often in conjunction with an exploration of Woolf’s socio-political agenda in the novel. Judy Little forcefully argues that *Jacob’s Room* “is not an effort to extend the *Bildungsroman*; it is, among other things, an attack on this form. It attacks that a conventionalised fictional ‘summing up’ can fit a real life, or that a young Englishman’s socialisation is anything but a burlesque of his real stumblings toward self-discovery” (109). Little’s analysis is consonant with feminist critiques exploring sexual politics in relation to the novel’s form. Susan C. Harris follows Little by pointing out that a

central feature of the *Bildungsroman* is the sexual education of its hero. However, observes Harris, the novel's narrative voice "is spectacularly reticent when it comes to actually recording [Jacob's] progress" (420). But, rather than reading this narrative reticence as subversively "remov[ing] sexuality from the novel" (420), Harris argues that the narrator acts as a censor who polices sexuality in order to control it at the narrative level. Ultimately, the narrative voice for Harris is comprised of "multitudinous voices whose dialogue constructs the cultural edifice within which Jacob moves" (422). Finally, Kate Flint's "Virginia Woolf, Women, and Language"—following the work of Charles G. Hoffmann, E. L. Bishop and Alex Zwerdling—examines Woolf's revisions of *Jacob's Room* and the way Woolf "came to organize her text around a more generalized perception of difference between the sexes" (362).⁶ According to Flint, the narrative strategy of "distancing" Jacob simultaneously enacts a critique of patriarchy and brings women's voices to the foreground of the narrative. My point in reviewing these select criticisms of *Jacob's Room* is not that their understanding of the novel's form is somehow unfounded or unjustified—or even incompatible with the possibilities Woolf herself notes about her then unwritten novel. Rather, criticism tends to ignore the question of responsibility as it relates to representation, that is, as Woolf "grope[s] & experiment[s]" (*Diary*, vol. 2 14) with the form of the novel.⁷

In "The Narrow Bridge of Art" (1927), Woolf asserts that "[n]obody can read much modern literature without being aware that some dissatisfaction, some difficulty, is lying in

⁶ Focusing on the textual history of *Jacob's Room*, Flint wants to remind critics that Woolf's own project "of finding a woman's sentence, of employing a language not made by men for their own uses" must be understood in the social context in which Woolf produced *Jacob's Room* as opposed to reading the novel as prefiguring post-1968 French feminism (379).

⁷ Writing to a more general audience in her introduction to the Oxford edition of *Jacob's Room*, Flint comes close when she observes that "Woolf's style allows her to pose the question of what the fictional presentation of life might seem if one were freed from the demands of convention" (xiii).

our way. On all sides writers are attempting what they cannot achieve, are forcing the form they use to contain a meaning which is strange to it” (904). The incommensurability between form and meaning Woolf identifies here as characteristic of modern literature applies to poetry, and what she goes on to discuss is pertinent to the development of the modernist novel. She observes that different ages have required different generic forms of expression and representation—the Elizabethans, drama; the Romantics, the lyric; the Victorians, the novel—and that modern writers of fiction have yet to find a suitable form capable of registering “an age clearly when we are not fast anchored where we are; things are moving around us; we are moving ourselves” (903 – 04). Like many of her other well-known literary manifestos, “The Narrow Bridge of Art” probes the possibilities of the modernist novel to assume the “duties and responsibilities” once achieved by past literary genres. In fact, Woolf seems reticent to even associate modern writing with the novel, aware as she is of the novel’s traditional modes of representation inasmuch as what she perceives as its limitations in representing the “queer conglomeration of incongruous things—the modern mind” (908). She goes so far as to suggest that “[w]e shall be forced to *invent new names* for the different books which masquerade under this one heading” (907; my italics). Though “The Narrow Bridge of Art” was written several years after the publication of *Jacob’s Room*, it clues us into Woolf’s commitment to finding new means of expression, of “inventing new names” in an age of transition and turbulence, of discovery and crisis. Her remarks on modern literature here and in many of her critical essays reveal a writer deeply concerned with balancing the myriad complexities of modern life with the demands of (re)inventing new modes of representation. Woolf suggests that the novel form—once freed of “carrying loads of details, bushels of fact” (909)—can bear the burden of “keeping [...] in touch with the amusements

and idiosyncrasies of human character in daily life” (909). In *Jacob’s Room*, however, Woolf’s narrator reflects on the “harsher necessity” involved in this process of “freeing” the novel from—and, in effect, buoying the subject above—the surface of details and facts (53).

As I will argue here and throughout this chapter, modernist responsibility, as exemplified by Woolf, can be understood with the help of the Derridean notion of undecidability. An ethical concept closely aligned with deconstruction, undecidability simply means an experience through which an ethical subject must go when confronted with a problem or dilemma that demands action. To truly decide, to consciously make a choice is “something terrible”, argues Derrida, because it means breaking with conventional knowledge and morality (“Hospitality” 67). He claims, “[a] decision, of course, must be prepared as far as possible by knowledge, by information, by infinite analysis. At some point, however, for a decision to be made you have to go beyond knowledge, to do something that you don’t know, something which does not belong to, or is beyond, the sphere of knowledge” (66). In this way, responsibility means being irresponsible in the view of established conventions and laws—specifically, in the way I am appropriating it, those that govern the novel. Such (ir)responsibility, then, concerns the disruption and destabilization of accepted forms of novelistic representation and modes of narration.⁸ Thus, in my view, undecidability also functions as a formal strategy of modernist resistance to narrative closure largely indicative of the conventional strategies of narrative representation. My discussion begins with an examination of Woolf’s anonymous narrator in *Jacob’s Room*. For, she not only reveals an overwhelming anxiety with regard to the ethical demand of having to make

⁸ I will use the form “(ir)responsibility” to denote modernist responsibility as heterogeneous to conventional responsibility and representation. Whenever “responsibility” or “irresponsibility” are used, I am thus thinking them in their normative senses.

narrative decisions—the fragmented form of her narrative reinforces the “terrible experience” of undecidability, that is, the burden of responsibility as it relates to representation. My analysis turns on Woolf’s interposition of the narrator between herself and the text, a move that exacerbates the novel’s undecidability and, I claim, muddles any possibility of directly ascribing responsibility to Woolf, the narrator, or text. Woolf’s evasive, (ir)responsible tactics participate in the broader modernist project of strategically undermining epistemological and ontological certainty.⁹ Her “absence” is suggestive of the consequences necessarily raised when, in the well-known words of Nietzsche, “God is dead.” Whereas certain authorial guarantees by a traditional author-narrator (God) make it possible to discern a moral center (or lesson) in the novel, the disassociation of the modernist author from his or her narrator antagonizes an already volatile situation, namely the incapacity to attribute responsibility to a reliable, omniscient narrative agent. In *Jacob’s Room*, I claim, Woolf devolves the burden of responsibility to an all too human agent who, as a result, finds herself subjected to the ethical demand of representing the novel’s eponymous character even when, as she observes, “[i]t seems that a profound, impartial, and absolutely just opinion of our fellow creatures is utterly unknown” (56). I argue that this contradiction—between the narrator’s responsibility and her observation that representation ultimately ends in failure—epitomizes modernist (ir)responsibility and its “crisis of representation.”¹⁰

⁹ As Pericles Lewis claims, “[t]he modernists generally saw the world as devoid of inherent significance. For them, the task of the artist was not to discover a preexistent meaning, but to create a new meaning out of the chaos and anarchy of actual modern life” (8). In light of this view, then, modernists had to act (ir)responsibly so as to shake the foundations of established truths and systems in order find new approaches to creating “new meaning.”

¹⁰ In this way, while *Jacob’s Room* might be regarded as a series of failed attempts to objectively represent its purported subject, at least from the vantage point of realism, I suggest otherwise.

My subsequent reading of *Jacob's Room* will show that the narrator's (ir)responsibility has significant repercussions for subjectivity and the representation thereof. Indeed, subjectivity is a fundamental concern of many modernist novels and continues to be one of the critical mainstays of modernist studies. As I asserted in the preceding paragraph, Woolf's narrator is the subject of an ethical demand. What does this mean? My answer to this question is informed by the structure of ethical experience sketched out in Simon Critchley's *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*. In Critchley's view, ethical experience is a "virtuously circular" situation that "begins with the approval of a demand, a demand that demands approval" (39). This "approval" can be thought as affirmation, or even understood as a response to a calling by an other—someone in excess of the subject who demands an ethical subject's infinite responsibility. That said, the source or origin of an ethical demand cannot necessarily be known: it might emanate from "God, the abyssal void at the heart of being, the fairies at the bottom of my garden, or some other occult source" (Critchley 55). The point is not to get embroiled in questions of priority, that is, whether a demand comes before an approval or vice versa. Rather, the structure of ethical experience necessitates *both* a demand by an absolute, unknowable other and a response by a subject. Most importantly, Critchley shows, an ethical subject "shapes itself in relation to a demand that it can never meet, which divides and sunders the subject" (40). This "shaping" means that an ethical subject's subjectivity is made possible by an other's unfulfillable, exorbitant demand, rendering the relationship between a subject and an other asymmetrical. In other words, any response to or approval of a demand calls into question a subject's autonomy, as it is split between a duty to self and to an other. Critchley's theorization of subjectivity—culled from contemporary European philosophy—assists in many ways in illuminating how I

approach the question of modernist (ir)responsibility, representation, and subjectivity in *Jacob's Room*. To put it plainly, representation is a demand demanded of the novel's narrator. And her response to this demand is precisely that which "divides and sunders" her, resulting in and reflected by the novel's (ir)responsible, fragmented, and undecidable narrative. More importantly, such a demand leads to the narrator's realization that justice can never be attained. That is, responsible representation—defined in the context of traditional forms of representation—is impossible. For, the impossibility of justly representing and affirming "our fellow creatures," as the narrator makes clear, lies in the fact that individual, subjective consciousness is always already in relation to a demand that both shapes and is shaped by it.

Finally, it might be helpful at this time to once again clarify what I mean by "representation" and "fragmentation" if only because I have and will often use them interchangeably rather than treat them as opposing terms. Fragmentation, as I understand it, already implies representation and is one of many formal strategies employed by modernists to imitate "the modern mind." Anne Fernihough has deftly and succinctly explored the philosophical underpinnings of modernist form as it relates to consciousness, citing the twin influences of French philosopher Henri Bergson and American psychologist William James on the works of Woolf, James Joyce, May Sinclair, and Dorothy Richardson. Through her analysis, Fernihough illuminates what seems an obvious but regularly unacknowledged point about the form of modernist narratives. Namely, the differences in the representation of subjectivity are routinely homogenized by critics of modernism under the well-known banner of stream-of-consciousness. However, as Fernihough makes clear, differences do in fact exist. For instance, whereas the form of *Jacob's Room* represents a "swarm of sense data bombarding consciousness at any given moment" (Fernihough 66), Molly's soliloquy at the

end of Joyce's *Ulysses* is constituted by an "unbroken flow of words on the page [that] embodies an indiscriminating and unstoppable consciousness in which there is no editing out or hierarchy of thought" (67). Both forms of representation attempt to imitate consciousness though in ways that are generally described as fragmentary. It is commonplace, that is, to subsume experimental modernist narrative under "fragmentation" despite the different forms fragmentation assumes. Often used pejoratively, fragmentation is a term cast wide by critics in order to rein in and smooth over modernism's formal heterogeneity. However, in light of my discussion about ethical subjectivity and representation above, it might be said that the heterogeneity of fragmentation emblematic of modernist texts points to varying if not vying ethical demands demanding representation. Herein lies the exemplarity and singularity of *Jacob's Room*, namely its unique and straightforward response to a demand among a multiplicity of demands.

LIFE ITSELF: REPRESENTATION AND RESPONSIBILITY

Before turning to a discussion of the formal qualities of *Jacob's Room*, I would like to extend my discussion of representation in the context of Woolf's non-fiction. This section will enable a deeper understanding of Woolf's literary project which will in turn have the effect of illuminating both the formal structure of *Jacob's Room* as well as the novel's treatment of subjectivity. In literary studies, representation has been traditionally defined as "the use of one thing to stand for another through some signifying medium. A representation of an event is not the event itself but rather a statement about or rendition of that event. An artistic representation is an image or likeness of something achieved through a medium such as language, paint, stone, film, etc." (Murfin and Ray 438). What this definition

implies but does not state outright is that representation traditionally tends toward totality, that is, full meaning or presence. In other words, traditional aesthetic representation aims at a direct, objective, one-to-one correspondence of the reality it purports to reflect. More technically, the signifying system—language or writing, in this instance—attempts to correspond without interruption to a signified object, to a “thing in itself.” With that said, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, artists and writers from all backgrounds began to pose many challenges to mimetic representation, disrupting the means by which “life” was generally mediated and thus experienced. As noted in the previous section, philosophers also started asking critical questions about subjective perception and consciousness, resulting in further questions not only about what a subject could know (epistemology) but also about a subject’s subjecthood, or being (ontology). The consequences of both the challenges posed to traditional representation and the revaluations of philosophical assumptions about human perception and knowledge precipitated a full-scale reassessment of modernity’s faith in human autonomy. Specifically, writers and philosophers were engaged in problems regarding experience, that is, what constitutes experience and how experience could be represented given “life’s” finitude. What interests me in this chapter is Woolf’s theoretical elaboration of writing fiction as much as her execution of that theory in *Jacob’s Room*. To my mind, and I am not alone in this assessment, Woolf’s fiction and non-fiction assemble one of the most full-fledged attempts to break with traditional literary conventions than any other modernist writer.

As a way of understanding what Woolf argues is an “obstacle and impediment” to modern literary representation, let us first examine George Eliot’s defense of realist representation. In this way, I hope to distinguish between realism and modernism not so

much for the sake of setting up realists to fail, as it were. Instead, I want to indicate a shift or “turn” in the ways modernists conceived of their methods and responsibilities as writers—and for the novel. In the second book of *Adam Bede* (1859), Eliot “pauses” to advance one of the clearer expressions of realism against what she perceives as a propensity to “create a world so much better than this” (178). She begins by lamenting her own lack of cleverness and creativity as a storyteller—otherwise, she states, “my characters would be entirely of my own choosing” (177). As a result, Eliot professes “to creep servilely after nature and fact” (177) rather than fabricate or embellish the details of her “simple story” (178). She notes that “I have no lofty vocation”(177) other than representing truth, later claiming that “[f]alsehood is so easy, truth so difficult” (178) and that “it is a very hard thing to say the exact truth, even about your own immediate feelings” (178 – 79). Even while Eliot readily admits to the difficulty in rendering a “faithful account of men and things” (177), she also defends her method against critics who would have her fashion characters into types so that “[t]hen we shall see whom we are to condemn, and whom we are to approve” (178). Eliot rejects such representation on the basis of its naivety and simplicity, that is, as overlooking the complexity of human character and a world brimming with material detail. Moreover, in fashioning herself as someone who “creeps” after such details, Eliot in effect “removes” herself, as it were, from the world to become an objective observer of its parts and motion. Only from this vantage point—one committed to truth as mimesis—can an “objective” rendering of the material world be delivered.

In this brief detour from her narrative, Eliot thus lays out the terms by which she will *responsibly* narrate and represent “men and things” in spite of the difficulty of doing so. She states:

[...] I aspire to give no more than a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind. The mirror is doubtless defective; the outlines will sometimes be disturbed; the reflection faint or confused; *but I feel as much bound to tell you, as precisely as I can*, what that reflection is, as if I were in the witness-box narrating my experience on oath. (177; my emphasis)

The metaphor of being on trial will certainly become significant in the course of this dissertation, as it might be said each of the modernists who I have selected to examine are in one way or another “on trial.” For now, however, I want to emphasize Eliot’s self-proclaimed duty to “precisely” reflect that which has been “mirrored” in her mind. The mirror as such might indeed be muddled—by what, she does not say—but Eliot seems confident that her duty to precision, if not duty itself, will aid her in depicting an accurately mimetic representation of “men and things.” The details constituting objective reality—“all those cheap common things which are the precious necessities of life” (179)—she argues have the potential to foster human sympathy. For, the “representation of commonplace things” aid to illuminate and remind readers of the real, working-class conditions of the world (180). She claims that more often than not “religion and philosophy,” inasmuch as literature, exclude “common, coarse people” and thus posit theories about the world based solely on a good/bad binarism (180). It would seem that Eliot and Woolf are not in disagreement insofar as their mutual commitment to representing reality is concerned. Both emphasize the mind as the instrument or register of reality. And both explore in their respective fiction the real, material conditions of people’s lives. The difference between the two female writers—at least on the question of representation—involves how much the

mind as mirror, or perception, can accurately record the details of the world. Eliot's scrupulous, slavish attention to "the precious necessities of life" from Woolf's perspective betray realism's commitment to "life" as it is actually lived and felt—or, in a word, experienced. In a diary entry from November 1928, Woolf reveals that she does not seek a complete expulsion of the exteriority of the outer world from experience—"I mean to eliminate all waste, deadness, superfluity" since these result from "the inclusion of things that don't belong to the moment; this appalling business of the realists: getting on from lunch to dinner is false, unreal, merely conventional" (*Diary*, vol. III 209). Indeed, "the moment" will become an important concept in Woolf's literary philosophy (as I discuss below) and it constitutes one of the major differences between Woolf's modernism and Eliot's realism.

Like many modernists, Woolf composed critical essays that simultaneously reflect a searching for and an elaboration of new methods of literary representation. These essays set out to justify Woolf's break with the conventions of Victorian realism—carried into the twentieth century with Edwardian materialism—inasmuch as they explore new possibilities for the novel. Additionally, her personal writing sheds light on a writer struggling to break through what she calls "the cotton wool of daily life," that is, the world obscured by materialist facticity. In the memoir "A Sketch of the Past" (1940), which recounts the death of her mother, Woolf explains that "behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this" (72). It is from this human interconnectivity that Woolf derives her belief that "by writing I am doing what is far more necessary than anything else" (73). Representation, then, for Woolf, means much more than

simply reflecting or relating the minutiae of everyday life.¹¹ Rather, representation is a demand or call to responsibility as “a revelation of some order” (72). This “order,” claims Woolf, is constituted by “separate moments of being [...] embedded in many more moments of non-being” (70). Non-being, she says, is the “cotton wool,” the non-events that constitute and seemingly overwhelm our daily lives—the stuff of realism: “[a] great part of every day is not lived consciously. One walks, eats, sees things, deals with what has to be done; the broken vacuum cleaner; ordering dinner; writing orders to Mabel; washing; cooking dinner; bookbinding” (70). Being, by contrast, is precipitated by “shocks” or “exceptional moments” of awareness and passivity (71). For instance, she recalls a fight from her childhood with her younger brother Thoby when, suddenly, “I dropped my hand instantly, and stood there, and let him beat me” (71). In this moment, Woolf explains, she was rendered hopeless and powerless—she recognized the futility of violence as she wondered to herself, “why hurt another person?” (71). While this episode from her childhood left Woolf in a state of despair, other moments—such as when she saw the organic wholeness of a flower bed—enabled her to later explore such “exceptional moments” in writing.

In Woolf’s view, the exceptional heightens a writer’s sensibility to “life”—it is “what makes me a writer” (72). Yet “life,” for Woolf, is less a matter of mimetic representation than a kind of assemblage of disparate moments or events. She states, “people write what they call ‘lives’ of other people; that is they collect a number of events, and leave the person to whom it happened unknown” (69). Woolf later makes a similar observation with regard to her mother: “But if I turn to my mother, how difficult it is to single her out as she really was;

¹¹ See Liesl Olson’s *Modernism and the Ordinary*, specifically her chapter Woolf, for an acute and provocative discussion of modernism’s “aesthetic of the everyday” (5).

to imagine what she was thinking, to put a single sentence into her mouth! I dream; I make up pictures of a summer's afternoon" (87). Both citations demonstrate Woolf's belief that a direct and total representation of "life" cannot be achieved, that expression always already involves artistic creation, that is, imposition. She further claims, "one's life is not confined to one's body and what one says and does; one is living all the time *in relation to* certain background rods or conceptions" (73; my emphasis). Herein lie the ethics of Woolf's responsibility as a writer: to disclose "life" not as a stable state or truth—but rather as something in the "background" order that cannot be fixed or comprehended in its totality. In part, what interests Woolf is "life's" dynamism, that is, the ever-changing relation between "the cotton wool" of non-being and the "real thing" that a writer such as Woolf occasionally glimpses (72). Disclosure as an act of ethical expression would involve a movement outside of oneself toward what is other, toward understanding an other however much that understanding fails to grasp or comprehend an other in its full presence.

In "Modern Fiction" (1919/1925), Woolf faults traditional methods of representation for failing to disclose "life itself." She wonders, "[i]s it due to the method that inhibits the creative power? Is it due to the method that we feel neither jovial or magnanimous, but *centred in a self* which, in spite of its tremor of susceptibility, never embraces or creates what is *outside itself and beyond*?" ("Modern Fiction" 289; my emphases). This "tremor of susceptibility"—like those "moments of being" discussed above—has the potential to open a centered self onto "what is outside itself and beyond" (this will have significant consequences for subjectivity, as I discuss below). It also has the potential to upend narrative conventions and shatter artistic presuppositions: "[i]s it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever

aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible?” (288). Woolf here seems to caution against an aesthetic that would artificially shape and give coherence to “life,” that is, to “this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit.”

The “task,” or responsibility, of a novelist is to convey “life”—not to impose meaning upon it. By contrast, conventional strategies of representation foreclose “life” such that they begin with questions about “the proper stuff of fiction”—meaning, morality, propriety—instead of “record[ing] the atoms [of life] as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall [...] however disconnected and incoherent in appearance” (288). It seems important to point out that Woolf does not mean to suggest abandoning representational methods altogether.

Rather, she wants to radicalize the means by which “life” might be conveyed and understood, however (im)possible that might be. Crucially, at the end of “Modern Fiction,” she asserts that “no ‘method,’ no experiment, even the wildest—is forbidden, but only falsity and pretence. ‘The proper stuff of fiction’ does not exist; everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought” (291). From the perspective of conventional representation, Woolf’s irreverence for “the proper stuff of fiction” can be construed as irresponsibility—what, from perspective of modernism, *is* responsibility. Yet this (ir)responsibility—as I have formulated the term—hits upon a radical tension fundamental to ethics itself. On the one hand, as I have shown above, Woolf recognizes that “life” must be represented—in fact, she claims that her sensibility to it is the reason she became a writer in the first place. Yet, on the other hand, she also realizes that “life” exceeds conventional representation, that the “proper stuff of fiction” cannot adequately represent or reflect “life’s” dynamism. This tension at the core of modernist representation, at least as reflected by Woolf, results in narrative undecidability and fragmentation. More so, in the broader

view, the consequences for literature concern questions about what constitutes, properly, the “literary.” If “everything is the proper stuff of fiction,” then the border between literature and “life” becomes so porous that one cannot seemingly be distinguished from the other. In this sense, then, Oscar Wilde’s quip that “life imitates art far more than art imitates life” seems an appropriate precursor to Woolf’s own literary theory.

“Life is always and inevitably much richer than we who try to express it.” So says Woolf in the conclusion of “The Narrow Bridge of Art,” suggesting that “the need of fresh developments is being felt” by writers attempting to escape “a bondage which has become irksome to them” (909). As I have intimated, what Woolf means by “life” she never does clearly define—either in “The Narrow Bridge of Art” or in any of her literary manifestos—but it seems to be something in excess of the life represented by nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century realism. She says, for instance, “[w]hether we call it life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing, has moved off, or on, and refuses to be contained any longer in such ill-fitting vestments as we provide” (“Modern Fiction” 287). Again, in Woolf’s view, the conventions of realism—which she also likens to “some powerful and unscrupulous tyrant” (287)—have obscured and stifled rather than inspired “life.” In other words, the constraining methods of traditional forms representation, wherein “if all [the realists’] figures were to come to life they would find themselves dressed down to the last button of their coats in the fashion of the hour” (287), conceal life’s dynamism, mysteriousness, and richness. Yet in spite of these conventions’ tyranny over literary representation, Woolf asserts that “a spasm of rebellion” (287) has in fact emerged critical of the novel and its stilted representation of “life.” As if to fan the flames of this rebellion, she famously exhorts her audience to turn away from the material world—“what is commonly

thought big” (288)—and to consider “an ordinary mind on an ordinary day [, for] [t]he mind receives a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel” (287). “Life,” it seems for Woolf, lies not in a presupposed stable exterior world—the world of traditional representation—but rather is filtered and illuminated by the mind, by consciousness. In this sense, it might be said that consciousness produces “life,” though not entirely in isolation from the exterior world.¹² Any adequate or “real” representation of the world, then, necessarily results in narrative fragmentation because “life itself” exceeds the “myriad impressions” the mind can receive. The totality of the world overwhelms, as it were, any singular consciousness attempting to absorb and narrate the vast number of details and events that come and go at any given moment.

Discussions about representation and consciousness in Woolf’s fiction inevitably lead to critical questions about subjectivity. Before addressing this topic, however, I would now like to discuss *Jacob’s Room* in light of my overview of Woolf’s critique of realist representation. In the subsequent section, I consider the formal structural of *Jacob’s Room* in order to understand its ethical consequences for modernist (ir)responsibility. My analysis below requires a basic familiarity with the novel’s “crepuscular” form (though not necessarily its thematic content) if only because I will be making both specific and general claims based upon its spatial arrangements. Only after a thorough elaboration of Woolf’s formal experimentalism in *Jacob’s Room* will my discussion be prepared to “descend” into the particulars of the narrative. In part, my goal has been, and continues to be, to demonstrate how Woolf’s modernism can be understood as an enactment of ethical responsibility.

¹² As Liesl Olson claims, “[Woolf’s] work is not split between representations of ‘inner’ versus ‘outer’ or ‘personal’ versus ‘political.’ Rather, her representation of ordinary experience reconciles two sides of a dichotomy that is often understood as dominating literary modernism” (62).

NARRATIVE FRAGMENTATION AND MODERNIST (IR)RESPONSIBILITY

Widely recognized as Woolf's first foray into experimentation with the novel, *Jacob's Room* concerns the life and development of its titular character, Jacob Flanders. Divided into fourteen chapters, the novel opens in prewar England, in Cornwall, and follows Jacob to his "rooms" in Cambridge, London, and Greece as he develops from a young boy to a man in his mid-twenties. It ends with his mother Betty Flanders, a central character in the novel, holding a pair of Jacob's shoes as the anticlimactic revelation of his death in the Great War—his death being the literal culmination of his metaphorical absence since the very beginning of the book. Much of what we do learn about Jacob, however, comes from the filtered impressions of an anonymous narrator and fragmented dialogue by myriad characters inhabiting the novel, primarily women. The main events constituting Jacob's life—ranging from his intellectual training to his failed amorous relationships with women to his travels abroad to his daydreams in Hyde Park—reflect a rather mundane, though privileged middle-class male existence that is unexpectedly and abruptly extinguished by the War. At the end of the novel, through the perspective of Jacob's friend Bonamy, the narrator reports: "He left everything just as it was' [...]. 'Nothing arranged. All his letters strewn about for any one to read. What did he expect? Did he think he would come back?' he mused, standing in the middle of Jacob's room" (143). The novel's somber tone coupled with images of death and loss reinforce *Jacob's Room's* elegiac dimension, as it laments the disappearance of a generation and the end of a certain way of life.¹³

¹³ Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, for example, argue that "the experience of violence in the 1914 – 18 war gave contemporaries the impression that, throughout Europe and in all nations, the apparent 'dynamic of the West' has been snuffed out. And this radical and radically new violence was not only massively accepted by the belligerent societies but also implemented by millions of men over for and a half years. Even more troubling, the about turn—from a social state where violence had become very controlled, repressed and unreal to a state of war where extreme violence had free rein—occurred in an extremely brief time span. In a

While the summary above manages to provide a basic overview of the plot of *Jacob's Room*, it does not address what has long been considered the real subject of the novel: its form. In fact, while conceiving the novel, Woolf herself admitted that “[w]hat the unity shall be I have yet to discover: the theme is a blank to me; but I see immense possibilities in the form I hit upon more or less by chance 2 weeks ago” (*Diary* 14). Prior to writing *Jacob's Room*, Woolf had written three short stories—“The Mark on the Wall” (1917), “Kew Gardens” (1919), and “An Unwritten Novel” (1920)—from which she began to formulate her ideas about the scope of and possibilities for the modern novel. In each of these stories, Woolf experiments with aesthetic representations of consciousness and perception. Though unlike from one another thematically, these stories collectively inaugurate, as it were, Woolf’s literary break from realism’s “unselfconscious practice of mimetic representation” (Jameson 38). To take a singular example, Woolf’s “The Mark on the Wall” features a narrator distracted by “a small round mark, black upon the white wall, about six or seven inches above the mantelpiece” (83). It is not until the last line of this story that the narrator realizes, “Ah, the mark on the wall! It was a snail” (89). Between her initial perception of the “small round mark” on the wall and her comprehension of it appears the narrator’s sporadic, fleeting thoughts and feelings on a random assortment of topics. Most notable in “The Mark on the Wall” is the narrator’s haunting sense that “[n]o, no, nothing is proved, nothing is known” (87). In other words, throughout the short story questions of epistemology beset the narrator as she repeatedly attempts to focalize on the dark spot. From an ethical perspective,

matter of days and with hardly any transition between the two, Europeans who had benefited from the ‘civilizing process’ left their work, their families and their sophisticated, cultivated social life to accept extreme violence” (33; Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker’s italics). In the last scene of *Jacob's Room*, Betty Flanders exclaims, “[s]uch confusion everywhere!” (143), no doubt referring to Jacob’s disorderly room and, more broadly, describing the state of world affairs.

it might be said that the narrator desires to affirm the mark—not just to know it empirically but instead to uphold it as an irreducible, singular entity among others. The anxiety she experiences as a result of the mark’s unintelligibility seems to emanate not from not from anything identifiable but the mark itself. She observes, “to my relief the sight of the mark interrupted the fancy, for it is an old fancy, an automatic fancy, made as a child perhaps” (83). Though the narrator initially feels a sense of relief, she soon expresses distress caused by the mark’s interruption: “I want to think quietly, calmly, spaciouly, never to be interrupted, never to have risen from my chair, to slip easily from one thing to another, without any hostility, or obstacle” (85). It is precisely this interruption that both awakens the narrator from a kind of ethical slumber—“never [wanting] to be interrupted”—and situates her in a position of responsibility. Told from a first-person perspective, “The Mark on the Wall” deliberates on ethical, epistemological, and narrative problems that are later explored more fully in *Jacob’s Room* both at the formal and thematic levels.

In this section, I will show that the priority given to form in *Jacob’s Room* provides a critical context for understanding ethical responsibility. By form, I mean a structure of representation in literary texts, specifically novels (their plots, events, and characters). This structure of representation is none other than writing itself—a topic on which Woolf spent a tremendous amount of energy and ink throughout her career. As its “subject,” the form of *Jacob’s Room* has undoubtedly mobilized many critics to examine Woolf’s textual practices and techniques in the broader context of modernism’s “crisis of representation.” Makiko Minow-Pinkney, for instance, writes that “the novel’s major concern is a sign which remains elusive and enigmatic. The impossibility of reaching a final truth precipitates a suspicion of signification itself, and dissolves the complacent signifier-signified equivalence of Edwardian

realism” (26). Minow-Pinkney’s comment articulates not only a familiar critical refrain that observes modernism’s break with realist conventions. It also implies that the “impossibility of reaching a final truth” is a problem—something of a “crisis” *for* traditional representation. In my view, *Jacob’s Room* explores this “crisis” as always already inherent in representation. Woolf creates a narrator whose anxiety and reticence result from “the duties and responsibilities” associated with a demand for representation. While I agree with Minow-Pinkney that “the novel suggests that a distance has opened between Woolf’s aspirations to totality and what the text actually shows” (30), I also read this “distance” as part of Woolf’s strategy to engage a thinking about responsibility as it relates to representation. As Levinas would write much later, “[a]rt is not a blissful wandering of man who sets out to make something beautiful. Culture and artistic creation are part of the ontological order itself. They are ontological par excellence: they make the understanding of being possible” (“Meaning and Sense” 82). Levinas is suspicious of artistic creation, or representation, in that it “assembles being” (82) at the expense of what is otherwise (the absolute other excluded by traditional philosophy). It might seem that Woolf, in light of my discussion above about “life” and “moments of being,” participates in “assembling” this “ontological order.” However, as I shall attempt to demonstrate, Woolf treads a fine line between onto-epistemological determinacy, on the one hand, and ethical undecidability at the narrative level, on the other hand. The “distance” Minow-Pinkney registers is what I understand as an ethical space, that is, a space opened up by narrative undecidability.

Just at the surface level of *Jacob’s Room*, Woolf’s ubiquitous use of white space enacts a metaphoric shattering of the traditional “practice of mimetic representation,” resulting in narrative gaps, digressions, and *non sequiturs*. The “surviving” fragments of the shattered

narrative, then, comprise and “frame,” however contingently, the ostensible story of Jacob. According to Francesca Kazan, the novel’s “white bordered fragments constitute the primary level of framing, one that is literally, albeit negatively, visible” (703). She reads the primary frame of the novel, or general text, as simultaneously seeking fixity as well as producing “the possibility for a radical site of exchange” (703) between art and life. The general text of the novel, in other words, might be thought of as a great container in which the “descriptive exteriors” (703) or narrative fragments “play,” causing the very frame of the general text to contract, expand, and even at times dissolve into the general text itself. In turn, the white spaces act as gaps that interrupt or silence “the incessant murmur of voices” (703) that dominate the primary frame of the novel. Kazan’s description of *Jacob’s Room’s* form thus raises problems in line with modernism’s deep-rooted suspicion of the “very categories of experience and events themselves” (Jameson 38). First, it asks to what end experience can be represented at all—let alone by the novel. Second, and perhaps more pragmatically, it poses questions about what it means to record events—or “moments of being”—intelligibly and reliably. Much of *Jacob’s Room’s* unintelligibility appears to be result of a tension caused by the narrator’s self-reflexive thinking about representation. Early in the novel, for instance, as she is describing Jacob, the narrator says that “of all the futile occupations this of cataloguing features is the worst. One word is sufficient. But if one cannot find it?” (JR 55). To catalogue means to participate in realism’s movement toward totality, or closure, through the collection and shaping of minutiae into narrative coherence. It is, to be sure, an encyclopedic act in that it strives for epistemological comprehensiveness and universality.

Like many modernist novels, *Jacob’s Room* complicates the possibility of attributing

the responsibility of representation to its “Author-God.” First, Woolf interposes an anonymous narrator between herself and the text (and its readers); second, this same narrator fragments—and is thus made responsible for—the form of the novel’s narrative. In other words, Woolf elides her own authorial presence, thereby evading any personal responsibility for the novel, i.e., the structure it takes or the values it promulgates.¹⁴ In doing so, she effectively deflects or shifts the burden of responsibility to the narrator (and the readers) of *Jacob’s Room*. In *Rich and Strange: Gender, History Modernism*, Marianne DeKoven observes that modernist writers and their narrators—such as those found in the fiction of Joseph Conrad and Kate Chopin—stand in “a relation of irresolvable and continuous oscillation between identification and distance, approval and disapproval, endorsement and repudiation” (25). DeKoven reads this “irresolvable” relational structure as part of a more general strategy by modernists seeking to intentionally produce and sustain irreducible tensions in their texts.¹⁵ Such a strategy is integral to modernism’s repudiation of realism, which aims to reduce reality and history to a set of observable, objective facts that can then be transparently represented in art and literature. By contrast, DeKoven claims, modernism exposes “the impossibility, the ludicrousness, and the danger of attempting to convert the facticity of history into harmless (or transcendent) art” (23). The modernist strategy of disjunction between a writer and a narrator, in other words, does not deny history or reality so much as it refuses “epistemological determinacy” (22). A modernist narrator does not act,

¹⁴ In *Bad Modernisms*, Rebecca Walkowitz addresses “Woolf’s evasion” as socio-political resistance to modernity’s enduring legacies and institutions, especially as they relate to individualism, war, sexuality, and marriage.

¹⁵ DeKoven notes that her reading of modernism “depends on the claim that modernist writing, at the level of form, is characterized most saliently by *sous-rature* (self-cancellation, unresolved contradiction, unsynthesized dialectic)” (22). She appropriates the notion of *sous-rature* from Derrida. Similarly to my own project, then, DeKoven understands both modernism and deconstruction as respective historical moments.

therefore, as a conduit for a writer seeking to determine an objective truth about reality. Rather, he or she functions as an autonomous agent whose own reality, whose own point of view within that reality, shapes and establishes a subjective truth about it. Epistemological indeterminacy thus stems from an uncertainty about textual authority—produced by a disjunction between the writer and narrator—inasmuch as it does from the subjective point of view of an autonomous narrator. The question of responsible representation, therefore, becomes quite difficult to address when both the epistemological and ontological “grounds” of authority are strategically undermined.

To intensify the problems of responsibility and representation in *Jacob's Room*, Woolf has her narrator replicate the strategy of disjunction between herself and Jacob Flanders. However, as is always the case with replication—or repetition—there is a difference. Woolf's narrator takes disjunction a step further by positing multiple characters in her narrative through whom readers learn about Jacob. This move not only disjoints an already unstable narrative structure, it also strains and diffuses authorial reliability. This diffusion of authority does not mean, though, that it has been eliminated or suppressed. Rather, it has been relegated to other “nodes,” or characters, within the framework (or network) constituting the text. In effect, Woolf via the narrator via her characters “horizontalizes” the structures of power and authority in *Jacob's Room*, breaking from the narrative practices of the past which in most instances invest in reliable and omniscient narrators (and who are often synonymous with the Author-Gods of their respective novels). The point I am making, then, is that *Jacob's Room* operates on at least two primary planes: first, in the frame of narrator's consciousness—itsself a representation by Woolf the “Author-God” of the novel; and, second, at the thematic level of Jacob's life, though, in most instances, readers learn about

Jacob through the impressions of other characters—themselves fragmented representations of the narrator. These planes, or layers, of representation exacerbate the epistemological indeterminacy of *Jacob's Room*, both formally and thematically, and further frustrate attempts to “locate” a moral center in the novel. Indeed, the narrator seems quite cognizant of the need or demand for a decidable meaning to her narrative, though she only ever remains at the threshold of making her story determinate: “But no—we must choose. Never was there a harsher necessity! Or one which entails greater pain, more certain disaster; for wherever I seat myself, I die in exile” (53). The threshold at which the narrator remains—the threshold she realizes she cannot cross—suggests an “undecidability” at the core of ethical responsibility. On the one hand, the narrator “must” choose, that is, she must make authorial decisions that will determine the shape and scope of her story about Jacob. On the other hand, if she “sits” or finds herself victim to “some powerful and scrupulous tyrant” of convention—that is, engages in decision-making—she will “die in exile.” In other words, a writer’s responsibility is to represent “life itself”—which, according to Woolf, requires liberating the novel from the constraints of convention. As a result, he or she must embrace writing as an open, on-going process of affirmation rather than as an act aimed at closure, or “death.”

The spatial metaphors I have used to describe the formal structure of *Jacob's Room*—e.g., diffusion, distribution, planes, frame, center, threshold, surface level—bolster claims that distance is one of the constitutive features of the novel’s fragmented narrative structure. While I am not particularly invested in spatial theory in this project, I do recognize that newly emergent theories of space dominated many academic disciplines around the turn of

the twentieth century.¹⁶ In the arts, reconceptualizations of space meant a decisive shift in perception and experience. No longer regarded by artists as linear and empty, space “was a multitude of creations of the seeing eye that varied dramatically with the most minute shifts in point of view” (Kern, *Culture* 142). Objective or “transcendent” points of view that had dominated the arts since the early modern period—refined and perfected by literary realism in the early nineteenth century—lost their hold over artists seeking to innovate form and technique, specifically in painting. The introduction of “a multiplicity of spaces from multiple perspectives” (143) onto the artist’s canvas in the modernist period had the disrupting effect of shattering the harmony and symmetry characteristic of past representations of reality. What is more, the formal conventions used to depict a landscape, a person, or an everyday object underwent transformation: the rules and techniques of the past no longer seemed to apply to new innovations being sought by artists interested in manipulating perspective and distance in their works. As Pericles Lewis explains, experiments in the visual arts “emphasized the extent to which the individual viewer mentally constructs the viewed object out of the primary data of colors, lights, and darkness. While fidelity to visual experience was one aspect of the [artists’] work, another involved a movement [...] away from the represented world and toward a focus on how the work of art itself orders experience, toward form” (51). That Woolf would have been cognizant of these dramatic developments in the visual arts is not in dispute—nor do I wish to explore them more fully now.¹⁷ What continues to interest me here are the effects that Woolf’s own formal experimentation with space and distance—appropriated from aesthetics—have on the

¹⁶ For an historical genealogy of the developments in spatial theory, see Kern, *Culture* 131 – 80.

¹⁷ For a representative critical example examining the influences of the visual arts on Woolf, see Stansky.

structure of and representation in *Jacob's Room*.

In *The Modes of Modern Writing*, David Lodge acutely observes that the novel's "experimentalism is all performed on the chain of combination—the chain of contiguous events that is Jacob's life—and consists mainly in cutting away huge sections of this chain and viewing the remainder from odd angles and perspectives. As readers we are rushed from one brief, fragmentary scene to the next [...] without explanation or preparation" (183). By and large, critics have advanced similar descriptions of the novel's form, suggesting that the gaps in the narrative are both reflective and constitutive of subjective experience. Edward L. Bishop argues that "gaps are essential, and if they are to be truly productive in engaging the audience they must be more than merely visual clues like paragraph indents" ("Mind the Gap: The Spaces in *Jacob's Room*" 305). In Bishop's view, the visual gaps trigger an awareness of the "chasms in everyday life" (314), that is to say, of the breaks and lacuna in consciousness. In a project similar to my own, Rachel Hollander, in "Novel Ethics: Alterity and Form in *Jacob's Room*," posits that "the text itself is itself haunted by the many stories it does not tell, as we are reminded of the limited and partial nature of representation as well as consciousness, novels as well as lives, and of the ethical responsibility to acknowledge these others even as both a reader and writers 'keep straight on'" (54). She claims that *Jacob's Room* "highlights the necessity of reading [the] gaps as the very encounter with otherness that defines the ethics of modernism" (41). Approaching the novel from the moral philosophy of Levinas, Hollander ultimately wants to reassess the importance of *Jacob's Room* to "the disorientations" (42) of postwar England, especially as the novel raises questions about the "ultimate knowability of the other" (42). It would thus seem that critics have undoubtedly been mindful of spatial relationships at the formal level of *Jacob's Room*. Indeed, the novel's

gaps, or spatial arrangements, suggest a rendering of consciousness (the narrator's) cognizant not only of its own limitations but also of its (ir)responsibility as it relates to the representation of "life itself."

Hollander's analysis relies on a particular reading of Levinas that resonates with past criticism of the novel—especially with regard to the ultimate inscrutability of its eponymous character. Yet I am inclined to read the novel in terms of an ethical demand demanded of the narrator. In my view, the spatial configurations of the novel's form necessitate a discussion about Woolfian subjectivity (and the representation thereof) inasmuch as it does a reading of the gaps for/as "encounter[s] with otherness." As Hollander rightly suggests, "the attempt to understand the other in terms of the self only produces more ignorance and confusion" (42)—presumably for the reader as well as for the self. What eludes Hollander's article, as if she takes it for granted, is a discussion that *Jacob's Room* is a representation of the narrator's consciousness. To read the novel on "this side" of subjectivity, that is, to recognize the written narrative as an expression of the narrator's consciousness means a radical rethinking of modernist ethical responsibility. Indeed, it is important to recognize that such a reading continues to depend on writing for its analysis. In this way, then, the narrator can be understood as a "writing subject," or what Sarah Gendron describes in another but related context, as a "self [who] is capable of producing text, but it is in turn subject to being produced by text, even, in the end, reduced to nothing more than text itself" (47).¹⁸ The narrator's textual embodiment, as it were, means she is both an effect and an agent of her

¹⁸ I have appropriated the phrase "writing subject" from Leon S. Roudiez's introduction to *Revolution in Poetic Language* by Julia Kristeva. Gendron also coincidentally uses this phrase without attribution.

narrative.¹⁹ Yet her ambiguous status with regard to the text of her story cannot rightly be characterized as occupying a position inside or outside it.²⁰ As I suggested above, the narrator is structurally posited in between Woolf the Author-God and the textual object that is the novel. Thus, like Lawrence's Lou Witt, the narrator does not "quite belong." Yet it would be a mistake to read the narrator's "dislocation" in terms of a pure disarticulation of her subjectivity. In other words, as a writing subject, the narrator is in the act of simultaneously constituting and disarticulating her "self" at the same time as she is attempting to respond to the demand of representation (what becomes the basis of her narrative).

WOOLFIAN SUBJECTIVITY

Critics have not been remiss in addressing the topic of subjectivity as it relates to writing in Woolf's fiction. For example, as Tony E. Jackson claims, Woolf "recognizes that the essential problem for the writer lies not simply in failing to get the right words to represent what has been 'mirrored' in the mind, but rather in being compelled to use words to begin with [...]. In other words, Woolf's conception of the problem of narrative desire recognizes the ontological problem of linguistic being" (120). Appropriating Lacanian psychoanalysis to inform her discussion, Jackson argues that writing is a strategy employed

¹⁹ As Edward L. Bishop has observed, "[t]he narrator flaunt[s] her power, flaunt[s] her status not as a mimetic character but as a textual construct so that the book is less about the possibility of knowing another person [...] than it is about the making of a person in art. *Jacob's Room* is self-conscious not just in its construction of Jacob but also in its construction of the narrator" ("The Subject in *Jacob's Room*" 163). "Flaunting" might be overstating it, given the narrative form's crepuscularity and fragmentation—its undecidability.

²⁰ Wall has made the same observation: Woolf "creates a narrator who is inside and outside the text; who possesses omniscience, but whose efforts to understand the world are troubled by her limited perspective; and whose shift from narrator- to character-focalizer reveals the arbitrariness of the world which has destroyed both Jacob and her authority" (319).

by a subject to overcome what she rightly understands as a fundamental aporia at the core of subjectivity. This aporia, she suggests, is created by the necessary albeit violent division between “life” and the instruments of representation used to represent it. To employ these “instruments of violence” (120), as Jackson terms them, serves to temporarily resolve the effects of this violence that constitutes subjectivity. That is, writing “sutures” the gap between a subject and the “life” from which he or she has been violently torn by the Symbolic order. Yet, ironically, it is the very same set of “instruments” that “always tears apart the metaphoric closure it sews up” (120). Put another way, while writing promises to fulfill a writing subject’s desire to achieve a kind of non-metaphorized, fully realized identity, it can only do so through metaphoric and metonymic devices. The writing subject, therefore, finds him- or herself in perpetual cycle of dissolution and constitution *ad infinitum*. Likewise, in “Waves and Fragments: Linguistic Construction as Subject Formation in Virginia Woolf,” Julie Vandivere writes, “Woolf’s investigation of subject construction manifests itself primarily in linguistic terms, leading her to use constructs of language to critique traditional assumptions about unified selves and patriarchal systems” (221). Interested in the ways Woolf seeks to subvert traditional notions of the self through language games, Vandivere explores *The Waves* (1931) and *Between the Acts* (1941) for their complex grammatical and syntactical constructions. Finally, Ruth Porritt asserts that Woolf’s work moves “beyond” the dislocated, ontolinguistic subject in poststructural philosophy. She argues, contrary to Derrida, that there is no necessary, logical correspondence between the linguistic sign and the reality it represents—“between the word ‘I’ and a real ‘self’” (334). Instead, she advances a Wittgensteinian account of language in which one “shift[s] one’s focus toward studying the implicit sanctions and enabling conventions operative in the shared meaning of ‘ordinary

language” (334). In this way, she claims, “[m]eaning is no longer simply the function of a linguistic system, nor a structure grounded on a metaphysical foundation, nor a test of logical truth conditions, nor an epistemological description of how the mind links up with the world” (334). As a result, questions and problems with regard to meaning—“shared meaning”—are effectively reoriented toward a pluralist “We,” replete with competing ethical and political claims, and away from a hegemonic “I.” In other words, for Porritt, Woolf’s fiction exemplifies a dialogical multiplicity of voices—that is, voices from the exterior world of the other internalized by a subject—constituting subjectivity. And, in this way, Woolf’s conception of subjectivity “surpasses” Derrida’s presumption of a unitary, Cartesian subject in need of deconstruction. The Woolfian subject, therefore, in Porritt’s view, enables a critique of subjectivity not on the basis of “the unitary presence of self-identity” (335) but rather on an internal difference of otherness, on the interplay of other voices.

The narrator of *Jacob’s Room*, as a writing subject, might rightly be regarded in anyone of the critical registers discussed above. Certainly, she fits the profile of Jackson’s “divided” subject inasmuch as she is the interpolated source and reservoir of the narrative’s multiple voices. In my view, the narrator’s subjectivity is constituted by her responsibility to affirm the life of Jacob Flanders, however difficult or impossible this responsibility proves to be. As Christopher Reed explains, “[w]e are left at the end of *Jacob’s Room* unable to *know* or *comprehend* its central figure—and it is significant that both terms carry a double sense of intellectual understanding and physical possession or inclusion, a dynamic underlined in the narrative [...]” (28). In response to Reed, I would only add that Jacob’s inscrutability as both a lack of “intellectual understanding and physical possession” accounts for the main source of difficulty of the novel (for both the reader and the narrator). Yet I would also suggest

Jacob's "evasion" from the narrator's gaze attests to an aesthetic (writing) that resonates with Levinasian responsibility. In his essay "Meaning and Sense," Levinas argues that all expression, that is, representation is animated by "the fundamental movement" (94) toward an other who does not belong to the order of Being. He writes:

[...] expression, before being a celebration of being, is a relationship with him to whom I express the expression, and whose presence is already required for my cultural gesture of expression to be produced. The other who faces me is not included in the totality of being expressed. He arises behind every assembling of being as he to whom I express what I express. I find myself again facing another. He is neither a cultural signification nor a simple given. He is *sense* primordially, for he gives sense to expression itself, for it is only by him that a phenomenon as a meaning is, of itself, introduced to being" (95).²¹

It has been said that for Levinas "Western thinking is a *representational* thinking" (96 note 66). In other words, representation renders present that which is absent or lacks signification. Put another way, representation imposes or confers meaning—on an object, on a situation, on a person—when perception fails, as it always and necessarily must. In conferring meaning, representation "betrays" an other by a process of integrating an other into the order of the Same, which is to say into the world of cognition and understanding. While Levinas is thus critical of representation itself, he readily admits it cannot be avoided. In fact, he states that

²¹ From this perspective, in his study of narrative ethics, Adam Zachary Newton has asserted that "[s]ubjectivity arrives, so to speak, in the form of a responsibility toward an Other which no one else can undertake; if, from this perspective, selfhood always remains in some way incomplete, it is because ethical responsibility continually outstrips one's capacity to assume it" (12). Echoing Newton, Melba Cuddy-Keane states, in the volume *Modernism and Theory*, that ethics "is predicated on some notion of compulsion, some concept of obligation, some demand for response in the way we live" (208).

the “I before the other is infinitely responsible” (97), which means that the conscious subject cannot escape his or her duty to an other. For, an other “calls” and puts a subject into question. Responsibility, as Levinas defines it, “is to be sure neither blind, nor amnesiac; but across all the movements of thought in which it extends *it is borne by an extreme urgency, or more exactly, coincides with it*” (98; my emphasis).

It is as if the narrator of *Jacob's Room* seeks, through her narrative, to satisfy an “irrecusable” demand of an other without its betrayal to the order of representation. Thus, unlike many other modernist narrators, Woolf's writing subject is responding to a demand whose source cannot be textually identified. Joseph Conrad's Marlow in *Lord Jim* (1900), for instance, attests to the extraordinary events resulting from the unnecessary abandonment of the *Patna*. And Jenny, in Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* (1918), recounts the story of Chris Baldry's unexpected arrival from the Western Front: “[d]isregarding the national interest and everything except the keen prehensile gesture of our hearts towards him, I wanted to snatch my cousin Christopher from the wars and seal him in this green pleasantness his wife and I now looked upon” (5). Yet what motivates the narrator of *Jacob's Room* to relate the life of Jacob Flanders remains a highly speculative enterprise. Nowhere in the novel does she explicitly foreground or announce her narrative purpose. And yet, the “extreme urgency” of her responsibility coincides with occasion of her narrative. It might be that the narrator wants to refrain from the same kind of moralizing that many modernists found symptomatic of Victorian and Edwardian literature. Indeed, the closest the reader comes to an understanding of the narrator's motives occurs in Chapter IX when she facetiously explains that “[t]he flesh and blood of the future depends entirely upon six young men. And as Jacob was one of them, no doubt he looked a little regal and pompous as he

turned his page [...]” (85). Such hyperbole seems to be an effect of exasperation more than a critique of Jacob himself. In the opening pages of the novel, the narrator explains that “Jacob is such a handful; so obstinate already” (6). It is this obstinacy—of locating and representing Jacob—that disrupts the narrator, that is, “calls” her into question as she is the subject of a demand to represent the novel’s eponymous character.

MODERNIST ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY

To read *Jacob’s Room*, then, on “this side” of subjectivity does not mean or imply a final surrender to the exigencies of onto-epistemological understanding. What I have labored to demonstrate is the “terrible experience”—exemplified by the structural qualities of the novel—involved with modernist narrative decision-making. The narrator as an interpolated formal device allows Woolf to deflect and diffuse any “ground” upon which one might attribute narrative responsibility as it relates to an ultimate moral vision of reality. In other words, Woolf’s obfuscation of responsibility is deliberate in that such obfuscation disrupts realism’s claim to a pure mimetic representation of reality. In effect, Woolf neutralizes the allegorical dimensions of the realist novel and thus undermines authorial omniscience. Woolf’s radical experimentation with the form of the novel further exemplifies an abandonment of past, realist narrative techniques that strove for coherence and totality. Indeed, *Jacob’s Room* reminds us that all narratives, especially those like biographies and history, are “the proper stuff of fiction.” That is to say, narrative is ultimately human, all too human, to coin a phrase. In a remarkable set of early passages in *Jacob’s Room*, the narrator—as though channeling Woolf the critical essayist—defines the problem frustrating her

narrative's coherence. Recognizing that no pure articulation of Jacob is possible, that each person has a different perspective and social position, she states:

It seems that men and women are equally at fault. It seems that profound, impartial, and absolutely just opinion of our fellow-creatures is utterly unknown. Either we are men, or we are women. Either we are cold, or we are sentimental. Either we are young, or growing old. In any case life is but a procession of shadows, and God knows why it is that we embrace them so eagerly, and see them depart with such anguish, being shadows. And why, if this an much more than this is true, why are we just surprised in the window corner by a sudden vision that the young man in the chair is of all things in the world the most real, the most solid, the best known to us—why indeed? For the moment after we know nothing about him.

Such is the manner of our seeing. Such is the conditions of our love.

(55 – 56)

“God knows” precisely because God does not “think” categorically the way “men and women” do. Division, classification, combination, separation—these are realist acts of understanding and narration. For, however much we seek illumination as a pure articulation of something or someone, “the moment after we know nothing about him.” Only God, says Levinas, is “capable of an unlimited perception, [as] there would be no meaning distinct from the reality perceived; understanding would be equivalent to perceiving” (“Meaning and Sense” 75). But observe that the narrator does not abdicate her responsibility given the finitude and partiality of her human perception. As if an addendum to her thought, she experiences a self-reflective moment in which she accepts the *injustive* of representation—

that it must necessarily “betray” that who seems to be “the most real, the most solid, the best known to us.” She says that “the manner of our seeing” and “the conditions of our love” are shaped by the very limitations of perception that also enable our knowledge of an other. It might be said, then, that representation is a double-bind that instigates ethical decision-making.

Yet however much we may heed the narrator’s call to decide, to engage in the act of making meaning à la representation, we cannot finally do so with certainty. With neither the Author-God nor the narrator on which to rely, an irresolvable lacuna opens up between us and the novel. For instance, the scene at the Opera House, in which the narrator endeavors to describe “two thousand hearts in the semi-darkness” (52), results in exasperation and, ultimately, failure. Overwhelmed by an imperative, by a responsibility to account for the singularity of each of the attendees of Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde*, the narrator stutters—“and...and...” (53)—before relenting on such a task. Next, in an act of self-reflexivity, the narrator comes to fully recognize the impossibility but also the necessity in making decisions. She says,

In short, the observer is choked with observations. Only to prevent us from being submerged by chaos, nature and society between them have arranged a system of classification which is simplicity itself; stall, boxes, amphitheatre, gallery. The moulds are filled nightly. There is no need to distinguish details. But the difficulty remains—one has to choose. (53)

Perhaps initially unbeknownst to the narrator, such a “system of classification” does not necessarily reduce difficulty in choosing, it only amplifies the “terrible experience” of such responsibility. For, in effect, what the narrator describes as a “system” closely resembles the

formal technique of *mise en abyme*. From stall to box to amphitheatre to gallery, the observer (narrator, reader, operagoer) finds him- or herself contained and delimited by reduplicating images and structures that ultimately defer the observer's ability to locate meaning in ever-expanding limits. The apparent promise of such "systems," so to speak, is "simplicity itself," that is, the possibility of transparent decision-making. Yet, as the narrator divulges, the capacity to decide—"to distinguish details"—becomes ever more difficult as she employs the very "arrangement" both "nature and society" have colluded in producing. Indeed, it might be that the very intelligibility of the world is guaranteed by epistemological structures (systems) that both produce it and disclose it to consciousness. Interesting, it seems, then, that the narrator stops short of the world in her list of "moulds," as though she is aware that the world somehow exceeds the structures upon which "we" rely to make choices. Put another way, "difficulty remains" in making choices precisely because choices themselves result in certain structural configurations, or ways of knowing, that foreclose other epistemological possibilities and, as it were, access to the world itself in its totality. Thus, the narrator's difficulty in faithfully attesting to Jacob's life and his world becomes increasingly agonizing and impossible. The aforementioned stuttering by the narrator is not, therefore, an abdication of her responsibility but precisely the moment whereby the "life itself" is divided into disparate "moments of being." In other words, "and...and..." reveals both the ethical necessity of and futility in attempting to account for "everything." No doubt, that the narrator "chokes" suspends her narration, renders it inert, as much as it bespeaks the exigency of narrative itself: "one has to choose." Alternatively, then, choking can also be thought as a sort of deliberate refusal to choose in spite of the imperative to do so. Put another way, the narrator's choking arrests or blocks her capacity to "inhale" singularity so

that the singular is not appropriated by the narrator's consciousness and thus transformed into one of realism's universal types.

The sudden narrative shift from pure description of the audience in the Opera House to thoughts on the act of observation itself might be considered a kind of textual gag reflex such that the narrator goes through the "terrible experience" of undecidability. The narrator repeats her injunction to choose and follows up with a description of the consequences of doing so, "But no—we must choose. Never was there a harsher necessity! or one which entails greater pain, more certain disaster; for wherever I seat myself, I die in exile" (53). The consequences of the narrator's reflections here must not be overlooked. At stake is not only narration itself—as a responsible act of attestation resulting from a demand—but also the source of narration, the writing subject. For, embedded in the "harsh necessity" of choosing is "life itself," that is, without decision ("wherever I seat myself") the narrator herself would "die." However, only a subject constituted by a "system of différance," that is, by writing could experience such a death. For, what keeps the narrator "alive" is precisely the dialectical "play" of differences that result from decision-making—in this case, in choosing the very words of her narrative. Thus, the narrator imagines the possibilities her story could take—"Whittaker in his lodging-house; Lady Charles at the Manor" (53)—before resuming with Jacob and Richard Bonamy, the "young man with a Wellington nose, who had occupied a seven-and-sixpenny seat" (53), at the opera. Curiously, a break of white space separates the narrator's musings on her narrative's possibilities and then her continuation with the story of Jacob. Whereas I had previously suggested the novel's white space functions to produce textual uncertainty, here it seems to represent both hesitation and deliberation by the narrator, like "and...and..." does before it. Perhaps more

radically, the textual break appears to function metonymically as the absence of a subject without the “play” of *différance*, that is, without writing. Much like the opening scene of the novel, when Mrs. Flanders momentarily suspends her letter to Barfoot, the narrator’s deferral opens up an interval or a gap that means not only the “death” of the narrator but also, as result, of “life itself.”

This space between life and death—between articulation and disarticulation—propels the writing subject to continually search and represent “life.” She asks, “[e]very face, every shop, bedroom window, public-house, and dark square is a picture feverishly turned—in search of what? It is the same with books. What do we seek through millions of pages? Still hopefully turning the pages—oh, here is Jacob’s room” (77). The answer to the narrator’s question, though not readily available or obvious to her, seems to be some sense of “self”—a “self” in spite of being divided and sundered by the enormity of “life,” by the ethical demand demanded of her as a writing subject. Jacob Flanders, for the narrator, is the focal point—her “centre” and “magnet” (75)—that, without any real explanation, locates and gives direction to her narrative. As Peter Brooks argues, “with the advent of Modernism came an era of suspicion toward plot, engendered perhaps by an overelaboration of and overdependence on plot in the nineteenth century. If we cannot do without plots, we nonetheless feel uneasy about them, and feel obliged to show up their arbitrariness, to parody their mechanisms while admitting our dependence on them” (7). The narrator’s uneasiness in representing Jacob is not so much a political protest against or parodic mocking of the “logic of narrative discourse [as] the organizing dynamic of a specific mode of human understanding” (7). It is rather the narrator’s ethical experience of affirming Jacob without “condemning” him to the binarism of realist thought. In other words, as much as

she might be impelled by convention to render a total, comprehensive, and exhaustive biography of Jacob, she resists for the sake of justice which she knows cannot be attained.

At the end of Chapter III, for instance, she explains that whatever cannot be known about an other, even as familiar as he or she might be, remains “mostly a matter of guess work”:

But though all this [the date of the Durrants’ party] may very well be true—so Jacob thought and spoke—so he crossed his legs—filled his pipe—sipped his whisky, and once looked at his pocket book, rumpling his hair as he did so, there remains over something which can never be conveyed to a second person save Jacob himself. Moreover, part of this is not Jacob but Richard Bonamy—the room; the market carts; the hour; the very moment of history. Then consider the effect of sex—how between man and woman it hangs wavy, tremulous, so that here’s a valley, there’s a peak, when in truth, perhaps, all’s as flat as my hand. Even the exact words get the wrong accent on them. But something is always impelling one to hum vibrating, like the hawk moth, at the mouth of the cavern of mystery, endowing Jacob Flanders with all sorts of qualities he had not at all—for, though, certainly he sat talking to Bonamy, half of what he said was too dull to repeat; much unintelligible (about unknown people and Parliament); what remains is mostly a matter of guesswork. Yet over him we hang vibrating. (JR 56 – 57)

The narrator, describing Jacob’s actions, recognizes the necessary limitations of representation imposed upon her by nothing other than the fact that she is not Jacob (or anyone else, for that matter). The ethical problem with which she is confronted has to do

with her responsibility, her obligation to represent Jacob as a fully-rounded character. In other words, realist convention would dictate that she furnish Jacob with “all sorts of qualities he had not all.” In short, resistance to such convention would mean, at the very least, “preserving uncertainty and ambiguity in order to act in ethical ways” (Cuddy-Keane 210). At worst, it might lead to the “death” of narrative—that is, to the end of “one of the largest categories or systems of understanding that we use in our negotiations with reality” (Brooks xi)—inasmuch as the narrator herself.

Chapter Three

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“Ach, the horror of responsibility!”:
Proximity and Ethical Subjectivity in D. H. Lawrence’s *Aaron’s Rod*

“In proximity is heard a command come as though
from an immemorial past, which was never present,
began in no freedom.”

—Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*

INTRODUCTION

In many ways, D. H. Lawrence’s *Aaron’s Rod* (1922) seems to run counter to the exploration of otherness and narrative representation in the previous chapter.¹ The novel’s mixed messages about ethics in the wake of the Great War—particularly its emphasis on individuality as a mode of ethical being—appear to undercut modernist efforts at decentering the moral humanist subject. And, despite its oft-acknowledged “disconnected and aimless structure,” the novel strikes the reader as an example of nineteenth-century realism rather than a radical modernist experiment in narrative form (Chalk 63). For not only does Lawrence deploy a stable, omniscient narrator “with broad vision, a singular authoritative voice, and seemingly unlimited knowledge” to take command of the story (Kern, *Culture* 179). He also eschews first-person narration in favor of objective representation; and he employs several mimetic devices to both represent and drive forward the events of the novel. However, notwithstanding Lawrence’s use of realist conventions or the novel’s ethical undecidability (or, precisely because of their conjunction in the book), *Aaron’s Rod* affords a distinct and productive examination of modernist ethics.² It does so by

¹ D. H. Lawrence, *Aaron’s Rod* (New York: Penguin, 1995) 3 – 299. I cite the novel by page number parenthetically throughout the chapter.

² To recall, Cuddy-Keane claims that “modernist ethics meets the question of how to live ethically in a questionable world with a paradoxical conjunction of metaphysical uncertainty and individuality answerability” (210).

explicitly investigating the difficulty of self-responsibility in a world shattered by war and transformed by socio-political upheaval. In this way, the novel manifests many concerns about “a world dominated by technology, standardization, the decay of community, mass society, and vulgarization” (Taylor 456). And it jointly expresses uncertainty about the human subject’s ability to liberate itself from the confines and routinization of domestic life. Additionally, the novel stages a series of disruptive encounters between its eponymous protagonist and multiple others who interfere with his desire to recover his authentic self. Aaron vigorously endeavors to break free from the immediate social forces comprising his identity. Yet he dismayingly comes to realize that such forces have only been reconstituted by and through his relationships with Lilly Rawdon, Josephine Ford, the Bricknells, the Franks, and the Marchesa.

Since the “ethical turn” in literary studies over a decade ago, Lawrence’s writing has become increasingly significant to humanities scholars and cultural theorists investigating difference and otherness. Indeed, Lawrence’s extensive literary, critical, and autobiographical works have experienced a revitalization after a long period of tepid reception and marked decline in the academy.³ Though conventionally read as attempting to fashion an egoistic subjectivity à la Nietzsche and Heidegger, I argue that Lawrence’s writing engages in upending the unified subject and, in turn, posits a subject attuned to the alterity of the other. Although many of Lawrence’s novels have already been productively paired with and interpreted through postmodern ethical theories, critics have largely ignored *Aaron’s Rod* because of its aloof and self-interested protagonist in addition to its weak plot.⁴ With the

³ Such decline is undoubtedly related to Lawrence’s “strident and ugly” treatment of women (Pinkney 111).

⁴ See Sargent and Watson; Asher; Turner.

exception of Margret Gunnarsdottir-Campion's recent article on *St. Mawr*, however, a noticeable paucity of criticism on the issue of responsibility exists within Lawrence studies. The discussion in the following pages centers around the experience of responsibility at the level of character. Articulated by Aaron not only in terms of a burden but as "horror," responsibility in the novel I argue evokes undecidability—that is, as an ethical mode of responding to and relating with others. On the one hand, Aaron seeks to affirm his singularity apart from the world's "debased sociality" of the world (Vine xxiii). On the other hand, as Stephen Vine has suggested, "Lawrence's novel overturns the ties of the world in an attempt to make them over again" (xxiii). In the context of the novel, I will show that "horror" resonates less with a general fear of the unknown than it does with a profound anxiety caused by the call to responsibility.

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My reading of *Aaron's Rod* draws upon the work of Emmanuel Levinas, particularly his account of proximity. Levinas's writing on ethics and responsibility has had a profound impact on contemporary ethical approaches to modernist fiction. Specifically, his radical theory of alterity has caused literary critics to reexamine the representation of subjectivity in the novel. For Levinas identifies the human subject as irreversibly and primordially responsible *for* the other—even if it means being accused of and persecuted for the other's actions. Moreover, he goes so far as to claim that the constitution and identity of the subject originates in the other's quiddity, or its givenness. In other words, the subject "exists" only as a result of the other's call to responsibility—a responsibility that precedes and determines the subject as such. More so, this call cannot be ignored; nor can the subject escape its duty to respond to the other. From the beginning, then, the subject finds itself exposed,

vulnerable, and predisposed to the other in a way that fundamentally disrupts the subject's faith in its unfettered and autonomous self. In *Otherwise than Being*, for instance, Levinas asserts that "[t]he more I return to myself, the more I divest myself, under the traumatic effect of persecution, of my freedom as a constituted, willful, imperialist subject, the more I discover myself to be responsible; the more just I am, the more guilty I am. I am 'in myself' through others" (112). As a "hostage" of the other, the subject thus emerges as an ethical agent—one who must be prepared to even give up its life for the other. "The other demands everything of the 'I,'" explains Annika Thiem in her analysis of Levinas. She continues: "on the level of this dyadic encounter [between the subject and the other], there is no room for negotiation, for one's own plans, for the inconvenience of the other's call, not even for taking interest in one's own survival" (109). Fundamentally dispossessed of autonomy and originarity, the ethical subject becomes overwhelmed by its responsibility for the other to the degree that it has no time to reflect on its bounded relationship to the other. Such "extreme passivity" does not render the subject inert but rather susceptible to the other's call (119).

The subject's very condition of possibility thus involves in the ineluctable encounter with the other. This encounter presupposes approach and contact—what Levinas describes as proximity. However, Levinas argues that proximity cannot lead to or result in an intelligibility of the other: for the other must remain absolutely and wholly other if the subject's responsiveness can be exacted responsibly. The impossibility of this task, that is, the subject's responsibility of responding without possessing knowledge of the other becomes the foundation of Levinasian ethics. In other words, an asymmetrical and non-reciprocal relationship (proximity) between the subject and the absolute other forms the basis of all ethical encounters for Levinas. He writes that proximity "is an immediacy older

than the abstractness of nature. Nor is it fusion; it is contact with the other. To be in contact is neither to invest the other and annul his alterity, nor to suppress myself in the other. In contact itself the touching and the touched separate, as though the touched moved off, was always already other, did not have anything in common with me” (*Otherwise* 86). The disunity, the broken contact, between the subject and the other causes the subject to suffer; and it awakens in the subject an understanding that it has arrived too late to respond. As a result, in the subject’s realization of its belatedness, “the core of what is identity” dissolves and waylays the subject so much so that it becomes obsessed with the other (89). This obsession—a “constant pressure of the Other on me and in me” (Haar 99)—traumatizes the subject because it “both internally and externally is directly exposed to an evil that [it] can, must, or wants to suffer from the Other” (100).

While the conceptions of alterity and subjectivity in *Aaron’s Rod* do not appear in such radical terms as those formulated by Levinas, the novel does cultivate a similar ethics that upends the protagonist’s claims to autonomy and self-mastery. Indeed, Aaron’s self-interested actions throughout the novel are countered by several unintended (if not unavoidable) meetings with unknown others. This chapter demonstrates that Aaron steadily undergoes a transformation in consciousness whereby he no longer acts from an illusory position of freedom but instead realizes that he must respond to the unequivocal demands made by the other.⁵ By considering *Aaron’s Rod* alongside Levinas, I thus seek to reverse a longstanding critical commonplace that regards the novel as advocating a return to self-

⁵ The “other” in this instance and throughout this chapter signifies both a singular other as well as a multiplicity of others. As Michel Haar has shown, “Levinas’s ‘concept’ of Other, in its own way, tries to force into a strange kind of sameness several different and apparently contradictory senses of otherness” (95). Thus, the other can be “the other human being taken as universal” inasmuch as it can refer to an abstraction such as “the idea of the Infinite in me” or “the Face [...], also double—both absolutely singular and close; overwhelmingly high and far, near and unreachable” (96). In *Aaron’s Rod*, the other is realized primarily as “the concrete presence of some other person,” though foreigners and strange voices permeate the novel (95).

mastery. My analysis shows that the ethical conflict subtending the novel stems from Aaron's inner turmoil to decide between reconstituting his self-identity and responding to others. These competing demands, present from the beginning of the novel, reflect "[t]he structure of the experience of alterity" in that Aaron cannot escape the immediacy of the other (Lingis xxv). In other words, the proximity of the other—"[t]his closeness without distance" (xxv)—disrupts the Aaron's self-rule so much so that he finds himself divested of authenticity. As a result, the very concept of responsibility itself changes as the novel unfolds: it shifts from a self-serving egocentricism to a solicitude for the other. Thus by the end of the novel, Aaron's quest to find himself—that is, his attempt to extricate himself from all contact with others and their demands—results in failure in the sense that he comes to terms with the idea that community with and love for others must form the basis of a new mode of life.

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Aaron's Rod has often been read as "a paradigmatic quest narrative" that sketches the life of a dissatisfied working-class man in search of a way of life beyond his immediate social, political, and historical milieu (Papayanis 102). Abandoning his family and home at the story's beginning on Christmas Eve 1918, Aaron lights out for London from Beldover, a fictional mining town in the industrial East Midlands, and eventually travels to different locales throughout Italy. The plot focuses on Aaron's various encounters with others to whom he forms no enduring attachment—perhaps with the exception his of acquaintance-turned-friend Rawdon Lilly. To this end, Aaron breaks off two romantic relationships he has with Josephine Ford and the Marchesa, respectively, because they threaten to obstruct his "greatest need" to be alone (265). Aaron is thus presented as something of an exile and

dispossessed wanderer in search of renewal and emotional vitality. However, his desire for complete and unfettered freedom—what he perceives as necessary for his spiritual revitalization—is continually undercut by the many chance meetings he has with other characters during his travels. By the conclusion of the novel, despite his unbending persistence to achieve the single life, Aaron has learned that if freedom can be realized it cannot be sustained in any lasting way. Moreover, he realizes that he cannot escape his duties and obligations to others, that is, whether those commitments pertain to his family or others in general. In the end, Aaron comes to recognize that he must confront the burden of responsibility from which he has so endeavored to abdicate himself.

The ethical ambiguity at the core of the novel, therefore, does not originate in the narrator so much as emanates from Aaron's ambivalence about his responsibility. Indeed, the story of *Aaron's Rod* is refracted through a narrative voice that does not waver in or reveal anxiety about its objective representation of the events constituting the novel. However, the narrator does not go to great lengths to explain Aaron's motivations for leaving his family: Aaron's disappearance simply happens without build up, background, or elucidation. More so, Aaron behaves and makes decisions throughout the novel that, on the surface, appear to be irresponsible in the context of traditional morality. His abandonment of home and career fly in the face bourgeois ideology. And his accomplishments mean nothing to him save a normative, routinized life that has sapped him of his emotional vitality and spiritual wholeness. In fact, Lawrence himself sensed that *Aaron's Rod* would be unpopular because Aaron's irresponsibility challenges various value systems comprising the modern world. As he explains in a letter a friend in 1921, "I am finishing Aaron. And you won't like it *at all*. Instead of bringing him nearer to heaven, in leaps and bounds, he's

misbehaving and putting ten fingers to his nose at everything. Damn heaven. Damn holiness. Damn Nirvana. Damn it all” (*Letters* 206). This description of Aaron gives perhaps too much credit to his roguishness, but it does imply that Aaron’s engagement with responsibility involves a break with traditional morality. For it might be suggested that Aaron’s “misbehaving” represents at the level of plot a renunciation of certain socio-historical modes of existence—particularly, marriage, romantic love, and national identity—disposed to alienating the singular self. In fact, “breaking” is a dominant leitmotif in the novel: a Christmas tree ornament from Aaron’s childhood breaks in the novel’s first chapter; Aaron breaks off his marriage and then later his aforementioned romantic encounters; and his flute, the symbol of his desired singleness, breaks in the book’s penultimate chapter, “The Broken Rod.” Additionally, Aaron’s expatriation from England early in the novel can be described as a breaking away, and the setting of the novel in the postwar years can be thought of as a break from the past.

These examples of “breaking,” however, evoke only negative connotations. It could be argued that “breaking” also carries with it the possibility of renewal achieved in part through the attainment of a “new and responsible consciousness” based on sympathy and love for the other (151). But to attain a new way of thinking and sympathetic caring requires more than simply wishing or even realizing it in some epiphanic, life-altering moment. Hence Aaron’s ethical ambiguity: beset by difficult choices that affect both himself and the people he meets, Aaron experiences undecidability on multiple occasions. His crisis of being, in other words, results from an uncertainty surrounding his singularity in the novel. In other words, as Vine has argued, Aaron’s undecidability about whether to pursue the “life single” or the “life double” haunts and harries his actions (*Aaron’s Rod* 128). For the inescapability of

“the circumambient universe,” to borrow a phrase from Lawrence’s “Morality and the Novel” (1925), disrupts Aaron’s commitment to a life unaffected by others and their own individual exploits (173). Indeed, individualism seems to be under indictment in the novel as the root of the modern’s world’s “debased sociality” inasmuch as the cause of the death and destruction of war. However, ethical disengagement does not seem to be a viable solution to remaking the world. Nor does returning to “a merely egoistic fulfillment of our needs” (Haar 102). Aaron’s naiveté at the beginning of the novel inheres in his belief that not only can the “life single” be achieved but that it also might be the grounds of a new social order. His initial escape from home has the inadvertent consequence of thrusting him into a new set of relations that trigger in him the sense that “we are directly and primordially affected by the Other” (102). To be affected by the other means to be “undone” by the other (Butler 19). And this undoing, this dispossession of self, signals the possibility of a “collective responsibility” for those who have been marginalized, silenced, even expunged by violence (23). To put it plainly: Aaron’s sense of self must be broken, as it were, in order for a new ethical mode of life to come into place.

NARRATIVE STRUCTURE IN *AARON’S ROD*

The structure of *Aaron’s Rod* provides an understanding of the ethical ambiguity at work in the novel. For despite its use of many nineteenth-century narrative conventions, *Aaron’s Rod* incorporates multiple genres into its narrative structure. What has thus been the source of critical rebuke—the novel’s formal undecidability—can be reexamined in light of questions related to the ethics of representation. Indeed, past critics have read *Aaron’s Rod* as one of Lawrence’s weaker novels precisely because of its lack of a consistent form and its

meandering plotline. This common critical refrain is echoed by Marguerite Beede-Howe, in *The Art of the Self in D. H. Lawrence*, who asserts that the text is a formless medley that “jumble[s] essay, novel, diary and travelogue” (79). Lawrence’s “denial of form” in *Aaron’s Rod*, she infers, plays into the novel’s “general tenor of rejection and withdrawal” (80). However, it might be argued that the novel’s apparent formlessness suggests yet another intentional break—this time with conventional standards of narrative representation. In fact, many of Lawrence’s essays written around the same time as *Aaron’s Rod* probe the possibility of representation to go beyond the adherence to rigid formal techniques. For example, in the simply titled “The Novel” (1925), Lawrence contends that “[t]he novel is the highest form of human expression so far attained. Why? Because it is so incapable of the absolute” (179). This comment hardly seems compatible with “rejection and withdrawal” but instead signals a search for a new means of novelistic expression. Indeed, while Lawrence reflects an uneasiness with “the absolute,” he certainly does not reject the significance of form as necessary medium to a story’s meaning. For a closer inspection of *Aaron’s Rod* reveals its organization according to a series of spatio-geographic paradigms. Comprised of twenty-one separate chapters, the novel can be unevenly divided into four sections. The first section of the novel (chapters I – IV) takes place in the fictional town Beldover and concerns Aaron’s exodus from home. The next seven chapters (V – XI) constitute the second and longest section of *Aaron’s Rod*, primarily taking place in London and concluding with Aaron’s final and failed return to his family. The remaining ten chapters are split between Aaron’s time in Novara (chapters XII – XV) and then Florence (XVI – XXI). It is helpful to read these sections strategies of de-familiarization devised to chart Aaron’s transformation in ethical consciousness in parallel relation to his journey south to Italy.

Through de-familiarization, or the transformative process of self-dispossession, the subject (Aaron) turns away from the comfort of its surroundings in order to answer the call to responsibility for the other. Aaron's trajectory in the novel, from the familiarity of home in the first chapter to Florence—where, in the final chapter, he dreams that “he was in a country with which he was not acquainted” (286)—maps directly onto his shift from the insularity of the self to the exteriority of the other.

Additionally, the mode of narration in *Aaron's Rod* relies much less on a detached and unreliable narrator than does *Jacob's Room*. In fact, save for once, Lawrence's narrator remains an impalpable and inconspicuous entity in the novel. However, it is worth pointing out that the narrator of *Aaron's Rod* does contrast himself with the novel's protagonist. In a significant chapter of the book, “*Wie es Ihnen Gefällt*” (“As You Like It”), the narrator asserts that his rendering of Aaron is “but a translation of the man. He would speak in music. I speak with words” (AR 164). This narrative intrusion is not nearly as pronounced as the narrator's overt contemplation of responsible representation in *Jacob's Room*. Yet, it does bespeak a self-reflexivity that is worth bearing in mind as we turn to the events of *Aaron's Rod*. For even at the level of narrative representation, it might be said that the narrator is seeking a method of novelistic expression compatible with an ethics that both recognizes and respects the other without making the other intelligible. For instance, when the narrator states that “[i]f I, as a word-user, must translate [Aaron's] deep conscious vibrations into finite words, that is my business,” he is implicitly admitting to his own search for responsible representation—much like Woolf's narrator. This is why the narrator insists that “[t]hese words are my own affair” (164). He wants to take responsibility for the text, that is, for the other of his own narration. Further, the narrator distances himself from his protagonist in

order to focus the reader's emphasis on the events of the novel so as to engage questions of responsibility at the level of plot. This strategy deflects the reader's attention away from problems related to aesthetics in order to address the painful experience of responsibility itself.

THE CALL TO RESPONSIBILITY

Not only does the structure of *Aaron's Rod* exhibit ethical ambiguity, but so too does Aaron's motivations for his quest. His desire for absolute freedom precipitates his flight from home into the broader, turbulent world. And yet he soon discovers after deserting his family that he cannot fully disentangle himself from relations with others. In this way, Aaron's search for total autonomy results in failure. In other words, his decision to abandon his home, family, and nation only resituates him in the company of others. As a result, Aaron comes to gradually realize and accept that he cannot escape his responsibility: he recognizes that only through human solidarity, understood in terms of proximity to the other, can he affirm his self. Aaron's journey from rural England to London and then to Italy thus represents a transformation in ethical consciousness. For he is continuously besieged and bombarded by encounters with others who effectively disallow him to be by himself. In fact, as the subsequent discussion shows, one of the three times Aaron is depicted as completely alone for an extended period ironically proves to be the low point of his quest—when he falls ill from a flu epidemic. Only through Lilly's treatment and care—arguably one of the central moments in the novel—does Aaron recover. That is, on the verge of death, Aaron's recuperation is made possible by and through the help of another. However, Aaron's ethical

conversion is depicted as a painful and difficult process—one that involves not only failure but also an acceptance that the unfettered, free self exists only as an illusion or dream.

Aaron's transformation begins in the space of the normative home. The novel opens with a basic description of Aaron's life and household. He has an established job in the mining industry, a committed wife and two loving daughters, and a house he himself had built in 1906. On the surface, Aaron's life appears conventional if not successful for a working-class man. Yet the "unspeakably familiar" dynamic of his home life fuels his near indifference to everything around him (11), including his family and the "scrupulously clean and perfect" house (7). Added to his general disinterest is an acute weariness with his marriage, which has all but collapsed into antagonism and bickering. His wife, for instance, scolds Aaron for returning home late from work on Christmas Eve and for giving more time and attention to "a lot of ignorant colliers" than to his family (8). She claims that "[i]f you care for your wife and children half of what you care about your Union, you'd be a lot better pleased in the end" (8). Here and elsewhere throughout the opening chapter of the novel, Aaron's wife prods at his commitment to work, charging him with being too self-involved and with playing politics. She states, "what I should like to see is a man that has thought for others, and isn't all self and politics" (8).⁶ Despite Lottie's well-intentioned criticism of Aaron's behavior the general tenor of the normative household has become intolerable for Aaron.⁷ It has turned into a suffocating space of domestic obligation and traditional

⁶ Lottie's rebuke, which Aaron disregards with "a blank look" (8), serves to inscribe him in a hackneyed situation—one which characterizes women as tyrannically critical of men for their shortcomings as well as their self-interestedness. But her criticism also ironically becomes the argument of the novel: that care for the other (ethics) must supersede the interests of the self (ontology).

⁷ A few chapters later, Lottie sheds greater light about her marriage with Aaron: "I'm sure it was death to live with him, he seemed to kill everything off inside you. He was a man you couldn't quarrel with, and get it over. Quiet—quiet in his tempers, and selfish through and through. I've lived with him twelve years—I know what it

responsibility. As a result, he feels both alienated and trapped by his roles as husband and father.

The felt sense of change and liberation in the immediate postwar period also contributes to Aaron's dual experience of alienation and entrapment. The novel opens to the following information: "the War was over, and there was a sense of relief that was almost a new menace. A man felt the violence of the nightmare released now into the general air" (5). The "new menace" facing postwar Britain in the novel involves resuming life in the wake of widespread death and mass destruction. However, returning to a state of normalcy—"the changeless pleasantness of it all"—seems inconceivable to Aaron (12). This problem is clearly illustrated when Aaron's daughters discover and accidentally break a Christmas tree ornament, the titular "blue ball" of the first chapter, from Aaron's boyhood. Examining a broken piece, Aaron realizes that this formerly indestructible "little globe of hardened glass" is in fact something quite susceptible to change and demise (10). The narrator states, "[i]t was fine and thin and hard, lined with pure silver, brilliant. He looked at it closely. So—this was what it was. And this was the end of it. He felt the curious soft explosion of its breaking still in his ears. He threw the pieces in the fire" (11). Aaron's indifference to the broken ornament, a symbol of the past, registers his inability to cope with the unthinkable possibilities and problems already confronting Britain nearly a month after the war's end. On the one hand, the end of the war would mean the reintegration of men from the front and thus renewed contact with those who had survived. On the other hand, it would cause great disruption because the past, like the ornament, had been shattered and could no longer be

is. Killing! You don't know what he was" (43). Given her perspective, it seems their unsettled marriage had always been a problem due to Aaron's self-interest.

reclaimed. Indeed, “[t]he war was over, nothing was changed. Yet everything was changed” (11). Combined, the lack of historical continuity and the uncertainty of the future produce in Aaron an anxiety that not only add to his decision to desert his home. They also occasion his attempt to cut off all ties with others.

It may seem counterintuitive to claim, however, that Aaron’s desertion and search for solitude are acts of responsibility. Except two times early and briefly in the novel, Aaron never returns home, and his refusal to do so—or even to provide a satisfactory explanation of why he abandons his family—poses challenges to an understanding of his motivations.⁸ I contend that though deplorable, such a decision to escape from home is necessary to realizing what the narrator later describes as Aaron’s “new responsibility”—a responsibility to which he is called by the other (151). For if the home initially is a space of convention and routine, it seems to undergo a conceptual transformation from a hermetically sealed space to a site opened up to the exterior world. The narrator renders this change as a warping, or break, in the home’s foundation: “[t]he doors were shut close, but there was a draught, because of the settling of the mines under the house made the doors not fit” (7). What presumably should be a delimited space closed off to the exterior world cannot fully

⁸ The same criticism might be leveled at the narrator of *Aaron’s Rod*. For unlike his nineteenth-century predecessors, he does not offer much in the way of helping the reader’s understanding of Aaron’s decisions. Lawrence’s narrator simply presents Aaron as a stubborn and selfish figure. What is more, the narrator does not undergo moments of crisis similar to Woolf’s narrator when depicting Aaron. Later in the novel, other characters who Aaron encounters interrogate him about his rejection of home, though they never quite receive sufficient answers to their questions—that is, answers that make sense in the context of traditional morality. It might thus be worth considering why neither Lawrence nor his narrator embraces his responsibility when representing the events of the novel. This displacement of responsibility seems to be a particular problem for modernists in general who, like the writers under consideration in this dissertation, sought new modes of representation while also wrestling with ethical questions about identity and the other. In other words, their ambivalence about responsible representation—about how to represent the self while also giving voice to otherness—produced myriad formal strategies that have often been described by critics as ambiguous and vague. To what end vagueness contributes to or can be read as part of the ethical project of the modernism, even in a text like *Aaron’s Rod* that shares many affinities with nineteenth-century novels, demonstrates the undecidability of modernist writers to fully embrace the other. On vagueness and modernism, see Quigley.

extricate itself—just like Aaron cannot totally withdraw or turn away from his responsibility to others. The narrator reinforces this point when he registers Aaron’s apprehension of diverse noises outside the home. The narrator states, “[a]s [Aaron] sat he was physically aware of the sounds of the night: the bubbling of water in the boiler, the faint sound of the gas, the sudden crying of the baby in the next room, then noises outside, distant boys shouting, distant rags of carols, fragments of voice of men. The whole country was roused and excited” (12). This description, pivoting on “then,” leads Aaron’s consciousness from the familiarity of the home to the unknown exteriority of the teeming, exciting, dangerous world beyond. Twice repeated is “distant,” suggesting in its repetition Aaron’s mind pausing to consider a strange and foreign, perhaps even unknowable, community—the fragments of which register both its remote distance and its proximity.

To this end, the proximity of the other both inaugurates Aaron’s calling to responsibility as well as causes his inner conflict and anxiety. The “noisiness” of the opening scene inside the home—the voices of his daughters, the shattering of the boyhood ornament, the scolding by Lottie—is amplified by similar disruptive sounds (the carolers’ singing) from the outside. Together, these voices seem to Aaron inescapable. And they disrupt the potential of a unitary self that the privacy, security, and tranquility of the home ought to guarantee. In this way, it might be said that without any real knowledge or experience of the world outside his mining community, Aaron is being provoked or called by someone or something to responsibility. Here, the ethical language of Levinas helps to better clarify this provocation. In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas claims that responsibility is “a response to a non-thematizable provocation and thus a non-vocation, a trauma” (12). In other words, the subject of responsibility answers to an absolutely unknown entity—an

other beyond or outside any available systems of representation. In fact, as Levinas claims, “the first movement of responsibility could not consist in awaiting nor even in welcoming the other [...], but consists in obeying this order [to respond] before it is formulated” (13). What engenders Aaron’s call to responsibility originates from the outside, that is, from a “non-thematizable” place or source other than Aaron himself. The multiplicity of voices, inside and outside the home, wrest Aaron not only from the “unspeakably familiar” but also arouse him from a state of non-thinking that such familiarity and routine cause.

For instance, as Aaron begins to shave, “[h]e held his soapy brush suspended for a minute. They [the carolers outside] called this singing! His mind flitted back to early carol music. Then again he heard the vocal violence” (11). In this brief scene, Aaron is temporarily provoked and “awakened” through the disruptive singing of the carolers. At the narrative level, the narrator uses free indirect speech (“They called this singing!”) to indicate the disruption of Aaron’s shaving routine. Of particular note, the passage moves from objective third-person narration to the indirect account of Aaron’s thought then to the source of disruption (the “vocal violence” outside). Although a minor event in the context of the chapter, this incident disrupts of Aaron’s consciousness and achieves something of a mental contact with the other. Alone in the home’s scullery, Aaron becomes momentarily conscious of that which exists beyond himself. Though such consciousness of the other does not in itself constitute responsibility, his momentary acknowledgement does signal a faint beckoning to break free from the conditions of domestic familiarity that prevent Aaron from consciously answering the call to responsibility. Indeed, as he decamps from home, he appears to have no clear-cut itinerary, only surrendering to a remote and perilous world. The narrator relates this distant place in the following way: “[t]he hollow dark countryside re-

echoed like a shell with *shouts and calls and excited voices*. Restlessness and nervous excitement, nervous hilarity were in the air. There was a sense of electric surcharge everywhere, frictional, a neurasthenic haste for excitement” (15; my emphasis). This description hints not only at the possibility of contact with but also at the danger of encountering the other. For the first line ambiguously renders the remoteness of the terrain as a structure without substance—a hopeful symbol of openness and possibility. In literal terms, then, “shell” probably refers to the outer housing of a crustacean that bends and redirects sounds applied to it. In this way, the “re-echoed” voices suggest proximity, care, and responsibility: it reciprocates the utterance of the speaking subject. However, “shell” also may connote the casing of an artillery projectile or bomb—not an unlikely case given the postwar setting of the novel. In this scenario, the “shouts can calls and excited voices” resonate with fear and intensity of trench warfare. Thus, the narrator registers the “dark hollow countryside” as both a mixed site of contact and perilousness, suggesting that responsibility cannot be taken without the risk of one’s life.

If Aaron does experience any real danger in the novel, it occurs once he has left his family and escaped the confines of England. Initially, the threat to Aaron’s self takes the form of affective and physical paralysis. In the wake of his departure from home, for instance, Aaron encounters others who effectively leave him in a state of emotional exhaustion. His first meeting takes place at “Royal Oak,” a local pub outside Beldover where he intensely engages questions about the common good, the relationship between education and money, and Indian self-governance. This early scene in the novel presages Aaron’s ethical transformation and newfound responsibility for the other. For Aaron’s dialogue with the Indian doctor, the Jewish keeper, and other frequenters of the tavern force him to take

and defend positions on social and political issues that in turn require him to think. In effect, Aaron has stumbled into a dynamic, cosmopolitan space that aggravates his quest for autonomy, that is, for freedom from having to think, care, or debate about anyone but himself. The narrator points to Aaron's ambivalence about being in the company of these strangers as a "terrible obstinacy" (23). On the one hand, the tavern's proprietress attempts to seduce him, to which Aaron initially takes an interest: "[h]e loved so to luxuriate, like a cat, in the presence of a violent woman" (22). Though laced with sexual undertones, the landlady's affection toward Aaron can be read symbolically as her attempt to connect with him—to establish an intersubjective relationship beyond psycho-sexual terms. The intimacy she offers him even through physical contact has the potential to undermine the ontological distinctions between self and other. On the other hand, despite his "luxuriating," Aaron revolts against her advances. He not only becomes enraged by her "great fierce warmth of her presence," animated in part by her intoxicated state (22). But he also feels uneasy by the fact that he cannot reconcile himself to solidarity with her and the others in the bar.

Aaron's subsequent encounter occurs when he happens upon a small circle of well-off bohemians located at Shottle House, "a pleasant square house, rather old, with shrubberies and lawns" located at the other end of the lane from the tavern (26). This scene, which occupies the entirety of the novel's third chapter, extends Aaron's emotional decline. It begins with an extended introduction of Jim Bricknell, Robert Cunningham, his wife Julia (sister to Jim), Josephine Ford, and Cyril Scott. The chapter opens with a warning to readers not to overlook the significance of these characters to Aaron's development, such that "[i]t is remarkable how many odd or extraordinary people there are in England" (26). In fact, the narrator defers Aaron's reintroduction into the narrative in order to linger over this group of

characters within the context of their own separate existence. In other words, unlike the diverse yet collectively engaged patrons of Royal Oak, the narrator represents these characters in their own individual state of emotional entropy. Huddled together in the house's drawing-room, they self-consciously engage in conversation about how to pass the time. Indeed, their all-too human characterization underscores not their extraordinariness but rather what the narrator echoes as the "continual complaints of the stodgy dullness of the English" (26). In this way, the narrator recasts the unspeakable familiarity of Aaron's home as an entropic space of ennui and self-conscious inaction at Shottle House. At the same time, the narrator sets up a simple division between the dynamism of the tavern and the degeneracy of the bourgeois home. Like a proverbial fork-in-the-road, the choice for Aaron seems clear—either he can return to the routine of the domestic sphere or he can seek out new possibilities with unknown others. At this early stage of the novel, however, he seems unprepared to make such a monumental decision—he lacks the emotional strength to commit either way. Indeed, his decision to abandon his home and England takes a few chapters to develop, as Aaron vacillates between his responsibility to his family and his need to establish a new existence.

Aaron's undecidability, however, contributes greatly to his ethical transformation. His absence in the first half of "Shottle House" effectively reverses the perspective from which the reader, through the Bricknells' viewpoint, sees him. For instance, when Aaron does reenter the story, the narrator describes him twelve times as "the stranger" (36 – 38). The significance of this early designation cannot be overlooked, for it results in his "othering," that is, he himself experiences what it means to be an outsider. Aaron's escape from home, then, not only means that he repudiates the familiarity and comfort of home,

but it also signals his unconscious willingness to be undone by the other. More so, this experience has the added effect of disrupting the existing state of affairs wherever Aaron goes because he constantly struggles against conventional standards and morals. In other words, as a potential ethical subject, he often upends the harmony and tranquility of the home: this is true not only of his own home and Shottle House but also later when he disembarks for Novara and visits the Franks. It thus seems that despite Aaron's own determination to attain "perfected singleness," he can neither help being an outsider nor avoid coming into contact with others (128). His immersion into the world effectively dissolves his claims to selfhood, rendering him uncertain about how to proceed. In other words, he struggles to come to terms with the fact that he can neither return home nor complete his quest to produce a new, authentic self beyond the jurisdiction of the other.

Adding to Aaron's emotional exhaustion, the narrator renders Aaron's struggle in terms of physical displacement and marginalization. When Aaron is first espied by Josephine, for example, he is standing "on the edge of the light, smilingly staring at the scene, like a boy out of place, but stubbornly keeping his ground" (34). The narrator's depiction of Aaron on "the edge" and "out of place" is then compounded by the fact that, after entering Shottle House, "[h]e did not wish to be with these people, and yet, mechanically, he stayed" (35). It would seem that Aaron's immobility in this moment reflects a brief attainment of solitude wherein he makes contact with others but remains at bay—that is, until the Bricknells invite him into their home for a glass of whiskey. Here the narrator reintegrates his protagonist into a domestic space where, like at home, he becomes the object of scrutiny and scorn. For the group morally condemns Aaron for deserting his wife and children, especially on the eve of Christmas, with Josephine going so far as to thrice repeat,

“You’re wrong” (37). While Aaron’s refusal to return home elicits such outrage, it also signals his break with conventional morality, that is, with prescribed duties associated with domestic responsibility. Thus, Aaron’s physical displacement coincides with his metaphorical status as an immoral outsider—as an other. This stage of Aaron’s ethical transformation in exacerbates the ambiguity of the novel. To what end Aaron’s self can finally be attained seems possible yet also appears undermined by the various encounters he has with the likes of the Royal Oak patrons and the Bricknells.

If the reader at times seems uncertain about Aaron’s motivations, so too do they evade even Aaron’s understanding. His incapacity to disclose to other characters in the novel why he has left his family and career contributes to the novel’s general ambiguity. In other words, at the narrative level, Aaron himself does not recognize or acknowledge his calling to responsibility. Thus, his inner conflict becomes for him a source of frustration and emotional torment, which only fuels his paralysis. This problem plays out when he reencounters the group of bohemians in Bloomsbury. Here, Aaron still refuses to provide a coherent or satisfactory reason for leaving home. In “The Dark Square Garden” chapter, for instance, Josephine once again raises the issue while at dinner with Aaron, who explains that he left his family “[f]or no particular reason” and that “I don’t know what I wanted” (66). These reasons do not suffice for Josephine and she raises perhaps the central rebuttal in the novel to Aaron’s decision: “[b]ut we *must* know: especially when other people will be hurt” (66; my italics). Josephine’s youth and naiveté are exposed in the next moment as she mishears Aaron’s desire “to loose myself” as wanting to find love (66). As John Worthen explains it, “Josephine, because it is her nature, assumes that the answer must be to do with love, either lost or sought” (122). Her recourse to a romanticized moral ideology—revealed

in her desire “to get married and feel sure of something”—help her to rationalize Aaron’s actions (67). Yet Aaron repeatedly deflects and dodges Josephine’s queries, fueling her desire “to pierce this amiable aloofness of his” (*Aaron’s Rod* 66). Her own insistence that “I must think and feel” (67) counteracts Aaron’s more indifferent “I don’t want to *care*, when care isn’t in me. And I’m not going to be forced into it” (66). Not fully understanding his calling to responsibility at that point, Aaron can only explain to himself and to others his actions through the register of apathy.

Yet Josephine’s criticism of Aaron takes on a certain irony, and it provides Aaron with a momentary glimpse of his ethical calling. For when Aaron later asks her whether she really would welcome “a bloody revolution,” she responds: “[y]es, indeed I would. I would give everything to be in it. I’d give heaven and earth for a great big upheaval—and then darkness” (68). Yet it would seem that Josephine does not quite understand that revolution—political, social, and moral—would really mean “[p]ulling the house down” (60). In other words, Aaron has revolted against bourgeois life by leaving his family and career. He acknowledges, however briefly, that his decisions do have significance beyond the immediate act of selfishness. By contrast, Josephine’s idealized notion of “a great big upheaval” in which “[y]ou’d feel you were doing something” only seems to reinforce an ideology that might be upended in the wake of such an upheaval (60). Moreover, her own conviction that revolution necessarily means action also implies an ethical transformation in consciousness if not a radical reconfiguration of human relationships. In other words, If Josephine truly desires revolution, she must be prepared to accept Aaron’s actions beyond

talk, that is, without moral grounds or theoretical justification.⁹ In this exchange between Aaron and the younger Josephine, the profundity of Aaron's ongoing transformation comes to light. Likened to a revolution, his call to responsibility signals a radically new ethics—an ethics that disrupts and precipitates a break from traditional moral ideology. And though he and other characters view his actions as primarily irresponsible, Aaron senses that what he has done cannot be avoided.

This possibility of a new ethics poses a threat to other characters' worldviews and moral ideologies as well. Later in the novel, another cross-examination similar to Josephine's associates Aaron's immorality with unlawful conduct. While a guest of Sir William and Lady Franks in Novara, the Major questions Aaron's behavior, calling it “almost *criminal* selfishness” (145; my emphasis). He point-blankly asks Aaron, “upon what grounds did you abandon your family?” as though to elicit a coherent, rational explanation that would correspond to an established moral system (145). Subsequently, exhausted by Aaron's resistance, the Major adds, “[m]ere caprice?” to Aaron's rather pithy response: “[t]here were no grounds [...]. No, there weren't. I just left them” (145). The overt institutional authority connoted by both the Major's title and affiliation, not to mention the company he keeps (including a Colonel), suggests that Aaron's indictment by various characters in the novel has now shifted paradigmatically. The naïve, romantic moral conceptions of love invoked by Josephine to criticize Aaron now instead bear the weight and language of legal censure that

⁹ This scene in the novel recalls Nietzsche's “God is dead” aphorism in which the very “death” of God seems lost on the townsfolk in the marketplace who continue to act and behave as if God still exists as a moral foundation for human action. Through the figure of the “madman,” the aphorism tacitly expresses the view that responsibility lies, has always lied, not with God (as a moral center) but with humanity itself, by itself. The point is that Josephine, like most people, espouses desire for change yet rigidly adheres to her principles and beliefs once they are called into question or disrupted. And Aaron himself, like the wiser madman who has arrived “too early” to disseminate the news of God's “death” among the townsfolk, represents a force of ethical disruption to those demanding an explanation for his decisions and actions.

attempts to bring him back within the space and control of the “law,” of the national and cultural home that is Britain. In other words, this collective accusation—“[m]ay *we* ask you another question, Mr. Sisson?”—instances the invocation of power (145; my emphasis). More so, this division between the Major’s cohort and Aaron once again evokes Aaron’s otherness. It demonstrates that Aaron, as an outsider, has the potential to disrupt the relationships between even the most established persons and relations of power. At one point, the Major even uses “catechism” to describe the scene—absurdly elevating Aaron’s mock trial to a question of religio-moral salvation. Aaron, amused, defiantly says he awaits the Major’s “judgment afterwards” (145).

Most notably, the scene turns on whether or not Aaron provides financial support for his family *in absentia*. Here the weight of the censure of Aaron’s desertion (of family, of home, of nation) also becomes quite palpable through Lady Franks’s condemnation of Aaron’s actions. The matronly woman has the final word on Aaron’s “wicked state of mind,” and she leads Aaron to the false conclusion that reconciliation with his family is still possible (146). She states: “I would like to frighten you indeed, so that you went back humbly to your wife and family” (146). But Aaron remains obstinate though ambiguous about why he left: “[i]t would *have* to be a big fright then, I assure you,” though, prior to this, he suggests that “I didn’t leave off loving her [Lottie]—not as far as I know” (146). Echoing Josephine in the early episode at Shottle House, Lady Franks asks Aaron, “[t]hen why are you so *wrong*, so wrong in your behavior?” (147). All Aaron can muster in response is, “I suppose I’ve got to have my bout out: and when it’s out, I can alter” (147). Neither the Major’s nor Lady Franks’s interrogation of Aaron leads them to a transparent, acceptable answer—at least one that conforms to the Franks’ sense of British propriety espoused in

their reaction to Aaron. In fact, Lady Franks goes so far as to insult Aaron outright, revealing the tension of this confrontation: “It seems to me altogether cold and unmanly and inhuman. Thank goodness my experience of a man has been different” (147). If Aaron presents a threat to British society, he does so by striking at the core of their moral sensibilities.

At odds with his compatriots, Aaron finally does reveal that his election to responsibility is beyond even his own control or comprehension. He suggests, “[i]t happened to me: as birth happened to me once—and death will happen. It was a sort of death too: or a sort of birth. But as undeniable as either. And without any more grounds” (145). The “it” in this remark refers to Aaron’s capriciousness, that is, what others view as his unpredictability and rebelliousness. Sir William, fascinated by “[t]he glistening youth of Aaron” who “seemed to calmly contradict his own wealth and honours” (144), can only perplexedly describe Aaron’s election as a “[n]atural event” (145). In other words, he can only render Aaron’s call to responsibility as something which defies understanding but also disrupts the natural order of the world. Elevating the seriousness that Aaron poses, the Major in a mocking way equates Aaron’s decision to an “almost unique event” (146). This description, despite its derisiveness, echoes Derrida’s view of “the event”—a concept worth a brief discussion because it helps to illuminate the profundity of Aaron’s call. In *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, Derrida states, “the event is first of all *that which* I do not first of all comprehend. Better, the event is first of all that I do not comprehend. It consists in *that, that* I do not comprehend: *that which* I do not comprehend and first of all *that* I do not comprehend, the fact that I do not comprehend: my comprehension” (90). In Derrida’s view, the event exceeds all registers, even the event as such. In this way, it transcends In

this light, Aaron's calling to responsibility can be seen to upend his if not everyone else's understanding. Aaron's ethical transformation, in other words, exceeds categorization and knowledge.

Indeed, Josephine, the Major, Sir William, and Lady Franks—each attempts to interpret Aaron's decision to leave home in a recognizable, determinate, knowable manner, even though Aaron insists that the choice to leave was out of his control. It might be that Aaron's decision can be likened to "the event" since both seem to be a kind of breach or rupture within the modality of the normative world. "For a decision to be a decision," Derrida explains, "it must be made by the other in myself, which doesn't exonerate me from responsibility. On the contrary, I am passive in a decision, because as soon as I am active, as soon as 'I' am the master of my decision, I am claiming that I know what to do and that everything depends on my knowledge, which, in turn, cancels the decision" (Derrida, "Hospitality" 67). That the decision is "made by the other in myself" can only mean that, like "the event," it is "what comes and, in coming, comes to surprise me, to surprise and to suspend comprehension" (*Philosophy in a Time of Terror* 90). In this sense, then, Aaron not only disrupts or contradicts world order, he deconstructs the normative world itself. To put it another way, Aaron's call to responsibility denaturalizes what is not natural. Thus, concepts like marriage, family, home, nation, individualism fracture as a result of his decision to abscond from traditional morality. Even responsibility itself, that is, responsibility for the other seems to be exploded by Aaron in the sense that his response can only be his alone. In other words, no one else can take the place of Aaron's responsibility: he must, in the Levinasian sense, act alone.

In *Writing in the Margins: The Ethics of Expatriation from Lawrence to Ondaatje*, Marilyn Adler Papayanis reads Aaron's actions in light of an ethics of expatriation. She claims that Aaron's "artistic and emotional needs exceed the fulfillments of bourgeois domesticity, the life of production and reproduction that modernity has embraced as its cultural dominant" (103). In this way, her critique echoes Taylor's view that modernist writers such as Lawrence rejected the routinization and standardization of modern life—and it views expatriation primarily in terms of an ethics of reclaiming identity. Moreover, she argues that the normative home fails to satisfy Aaron's desire for the "world in its diversity," that is, the world of *life* absent its stifling moral restrictions and domestic obligations (106). Papayanis concludes that "Aaron's ethical project [...] is not indebted to principles of equality and universal brotherhood and this puts him at odds with the democratic institutions of home" (105). As a result, she suggests, as I have done, that Aaron "is in the thrall of a calling," but one that, means a "solitary quest for spiritual salvation" or "self-artistry"(108). Thus, Aaron's call to responsibility, insofar as Papaynis understands it in the novel, is really "an existential project of self-fashioning" (108).

No doubt Aaron disrupts the "democratic institutions of home," but it seems less the case that *Aaron's Rod* necessarily jettisons the "principles of equality and universal brotherhood." Rather, the novel actively toys with them only to transform them into something more transcendent than simple abstractions. Further, it has been shown above that Aaron's quest appears less a solitary endeavor than it does an integration into the world. Indeed, his journey may be considered as singular in the sense that his responsibility is his alone. Moreover, if by "universal brotherhood" one entertains a utopian fantasy in which equality and social justice outweigh the pettiness of quotidian desire, which thereby pit

individuals against other individuals, then, no, the novel does not champion such a notion. However, if “universal brotherhood” is defined and understood in the context of proximity, then *Aaron’s Rod* affords a view of brotherhood in the form of responsibility. Everywhere Aaron travels and everyone he encounters results in this disruption of his self through proximity with others. Yet despite the often fraught exchanges and accusatory dialogue with others, Aaron forges intersubjective relationships that prevent his total disengagement from the world. By contrast, Papayanis’s reading of the novel operates on a different assumption that “in Lawrence diversity often runs afoul of the concrete Other, recognition of whom, in intersubjective terms, is problematic” (103). For example, Papayanis reads Aaron’s encounter at “Royal Oak” as proceeding from an “ominously racial note” (103) that prefigures his disconnectedness and thus unwillingness to heed “the demand of the Other” (109).

It would seem that in Papayanis’s view, then, any authentic ethical encounter can only be rooted in “the intersubjective relations between self and Other” (110). By intersubjectivity, she seems to assume, in the words of Simon Critchley, “a relation of equality, symmetry, and reciprocity” (*Infinitely Demanding* 59). Yet as Critchley points out, “[w]hen I am within the relation, then the other is not my equal and my responsibility towards them is infinite” (60). This “non-dialectical model of intersubjectivity” disrupts normative conceptions of equality and universal brotherhood, but it does not dispense with them altogether (60). In this light, equality might be understood on the basis of “an exorbitant demand of infinite responsibility” that burdens all subjects as such (40). In other words, all subjects are equal in their “infinite responsibility” to and for the other. Yet responsibility is never identical: it occurs in different contexts and from disparate demands. Here it might be said that the shape, or form, of the subject’s nonidentical responsibility

need not always adhere to prescribed notions of “intersubjective relations” such as those invoked by Papayanis. Thus, at the core of Aaron’s quest for solitude is in fact a calling to responsibility, a contradiction that teases out ethical experience as one that “divides and sunders the subject”—what Aaron later regards as a horror-inducing experience (40).

The asymmetrical relationship with the other thus threatens the possibility of a unitary self. This problem emerges as early as Aaron’s desertion from home when he appears overwhelmed and beset by the exorbitance of his responsibility. For instance, the narrator relates Aaron’s initial reaction to a frenzied crowd precisely in terms of ambivalence and undecidability:

When he got into the main street, the only street of shops, it was crowded. There seemed to have been some violent but quiet contest, a subdued fight, going on all afternoon and evening: people struggling to buy things, to get things. Money was spent like water, there was a frenzy of money-spending. Though the necessities of life were in abundance, still the people struggled in frenzy for cheese, sweets, raisins, pork-stuff, even for flowers and holly, all of which were scarce, and for toys and knick-knacks, which were sold out. There was a wild grumbling, but a deep satisfaction in the fight was witnessed whenever a tram-car stopped, or when it heaved its way into sight. Then the struggle to mount on board become desperate and savage but stimulating. Souls surcharged with hostility found some outlet for their feelings. (15)

This passage of postwar consumerism is noteworthy for a number of reasons. To begin, it receives no immediate critical response whatsoever, neither by the narrator nor by Aaron.

The passage simply hangs in a kind of hermeneutic suspension—a particular modernist ethical strategy that refrains from imposing meaning on the text. Both the narrator and his protagonist withhold their critique of the citizens' impetuous behavior—“[m]oney was spent like water”—and their “struggling to buy things.” In effect, the narrator keeps Aaron at a distance from the ugliness and violence of democratic-capitalist culture in order to contrast his singularity with the mass identity of the crowd. More importantly, he places him in a non-dialectical relationship with the crowd. Indeed, Aaron finds himself in proximity with the townspeople but he does not engage them. His ethical mode of being thus appear mixed in the sense that he both retains his identity but that identity only exists in relation to others. Unwittingly, Aaron glimpses his responsibility to the other—a responsibility that will require him to engage even the most violent and disruptive alterity.

Perhaps the most concrete manifestation of the violent other in *Aaron's Rod* is women. In *D. H. Lawrence and Modernism*, Tony Pinkney has shown that the various romantic encounters Aaron has with women—including his wife—suffocate him to the point of near death. Pinkney claims that the “fear of women in Lawrence is always at least shot through with other, equally fundamental anxieties, and can even at times become a kind of mask or code-word for these latter” (111). The anxieties Pinkney has in mind refer to the rise of mass-culture and the Great War, though he does concede that “Aaron's sexual relations [can] be seen as a code for the study of an entire new culture—one which can no longer be comfortably labeled in the old class terms” (112). In other words, because Aaron's relationships often cut across the class divide—both Josephine and the Marchesa belong to the middle- and upper-classes, respectively—the possibility of a “new culture” of women comes into view in the novel. However, this view can only be sustained for so long until it

collapses, usually due to a breakdown in Aaron's health and emotional vitality. For instance, after having slept with Josephine, Aaron contracts the flu that in turn leads to his lapse in consciousness. This breakdown occurs at the beginning of "Low-water Mark," which curiously presents Aaron without name or mention. It seems that his illness, brought on by his physical contact with a woman, threatens not only to bring him to the edge of death but also to erase his identity. He explains to Lilly that "I gave in to her—and afterwards I cried, thinking of Lottie and the children. I felt my heart break, you know. And that's what did it. I should have been all right if I hadn't given in to her—" (89). This moment, though certainly not an encouraging endorsement of women, serves to facilitate Aaron's ethical transformation. For his physical contact with the other not only does him near-irreparable harm, but it also reveals to him that ethical relationships must be founded on a new set of terms or codes. Thus sex, as familiar structure/code between a man and a woman, violates the other—appropriates and transforms the other into a familiar figure. Ironically, Aaron's violation of Josephine, as it were, leads to his own physical and emotional demise.

ESCAPE

The term "escape" has been used in the discussion above to describe Aaron's desertion or flight from home. As such, escape in the novel has been presented as a radical disruption of the normative home inasmuch as a kind of noncritical awareness of Aaron's call to responsibility, at least throughout the first half of the novel. However, it seems that his escape often coincides with his encounter with the other. This point is significant because, as Levinas explains, "[e]scaping is the quest for the marvelous, which is liable to break up the somnolence of our bourgeois existence" (*On Escape* 53). In *Aaron's Rod*, this

“quest for the marvelous” might be thought in terms of fleeing home in order to answer the call to responsibility. On the surface, Aaron’s refusal to justify his actions seems to other characters in the novel to be a self-serving abdication of his duty—not only to his family but also to account for his wrongdoings. Further, it appears that he refuses to engage in acts of self-reflexivity epitomized by modernism’s more well-known characters who might have provided a kind of internal confession or apology in the same situation. However, this refusal does not mean that Aaron totally refrains from revealing emotional state. For it is the narrator himself who often provides access to Aaron’s thoughts and feelings. As noted before, the narrator’s depiction of Aaron is “a translation of the man.” Thus, even the act of giving readers access to an authorial justification of Aaron’s actions further complicates the issue of Aaron’s apparent lack of contrition. The point is that in order “to break up the somnolence of our bourgeois existence,” the ethical subject must act in ways that challenge and confuse preestablished conceptual and moral lines of understanding.

The urgency of Aaron’s escape appears all the more necessary when, in “The Pillar of Salt,” he returns home in order to retrieve his handbag containing his flute and piccolo. The physical enervation and nausea he experiences as he reenters the domestic space, described in the passage below, reaches to levels of existential despair and forlornness:

He sat down on the sofa by the window. The energy had suddenly left all limbs. He sat with his head sunk, listening. The familiar room the familiar voice of his wife and children—he felt weak as if he were dying. He felt weak like a drowning man who acquiesces in the waters. His strength was gone, and he was sinking back. He would sink back to it all, float henceforth like a drowned man. (41)

Similar experiences occur in the novel when Aaron, having spent “a pleasant month” seaside after the music season, returns to London and then to the Beldover again (122). The narrator explains that “[q]ualms and emotions concerning his family overcame him” (122), that “[t]he place, the home, at once fascinated and revolted him” (122), that “[w]ild emotions attacked his heart” (123), that “[h]e was filled with a violent conflict of tenderness, like a sickness” (123), that “[c]urious sensations and emotions went through the man’s frame, seeming to destroy him” (123). The emotional pain Aaron experiences in breaking from the familiarity of his home life is seemingly designed to underscore the asymmetry and seriousness of his call to responsibility. Critchley explains, “[e]thical experience is heteronomous, my autonomy is called into question by the fact of the other’s demand, by the appeal that comes from their face and lays me under an obligation that is not of my choosing” (*Infinitely Demanding* 56).

The terms on which Aaron’s responsibility has been radicalized exceed even the understanding of those who know him best. For instance, when Aaron temporarily returns home, his presence goes undetected while he listens to his wife discuss their marriage with Sherardy, an Indian doctor Aaron had encountered at the Royal Oak tavern. This brief scene is focalized around Lottie’s despair in being left to attend to all domestic matters of the home, including raising their children, by herself—“[b]ut to leave me *alone* [...]. To go off and leave me with every responsibility, to leave me with all the burden” (*Aaron’s Rod* 43). Lottie’s comments about her marriage provide readers with deeper insight into Aaron’s character: “[h]e was a man you couldn’t quarrel with, and get over it. Quiet—quiet in his tempers, and selfish through and through. I’ve lived with him twelve years—I know what it is. Killing! You don’t know what he was—” (43). This depiction of Aaron reinforces what other characters in the novel perceive about Lawrence’s protagonist—namely, his

selfishness, obstinacy, and aloofness. When Aaron realizes that he might be discovered in the house, the narrator explains that “[h]e was tempted to wait and meet them—and accept it all again” (43). What “it” refers to is not divulged, though it can be surmised that “it” probably means domestic responsibility. In the end, Aaron decides to abscond to London, and the narrator once again reiterates the emotional conflict that Aaron’s call to responsibility causes him: “[i]t seemed a burden just then—a millstone around his neck. He hated the scene he left—and he hated the hard, inviolable heart that stuck unchanging in his own breast” (44).

Aaron’s call to responsibility and his flight from home ultimately mean that his desire to reclaim his self cannot be accomplished. *Aaron’s Rod* makes it clear that the transformative process through which the subject must go in order to achieve solidarity with the absolute other is “infinitely demanding.” This process is represented by Aaron’s quest for an authentic self that is simultaneously undermined by a restlessness that cannot be assuaged. In other words, Aaron finds himself torn between self-interest and care for the other. Neither his insular home in Beldover nor the larger cultural space of postwar London afford him a respite from contact with other characters. Aaron’s restlessness in the first half of the novel is thus a result of his undecidability about leaving the familial and social circles to which he belongs. What remains to be seen is Aaron outside the familiar frames of home and nation in order to demonstrate his own understanding of responsibility.

EXILE AND THE “HORROR” OF RESPONSIBILITY

This last section examines Aaron’s self-imposed exile in Italy and its consequences for his “new and responsible consciousness” (151). Italy figures in *Aaron’s Rod* as a liminal

space situating Aaron beyond the familiarity and comfort of England. In this way, Lawrence's protagonist not only finds himself to truly be an outsider but he also realizes what his call to responsibility means. His flight from home, as a deliberate act of self-exile, begins as a necessary condition to responding to the demand demanded of him by the other. Moreover, his physical dis-placement into the unfamiliarity of an unknown, diverse world metaphorically awakens him to the other—that is, to what is other than himself. Thus, the consequences of his desire for singleness are such that Aaron ironically attains only a temporary state of solitude. Ironically because the narrator continually undermines his protagonist's search for "perfected singleness" (128) despite the novel's insistence on singularity as necessary to Aaron's "exercise in self-remaking" (Vine xxvi). It might be an over-exaggeration to say that the novel wholly condemns the self as the "ground" of ethical experience, though, to recall Critchley, "the exorbitant demand of infinite responsibility" precedes the subject's autonomy. On this score, Aaron's self-imposed exile is much more than a consequence of his abdication of traditional morality and domestic duty. It would seem, rather, that the exile of the self—or the self in exile—is the basis upon which the possibility of a new mode of ethical existence rests.

In the 1920s Lawrence himself was in search of a "world" beyond the trappings of modern culture. In "Education of the People" (1920), for example, he writes: "[w]e have got to discover a new mode of human relationship. Which means, incidentally, that we have got to get a new conception of man and of ourselves. And we have then to establish a new morality" (115). Aaron's own quest, however, is not imbued with the same sense of urgency

as that related by Lawrence in his essay.¹⁰ In fact, as I have shown, Aaron remains largely unconscious about the source of his “need” to flee home and country. His self-imposed exile, in other words, does not register with other modernist characters such as Stephen Dedalus who deliberately “go[es] [to] encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race” (Joyce 253). Instead, Lawrence’s narrator represents Aaron as an aloof and directionless wanderer neither with the predisposition to redeem his country nor with the youthful courage to “forge” a new conscience of his race. The dissonance between Lawrence’s outward desire “to discover a new mode of human relationship” and his literary “enactment” of that desire in *Aaron’s Rod* is striking. It reveals an ambivalence about the possibility of establishing “a new morality” for which the novel calls.

It is interesting to note that in spite of the representation of Aaron as a detached and aloof wanderer—perhaps attributable to his working class background—he is something of a recalcitrant intellectual: “[h]e had a curious quality of an intelligent, almost sophisticated mind, which had repudiated education. On purpose he kept the midland accent in his speech. He understood perfectly what personification was—and an allegory. But he preferred to be illiterate” (65). This way of depicting Aaron’s intelligence, especially his “preferred” illiteracy, sets him apart from other characters in *Aaron’s Rod* who often toe the line of conventional morality. In other words, Aaron’s consciousness, that is, his perception

¹⁰ Aldous Huxley, in his Introduction to *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence* (1932), writes: “It was, I think, the sense of being cut off that sent Lawrence on his restless wanderings round the earth. His travels were at once a flight and a search: a search for some society with which he could establish contact, for a world where the times were not personal and conscious knowing had not yet perverted living; a search and at the same time a flight from the miseries and evils of the society into which he had been born, and for which, in spite of his artist’s detachment, he could not help feeling profoundly responsible” (xxvi). In the end, Huxley characterizes Lawrence’s search “as fruitless as his flight was ineffective” because he believed Lawrence “never found a society to which he could belong” (xxvii).

and understanding of the world, is susceptible to being attuned to what is otherwise. Perhaps this explains why the narrator can only translate the “inaudible music of [Aaron’s] conscious soul” (164). For his musical consciousness—“[h]is mind was music” (164)—expresses a mode of existence that upends “the metaphysics of the subject,” to borrow a phrase from Derrida (“Eating Well” 264). Aaron’s “conscious vibrations” resist the many discursive and narrative practices—especially those inherent in literature—that attempt to subjectivize subjects as such (*Aaron’s Rod* 164). Thus, Aaron’s separateness from others in the text, exemplified by his intelligence, already marks him as an exile even within English society. Yet it is only in the wake of his exile that he comes to recognize his call to responsibility.

Aaron’s decision to pursue a state of “perfected singleness” not only occasions his exile into Italy, but also represents something of an inflection point in *Aaron’s Rod*. For it might be said that Aaron’s undecidability—that is, at least until the moment he determines to leave his family and England permanently—has been the source of his anxiety. In this way, his quest in the first half of the novel resonates with the “terrible experience” Derrida describes as necessary to making a decision and in being responsible (“Hospitality” 66). For as Derrida states, “[f]ar from opposing undecidability to decision, I would argue that there would be no decision [...] in ethics, in politics, no decision, and thus no responsibility, without the experience of undecidability” (66). Aaron’s meanderings from “Royal Oak” to Shottle House to London and back home serve no other ostensible purpose than to lead him to a decision to go into self-exile. Yet the decision itself has far-reaching consequences that Aaron himself cannot anticipate: it awakens him to the other in himself.¹¹ This ethical

¹¹ As Derrida explains, “[f]or a decision to be a decision, it must be made by the other in myself, which doesn’t exonerate me from responsibility. On the contrary, I am passive in a decision, because as soon I am active [sic], as soon as I know that ‘I’ am the master of my decision, I am claiming I know what to do and that everything

awakening has been part of the process through which Aaron's consciousness becomes attuned to otherness. To this end, Chalk has observed that "[a]fter Aaron flees England and his family, the mediations through which he has been perceived by the social world fall away, and his identity is disarticulated" (61). She further notes, "Lawrence's protagonist travels away from social roles and responsibilities into a foreign netherland of temporary affiliations, rather than progressing toward a fixed state of fulfillment" (61). Thus, *Aaron's Rod* appears consistent with many modernist novels that "aimed to revise the social values of the [nineteenth-century] novel" as it attempted "to propel [a protagonist] toward a stable position in the social order" (61). Both Aaron's disarticulated identity and destabilized social position are in fact part of the novel's ethical "project." Even the opening chapter of *Aaron's Rod*, as shown above, depicts an unstable environment in which Aaron himself appears not to have a fully articulated identity.

When Aaron goes into self-imposed exile in Italy, the narrator depicts him as a guest whose arrival continues his transformation in ethical consciousness. Notably, Aaron arrives "on a wet dark evening" in Novara where a "stream of people carried him automatically through the barrier [of the train station] [...] and volleyed unintelligible questions at him. Aaron understood not one word" (131). The motif of darkness in this brief scene redoubles the unfamiliarity of a world into which Aaron is being ushered and reinforces his passivity as an ethical subject responding to the other's demand. It is not a coincidence, then, that he encounters others who, in his mind, are unintelligible and who "carry" him "through the barrier." For his self-exile means, in a sense, a relinquishing of the self to the unfamiliar. That they "volley" questions at him recalls the faint voices he hears calling to him in the first depends on my knowledge which, in turn, cancels the decision" ("Hospitality" 67).

chapter of the novel. And when Aaron hires a cab to drive him to the Frankses' estate—Aaron has been invited there by Lilly to join him and play the flute to earn money—he is conducted “*under* the hood [of the carriage], clattering down the wide darkness of Novara, *over* a bridge apparently, *past* huge rain-wet statues, and *through* more rainy half-streets” (131; my emphases). The whole scene is rife with uncertainty—“Aaron stood there in the dark *outside* the big gates, and wished himself elsewhere” (132; my emphasis)—until Aaron reaches the estate, enters its “circle of light,” and is effectively reintegrated albeit briefly into English society (133).

Aaron's visit to Italy as an exile thus enables him to acquire a critical distance from England that further prepares his new ethical mode of being. The morning after his arrival in Novara—and his interrogation by the members of Sir William's party—Aaron takes to Sir William's gardens where he “noted with gratification a certain big magnificence, a certain reckless powerfulness in the still-blossoming, harsh-coloured, autumn leaves” (150). The language of wildness and harshness, of expansiveness and violence, in this scene is suggestive of a final liberation from the domesticity and familiarity of home. Aaron is literally ex-posed in this moment, and he attains a state of solitude that paradoxically results from his proximity to the other. This is discerned in the central passage of *Aaron's Rod*, when Lawrence's protagonist is awakened to his call to responsibility:

Aaron sat watching in silence. Only the uneasy birds rustled. He watched the city and the winding river, the bridges, and imminent Alps. He was on the south side. On the other side of the time barrier. His old sleepy English nature was startled in its sleep. He felt like a man who knows it is

time to wake up, and who doesn't want to wake up, to face the responsibility of another sort of day.

To open his darkest eyes and wake up to a new responsibility. Wake up and enter on the responsibility of a new self in himself. Ach, the horror of responsibility! He had all his life slept and shelved the burden. And he wanted to go on sleeping. It was so hateful to have to get a new grip on his bowels, a new hard recklessness into his heart, and new and responsible consciousness into his mind and soul. He felt some finger prodding, prodding, prodding him awake out of the sleep of pathos and tragedy and spasmodic passion, and he wriggled, unwilling, oh most unwilling to undertake the new business. (151)

It is worth remarking that Aaron's "watching" in this passage harmonizes the city, the river, and the "imminent Alps" into focus the moment he finds solitude. In turn, this act initiates his awareness of responsibility, which startles him from a deep slumber. The incessant prodding of "some finger"—or, the "new self in himself"—disrupts Aaron's reverie such that he subsequently plans to escape to Milan. Finding himself surrounded by a multitude of others at the train station, described as "dynamically different" by the narrator, Aaron reluctantly returns to the Frankses'. This moment of return crucially marks his willingness to accept his responsibility despite his initial rejection to "undertake the new business."

However, the degree to which Aaron fully realizes his call to responsibility remains unresolved. The conclusion of the novel leaves Aaron in a state of paralysis and undecidability as he ponders what it means to "take" responsibility. In other words, Aaron recognizes that responsibility implies submitting to someone or something else but that to

engage responsibility is an entirely different matter. In the final chapter of *Aaron's Rod*, Lilly reminds Aaron that the burden of responsibility lies on him alone: “[b]ut remember, all the time, the responsibility is upon your own head, it rests with your own lonely soul, the responsibility for your own action” (296). Aaron partially rejects Lilly’s notion of responsibility in the sense it falls back on “your own action.” He states, “[b]ut you talk [...] as if we were like trees, alone by ourselves in the world. We aren’t. If we love, it needs another person than ourselves. And if we hate, and even if we talk” (297). Lilly clarifies that his conception of responsibility does not have to conform to any one mode—love, hate, talk—so much as follow what he calls “the power motive” (297). For Lilly, this motive means disruption of “the old leaves, the inception of the new” which resides in the self, “not seeking its centre outside, in some God or some beloved, but in acting indomitably from within itself” (298). It would seem that while Lilly seems so convinced of this new mode of being, Aaron resists it because it falls back on a traditional discourse of subjectivity that privileges the self over the other. In fact, Aaron repeatedly tells Lilly that “[y]ou’ll never get it” because he knows that self-interested power, like romantic love, cannot provide a path to responsibility for the other (298). Rather, responsibility means submission to the other’s call and its demands in spite of all other domestic duties.

Aaron's Rod, despite its circuitous plotline and its unlikeable protagonist, effectively imagines a “new responsibility” well before many of today’s prevailing critical and ethical theories. Published over ten years before Levinas’s landmark *On Escape* (1935), Lawrence’s postwar novel tediously works through the experience of responsibility defined largely in terms of responding to the call of the other. The novel’s mixed messages about ethical modes of being can be attributed not only to its undecidability about the self as the source of

action. But it can also be linked to Lawrence's own ambivalence about the genre of the novel as means of ethical representation. In this way, Aaron's meandering can be said to mirror the novel's hesitation to endorse an aesthetics that subscribes to past conventions and standards of narrative representation. That the protagonist uses realist strategies of representation only exposes their artificiality, that is, their use as scaffolding or as frameworks for traditional storytelling. Thus the nonlinearity of the plot, coupled with the narrator's detachment from his protagonist, undermines past narrative strategies. Added to this narrative subversion is the novel's lack of closure. It ends with Aaron asking Lilly, "[a]nd whom shall I submit to?" to which Lilly only responds, "[y]our soul will tell you" (299). If Aaron has become fully conscious of his ethical responsibility, it is left to the reader to decide. Like the modernist novels under consideration in this project, then, the reader always seems to be implicated in the decidability of the text. However, the reader almost always finds herself confounded by the same "horror" that Aaron does in taking responsibility for her decisions.

Chapter Four

Refusal and Responsibility in *A Passage to India*

INTRODUCTION

A study of responsibility and the modernist novel eventually finds itself confronted with the writing of E. M. Forster. His novels have been canonical to wide-ranging discussions about class and identity politics, about the erosion of tradition in the modern world, and about Britain's colonial mission and imperial exploits in the early decades of the twentieth century. Forster's work is equally central here, for his writing echoes many contemporary theories related to the "ethics of alterity." Specifically, his novels investigate the self-other encounter that similarly informs and shapes much of the current critical discourse about the intelligibility of the other—particularly in terms of narrative representation. Forster's writing additionally betrays a preoccupation with the possibilities and limitations of subjective experience. His fiction explores the bounds of subjectivity and the capacity to empathize with who/what exists fundamentally outside the scope of the humanist subject, or "the knowing ego" (Critchley, *Ethics* 6). In this way, his account of subjectivity conveys an underlying anxiety and hesitation with regard to the representation of otherness. It does so in part by contrasting the "rigid, paternalistic, stratified world" of the ruling elite with the "geographically peripheral and socially unstructured spheres" of the lower middle-classes and colonized other (Land xiii). More so, Forster's fiction discloses a disquieting sense that representation does violence to the alterity of the other—that is, that representation objectifies and reduces the other to the world of the subject, of knowledge, of perception. As a result, his work resonates with a particular problem in contemporary ethics, namely how to preserve the other's difference without betraying the other to the effects of

representation.¹ In broad terms, Forster's disquietude can be ascertained by reviewing the trajectory of his major fiction. It initially maintains a fidelity to the conventions of nineteenth-century realism, as in *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905) and *The Longest Journey* (1907), yet gradually gives way to modernist narrative techniques—in *Howards End* (1910) and *A Passage to India* (1924)—marked by narrative fragmentation and uncertainty. Put another way, the arc of Forster's work gradually shifts from the secure repose of Victorian culture, with its realist pretensions to sameness and closure, to a modernist world that values transformation, difference, and ambiguity. Forster's novels not only offer engaging responses to a world under tremendous change: they collectively afford a unique examination of modernist ethics.

It is surprising, then, that scant attention has been paid by modernist critics to the ethical aspects of Forster's novels.² Perhaps such a paucity in contemporary scholarship exists because past critics relegated Forster to a status of tertiary importance in modernist studies. Their general dismissal of Forster seems to have originated from a concern with his refusal to adopt modernist techniques in his writing. In other words, despite the widespread experimentation with narrative style by British writers during the early decades of the twentieth century, Forster often expressed a certain uneasiness with modernist "fiction-form." In a letter to a close friend, for example, he explains his displeasure with "the [modernist] convention that one must view the action through the mind of one the characters; and say of others 'perhaps they thought', or at all events adopt their view-point

¹ See Marais.

² It might be argued that postcolonial readings of *A Passage to India* have already raised and engaged ethical questions about alterity, justice, hospitality, and responsibility in the novel. No doubt, postcolonial critics have recruited ethical theory to address the injustices and evils of British imperialism and colonialism. However, their line of analysis is often infused with broader historical problems of empire whereas I am interested in discussing the interpersonal relationships between characters and the formal problems of the text.

for only a moment” (*Selected Letters* 26). Critics have taken this and similar statements as proof of Forster’s anti-modernism—so much so that the critical debate about Forster’s commitment to modernist style pervades even the most recent studies of his work.³ While this issue deserves some discussion, especially in light of modernism’s critical resurgence today, it has the negative effect of essentializing modernism as a monolithic literary movement—and it risks disregarding the impact of the social milieu within which Forster worked. His peripheral involvement with the Bloomsbury Group included critical exchanges with some of the most prominent modernists of the period, among them Virginia Woolf.⁴ No doubt these exchanges between Forster and the members of this small circle of artists profoundly affected his work. Thus, to argue Forster’s inclusion in or exclusion from the modernist canon seems nothing more than a sideshow to the fact that his writing contributed significantly to modernism.

With few exceptions, contemporary studies that have examined Forster’s work tend to subordinate the issue of modernism to social, political, and historical analysis. Most recent scholarship, for instance, has turned to questions related to British jurisprudence in the context of colonial life depicted in *A Passage to India*.⁵ These newer examinations of legal practices during the British Raj, however, remain indebted to postcolonial approaches to the novel, which have spanned the literary field for over two decades. Critics such as Edward Said, Susan Suleri, Benita Parry—and numerous others—have largely and carefully shaped

³ Postcolonial readings of Forster, which I briefly discuss below, also wade into discussions about style and form. For instance, see Parry.

⁴ Forster’s impact was not lost on Woolf. She writes in her diary for 6 November 1919 that “Morgan has the artist’s mind; he says the simple things that clever people don’t say; I find him the best of critics for that reason. Suddenly out comes the obvious thing that one has overlooked” (*A Writer’s Diary* 20).

⁵ See Mendenhall; Ferguson.

the critical view that regards *A Passage to India* as an “essentially colonialist, even imperialist text” (May 136). Their primary line of analysis has rallied around Said’s claim that *political* reconciliation between the East and West will always and necessarily result in failure. He writes, “[w]e are left at the end with a sense of the pathetic distance still separating ‘us’ from an Orient destined to bear its foreignness as a mark of its permanent estrangement from the West” (*Orientalism* 244). The conclusion of *A Passage to India*, Said remarks, harbors “this compact definition” (244) of irreconciliation between the Orient—“the source of [Europe’s] civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one its deepest and most recurring images of the Other” (1)—and the West. In light of Said’s judgment, I would suggest that postcolonial readings of *A Passage to India*, though ostensibly political, make implicit ethical claims that undergird and motivate them. For ethics already implies politics—it contemplates the possibility of justice as an unconditional “[o]penness to the Other beyond the Same” (Kearney 67).⁶ Therefore, an ethical investigation of *A Passage to India* would not deny politics so much as afford extend our understanding of the novel’s responsiveness to the political impasse Said identifies as constitutive of East-West relations.

The previous two chapters of this project investigated the “terrible experience” of undecidability—the hallmark of modernist responsibility—in both *Jacob’s Room* and *Aaron’s Rod*. Woolf’s novel concerns an unnamed narrator whose ethical responsibility, I argued, is involved with her struggle to represent Jacob Flanders, the figure intimated in the novel’s title, without betraying his singularity. My analysis of the novel’s porous structure, as both a deliberate strategy of representation employed by the narrator as well as a reflection of her

⁶ As Simon Critchley explains in *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, “[t]he ethical relation [with the other] does not take place in an a-political space outside the public realm; rather, ethics is always already political, the relation to the face [of the other] is always already a relation to humanity as a whole” (226).

anxiety due to undecidability, occasioned a broader discussion about modernist subjectivity and the so-called inward “turn.” Here I posited that the modernist subject’s desire to “turn” away from the external world can never be fully realized. For the subject as such is always already beset by an ethical duty to respond to the other’s demand. Woolf neither supplies an explanation about her narrator’s relationship to Jacob nor does she provide a reason for the narrator’s compulsion to represent him. In this way, it might be said that Woolf abandons her narrator, that is, leaves her to attend to the duty of representing Jacob without a stable, authorial foundation. Finally, I claimed that although *Jacob’s Room* retains some of the trappings of conventional representation, it ultimately “breaks” with realism’s commitment to closure. By contrast, Lawrence’s *Aaron’s Rod* adheres to many of the formal properties of the nineteenth-century novel, though it too ends without definitive closure. This absence of closure in Lawrence’s postwar novel—that is, its undecidability—results from the irresponsibility of the protagonist’s decisions and actions. On the one hand, Aaron Sisson behaves recklessly as he tries to escape from the social and moral constraints of domestic life in an effort to realize his “authentic” self. He abandons his family, his occupation, and his nation only to discover that his endeavors have failed. On the other hand, Aaron’s struggle to free himself from social responsibility, I suggested, has its basis in a more primordial, ethical responsibility. My approach to *Aaron’s Rod* drew on Levinas’s concept of proximity, and I asserted that the basis of Aaron’s call to responsibility in the novel issues from “a corporeal obligation to the [o]ther, an obligation whose form is sensibility” (Critchley, *Ethics* 180).

This concluding chapter shifts to *A Passage to India*—the novel in which Forster’s modernism intersects most visibly with questions about responsibility, subjectivity, and

narrative representation.⁷ I examine how Forster grapples with undecidability as a crucial problem to the shared field of ethics and modernist form. In particular, my analysis of the novel's central episode, the "tedious expedition" to the Marabar Hills (141), yields significant observations about modernist responsibility—especially in that the narrator withholds, or refuses to disclose, the details and events comprising Miss Adela Quested's alleged attack inside one of the caves. This textual aporia raises broader questions related to Forster's modernist practices—questions, that is, connected to narrative fragmentation and abstraction. Namely, the unreliability of Forster's narrator in the novel functions to disengage the reader from the text and thus from the production of meaning. In this way, the narrator effectively denies the responsibility of the reader who, according to Forster in *Aspects of the Novel*, "must sit down alone and struggle with the writer" (13). Compounding the problem of the reader's disengagement, the narrator refuses to single out a main protagonist in the novel. Instead, he diffuses character across the chief figures of Adela, Dr. Aziz, Mrs. Moore, and Cyril Fielding. I claim that this "fragmentation" of character exacerbates the novel's undecidability, for it frustrates the reader's capacity to identify with a particular perspective or storyline. In other words, the reader finds herself in a state of disorientation with respect to the novel's multiple and shifting viewpoints. I argue that the interminable disruption of narrative determinacy by Forster's narrator interferes with the reader's claims to mastery of the text. It causes the reader to confront her "epistemological limits" and thus forces her into a state of vulnerability that further predisposes her to the "characterological alterity" central to the modernist novel. (Hale, "Aesthetics" 901, 903).

⁷ E. M. Forster, *A Passage to India* (New York: Penguin, 2005) 3 – 306. I will cite the novel by page numbers parenthetically throughout this chapter.

APORETIC ETHICS

Before turning to *A Passage to India*, I want to briefly examine some of Forster's reflections on India in order to consider his response to the socio-political impasse that had developed between Britain and the Indian subcontinent after the Great War. Although his thoughts on the matter seem less concerned with ethics than one might expect, they occasionally betray his desire for a mutual understanding between individuals despite their respective national/ideological commitments. Indeed, many of Forster's letters, book reviews, and essays written in the years preceding the publication of *A Passage to India* testify to his increasing frustration with the British Raj, particularly in the way Anglo-Indian officers often (mis)treated local inhabitants.⁸ His comments about the state of affairs in India help to illuminate the connections between fragmentation and epistemology explored in the novel. More specifically, they demonstrate that for Forster the political muddle in India raised crucial questions about ethics, alterity, and responsibility. In a letter to his mother from Hyderabad—written in the context of the “ill-omened visit” by the Prince of Wales in 1921—he observes that “[p]olitics here have unexpectedly turned to the worse” (*Selected Letters* 17). He notes that local schoolboys and scholars have spontaneously boycotted the Prince's arrival and that “the streets for seven miles are absolutely deserted by the inhabitants when the Prince passes” (17). His worry that the colonial police have overreacted by demanding “a list of the boys who didn't come” is amplified by the claim that “[t]he arrests elsewhere in India have exasperated everybody so much” (17). At the same time, Forster explains that if the police had refused to act—in terms of showing force—the results might have been much worse than quiet protest throughout the subcontinent. Forster's

⁸ Pankaj Mishra explains that “Forster was instinctively against authority of any sort; and he did not take too well to the pompous and racially aloof British administrators he often met during his travels in India” (xii).

conclusion that “[y]ou can’t solve real complicated and ancient troubles by sending out a good-tempered boy” taps into his uncertainty that anything could have been done at this point to salvage British-Indian relations (17). Moreover, it suggests his belief that the political situation in India had become untenable, particularly on the side of the Indians who he claims regard the Prince as “just a piece of luggage that must be carried about carefully” (18).

This event appears to have significantly affected Forster’s view that a rapprochement between the two nations could not be achieved. For Forster, however, irreconciliation between the British Raj and India had less to do with colonial policies and practices than with a decisive change in social attitudes by both sides. A month after writing the aforementioned letter, in two unsigned articles originally published in *The Nation and the Athenaeum*, Forster elaborated upon the “the great blunder of the past [that] is neither political nor economic nor educational, but social” (*The Prince’s Tale* 243). The first article, “Reflections in India I: Too Late?,” registers Forster’s sense that the processes of modernization in India had resulted in “the present crisis” (243). That is, India’s decreasing dependence on British authority could be traced to both its adoption and alteration of Western customs—the Indians “had taken what they wanted from the West, and were using it instead of being used by it” (244). The resulting breakdown in social relations, explains Forster, produced an impasse that neither side could bridge. He writes that “there is little hope now of spontaneous intercourse between the two races. The Indian has taken up a new attitude” (243). Furthermore, the “social friction” between the Englishman and Indian underscored for Forster the inevitable decline of Britain’s foothold in the world (245). As the subtitle of the article suggests, he believed the dissolution of the Empire had already begun: “it is too late because Indians no longer require [Britain’s] social support” (246).

In Forster's view, the failure of the British occupants to build and maintain friendships with Indians directly contributed to the political muddle at the time. In a telling passage, Forster registers the dramatic shift in social relations that might have been forestalled if some kind of mutual understanding had been achieved between the two sides. He writes:

Ten or fifteen years ago he [the Indian] would have welcomed attention, not only because the Englishman in India had power, but because the etiquette and customs of the West, his inevitable destiny, were new to him and he needed a sympathetic introducer. He has never been introduced to the West in the social sense, as to a possible friend. We have thrown grammars and neckties at him, and smiled when he put it on wrongly—that is all. For a time he suffered, and it was with shame and resentment that he found himself excluded from our clubs. [...] Today he has ceased to suffer. He has learnt to put on neckties the right way, or his own way, or whatever one is supposed to do with a necktie. He has painfully woven, without our assistance, a new social fabric, and, as he proceeds with it, he has grown less curious about ours. (243 – 44).

In short: British condescension, combined with mockery, has turned “a possible friend” away so that “modern India [...] does not care how Englishmen amuse themselves, nor whether they are amused” (244). The resultant void in contact and communication, from Forster's perspective, only reinforced and hardened India's resentment of imperial Britain. Indeed, Forster recounts the Prince's visit in the second article, “Reflections in India II: The Prince's Progress,” in order to underline how insensitive the British had become to “the tie

between England and India [...] at the moment it is under revision” (247). However, as a liberal optimist, Forster held out hope that “[u]ntil the unimportant Englishmen [that is, non-officials] here condescend to hold out their hand to ‘natives’, it is a waste of money to display the affabilities of the House of Windsor” (250). In other words, until the British take a sincere “stand upon a common humanity instead of the pedestal of race— [only] then [can] the foundation of a democratic empire [be] well and truly laid” (250). Whether sincere, or profoundly naïve, Forster’s hope for reconciliation would not come to pass.

The socio-political impasse that thus defined British India in the early 1920s would make its way into *A Passage to India* as the novel’s central problem. However, Forster treats this impasse in the novel largely in terms of representation, that is, in terms of a representational mode maintaining “discursive indeterminacy,” resisting closure, and welcoming otherness (Cuddy-Keane 209). Marked by multiple viewpoints and narrative fragmentation, *A Passage to India* investigates the experience of impassability in its characters and its readers. In Derridean terms, Forster renders the novel’s formal and thematic ambiguity as “the interminable experience” of the aporia (*Aporias* 16). For Derrida, aporia means “the difficult or impracticable, here the impossible, passage, the refused, denied, or prohibited passage, indeed the nonpassage” (8). The aporia, in other words, disrupts the possibility of subjective certainty by disallowing “passage” to “any *presentable* determination” (17). In this way, the aporia conditions undecidability and thus responsibility—it is, as Derrida suggests, “the law of all decisions, of all responsibilities, of all duties within duty, and of all the border problems that ever can arise” (78). Additionally, the subject’s maddening experience of the aporia always already (and necessarily) involves “the absolute risk that every promise, every engagement, and every responsible decision” cannot be met or fulfilled

(19). Yet, the subject called to responsibility—that is, hailed to respond to the demands of the other—has an ethical commitment that cannot be refused, denied, or ignored.⁹

Consequently, the impassability/impossibility of decision—that is, of epistemological and moral assuredness in decision-making—disrupts even the foundations of the subject’s subjecthood. For the aporia, by denying resolution or closure, undermines “every concept or phenomenon that traditionally has been stabilized, fixed, subjected, represented and normalized by Western metaphysics” (Debrix). The destabilization of the subject—achieved by the subject’s inexorable waiting for passage—upends identity in the sense that the subject suffers an unendurable anticipation of a future event. Who or what will come to pass, in other words, torments the subject, “put[s] into operation the aporia” (*Aporias* 32). Yet Derrida questions if it “is possible to undergo or to experience the aporia, the aporia *as such?*” (33). The possibility of coming up against a limit, a border, a threshold in experience engenders, according Derrida, either a renewed search for passage or a transgression that would “end” in the subject’s death. Here he emphasizes that the experience of the aporia, if possible, “is not necessarily a failure or a simple paralysis, the sterile negativity of the impasse. It is neither stopping at it nor overcoming it” (32). In this way, it might be said that the subject finds herself caught in a double bind. On the one hand, she must make a responsible decision that will in turn occasion action, response, passage. On the other hand, she cannot but help defer her decision because she continually comes up against a limit that denies its surpassing. In the most radical sense of the term, then, aporia constitutes non-

⁹ Recall Cuddy-Keane’s understanding of ethics as that which “is predicated on some notion of compulsion, some concept of obligation, some demand for response in the way we live” (208). I would only add (or clarify) that the ethical subject’s response engages the other, that is, acknowledges someone or something exterior to the subject. In other words, the subject directs her response to an “outside” that necessarily imposes and impinges on the sovereignty and primacy of her “self.” Responding to the other means, in other words, a welcoming act of hospitality that dis-locates the subject as such.

experience—or, perhaps, an experience of non-experience. Without experience, therefore, the subject's onto-epistemological foundations become untenable.

Derrida and Forster seem to share the view that responsible decision-making remains foreclosed to the subject despite the ethical injunction that she *must* make a decision. Put differently, both philosopher and writer regard responsibility as an ethical commitment which must “pass” through the aporetic experience of undecidability. In his “most modernist” work, *A Passage to India*, Forster orchestrates this interminable undecidability in the novel's structure, plot, and characters (Childs 202). My analysis below follows this “top down” sequence in order to illustrate the radicalism of Forster's modernist project in the novel, particularly as it concerns the role and responsibility of the subject-reader to participate in “the act of interpretation that is the basic element of the reading process” (Iser 280). I additionally want to suggest in the following pages that the multiple indeterminacies that inhabit or reside in the structure of *A Passage to India* point to Forster's own ethical fidelity to the novel form. Like many modernist writers, he too virtuously disrupts “familiar narrative patterns” in order to reinvigorate the novel's power to respond to modern social, political, and ethical problems.

A NONPASSAGE TO INDIA

A Passage to India hardly needs introduction. It has been a mainstay of twentieth-century fiction since its publication and has attracted considerable critical reaction. Its staying power can be attributed to the fact that it deals with a broad range of interrelated problems such as friendship and politics, art and reality, hope and disillusionment, understanding and misconception. In his “Programme Note” to Santha Rama Rau's theatrical adaptation of the

novel, Forster remarks that “I tried to indicate the human predicament in a universe which is not, so far, comprehensible to our minds” (Forster, *Passage* 327). Indeed, *A Passage to India* operates on an enormous scale yet compresses every detail and event into “something much neater and tidier than diffuse reality” (Burra 310). Forster’s depiction of India at once eludes comprehension and categorization, yet the subcontinent itself endures as a material, geopolitical space of trade, conquest, mutiny, injustice, and death. Further, both mythic structure and everyday triviality unite in the novel, elevating its philosophical concerns above the trite and clichéd problems of English bourgeois culture. Finally, Forster’s indictment of rationalism and epistemology in the novel—through his refusal to explain what exactly happened in the Marabar Hills—strikes at the heart of the mimetic practices of realist fiction.

The story of the novel, insofar as it goes, appears simple enough. It begins with the arrival of the young and impressionable Adela Quested along with her chaperon (Mrs. Moore) in the fictional city of Chandrapore, British India. The ostensible reason for Adela’s visit pertains to her decision to marry Ronny Heaslop—Mrs. Moore’s son and Chandrapore’s city magistrate—though she claims really to be “desirous of seeing the real India” (21). During their first night’s stay, Mrs. Moore slips away from the exclusively English nightclub and visits a local mosque where she meets Aziz, a young Muslim physician who had been erroneously called away by the city’s Civil Surgeon. Despite an initial misunderstanding wherein Aziz mistakenly accuses Mrs. Moore of not removing her shoes before entering the mosque, the two quickly become friends. Aziz shows himself to be charming and, above all, hospitable, offering to call Mrs. Moore a carriage for safe return to the club. Though Mrs. Moore refuses his kind gesture, Aziz escorts the elderly

Englishwoman back to the club whereupon her return she expresses regret at not having the power to invite the doctor inside. In a telling response that registers the English-Indian divide, Aziz modestly explains that “Indians are not allowed into the Chandrapore Club even as guests” (20). After Aziz’s departure, the focus quickly turns to the Club, where the “[w]indows were barred, lest the servants should see their memsahibs acting” (21). Here, the social politics of British society in Chandrapore play out for the first time and in such a way that they disabuse the new arrivals of the benevolence of colonial rule. When, for instance, Adela presses Ronny to show her “the real India,” she learns that he has adopted many of the racial prejudices as the British ruling “caste” (30). And when she suggests that Ronny “never used to judge people like this at home,” he retorts, “India isn’t home” (29).

Another prominent character in the novel is Cyril Fielding, principal of the government college in Chandrapore. At the outset of the novel, Forster’s narrator describes Fielding as “a hard-bitten, good-tempered, intelligent fellow on the verge of middle age, with a belief in education” (56). Known for his success with students—and noted by the narrator for his cosmopolitanism—Fielding exemplifies the best of the liberal humanist tradition:

The world, he believed, is a globe of men who are trying to reach one another and can best do so by the help of goodwill plus culture and intelligence—a creed ill suited to Chandrapore, but he had come out too late to lose it. He had no racial feeling—not because he was superior to his brother civilians, but because he had matured in a different atmosphere, where the herd-instinct does not flourish. (57)

Ever the eternal optimist, Fielding stands apart from his fellow countrymen who see him as a potentially “disruptive force” (57). In part, this view holds because Fielding does not

subscribe to the ideology of the British Raj and sees through the ultimate fiction of racial superiority as the basis of colonial rule. He consequently albeit unintentionally disrupts social propriety by expressing what ought to remain undisclosed about the matter. His flippant comment, for instance, that “the so-called whites are really pinko-gray” (57) scandalizes his fellow countrymen and awakens him to their deep-seated sense of privilege and power. More so, Fielding enjoys “the give-and-take of private conversation” (57) and often eschews his social obligations “in a community where the male is expected to be lively and helpful” (57). Not only does this eschewal garner him disfavor by the women in the community, but it also marks him as a loner and outsider. Fielding’s contrast to Ronny and the rest of the public officials could not be more stark—and it will prove significant to my analysis below. For Fielding’s failure to bridge the divide between the British and the Indians in the wake of Adela’s attack results in the breakdown of his friendship with Aziz.

The drama of the novel hinges not so much on the social improprieties of British India nor on the palpable tensions galvanized by the English-Indian cultural divide. Instead, it plays out in the events surrounding the expedition to the Marabar Caves. While attending “an ‘unconventional’ party” at Aziz’s modest home (62), Adela and Mrs. Moore are invited to explore the caves as Aziz’s guests. Nothing seems to go according to plan and, ultimately, the British arrest Aziz on the accusation that he has sexually assaulted Adela. Attempts by Fielding to clarify the matter—he rightly does not believe that Aziz would engage in such heinous behavior—fail and the case goes to trial. Overwhelmed by these events, in addition to being disoriented by the echo of the caves, Mrs. Moore departs from India and dies aboard a ship en route to England. Thereafter, Aziz’s trial ends in his dismissal when Adela succumbs to her conscience and reveals that she cannot recall what actually occurred at the

caves. With a mixture of outrage and a sense of justice, the Indians riot while Fielding escorts Adela, who “felt emptied, valueless” (220), from the courthouse. In the aftermath of the trial, Adela returns to England—the British feel that she “had renounced her own people” (218)—and Aziz relocates to the northeast town Mau. Fielding briefly visits England but goes back to India where he sees Aziz for the last time. Fielding, it is revealed, has married Stella, the daughter of Mrs. Moore, and has taken a new position in Chandrapore. The novel ends with Aziz rebuffing Fielding’s desire for friendship and the collective voices of India—“the temples, the tank, the jail, the palace, the birds, the carrion, the Guest House” (306)—murmuring the novel’s oft-cited concluding lines, “[n]o, not yet [...] [n]o, not there” (306).

Notwithstanding this plot summary of the novel, the narrative structure of *A Passage to India* largely plays on the conventional “insistence on mimesis” against modernist representational practices that actively disrupt epistemological certainty (Gutkin 43). Indeed, the novel’s structure has long been the source of critical attention and scrutiny, particularly in terms of its (non)adherence to the conventions of the nineteenth century novel. In *Culture and Imperialism*, for instance, Said states that he “always felt that the most interesting thing about *A Passage to India* is Forster’s using India to represent material that according to the canons of the novel form cannot in fact be represented—vastness, incomprehensible creeds, secret motions, histories, and social form” (200). However, he also suggests that Forster tempers this break with the “canons” of novelistic representation with a return “to a traditional sense of social propriety in its last section, where the author deliberately and affirmatively imports into India the habitual novelistic domestic resolution (marriage and

property)” (200).¹⁰ Said’s remarks have thus enabled critics such as Benita Parry to posit that “[t]he reputation of *A Passage to India* as conventional in form, language, and attested value has inhibited discussion on an emergent modernism that is inseparable from the novel’s failure to reach the destination intimated in its title” (“Materiality” 175). For Parry, the novel “exists at the limits of realist writing, [and shares] affinities with modernism evident in the prominence of its anti-representational registers” (176; my emphasis). And she observes that “the perplexity with which the novel reconfigures the distant, alien complex of cultures that is its ostensible subject, signals an anxiety about *the impasse* of representation” (176; my emphasis). Whether *A Passage to India* can (or should) be read as realist or modernist seems beside the point in the context of what it does, that is, how it produces “anxiety about the impasse of representation.” The novel slides around, as it were, between both realist coherence and modernist fragmentation. It promises formal unity and order only to tease the reader by withholding closure. In this way, *A Passage to India* virtuously disrupts modernism from within: Forster’s admixture of realist and modernist elements participates in the novel’s undecidability.

The tripartite structure of the novel, for instance, offers the possibility of formal unity but simultaneously refuses any causal relationship between its sections.¹¹ “Mosque,” “Caves,” and “Temple”—as Forster has labeled the three main divisions of the novel—point immediately to the dominant religious faiths in the world (Islam, Christianity, and Hinduism,

¹⁰ In an earlier essay, “Colonizing the Represented: Anthropology’s Interlocutors,” Said seems less sure about “resolution” in the novel when he remarks that at “the ending of *A Passage to India* [...] Forster notes, and confirms the history behind, a political conflict between Dr. Aziz and Fielding—Britain’s subjugation of India—and yet can neither recommend decolonization, nor continued colonization” (223).

¹¹ Parry recounts that “the book’s triadic structure has been variously glossed as corresponding to the Indian seasonal cycle [I discuss this below], the movements of a musical score, the Hegelian dialectic of thesis-antithesis-synthesis, the recurrent process of birth, destruction, and re-birth recited in Hindu mythology, and as metonyms of Muslim India, Anglo-India, and Hindu India” (“Materiality” 84).

respectively) and their respective spaces of worship. As such, they signify separate though not incompatible moral systems that have been at the core of civilization around the world. But these faiths also account for much of the strife, conflict, and violence in the modern human history. That is to say, religion—with its impulse to spread and unify—has been the source of political disagreement and hostility, both domestically and globally. In this way, religion represents something of a contradiction. On the one hand, it offers the promise of peace (either here or in the afterlife) and goodwill toward others; yet, on the other hand, it suggests dogmatism, crusade, and domination. It might be said, then, that Forster’s use of religious appellations reverberates with the interrelated political ideologies of imperialism, “whereby a nation establishes rule over another country or group of countries through the application of military force or conquest,” and colonialism, which “designates the institution and administration of an imperial power’s foreign holdings and dependencies” (Begam and Moses 3). The idea here is that religion and imperialism share the same utopian dream of order, disciplinarity, regularity, predicatability, and homogeneity. However, that Forster divides the novel into three distinct sections shows us that indeed divisions exist—despite their unity under the title of the book. Thus, even at the structural level, the novel resists closure both by not championing a religious creed (all seem to be under indictment) and by exploding the typical binary of Western logic of either/or: either Christianity or Islam; either Christianity or Hinduism; either Islam or Hinduism.

To complicate matters, Forster himself later explained that the sections correspond to “the three seasons of the Cold Weather, the Hot Weather, and the Rains which divide the Indian year” (qtd. in Herz 57). Yet it does not seem too far a stretch to suggest that whether these sections refer to the world’s major religions, to political ideologies of conquest, or to

the seasonal weather patterns in India, they ultimately disclose conflict and flux—not unity. At its root, human history has been propelled by the desire to spread and foist one system of beliefs on others, yet none has ever dominated entirely (much like the weather does not dominate the year). But maybe Forster’s indictment goes much further than religion or politics. Perhaps, given the widespread bloodshed of the Great War, Forster’s real object of critique is nationalism. For it seems rather telling that while most of his contemporaries had written novels in the 1920s dealing explicitly with the War—with the exception of Joyce—Forster’s novel should take up matters seemingly unrelated.¹² Yet, Forster appears to be suggesting that nationalism is at its root the source of war and imperialism—and, in turn, misunderstanding and division between people, whether between English and Germans or English and Indians. The narrator, for instance, describes Aziz’s connection with Islam strictly in terms of nationalist discourse. Immediately before encountering Mrs. Moore in Chapter II, the narrator explains that “[a] mosque by winning [Aziz’s] approval let loose his imagination. The temple of another creed, Hindu, Christian or Greek, would have bored him and failed to awaken his sense of beauty. Here was Islam, his own country, more than a Faith, more than a battle-cry, more, much more...Islam, an attitude towards life both exquisite and durable, where his body and his thoughts found their home” (16). That Aziz’s faith is intimately bound up with “his own country” discloses that, as he tells Ralph Moore at the end of the novel, “the two nations cannot be friends” (296).

These layers of possible associative meanings for the section divisions, however much we try to correlate them to a specific thematic problem in the novel, ultimately resist determination. Each section begins with the narrator’s description and meditation on the

¹² See Booth (76 – 83) for a reading of the novel that explicitly connects the alleged rape of Adela to the Great War.

Indian landscape, which do much to produce the illusion of unity and coherence for the novel as a whole. But India, insofar as the narrator describes the subcontinent, seems removed or resistant to the Western scientific impulse to map, categorize, classify—ultimately, to know. Chandrapore, for instance, is presented in the opening paragraphs of the novel as “nothing extraordinary” (5), as a place devoid of decoration and life. And later, as the excursion to the Marabar Caves begins, the enormity of the Indian landscape is described in terms of an empty promise, that is, as something that exceeds cognition and knowledge:

Unfortunately, India has few important towns. India is the country, fields, fields, then hills, jungle, hills and more fields. The branch-line stops, the road is practicable for cars to a point, the bullock-carts lumber down the side-tracks, paths fray out into the cultivation, and disappear near a splash of red paint. How can the mind take hold of such a country? Generations of invaders have tried, but they remain in exile. The important towns they build are only retreats, their quarrels the malaise of men who cannot find their way home. India knows their trouble. She knows of the whole world’s trouble, to its uttermost depth. She calls ‘Come’ through her hundred mouths, through objects ridiculous and august. But to come to what? She has never defined. She is not a promise, only an appeal.

(127)

In this passage, the narrator evokes the eternal quality of India: it can be traversed, mapped, and understood—but only up to a certain point. The subcontinent’s undefined call to both no one in particular and at the same time to everyone suggests a return to an origin that does not exist. This contradiction calls to mind Fielding’s claim earlier in the novel that “‘India’s a muddle’” (63)—a state of unresolvable disorder, chaos, bewilderment.

The title of *A Passage to India*—taken from Walt Whitman’s poem of the same name—suggests Forster is seeking some way, some path to understanding India. But the title is ironic. No passage seems possible: no impasse can be bridged epistemologically or otherwise. For Forster, understanding cannot be gained through knowledge, for knowledge only produces a false sense of connection with others and most often leads to division and conflict. “My world” is just as valid, just as certain as another’s—and no “passage” can occur so long as we continually “attempt to pose, to impose, to propose, to stabilize” that which remains other (Derrida qtd. in J. H. Miller 285). At bottom, any “passage,” any encounter runs the risk of turning into a situation whereby the other becomes appropriated or assimilated into the norms and standards of “the ‘my world’” (285). A true passage to India would require—as it does to the narrator of Forster’s early short story, “The Other Side of the Hedge”—being stripped of all the “things” (not just one’s material possessions but also that which constitutes one’s identity). However, as even “The Other Side of the Hedge” intimates, one can never be wholly dispossessed of one’s sense of self. Forster seems to have known all along that connections made through encounter result in failure, if not disaster, just as it does in the Marabar Caves. A passage to India is always already an “appeal” with no “promise” or fulfillment of connection—it is always a “misquest” as Adela’s surname suggests.

It is to this end that that the role of the narrator comes into view. I claim that as Forster’s “agent” the narrator functions to perpetuate the novel’s indeterminacies, gaps, lacunae, and impasses. Indeed, the narrator himself seems conspicuously absent from the novel, raising questions about the reliability of “his” story. In *A Passage to India: Nation and Narration*, Judith Scherer Herz explains that “the narrator, although he often speaks with

considerable authority, does not occupy a position of privilege within the text; possibly he may be as uncertain of the ‘meaning’ of his narrative as any of his readers” (74). She views the narrator as “a shape-shifter” and “a polyvocal character” who “takes a stance of omniscience one moment and is quite dark the next” (74). Her extensive analysis of this elusive figure, “contrived by the author outside it,” builds on a problem similar to the one explored in the second chapter of this project: namely, the responsibility of the narrator. For Herz ultimately wonders “if he [the narrator] is responsible for it [the story]?” (74). This question raises broader questions about modernist ethics, specifically in relation to undecidability. In other words, an examination of the narrator’s ethics in *A Passage to India* cannot finally provide a sound decision about the narrator’s involvement in the novel. To assign or “take” blame in this sense would mean establishing responsibility as “a moral-philosophical category through the context of judgment and justification of particular actions for which one is deemed ‘responsible’” (Thiem 4). That is, responsibility would lock the narrator’s actions into a binary logic (right/wrong) of which Forster seems to be suspicious if not critical. However, the consequences of the narrator’s radical disengagement from his responsibility can provide insight to Forster’s own ethical commitments to novelistic representation.

Forster’s strategy of deploying a separate narrative voice to manage the novel also evokes the problem of authorial presence and reader responsibility. Unlike Woolf’s narrator in *Jacob’s Room*, however, the narrator of *A Passage to India* seems neither concerned with nor anxious to attend to his responsibilities as storyteller. Indeed, the moments in which he does appear serve to build anticipation for some kind transcendent or revelatory experience by the novel’s end. It is as if the narrator’s disengagement will be given some explanatory force

wherein the various gaps and blanks will be filled. However, this disclosure never comes: the mystical qualities of the Marabar Hills remain mysterious; the entity that strikes the Nawab Bahadur's car as Ronnie and Adela break off their engagement receives no explanation; Adela's alleged "attack" persists as a literal gap in the text. The narrator's absence thus leaves the reader in a suspended state, that is, his withdrawal induces the reader's necessary involvement in the production of the novel's meaning. To this end, the reader cannot maintain a distanced stance toward the novel—she now becomes responsible for it. In light of contemporary ethical theory, Lawrence Buell explains such readerly responsibility in terms of "literature as the reader's other": "a work is an other in the form of a creative act for which readers are called to responsibility, to allow themselves to become engaged even to the point of being in a sense remade" (12). However, unlike older reader-response criticism—which privileges the reader's engagement with a text as a mode of "appropriation and reinvention"—the new ethics posits the reader's responsibility as a "conscienceful listening" (12). In other words, the reader remains in a state of suspension and finds herself vulnerable to the alterity of the text, much like "the unconcealing that goes on in the ethical hermeneutics of being open to [...] the truth of another person" (Gadamer qtd. in Buell 13). To decide the meaning or truth of the text, as in the case of another, requires patience and passivity: responsibility for the novel implies preserving indecision and uncertainty. Therefore, it might be said that the narrator's protracted absence is responsible in the sense that the decidability of the novel shifts to the reader.

CAVES

The narrator's (ir)responsibility comes into full view in the central episode of the novel, which concerns the expedition to the Marabar Caves where Adela is the alleged victim of an unspecified "insult." It begins with Fielding—who has agreed with Ronny to take "full responsibility" (119) for the trip—missing the branch-line train to the hills where the travel party will then climb to the caves. Agitated and scandalized, Aziz believes that "our expedition is a ruin" (123) only for Mrs. Moore to calm him down by suggesting that "[w]e shall be all Moslems together now, as you promised" (123). Along the way, while on elephant, Mrs. Moore, Adela, and Aziz engage in conversation about the history of the Moguls in India. Adela remarks that the Mogul emperor Akbar wanted to use religion "to embrace the whole of India" to which Aziz replies, "[y]ou keep your religion, I mine. That is the best. Nothing embraces the whole of India, nothing, nothing, and that was Akbar's mistake" (135). Adela's naiveté about the history of India—let alone the current political situation—becomes clear when she expresses her belief in a "universal brotherhood" that can overcome all political, racial, and cultural barriers (135). Realizing her error on the matter, Adela then shifts the discussion to the "Anglo-Indian difficulty" which involves her marriage to Ronny (135, 136). She states that [s]ome women are so—well, ungenerous and snobby about Indians, and I should feel too ashamed for words if I turned like them [...]" (135). Aziz, sensitive to the matter, feels insulted by the truth of Adela's observation but recovers himself as they arrive at the first cave. Here, the party and their retinue enter the "small black hole" (136) where Mrs. Moore panics and feels overwhelmed by "a terrifying echo" (137), an echo that Mrs. Moore recalls "Professor Godbole had never mentioned" (137).

At Mrs. Moore's behest, Aziz and Adela—with their guide in tow—continue the flight up the hills toward the caves. The narrator informs us Aziz “had never liked Miss Quested as much as Mrs. Moore, and had little to say to her [...]. Nor had Adela much to say to him” (141). But their mutual dislike for one another does not prevent them from engaging in small talk on the topic of marriage. When Adela asks Aziz if he has a wife, he responds affirmatively—despite the fact that his wife has died many years before—but feels overcome with resentment when she inquires if he has more than one wife. The narrator relates Aziz's thoughts through indirect speech: “The question shocked the young man very much. It challenged a new conviction of his community, and new convictions are more sensitive than old. If she had said, ‘Do you worship one or god or several?’ he would not have objected. But to ask an educated Indian Moslem how many wives he has—appalling, hideous!” (143). In order to collect himself, Aziz quickly enters a cave where he smokes a cigarette while pondering what to say when he rejoins Adela outside. When he exits the cave, he discovers that Adela has disappeared and admonishes the guide for not keeping watch for her: “[y]ou should have kept her in sight, it was your duty” (144). Frantically, Aziz searches for Adela, only to discover that “Miss Quested wasn't lost” (145) but instead has joined her friends in a motorcar at the base of the hills. As he starts back toward the camp at the first cave, he finds Adela's binoculars, “at the verge of a cave, halfway down an entrance tunnel,” with a broken leather strap (145). Finally, Aziz returns to the camp site where he runs into Fielding who, after inquiring after Adela, “felt at once that something had gone queer” (147). Aziz nonchalantly explains that “Miss Quested was always to do what she wished, it was our arrangement” (149). The scene ends with the Inspector of the Police arresting Aziz, though without explaining to Fielding or the travel party what charges have been set against him.

Numerous critics have addressed the events surrounding Adela's attack at the Marabar Caves, attempting to explain what happened in the interval between her inappropriate remark to Aziz (at the end of Chapter XV) and her flight from the caves (in Chapter XVI). Some have suggested that Adela suffers from sunstroke on her way up to the caves and thus imagines the incident. Others like Jo Ann Hoepfner Morgan read the incident as retaliation by religious devotees of the cave for Adela's "rape of the rock," that is, when she "scratched or struck the polished walls to raise an echo" (602). Morgan's account argues that Adela's perception of the attack as sexual must be understood within the context of her immediate preoccupation with marrying Ronny—when Adela realizes that she does not love Ronny and considers breaking off her engagement (for a second time)—as she follows Aziz to the upper caves. Other critics, by contrast, have not ventured to explain what happened to Adela inside the caves. Rather, they have turned their attention to Forster and asked why his narrator omitted the event itself in the final version of the novel. David Medalie, for example, devotes an entire chapter of *E. M. Forster's Modernism* to examining the manuscripts of *A Passage to India*. He shows that while in earlier versions of the novel "Adela is quite unambiguously attacked by someone" (175), the manuscript revisions reveal an "increasing propensity towards the secretiveness on the part of the narrative voice" (177). Yet while the narrator does temporarily withhold information from the reader throughout the novel—for instance, Mrs. Moore's death—he ultimately "cannot divulge [what happened to Adela in the Caves] for it does not know" (177). Thus, what appears to be "narrative guile" at certain moments in the novel turns out to be sheer ignorance with episode at the caves. For, as Medalie explains, not even the narrator can protect us from the gaps and voids in life.

The inconclusiveness of the “uneventful” event at the Marabar Caves—reified by the narrator’s absence—underscores the radical desire to know what happens. The caves themselves represent an affront to western epistemology as they negate pure, unmediated experience. Presented as an exception to Chandrapore in the first line of the novel, they eternally preside over the monotony and debased activity of human life. Their contradictory nature renders them irreducible and thus threatening to purveyors of rationalism. The narrator describes the caves as “like nothing else in the world, and a glimpse of them makes the breath catch” (116). They do not actively call attention to their presence, yet they interrupt “the endless expanse” (7) of the Indian landscape. Nor do the caves “bear [...] relation to anything dreamt or seen” (116), yet the narrator anthropomorphizes them as “a group of fist and fingers [that] are thrust up through the soil” (7). “[O]lder than all spirit” (116), the caves are represented as holy shrines, yet they expel all those who attempt to settle them—even the Buddha, who “shunned a renunciation more complete than his own, and has left no legend of struggle or victory in the Marabar” (116). The Buddha’s mistake: to domesticate the caves, to make them familiar through appropriation and settlement. That “no legend,” or trace, remains of the Buddha’s visit suggests the narrator’s desire remind us that order and meaning cannot be imposed, that is, because no evidence remains to corroborate it. In other words, no narrative or system of categorization can “seize” the experience of these “extraordinary caves” (7). Their inscrutability—but not because of their active resistance or inertness—involves universal indifference and certain mockery.

The interiority of the caves intensifies and reinforces the aporetic experience of those who visit. Circular and dark, with “most marvelously polished walls” (116), the inner chamber achieves “internal perfection” (117) compared to the rough walls of the manmade

tunnels leading inside. More so, the caves do not vary—their structure and pattern repeat infinitely, producing a sense of uncertainty and doubt. The narrator relates that the visitor thus “finds it difficult to discuss the caves, or to keep them apart in his mind, for the pattern never varies, and no carving, not even a bees’ nest or a bat, distinguishes one from the another. Nothing, nothing attaches to them, and their reputation—for they have one—does not depend on human speech” (116). Outside the reach of language, that is, beyond human intellect, the caves persist autonomously as they evade reification and signification. For instance, Aziz’s erroneous description of the caves to Adela earlier in the novel as “immensely holy” and “ornamented in someway” (68) is met with Professor Godbole’s refutation precisely because they do not even correspond to religious gnosis or aesthetic abstraction. Further, their mysteriousness provokes the narrator to muse on the existence of “certain chambers that have no entrances” (117), entertaining the notion that “[o]ne of them is rumoured within the boulder that swings on the summit of the highest of the hills; a bubble-shaped cave that has neither ceiling nor floor, and mirrors its own darkness in every direction infinitely” (117). This final image of the Kawa Dol, “empty as an Easter egg” (117), engenders “emptiness, the nothing that is so insistently elaborated and ‘confabulated’ through the text” (Herz 99). Void of meaning and possibility, the Kawa Dol shuns exteriority and denies cooptation.

Despite their mysteriousness, or rather because of their incomprehensibility, the caves excite Adela’s romantic imagination and prompt her ill-fated quest to see “the real India.” Yet, as noted above, her experience in the Marabar Hills never comes to light: she herself never quite knows what has taken place inside the caves. As Forster himself observes in *The Paris Review*, “[w]hen I began *A Passage to India* I knew that something important

happened in the Malabar [sic] Caves, and that it would have a central place in the novel—but I didn't know what it would be" (31). But that "something" never materializes in terms of a full disclosure: it remains incomprehensible and undecidable. For Forster, the caves "represented an area in which concentration can take place. A cavity. [...] They were something to focus everything up: they were to engender an event like an egg" (31). To fully appreciate what Forster means by "event" in this instance, it might be helpful to turn to Derrida who has elaborated on the concept of the event in terms of a disruptive, pure singularity that upon its occurrence refuses all comprehension. In "Autoimmunity: Real and Symbol Suicides," he claims that an event "should be so unforeseeable and irruptive that it disturbs even the horizon of the concept or essence on the basis of which we believe we recognize an event *as such*" (90). The event "resists experience" (96) because it exceeds the horizon of all knowledge, foresight, and possibility. For this reason, Derrida explains, "it escapes, remains evasive, open, undecided, indeterminable" (90 – 91). Yet, the double bind of the event materializes when, in the event's wake, those such as the English in *A Passage to India* seek meaningful explanations to what happened at the caves. Determination, interpretation, description, comprehension—all these occasion violence and injustice. For no explanation can thoroughly or totally apprehend the event itself or the aggregate of minor events leading to it.

Thus, to label Adela's experience in the caves as an "insult," an "assault," an "attack," or even "rape" means to appropriate the unanticipated and unknowable event in hindsight in order to supply a valid, meaningful elucidation. This event's interpretation, initially supplied by Mr. McBryde (the District Superintendent of Police) as series of "insulting advances" by Aziz, comes with almost no shock or surprise by the rest of the

British officers save Fielding. (157). When he addresses the Collector regarding the “mistake” in the matter, Mr. Turton sternly explains: “I have had twenty-five years’ experience in this country [...] and during those twenty-five years I have never known anything but disaster result when English people and Indians attempt to be intimate socially” (153). Though Mr. Turton does consider both parties at fault, the narrator reveals that “[h]e was still after facts, though the herd had decided on emotion” (154). More tellingly, the narrator states that “[i]t is impossible to regard a tragedy from two points of view, and, whereas Turton had decided to avenge the girl, [Fielding] hoped to save the man” (154). The inflexible British response—hardened by “[p]ity, wrath, heroism” (155)—both exacerbates the impossibility of knowing what happened to Adela and weakens an already fragile relationship between the two nations. More so, by the end of the novel, the event at the caves culminates in a series of interconnected and unjust consequences. Particularly, it precipitates the impossibility of an everlasting friendship between Aziz and Fielding.

By refusing to disclose full knowledge of the event at the Marabar caves, Forster (through his narrative surrogate) engages in an act of responsibility that throws *A Passage to India* into a crisis of representation. In a letter written in 1924 to his friend Dickinson, who had inquired about what happened to Adela at the caves, Forster responds:

In the caves it is *either* a man, *or* the supernatural, *or* an illusion. If I say, it becomes whatever the answer a different book. And even if I know! My writing mind therefore is a blur—i.e. I will it to remain a blur, and to be uncertain, as I am of many facts in daily life. This isn’t philosophy of aesthetics. It’s a particular trick I felt justified in trying because my theme was India. It sprang from my subject matter. I wouldn’t have attempted it in other countries, which though

they contain certain mysteries or muddles, manage to draw rings around them. Without the trick I doubt whether I could have got the spiritual reverberation going. I call it 'trick': but 'voluntary surrender to infection' better expresses my state. (qtd. in Stallybrass 26).

Forster's emphasis on the conjunctions "either" and "or" (twice), redoubled by his willed uncertainty, not only serves to undermine the decidability of the novel. The "trick" he purports to have justifiably played deconstructs experience itself and untethers the reader from what, in "Meaning and Sense," Levinas calls "the ontological order" (82). For Levinas, "[t]he ambivalence of meanings bears witness to a disorientation" that ultimately denies philosophy—and equally, art—from "reabsorb[ing] every Other into the Same and neutralize[ing] alterity" (90). In other words, to disrupt the order of meaning, as Forster does in *A Passage to India*, means a possibility of openness to difference, to the absolute other. But the other must remain unknowable, uncategorizable, beyond sense in order to endure as being wholly other. In terms of *A Passage to India*, this means that the reader can only persist at the margins of the novel—for she occupies an ethical subject position wherein responsibility means "preserving uncertainty and ambiguity in order to act in ethical ways" (Cuddy-Keane 210).

One of the fundamental problems to emerge from the novel's crisis of representation—and one that further complicates the reader's responsibility—concerns the "fragmentation" of character. Unlike many modernist novels that feature a central protagonist or deploy a central consciousness around which the text is organized, *A Passage to India* deploys multiple subject positions through its characters. In doing so, Forster's novel disrupts certainty about whose perception the reader ought to adopt. It thus seems that

Forster's narrative strategy involves fracturing a coherent, unified vision of the novel: this begins with the subject position of the narrator. As noted earlier, the unreliability of the modernist narrators contributes to the general "dehumanization" of master-narratives. For as Peter Sheehan has suggested, "[n]arrative works to the extent that it can replace contingency and uncertainty with necessity and inevitability. [...] Narrative compels initially through the creation of expectation, the production of possibility. It compels through what we might think is the opposing experience: the sense that its resolution, its final shape, could not be other than it is" (11 – 12). Without the full presence of the narrator to shape and unify it, the narrative becomes untenable. In turn, the reader must then look to the novel's characters for coherence, security, and assurance. However, Forster's splintering of character—redoubled by the myriad aporias in the structure and plot of the novel—suspends narrative closure in that the reader must choose a "passage" through which to make a final judgment about the text. The ethical dilemma this problem poses for the reader thus has at least two consequences: a) the reader reaches a point of impasse since she cannot ultimately adopt all subject positions simultaneously; and b) even if the reader could concurrently inhabit the minds of all characters in the same way realist narrators do, the characters themselves only have partial knowledge of the events constituting their reality in the novel.

An example of this problem in *A Passage to India* occurs in Chapter VIII during the scene of the car accident—an incident that in many ways prefigures and prepares the reader for Adela's "attack." It begins with the narrator's revelation that Adela has grown uneasy about marrying Ronny because "India had developed sides of his character that she had never admired" (74). She particularly finds Ronny's indifference toward fellow officers to be

a sign of his general air of superiority. More so, it is suggested that this attitude manifests as direct condescension when it involves her: “[t]he point she made was never the relevant point, her arguments conclusive but barren, she was reminded that he had the expert knowledge and she none, and that experience would not help her because she could not interpret it” (74). The narrator’s commentary presages the disclosure shortly thereafter that Adela “didn’t mean to stop in India. Which meant that she wouldn’t marry Ronny” (76). Before Adela and Ronny partake in the car ride along the Marabar road, this background information comes to the fore when Adela does in fact break off her engagement. A few moments later, the unengaged couple set out with the Nawab Bahadur when, “owing to a jolt,” Adela’s hand touches his “and a spurious unity descended on them, as local and temporary as the gleam that inhabits a firefly” (80). Almost immediately after this erotically-charged encounter, the Nawab Bahadur’s chauffeur loses control of the vehicle and swerves off the road.

The narrator’s staccato description of the incident—“An accident. A slight one. Nobody hurt. The Nawab Bahadur awoke” (81)—not only interrupts this “spurious unity” between Ronny and Adela. More importantly, it provides the reader with a factual account of what happened without supplying an explanation of its cause. Instead, the narrator temporarily disappears and leaves the characters to work out the problem for themselves. At first, an unnamed voice spontaneously exclaims, “[w]asn’t the bridge. We skidded,” which Adela rebuts by stating that “[w]e ran into an animal” (81). Ronny corroborates Adela’s claim, though neither one can initially agree what kind of animal hit the car—goat, buffalo, or hyena. However, when the couple investigates the animal’s tracks, the narrator suddenly intervenes and suggests that “[c]ertainly some external force had impinged, but the road had

been used by too many objects for any one track to be legible, and the torch created such high lights and black shadows that they could not interpret what it revealed. Moreover, Adela in her excitement knelt and swept her skirts about, until it was she if anyone who appeared to have attacked the car” (82). The double meaning of this passage could not be clearer. On the one hand, it demonstrates the narrator’s limited viewpoint—an omniscient narrator would know with certainty the direct cause of the accident. His attempt to deflect the reader’s attention onto Adela as a possible cause reinforces his unreliability because he cannot supply a simple answer to the problem. On the other hand, the narrator seems to reveal something about his story as such. Suffused with uncertainty, the accident mirrors the aporetic experience of reading *A Passage to India* as a whole. In other words, like the Marabar road, the “passage” that the reader follows in the novel has been rendered illegible not only by “too many objects” (multiple subject positions) but also by the “high lights and black shadows” (aporias, gaps, blanks) that render the narrative uninterpretable. Complicating matters, Ronny later introduces an alternative version of the accident to Mrs. Moore—one that he apparently had acquired from the Nawab Bahadur. He tells his mother that “[o]ur excellent host [the Nawab] awoke much rattled from his dreams, appeared to think it was our fault, and chanted Exactly, exactly” (88). Mrs. Moore infers from Ronny’s remark that the cause must have been a ghost. While the matter appears to have been put to rest, it briefly comes back up when Adela questions Ronny: “[w]hat made you call it a ghost?” (90). Ronny tellingly replies, “I couldn’t have been thinking of what I was saying” (90). Adela corrects him—reminding Ronny of the agreed upon explanation (hyena)—and the chapter comes to a close.

Stephen Ross, in his unpublished “Modernist Ethics, Critique, and Utopia,” reads

this episode in similar terms as those presented above. He suggests that in *A Passage to India*, “Forster actively toyed with the readerly desire for closure and stability, all the while both denying its fulfillment and critiquing the desire itself. With this strategy, equally formal, thematic, and critical, Forster and the modernists more generally force the reader into an ethical relationship with narrative itself” (11 – 12). In light of the car accident, Ross claims that Forster sets a “cunning trap” for the reader (15). It would seem that from his perspective Forster baits the reader into seeking a coherent version of the incident. Indeed, as Ross states, “a committed reader can produce a hermeneutically complete account by fusing the two accounts as twin halves of a dialectical whole” (15 – 16). This authorial trick, however, seeks to upend the reader’s commitment while simultaneously “inviting [her] to seek yet more unifying explanations” (17). For Ross, Forster’s strategy can be glimpsed in the twice repeated phrase “spurious unity” before the minor wreck. Not only does Forster bait the reader, argues Ross, he also seems to be warning her of the dangers involved in seeking a total and complete account. For “if [the reader] [is] to approach ethically that which remains ultimately unreadable,” he asserts, “then [she] [has] to resist the urge to supplement the characters’ explanations with anything ostensibly more stable, rational, complete, likely” (18). Notwithstanding his neglect of the narrator’s role, Ross corroborates the point that Forster’s responsibility involves withholding certainty and disrupting clear “passages” to India.

In the end, *A Passage to India* compels the reader to recognize that all unities are “spurious,” that is, that all explanations ultimately dissimulate their own contingencies and aporias. In the context of the car accident, the reader can adopt multiple subject positions that only provide in their own way myopic albeit individual truths. Thus, neither Adela’s nor

the Nawab's account can be wholly dismissed. In other words, both explanations seem plausible depending on the "logic" and perspective of the subject. What seems to frustrate and perhaps contradict the Nawab's version of what occurred on the Marabar road has less to do with his supernatural explanation than it does with the fact that he had been asleep when the accident happened. What he could have seen or known might be described as not only limited but perhaps as even fabricated. Yet as Ross observes, Forster "provides a discursive means of unifying the two apparently opposed versions of the cause of the accident" (15). For "hyena" in Greek means "female swine"—a reference Aziz makes with regard to the legend of "the savage pig on the Marabar road" (90).¹³ If this trivial event in the novel cannot reach a satisfying conclusion from the reader's perspective, then Adela's "attack" in the caves reaches a point of impassibility. That the reader cannot safely decide if Adela has falsified her allegations against Aziz—despite her claim that "I'm afraid I have made a mistake. [...] Dr Aziz never followed me into the cave" (215)—empties the experience of epistemological meaning. To be clear: something does happen to Adela inside the cave, but no one in the novel (including the narrator) seems to know what or by whom.

It thus does not seem a coincidence that the novel intimates sexual assault as the event which takes place in the extraordinary Marabar Hills. For Forster appears to suggest that the only way "passage" can be ever made is by unsolicited violation. Put another way, reading practices that emphasize interpretation in the form of imposition—such as filling in narrative blanks—engage in a metaphorical act of rape. The irony of this situation occurs in novel when the British impose their interpretation of Adela's "attack" as sexual assault. She may not have been raped by Aziz, but she "is" by her fellow countrymen when they attempt

¹³ Ross rightly suggests that the etymological link between hyena and "savage pig" can only be understood from the reader's viewpoint since Aziz does not know that Adela and Ronny have ascribed a hyena to the crash.

to foist a false narrative on event. To prevent this unwanted, violent entry the reader must cultivate practices that maintain “a dwelling in between questionableness and answerability, between the uncertain and the ‘ought’” (Cuddy-Keane 217). In other words, textual aporias—like political and social impasses—cannot and should be resolved by force. To read responsibly, then, means to accept and even uphold interpretive impasses rather than cross them. For, as Derrida reminds us, “[t]here is no decision nor responsibility without the test of aporia or undecidability” (“Intellectual Courage”).

Conclusion



Disruption

In this dissertation, I examined three British modernist novels and argued that modernism was an ethical “project” engaged in problems of responsibility. The underlying premise of my analysis—that modernists consciously disrupted the conventions of nineteenth-century realism—initiated a discussion about modernist practices particularly concerned with ethical modes of narrative representation. I additionally argued that modernist writers developed an innovative array of techniques and styles that responded to the myriad moral dilemmas and social transformations of early twentieth-century life. In particular, I asserted that modernists designed multiple strategies of narrative disruption in order to avoid “representational violence” as it pertains to appropriating “the world’s surprising variety, its complexity and mysteriousness, its flawed and imperfect beauty” (Nussbaum 3). In other words, modernist practitioners not only sought out to “invent” new methods of representation. They did so with a view to defer as much as possible the violent, appropriative effects of narration. My analysis showed that modernists actively cultivated ethical writing practices which put them at odds with realist narrative techniques—techniques that reduced and assimilated the unknown other to the intelligible world of knowledge and perception. In this way, I claimed, modernist responsibility—insofar as it relates to ethical representation—involves a deeply irresponsible “break” with many familiar aspects of fiction that had dominated since at least the eighteenth century.¹ This “break,” however, resulted in a number of critical problems germane to the concept of responsibility

¹ Peter Childs lists some of these aspects: “narrative authority and reliability, a contemporary setting, representative locations, ordinary speech, linear plots and extensive use of free indirect discourse” (81).

itself.

One of the central problems concerning modernist fiction, especially the novel, involves the act of “taking” responsibility. Modernist writers often deflected their authority by deploying narrators to assume control of and give shape to their stories. Unlike narrators of past novels, these narrators almost always have a limited or partial understanding of the worlds they attempt to depict and the characters they strive to represent. Thus, many modernist narrators can be regarded as unreliable despite their responsibility to provide accurate and comprehensive accounts of the events and characters constituting their stories. This unreliability, I claimed, undermines the omniscience and “master-voice” of authors “whose accents [...] [unify] the world in a single interpretive center” (D. A. Miller 25). This particular issue especially preoccupies *Jacob's Room*, as Woolf all but absconds from her story and leaves her narrator to complete the task of representing Jacob Flanders. Of course, the narrator can neither exist nor perform her duties without the control or design of Woolf (the novel's Author-God). However, Woolf's narrative strategy seems to involve “loosening” the power of the author as such. In other words, she effectively removes her own authorial presence as the source of the novel's meaning. In doing so, Woolf disrupts the possibility of assigning responsibility for the text, that is, she limits the means by which readers can locate a moral or theological “ground” upon which meaning can be determined. In turn, as the “benefactor” of authority, Woolf's narrator endures the burden of responsibility as she attempts to structure and delimit the parameters of Jacob's life. Her newfound agency results in anxiety and reticence as she attends to the ethical obligation of representing the life of an other who, she reveals at the end of the novel, has died in the Great War. The narrator's distress about her responsibility—in the absence of an authorial moral center—manifests in

the porous, crepuscular form of her narrative. The novel's fragmentary form, in other words, can be attributed to her uncertainty about how to respectfully represent Jacob's singularity.

By contrast, the narrator in *A Passage to India* evades responsibility altogether. Forster, I endeavored to show, exacerbates the problem of responsibility by utilizing a narrator whose conspicuous absence only fuels the critical search for a moral center to secure, verify, and complete the text. In this way, Forster's narrator displaces responsibility onto the reader, whose "birth" comes at the expense of author's "death"—if not by the narrator's own evasiveness.² The narrative voice that Forster elects to take command of the story intermittently presents itself, only to fade or blend into the background. The resulting narrative gaps, blanks, impasses, lacunae comprising *A Passage to India* thus point to the narrator's irresponsibility inasmuch as they call the reader to action, for the reader "cannot help but try to and supply the missing links that will bring the schemata together in an integrated gestalt" (Iser 186). However, like Woolf's narrator, the reader faces the terrible burden of choice. With neither an author nor a narrator on which to guarantee interpretive certainty, the reader is condemned to freedom, as it were, and enjoined to the maddening task of decision-making. She alone must assume responsibility for the meaning of the novel—a novel destabilized at the expense of the narrator's detachment. The ethical import of shifting this responsibility from the narrator to the reader thus involves the interminable experience of undecidability. It might be said that the multiple aporias in the novel, "as they withhold their references [...] help to dislocate the reader's normal expectations of language, and [the reader] finds that [s]he must reformulate a formulated text if [s]he is to be able to absorb it" (185). Yet this "absorption" never occurs—and the reader remains "dislocated,"

² At the end of "Death of the Author" (1968), Roland Barthes remarks that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (148).

as she never fully possesses mastery over the text as such.

This experience of dislocation resonates with similar problems of the “self” that preoccupy and overwhelm characters in many modernist novels. Their search for unmediated experiences—perhaps best exemplified by Adela Quested’s desire to see the “real” India—culminate in failure in the sense that they cannot escape the trappings of the world at-large, the world of otherness. Modernist characters such as those featured in Lawrence’s fiction seek total solitude from the demands of everyday life only to discover themselves reinscribed in the company of others. Whether Birkin in *Women in Love* or Lou Witt in *St. Mawr*, Lawrence’s protagonists express a naïve desire to retreat from their familial and social responsibilities in order to realize their unfettered, authentic selves. Yet however much these characters prize autonomy, they continually discover that they cannot do without the help of, friendship with, or hospitality by others. Their dislocation thus becomes a literal state of being (they often run away from home) as well as a metaphor for their failed struggle to achieve complete autonomy. In this way, as Levinas argues, “[t]o be an I then signifies not to be able to slip away from responsibility” (“Trace of the Other” 353). The encounter with any other always already establishes an ethical relation from which the “I” cannot escape.³ In other words, from a Levinasian perspective, no retreat can wholly sever the subject from the other. For the subject must respond to the demand demanded of it. Thus, it might be said that the very basis of subjectivity can only be established by a “call” to responsibility—a “call” that incessantly haunts and burdens the subject.

This experience, as I explored in *Aaron’s Rod*, ultimately subverts the subject’s desire

³ Levinas claims that “escape is the need to get out of oneself, that is, to break that most radical and unalterably binding of chains, the fact that the I [*moi*] is oneself [*soi-même*]” (*Escape* 55).

for self-sufficiency: it disrupts the “ideal of peace and equilibrium presupposed by the sufficiency of being” (Levinas, *On Escape* 51).⁴ Aaron’s restlessness throughout the novel, as Steven Vine has suggested, “refutes the idea that the self is a fixed or a given entity” (Vine xxvi). But what animates Aaron’s uneasiness has less to do with his self’s “blossoming” than it does with his multiple encounters with others—despite his desire to attain solitude (xxvi). Aaron fails to cut himself off from others and comes to accept that his responsibility originates in a “dark, living, fructifying power” that displaces “the old leaves, [and welcomes] the inception of the new” (AR 29 – 98). In other words, he learns that he cannot be alone, that he must let go of past conceptions of autonomous selfhood because they ultimately deny the circumambience and plenitude of life. As he explains to Lilly at the end of the novel: “[b]ut you talk [...] as if we were like trees, alone by ourselves in the world. We aren’t. If we love, it needs another person than ourselves. And if we hate, and even if we talk” (297). Lilly urges Aaron “to submit to the greater soul of man,” yet Aaron hesitates and, in the final lines of the novel, wonders “[...] whom shall I submit to?” (299). Lilly’s response—“[y]our soul will tell you”—only frustrates the decidability of Lawrence’s conclusion (299). Aaron remains unconvinced that he ought to submit to anyone or anything. Aaron has neither been consciously embraced his “call” to responsibility nor decided to return home. Thus, the uncertainty of Aaron’s fate parallels the ambiguity of the novel’s conclusion—the lack of resolution frustrates the promise of “taking” responsibility, either by the reader or by the novel’s protagonist.

⁴ In “Trace of the Other,” Levinas reformulates this disruption: “The putting into question of the self is precisely the welcome of the absolute other” (353).

In the final analysis, the clash between modernists' fidelity to new modes of representation and their commitment to self-critique can be glimpsed in the fragmentation of their narratives.⁵ For modernist practitioners of the novel, narrative representation had to become almost anti-representational in order to responsibly respond to the demands of the other. Such a response, in other words, endeavored to give voice and expression to the unknown, uncanny other who—despite having been silenced or misrepresented by past (pre-modernist) narrative strategies—always already patrols the margins of representation. In *Modernism, Narrative, and the Novel*, Peter Sheehan claims that “[m]odernist narrative suggests that literature can pass beyond the limits of what is representable” (16). And he wonders why modernists, who engaged in a critique of humanist thought, did not totally abandon narrative form. He argues that “anthropological self-importance is more effectively undermined by being taken apart from within” (16), that is, that modernist representational strategies “strike at the human where it is most vulnerable, most prone to damage—in the forms and ways of understanding that are exclusive to narrative” (17). In short, the self can be best put into question not only by exposing its limitations and contingencies but also by revealing the self's relation to the superabundant world. In this reading, the “crisis” of literary modernism ultimately results from “a loss of narrativity”—a loss that, for Sheehan, shaped the various theories of postwar antihumanism (19).

⁵ Similarly, Peter Gay claims in *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy*, modernist writers made “a commitment to a principled self-scrutiny” (2) despite their general “conviction that the untried is markedly superior to the familiar, the rare to the ordinary, the experimental to the routine” (4).

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