

SQUATTERS, VAMPIRES, AND PERSONALITIES: STAGING NARRATION IN THE
LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY

By

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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“Squatters, Vampires, and Personalities” argues that modern drama emerged through convergences of multiple genres, narration, and dramatic form during the late nineteenth century. My dissertation is a work of historical formalism that shows how formal elements combine with the conditions of theatrical production and publication to produce new forms of drama. Recent scholarship across literary studies has returned to considerations of form inflected by the lessons of historicism and various forms of literary theory, but this “formalist turn” has not yet spurred reconsideration of the overarching narratives of dramatic development. My work on George Eliot, Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, and Oscar Wilde uses genre as a historically specific way of studying form and supplies a new understanding of dramatic modernism’s engagement with interiority and epic.

I argue that modern drama demands an intergeneric critical approach; thus, I juxtapose drama with narrative fiction and criticism from the Victorian and modernist canon. The generic shifts of Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), for example, set up a relationship between interiority, narration, dramatic form, and external circumstances against which I position the

narrator types—squatters, vampires, and personalities—that structure my dissertation. I call Ibsen’s characters squatters because they illegitimately occupy other people’s homes (the domestic interiors on the stage) by rhetorically inserting themselves into the past lives of present residents. The play and novel characters that Strindberg calls vampires also attempt to control the environments they inhabit through performative narration, draining people, households, and linguistic conventions of vitality and meaning in the process. In Wilde’s plays, fiction, and essays, this movement across formal and social conventions is embodied in narrator, critic, and dandy characters through which Wilde articulates and performs the project of “realizing personality”—a paradoxical quest for a self that constructs people out of (and in resistance to) artistic genres. Thus, my dissertation moves from a novelistic character who approaches the world-altering powers of a narrator, to stage characters who narrate, to characters who are produced by onstage narration. Through these characters’ relationships to language and the material stage my dissertation yields a new history of dramatic form.

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Table of Contents

Abstract of the Dissertation	ii
Acknowledgments	iv
Introduction: Historical Formalism and the Emergence of Modern Drama	1
Chapter 1: A World Outside: Generic Collisions in <i>The Mill on the Floss</i>	14
Chapter 2: Ibsen's Squatters	51
Chapter 3: Strindberg's Vampires	123
Chapter 4: Wilde's Personalities	191
Bibliography	259

Introduction

Historical Formalism and the Emergence of Modern Drama

“And though I have tried not to, I still see only the conventions of the time in what others maintain are enduring laws....I believe [these ideas] are in harmony with my general outlook, and that my understanding of art will develop along these lines.”

—Ibsen in Rome, September 16, 1864

In 1864, when Henrik Ibsen was writing the epic poem that became *Brand* (1866), he arrived at a historicized understanding of form. Like George Eliot’s Dorothea, Ibsen is unprepared for Rome and its ancient art; he “cannot make out its relation to our own times” (Ibsen, *Letters* 36-37). Unlike Dorothea, Ibsen translates his alienation into consciousness of historically contingent artistic conventions and, subsequently, into a formally revolutionary modern drama.

“Squatters, Vampires, and Personalities” argues that modern drama emerged through convergences of multiple genres, narration, and dramatic form during the late nineteenth century. My dissertation is a work of historical formalism that contributes to the history of dramatic modernism by showing how formal elements combine with the conditions of theatrical production and publication at the end of the nineteenth century to produce new forms of drama. Through a renovated formalism that examines genre as a historically specific way of studying form, my work on George Eliot, Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, and Oscar Wilde supplies a new understanding of dramatic modernism’s engagement with interiority and epic.

I build on and depart from the early to mid-twentieth-century scholarship that in some ways still dominates critics’ understanding of modern drama’s emergence, despite (and because of) theater studies’ movement away from formalism and genre studies in favor of cultural and performance studies. Martin Puchner, whose work on closet drama and post-Wagnerian theater is

among several recent studies to return to considerations of dramatic form and genre, identifies “two competing histories” of generic development, “one that tells of an increasing absorption of drama (and poetry) by the novel and one that describes the increasing use made of narrative elements, in particular narrative diegesis, by modern drama” (Puchner 82). These competing histories, which overlap substantially in the work of Georg Lukács, Peter Szondi, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Raymond Williams, point to the interpenetration of genres and modes during this period. In *The Historical Novel* (1937) Lukács argues that naturalist dramas are “novelized” by “characters who serve only to illustrate the social milieu for the spectator (96). Another aspect of Lukács’s novelized drama, of which Ibsen is a central example, has to do with “whether a person can express himself immediately and completely through a deed” (123). For Lukács dramatic form requires expression through immediate action, whereas novelistic form is about gradual growth, change, or revelation (Lukács 123-124). The interpenetration of dramatic and novelistic form is “particularly visible in nineteenth century literature,” with Goethe and Schiller as founding figures in the “reciprocal influence” of these forms (Lukács 124).

Szondi draws on Lukács’ work in *Theory of the Modern Drama* (1956). For Szondi, capital-D “Drama,” a distinct formal and historical category, is constituted by interpersonal relationships as they develop in character dialogue (5-6). According to Szondi, Drama arose in Elizabethan England and developed further in seventeenth-century France and the German classical period, a definition that excludes medieval and classical drama. Also excluded are “modern theatrical works” characterized by epic form; these works “develop out of and away from the Drama” (Szondi 5). For Lukács epic is a lost form from a “presubjectivist period” that embodies a social totality; this wholeness is impossible in the modern world, which is represented in the novel (Szondi x). But Szondi’s epic drama is not about wholeness so much as

fracture, for modern drama in his view is characterized by the impossibility of a pure Drama constituted entirely by character dialogue. Szondi's use of "epic...designates a common structural characteristic of the epos, the story, the novel, and other genres—namely, the presence of that which has been referred to as the 'subject of the epic form' or the 'epic *I*'" (Szondi 6). The epic *I* is essentially a narrator who is the subject of his own story, and the epic trajectory of modern drama, as Szondi sees it, has more to do with the novel than with traditional epic.¹ But because Szondi sees modern drama as an expertly constructed failure during a historical period that is "hostile" to Drama, he tends not to pursue the formally generative properties of the epic *I*; nor does he consider modern drama in terms of the heterogeneous formal properties of the *fin de siècle* novel (Szondi 18).²

Bakhtin discusses the novelization of other genres in *The Dialogic Imagination* (1930s), though he de-historicizes the novel in the process. According to Bakhtin, when exposed to the novel, other genres "become more free and flexible, their language renews itself by incorporating extraliterary heteroglossia and the 'novelistic' layers of literary language, they become dialogized, permeated with laughter, irony, humor, elements of self-parody and finally...an indeterminacy" (Bakhtin 7). Any literature that engages with multiple discourses, that has become self-conscious and self-ironizing, has been novelized. For Bakhtin, the novel as it relates to other genres is an anti-genre that rejuvenates other genres by eroding their purity. In contrast to Bakhtin, I see the novel as a historically specific genre. But his conception of the play between dialogized layers of literary language is a useful way to think about modern drama, if the play between layers is revised and extended to include not only language, but also staging and performance.

¹ At times Szondi uses the term "narrator" in place of "epic *I*"; see for example pages 10, 37.

² On the limitations of Szondi's approach see also Bennett 7-9.

In *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* (1968) Raymond Williams tracks the relations between “conventions and structures of feeling” (Williams 16). Williams cites “the necessity of tradition—convention as tacit consent—and at times the equal necessity of experiment, from the development of new modes of feeling, and from the perception of new or rediscovered technical means—convention as dramatic method” (Williams 16). Williams’ structures of feeling have to do with formal as well as historical senses of convention; that is, with formal change in relation to what an audience will accept or agree to watch. The naturalist structure of feeling that revolutionized modern drama, Williams adds, is the “dramatic tension...between what men feel themselves capable of becoming, and a thwarting, directly present environment” (Williams 335). Ibsen, Strindberg, and Wilde—in different ways and with different results—make character the medium for narration that produces (or fails to produce) an agreement in opposition to environment. The narrated agreements these dramatists’ characters (fail to) produce are attempts to alter the oppositional worlds they inhabit, which frequently are represented by realistic interior sets. Ibsen’s drama imbues these sets with metatheatrical and sinister properties, and as the realist cycle develops his characters increasingly leave staged domestic interiors behind. Strindberg marks his transition from naturalism to expressionism with an increasingly fluid relationship between the material and the metaphorical, with the result that in his late drama the material set responds to character narration by burning down or fading away. Wilde’s sets, on the other hand, remain mimetic; the characters’ self-constituting narration empties the sets of ideological authority even as it relies on their material solidity.

I argue that modern drama’s convergence with narration is a nexus of formal change that demands an intergeneric critical approach. In contrast to traditional accounts of epic form in modern drama, I juxtapose drama with narrative fiction and criticism—often by the dramatists

themselves and by powerful formal thinkers in the Victorian and modernist canon. My project thus contributes not only to the field of modern drama, but also to the study of genre and the Victorian and modernist novel. My account of drama's engagement with narration provides a counterpart to work on theatricality in the novel by Joseph Litvak, J. Jeffrey Franklin, Emily Allen, and David Kurnick. Kurnick notes that theater often plays a "figurative role" in prior critics' work on theatricality the novel, and instead takes a "demetaphorized" approach to the actual substance of theater and its importance to the novel form (Kurnick 6). Existing criticism on epic form and the novelization of drama suffers from a similar lack of attention to the actual novels written by dramatists, and I also take concrete and specific approach to the models of narration afforded by dramatists who wrote novels and prose fiction. But my project is not predicated on whether or not dramatists wrote novels; rather, I am interested in how dramatists deploy narration to mediate and alter the relationship between language, dramatic character, and the material set in order to create new forms of drama.

This focus emphasizes and responds to some major differences between dramatic and novelistic modes of presentation, and also to differences in the criticism that treats drama and novels. Though material culture and the relationship between character and environment are hugely important to nineteenth-century novel studies, materiality, environment, and character in the novel must be represented and analyzed through language. Theatrical characters and environments, on the other hand, are also represented corporeally and materially, though they must be imagined and/or reconstructed in relation to the study of dramatic literature. Attention to this difference and resistance to the New Criticism-inflected idea that theatrical performance attempts to reproduce or interpret dramatic texts has led drama criticism away from

considerations of literary form and toward historicist and performance studies approaches.³

Although recent scholarship across literary studies has returned to considerations of form while benefitting from historical and theoretical approaches, this “formalist turn” has not yet spurred reconsideration of the overarching narratives of dramatic development. My account of narration by characters is the way to approach this reconsideration because of its literary-historical specificity, flexibility, and capacity for mediating between and against material and performative modes of theatrical and literary production.

I reconsider early criticism on the so-called novelization of drama with attention to specific models of narration, the historical conditions of the material stage, and theatrical performance. In so doing I also build on work by more recent drama and genre scholars who have nonetheless not attempted the sort of integrative formal history I undertake. Although recent decades have seen some criticism (most notably by Brian Richardson) on narration and narrators in drama, much of this work remains within the purview of narratology.⁴ Martin Puchner’s account of “modernist diegesis” is closer to my understanding of stage narration. Though his primary focus is on closet drama, Puchner notes that in modernist drama “[c]haracters, objects, and events that are already mimetically present are suddenly confronted with modes of diegesis that project onto the mimetic space their own version of it” (Puchner 25). Puchner locates this diegetic theater in a Platonic (rather than Aristotelian and mimetic) tradition, whereas I focus on more immediate literary-historical contexts in the narrators of nineteenth-century and *fin de siècle* prose fiction (Puchner 25). Additionally, Puchner sees in this diegesis “a productive resistance to the theater,” where what is produced is “a new form of theater” that

³ On the history of performance theory and performance studies in relation to dramatic literature see Worthen 17-18, 52-56, 64-93. See also *Modern Drama: Defining the Field*, edited by Ric Knowles, Joanne Tompkins, and Worthen.

⁴ On narration and narrators in drama, from characters that perform framing functions, to authorial personae who produce stage directions, see for example Richardson (1988, 1997, 2001, 2007), Monika Fludernik (Pier and García Landa 2008), Ansgar Nünning and Roy Sommer (Pier and García Landa 2008), Michael Issacharoff (1989), Patricia A. Suchy (1991), Marvin Carlson (1991), and Manfred Jahn (2001).

folds mimesis “back into the literary either as text or as diegetic speech” (Puchner 27). But in staged (and particularly naturalist) drama this folding of mimesis into the literary frequently does not occur, and the plays instead leave audiences to consider the semantic gaps between mimetic staging and diegetic formulations of character. When viewed through Ibsen, Strindberg, and Wilde (as distinct from but overlapping with Puchner’s stable of Wagner, Mallarmé, Joyce, Stein, Yeats, Brecht, and Beckett), I argue, this new form of theater looks less like closet drama per se and more like a convergence of many genres and modes—some literary and some not—that cluster in and around changing conceptions of character and language.

In working out these formulations of character and language I focus on drama as texts for reading and for performance. W.B. Worthen’s recent book *Drama* suggests bringing literary and performance studies approaches into closer dialogue, drawing on J.L. Austin’s speech act theory: “Despite the apparent impact of ‘performativity and performance’ in literary studies, reopening the territory between dramatic and performance studies requires a considerably more vigorous contestation of the ‘literary’ dimension of drama, in which doing things *with* words resists the sense that it’s the *words* that are doing the *doing*” (Worthen 69, emphasis in original). Worthen’s transhistorical emphasis is on writing and/in performance, whereas I make a historical argument about formal development. My focus on narrators is part of the literary-historical aspect of this argument, since I am writing about a period that increasingly featured novelistic experimentation with multiple character narration. (Thus, while I do not disagree with Puchner’s account of the importance of Platonic dialogue form to this period—it is especially relevant to Wilde—novelistic multiple character narration also developed from and in many forms that were quite distant from Plato, including the epistolary novel, for example.) My work on narrators in drama approaches language as action tethered to character, where characters are by turns linguistic

agents—personae who do things with words—and products of their own and other people's words, performances, and environments. My account of stage narration does not only construct and deconstruct character; it also functions in dialogue and in tension with physical performance, material settings, and formal conventions across genres, modes, and media.

My first chapter focuses on George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), in which the protagonist's incompatibility with the realist world she inhabits triggers a generic shift: what begins as a novel ends as melodramatic tragedy. The novel is unique in Eliot's writing because its opening frames the omniscient narrator and the protagonist as versions of each other, and also as versions of Eliot. Eliot undertakes this experimentation with character and narrative form at a historical moment that also saw drama beginning to experiment with realism. I discuss Eliot's novel in terms of the varied ways narration represents consciousness, constructs internal and external worlds, and incorporates diverse genres and modes during the late nineteenth century. The novel's ending, which shifts radically from realism to melodramatic tragedy, is also the point at which its heroine comes closest to wielding the powers of a narrator. The galvanizing moment for this generic shift occurs when the heroine wishes for death and the physical environment seems to respond to her emotions and will in the form of a massive flood. Narration has the power to change the conditions and meaning of reality, and Eliot was alive to the possibilities of intergeneric effects in enacting such changes. Through narrative form, Eliot sets up a relationship between interiority, narration, dramatic form, and external circumstances against which I position the narrator types—squatters, vampires, and personalities—that structure my dissertation.

Though Ibsen experimented with several dramatic and poetic forms, he did not write novels aside from a rapidly abandoned frame story, *The Prisoner at Akershus*, early in his career

(Meyer 49). Nonetheless, in Ibsen's realist prose plays, properties of narration make their way into the mouths of particular characters, and therefore into the language that constitutes the world of the play in conjunction—and often in tension—with a generally mimetic material stage. While some of the most formally sophisticated examples of narration during the late nineteenth century are (unsurprisingly) to be found in the novel, my understanding of narration and narrators is not strictly bound to the influence of the novel genre. Rather, narrators are characters for whom language and storytelling are forms of action that construct and appropriate representations of reality for and from themselves and others. These spoken actions place narrator characters in peculiar relations to the temporal experience of dramatic action and the semantic authority of the mimetic stage. I call Ibsen's characters squatters because they illegitimately occupy other people's homes (the domestic interiors on the stage) by rhetorically inserting themselves into the past lives of present residents. For example, in *The Wild Duck* (1884) Gregers Werle talks his way into the Ekdal family's home and history, infiltrating and redeploying their rhetoric in a way that beaks up the already tenuous family unit. The play's eponymous wild duck, which is both the subject of a spoken story and a visually obscured stage presence, spurs a convergence of narration and theater that casts dramatic speech itself as squatting. Though the play posits a relational formulation of character through Hedvig—a foundling without an origin story, rather than a squatter—Ibsen quickly forecloses this possibility by removing Hedvig from the stage and replacing her body with reductive narrated accounts of the preceding and future action. The play thus ironically models the squatting narration it rejects.

By asserting ownership over representations of reality squatters contravene traditional readings of Ibsen's plays as attempts to represent interiority and distance dramatic character from its Aristotelian alignment with plot. *Rosmersholm* (1886) is a staged ghost story, where the ghost

is a narrated but never staged character. The play pits its upwardly mobile squatter, Rebecca West, against the conservative ideology of the Rosmer ancestral home, which is materially represented by the interior set. Through narrative squatting, the play presents a formulation of dramatic character that attempts to draft realist staging practices into the service of politically radical ends. Though the conservative house proves stronger than the radical characters, the play succeeds in the formally radical project of troubling the Aristotelian understanding of character as “subsidiary to the actions” (Aristotle). *The Master Builder* (1892) widens the gap between character and plot through Ibsen’s most successful squatter, Hilda Wangel, whose narrated version of past events triumphs without being endorsed by the play. Although Ibsen is typically credited with developing a technique for producing interiority in drama, his later plays move outdoors and away from domestic interiors. *The Master Builder* in particular abandons the searches for motives and coherent back-stories that seem so urgent to the characters of *The Wild Duck* and *Rosmersholm*. The play replaces this search for motive with a narrated consensus that eventually breaks off from the semantic authority—and the staged action—of the material set. The rhetorical and characterological practice of squatting shows how aligning psychological interiority with domestic interiors is not only psychologically oppressive, but is also formally sterile.

The characters that Strindberg calls vampires also attempt to control the environments they inhabit through performative acts of narration, draining people, households, and linguistic conventions of vitality and meaning in the process. Strindberg describes his writing as explicitly intergeneric, going so far as to claim that his novels and stories are “plays in epic form” that are meant to be staged as well as read. (Strindberg’s understanding of epic is most closely linked to the novel, in contrast to Ibsen, for whom the epic poem fed into closet drama, and subsequently

into prose realism.) What Strindberg likes about character narrators is their potential to facilitate movement across worlds—to escape, destroy, and transcend the social and formal structures that produce them. To narrate one’s way into fame, professional success, or domesticity, for Strindberg, is to become a vampire who sustains his own fictional world and, at times, his physical life, by draining others of vitality and meaning. The importance of epic form to Strindberg’s naturalist and expressionist drama (and the work of the many modern dramatists he influenced) is well known; however, unlike existing studies of Strindberg’s drama, I also engage closely with his formally heterogeneous novels: *The Red Room* (1879) and *Black Banners* (1907) both shift from third-person omniscient narration to, in their final chapters, multiple first-person narrators. The vampire characters in these novels are authors and actors who possess some of the world-altering abilities of omniscient narrators; at the same time, the vampires are pointedly excluded from the narration by characters at which the novels arrive.

Strindberg’s novelistic treatment of vampirism and narration casts new light on the forms of his plays. In *Miss Julie* (1888), *The Dance of Death* (1900) (which Strindberg considered titling “The Vampire”), and *The Ghost Sonata* (1907), I argue, the vampire is a formally generative, thematically parasitic agent of epic form. Strindberg’s vampires sustain themselves with language rather than blood, and the forms they use to drain their victims are inextricable from the epic narration Strindberg explicitly adapts and develops in his dramaturgy. As Strindberg transitions from naturalist to expressionist drama, character narration takes on the ability to impact the physical world of the stage, both through the bodies of the characters (who shrivel and die as vampires speak to them) and through the material set (which, in *The Ghost Sonata*, literally fades away). If in Ibsen’s realist plays characters tend to sicken, die, and lose or

leave their houses after extended exposure to narrative squatters, in Strindberg's drama the links between vampiric narrators, actors' bodies, and the material set become explicit.

The words that describe Wilde's characters also describe performative positions he occupied in late Victorian society: storyteller, critic, and dandy. By writing through and about these personae Wilde attempts the project of "realizing personality," a quest for a self that is both constructed by the individual and connected to prefiguring types in history and art. For Wilde, realizing personality involves a parodic historicism exemplified in "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." (1889), a short story that is also a critical essay in which the central theory hinges on proving the existence of an imaginary actor. In "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." the positions of narrator, protagonist, and literary critic converge to perform Wilde's theory of personality on the level of form. The formal functions of these personae are also common to Wilde's dandies, who in *Vera* (1880), *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), *An Ideal Husband* (1895), and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) personify the movement across genres and modes that characterizes Wilde's writing, and particularly his drama. These genres cluster around and in resistance to dandies whose formally generative properties exist in tension with mimetic staged interiors. In *The Importance of Being Earnest* the parodic historicism of Wilde's critic and dandy characters becomes a collectively endorsed narrative effort toward producing a person, Ernest. In *Salome*, on the other hand, the parasitic properties of character narration are dominant, and Wilde departs from the realistic set that characterizes most of his plays. If in *The Importance of Being Earnest* Wilde's characters narrate a character into embodied existence, in *Salome* a voice becomes a body that is subsequently disassembled through beheading.

Thus, my dissertation moves from a novelistic character who approaches the world-altering powers of a narrator, to stage characters who narrate, to characters who are curious

products and casualties of onstage narration. This movement suggests the value of examining Wilde's personalities alongside Ibsen's squatters and Strindberg's vampires. Wilde's role in the emergence of modern drama is often downplayed; however, my work shows how he takes distrust of the mimetic interiors that are endemic to modern drama to the next level by explicitly rejecting mimetic formulations of character. For Wilde, as for Ibsen and Strindberg, narration—a formal tool ubiquitously used to move between interior and exterior worlds throughout the nineteenth century—is the vehicle for this transformed notion of dramatic character and of dramatic form. In linking Eliot, Ibsen, Strindberg, and Wilde through their engagement with narration across genres, my dissertation yields a new history of dramatic form.

Chapter 1

A World Outside: Generic Collisions in *The Mill on the Floss*

George Eliot begins *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) by establishing a link between herself, her narrator, and her protagonist, and by demonstrating that the affinity between them has the power to bend the reality of the novel. The first paragraph describes a view of the Floss, the river that runs through the novel and the life of its protagonist. At the end of this paragraph the narrator announces her presence in the first person: "It seems to me like a living companion while I wander along the bank and listen to its low placid voice, as to the voice of one who is deaf and loving. I remember those large dipping willows. I remember the stone bridge" (*Mill* 7). The narrator is simultaneously in the scene and remembering it, both present and reflecting upon a familiar past. She then takes up a position on the bridge, with a view of Dorlcote Mill. It is here that the first two shifts in the novel's already ambiguous reality occur. As the narrator watches the mill, she observes:

That little girl is watching it too: she has been standing on just the same spot at the edge of the water ever since I paused on the bridge....It is time the little playfellow went in, I think; and there is a very bright fire to tempt her: the red light shines out under the deepening grey of the sky. It is time, too, for me to leave off resting my arms on the cold stone of this bridge...[sic]

Ah, my arms are really benumbed. I have been pressing my elbows on the arms of my chair, and dreaming that I was standing on the bridge in front of Dorlcote Mill, as it looked one February afternoon many years ago. Before I dozed off, I was going to tell you what Mr and Mrs Tulliver were talking about, as they sat by the bright fire in the left-hand parlour, on that very afternoon I have been dreaming of. (*Mill* 8-9)

The little girl on the bridge is Maggie Tulliver, the novel's protagonist, but in this first scene she remains nameless. As the little girl and the narrator stand by the Mill, their realities are the same: the narrator has physically entered her novel. Then reality shifts again, and the narrator on a bridge becomes the writer in a chair, linked by numb elbows. But while Eliot relegates the bridge scene to the status of a dream, she does not divorce that dream from the reality of memory; she

dreamt of the mill “as it looked one February afternoon many years ago.” Moreover, the dream scene occurs on the same afternoon as the one she had been planning to write about before she fell asleep, and Chapter II, which begins immediately after the passage I have cited, does report the conversation between Mr. and Mrs. Tulliver. The dream-memory is divided from the reality of the bulk of the novel by Eliot’s presence within it: never again does the author appear as an embodied narrator alongside her characters.

While the dream-memory scene establishes *The Mill on the Floss* as a form of autobiography, it is an autobiography at a remove.⁵ Eliot is our narrator, but exists as an author in a world beyond the scope of that narrator; Eliot sees Maggie Tulliver as a version of herself, but is not Maggie Tulliver; and Maggie Tulliver and the narrator cannot occupy the same physical and temporal reality in order to accomplish Eliot-the-author’s aims. By beginning the novel with the dream-memory scene, Eliot suggests that the realities of Maggie and Eliot-the-narrator *could* collapse into each other, if only Eliot-the-novelist would go to sleep and allow it to happen. The dream erodes the barriers between the realities of authorial memory, narration, and the characters, whereas a realist novel, for Eliot, sustains them while allowing for such moments of contact.

At the same time, Eliot’s opening suggests *The Mill on the Floss* is a novel *about* crossing over between the realities of writer, narrator, and character. Though the author never again stands next to her protagonist, Maggie, like the incarnation of Eliot that begins the novel, is troubled by a tendency to dreamily collapse the boundaries of fiction and everyday life.

Accompanying Maggie’s development is a narrator who operates from a position of knowledge

⁵ Eliot’s narrator is often referred to as a “he”; however, based on the affinity between the narrator and Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss*, I will use the feminine pronoun. Philippe Lejeune defines autobiographical novels as “fictional texts in which the reader has reason to suspect, from the resemblances that he thinks he sees, that there is identity of author and protagonist, whereas the author has chosen to deny this identity, or at least not to affirm it” (13).

about the world of the novel. The narrator's knowledge includes the history of the town of St Ogg's and the families who live there, as well as the past literary forms the novel both draws upon and departs from. Maggie initially wants to transform the world to suit her desires, then to transform her desires to suit the world; she finds neither is possible. Throughout the novel, Maggie struggles to be faithful to her past ties, but finds the obligations attendant on these ties to be in conflict with each other, and with her own desires. By taking a long view of historical and generic change, the narrator succeeds in synthesizing the past and the present into a continuous history. At the same time, the novel's climactic ending, which leaves realism behind entirely in favor of a dramatic tragedy, suggests that Eliot sees the long past she links with the novel's present as inadequate to mitigating the misery of an individual life. The generic intervention that Eliot titles "The Final Rescue" *is* adequate to mitigating Maggie's misery by transforming her world into one where she can function effectively, but this transformation into dramatic tragedy is, in turn, incompatible with the larger social world that is so central to considering the human lot. The emotional relief of a radically transformed world is ethically and formally unsustainable.

Maggie is the locus of the novel's ethical and formal concerns, which nonetheless extend beyond her individual status. The bulk of the novel is written in a realist mode that considers its main character primarily in relation to her immediate domestic context, which is increasingly invaded by the wider social world of St. Ogg's. In Eliot's realism the circumstances of family and social life heavily influence character formation. At the same time, these inescapable circumstances are frequently inadequate to the emotional and material needs of the characters they form. Maggie experiences this situation as a form of social determinism from which she cannot escape. But Maggie also experiences the pressures of generic determinism, based on the lives of a long line of non-realist heroines. This second type of determinism seems to have little

to do with Maggie's everyday life, and at the same time to prefigure her fate at every turn. The collision of social and generic determinism in Maggie means that she is perpetually verging on a meta-fictional status that threatens to catapult her from the provincial, unmindful characterological reality of the novel and into the wider, more self-conscious world of the narrator. But while Maggie's status as both a character in a realist novel and the inheritor of non-realist literary traditions unfits her for her own characterological reality, Maggie also lacks the historical, literary, and philosophical knowledge, coupled with temporal distance, which would enable her to function effectively in the world of the realist narrator. The moment when Maggie is finally granted the power of a narrator to shape the world is also the moment that destroys her.

Maggie's destruction is accompanied by a radical shift in the world of the novel from realism to a highly improbable tragedy. Though Eliot called her novels tragedies, she was also frequently dismissive within their pages of the improbable world of the dramatist. We should distinguish, then, between realistic and dramatic tragedy to better understand Eliot's use of genre in *The Mill on the Floss*. In a realist tragedy, character and circumstance combine to make life miserable, generally without hope of cathartic release. In dramatic tragedy, improbabilities rather than everyday occurrences shape the world and drive the plot toward a cathartic death. In Book Sixth, "The Great Temptation," Maggie is displaced into a courtship plot that catapults her into first realist tragedy, and then dramatic tragedy. These genre shifts place Maggie at the center of a demonstration of the limits of Eliot's realism, which can depict everyday life and meditate on the remarkable, but cannot operate on principles of wish-fulfillment without warping the world. But if romantic and dramatic fictions are divorced from the realities of daily life, neither does an unrelenting adherence to depicting those realities provide any relief from them.

In line with Maggie's desires, Eliot chooses to warp the world at the end of *The Mill on the Floss*. Maggie uses her ties to the past as an ethical touchstone throughout the novel, and it is a past form she turns to when she finally has the power to shape the world of the novel around her. In dramatic tragedy Maggie finds a simpler if less probable world in which the course of action required of her is clear. At the same time, this seemingly simpler world contains a flood symbolically weighted with a connective history so large and multifarious that it cannot be distilled into an ethical system to live by. The dramatic flood ending is an emotional rescue for Maggie and for Eliot's readers; according to Eliot's own ideas about form and the social obligations of novel-writing, it is also unsustainable. After Maggie's death, Eliot brings the novel briefly back to realism, thereby cementing the gap between Maggie and the world that reasserts itself in her absence: Maggie is destroyed by her faithfulness to a formal and social past both interconnected and at odds with itself, whereas the larger social world soldiers on with modest ambitions and a short memory.

In "The Antigone and its Moral" (1856), Eliot writes, "Here lies the dramatic collision: the impulse of sisterly piety which allies itself with reverence for the Gods, clashes with the duties of citizenship; two principles, both having their validity, are at war with each" (Pinney, *Essays* 263). The dramatic collision of *The Mill on the Floss*, a novel that pits sisterly devotion against temperamental incompatibility as well as the social obligations, occurs literally and generically, as well as in principle: the novel shifts from a realistic world of probabilities to a dramatic world of floods and heroism, ending in the physical collision of the boat carrying Maggie and Tom Tulliver. The central conflict of *The Mill on the Floss*, as in *Antigone*, is an "antagonism of valid claims" (Pinney, *Essays* 261). Valid claims in *The Mill on the Floss* are

based on the past; Maggie Tulliver asks at a pivotal moment of decision, “If the past is not to bind us, where can duty lie?” (Eliot 475).⁶ For Maggie, the past consists of shared experience and the expectations she has raised in others. For Eliot, the past is also formal and historical, and the writerly “duties” it imposes upon her (which, of course, are actually the duties she imposes on herself, since this relationship between the past and duty is her own conviction) are consequently the product of a larger and more complicated history.

In what sense can a formal past have “claims” on George Eliot? Through the lens of genre, a set of readerly expectations that is also a formal register of change over time, we might work toward an answer. Frederic Jameson argues, “Genres are essentially literary *institutions*, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact” (106). Moreover, “form is immanently and intrinsically an ideology in its own right. When such forms are reappropriated and refashioned in quite different social and cultural contexts, this message persists and must be functionally reckoned into the new form” (Jameson 141). To invoke genre is to raise a set of expectations which must be honored, acknowledged, integrated, rejected, or adapted—the meanings and ideologies associated with a given genre do not simply go away when the context or content changes. To be bound by the claims of past forms is not to uncritically reproduce those forms, but to reckon with their histories as we adapt them to our present purposes.

Eliot’s chosen genre is the realist novel, but the lens through which she most frequently meditates on literary form in *The Mill on the Floss* is tragedy. Eliot reckons with the history of tragedy in *The Mill on the Floss* when she redefines it for the common man:

And Mr. Tulliver, you perceive, though nothing more than a superior miller and maltster, was as proud and obstinate as if he had been a very lofty personage, in whom such

⁶ For an overview of the claims of the past in Eliot’s novels, see Thomas Pinney’s “The Authority of the Past in George Eliot’s Novels.”

dispositions might be a source of that conspicuous, far-echoing tragedy, which sweeps the stage in regal robes, and makes the dullest chronicler sublime. The pride and obstinacy of millers and other insignificant people, whom you pass unnoticingly on the road every day, have their tragedy too; but it is of that unwept, hidden sort that goes on from generation to generation,—such tragedy, perhaps, as lies in the conflicts of young souls, hungry for joy, under a lot made suddenly hard to them, under the dreariness of a home where the morning brings no promise with it, and where the unexpectant discontent of worn and disappointed parents weighs on the children like a damp, thick air, in which all the functions of life are depressed; or such tragedy as lies in the slow or sudden death that follows on a bruised passion, though it may be a death that finds only a parish funeral. (*Mill* 197)

Eliot posits a tragedy of common rather than lofty personages; this sort of tragedy is of an “unwept, hidden sort that goes on from generation to generation.” Eliot is responding, then, to an existing version of tragedy that induces weeping and exposure, and presumably has accomplished its goals when these things happen, as in the cathartic traditions of Classical and Renaissance tragedy. A tragedy of the common man, Eliot proposes, features no cathartic release from suffering. The lack of catharsis has to do with the lack of potential for change from one generation to another, and constitutes another aspect of Eliot’s generic redefinition, since intergenerational strife is traditionally the vehicle whereby tragedy figures social change. Finally Eliot suggests a tragedy of inner or emotional life, where the death is not of a hero character, but a “bruised passion,” unmourned by any save the person who felt it.

What is curious about this passage is its clear investment in sustaining ties to tragedy as a genre while changing most of the characteristics that tend to constitute that genre. There is no reason Eliot cannot write a sad story about common people without invoking tragedy at all, unless seeing those people in a tragic literary tradition accomplishes something that the sad story would not. For instance, comparing Mr. Tulliver to a tragic hero lends him a certain greatness of emotion that readers might otherwise dismiss as inappropriate to his provincial life. Eliot’s redefinition thus works both ways: she describes a tragedy of the common man, but the passions

of the common man are made less common by the description. Eliot also shows an investment in literary tradition that does not uncritically adopt the ideologies of past forms and their present associations. The narrator's ability to reshape literary form without divorcing it from the traditions that give it context and meaning contrasts with Maggie Tulliver, whose relationship to social and formal traditions is often paralyzing.

This paralysis is first apparent in Maggie's inability to create lasting change in her world by reimagining it. When her brother Tom has run off to play with Bob Jakin instead of Maggie, Eliot writes, "Well! there was no hope for it: he was gone now, and Maggie could think of no comfort but to sit down by the holly, or wander by the hedgerow, and fancy it was all different, refashioning her little world into just what she should like it to be. Maggie's was a troublous life, and this was the form in which she took her opium" (*Mill* 49). This imaginative refashioning is necessarily only a temporary measure, for the practical reason that Maggie is a little girl with no actual power to change the world around her. But neither is Maggie allowed to refashion her world for the reader: the passage starts out in free indirect discourse, but quickly moves back into the voice of the narrator. This is a change from a lengthier passage, added and deleted from Eliot's manuscript, which describes in detail how Maggie refashions her world:

there was no such person as Bob Jakin, Tom never went to school, and liked no one to play with him but Maggie; they went out together somewhere every day, and carried either hot buttered cakes with them because it was baking day, or apple puffs well sugared...Above all, Tom loved her—oh, so much,—more, even than she loved him, so that he would always want to have her with him and be afraid of vexing her; and he as well as every one else, thought her very clever. (*Mill* 523-524, explanatory notes)

The deleted version sustains Maggie's voice throughout, and thus the revised version changes the way Eliot positions the reader in relation to Maggie. When free indirect discourse is sustained, the reader is borne along by Maggie's fantasy, subject to the "opium" of her refashioning. When we are simply told that Maggie refashions her world in response to all the things she dislikes

about it, we shift more firmly into the reality of the narrator, and the refashioning is a character trait we see in Maggie, rather than a process we experience with her. Thus Eliot's revision effectively prevents Maggie from refashioning the world of the novel through the narration, even as it comforts her within the small world of Dorlcote Mill.⁷

Eliot's narrator can also engage with literary history in a way that Maggie cannot. If Eliot prevents Maggie from refashioning the formal world of the novel through the narration, the narrator also will not at first revise the "rules" of tragedy in order to include Maggie. When Maggie, once again frustrated by Tom's preference for spending time with someone else, pushes her cousin Lucy into the mud, Eliot writes, "There were passions at war in Maggie at that moment to have made a tragedy, if tragedies were made by passion only; but the essential *τι μεγεθος* which was present in the passion was wanting to the action; the utmost Maggie could do, with a fierce thrust of her small brown arm, was to push poor little pink-and-white Lucy into the cow-trodden mud" (*Mill* 101). Missing from Maggie's tragedy is the Aristotelian requirement of actions of a certain magnitude (*Mill* 524, explanatory note). Maggie's actions, because she is only a little girl, cannot reach up to the level of her passions. But instead of calling this gap between passion and an available sphere of action a new type of tragedy, as she does for Mr

⁷ Eliot uses free indirect discourse at various other points in the novel where Maggie's voice is allowed to emerge in the narration for brief periods. I take this example not as necessarily typical of Eliot's use of free indirect discourse in relation to Maggie, but as an important moment in guiding the reader's relation to Maggie's propensity for refashioning the world. Margaret Anne Doody ties the technique of free indirect discourse to the emergence of women's novels of the eighteenth century, and argues that the "effect depends upon the reader's noticing a gap, a distance which always implies...that the author is superior to the character" (288). At the same time, this gap "lends itself to historical insight. The gap between author and character can be used to make us ask why there should be this difference....History is rendered in many voices, even while being judged by one authoritative voice" (Doody 289). I address the split between Maggie's limited historical consciousness and the narrator's longer, more complete knowledge of the past later in this essay. John Bender argues for a containment model of free indirect discourse in the realist novel, which "pretend[s] that character is autonomous," but in fact subjects character and consciousness to "[a]uthoritative narratorial presence" (212). Michael McKeon sees free indirect discourse as a reflexive technique that creates "the effect of greater interiority" through "oscillation or differential *between* the perspectives of narrator and character, by the process of moving back and forth between 'outside' and 'inside'" (485). I agree that free indirect discourse is a reflexive technique that can separate as well as merge the narrator's point of view with the character's, and which can confer authority upon either party depending on specific language and context. In the particular instance I cite, sustained free indirect discourse aligns the reader emotionally with Maggie, whereas cutting free indirect discourse short reigns in this sympathy.

Tulliver, Eliot makes it the criterion for Maggie's exclusion from a genre that could otherwise legitimate her passions by giving them a context and a history. As with Mr Tulliver, Eliot's invocation of tragedy has the effect of affiliating Maggie with the very genre from which she is excluded. But while the narration both links Maggie with tragedy and excludes her from it, compared with the parallel passage redefining tragedy to include Mr Tulliver, it is clear that this seeming reflexivity does not nullify Maggie's exclusion. The fact that tragedy bends to include Mr Tulliver but not Maggie shows that Eliot's investment in depicting Maggie's exclusion in this scene is formal as well as personal.⁸

The barrier between the narrator's ability to refashion literary forms and Maggie's more limited ability to refashion the world in her thoughts is important to Eliot's version of realism. Maggie frequently finds herself upset by the discrepancy between the books she has read and the world she experiences:

there was no indulgence, no fondness, such as she imagined when she fashioned the world afresh in her own thoughts. In books there were people who were always agreeable or tender, and delighted to do things that made one happy, and who did not show their kindness by finding fault. The world outside the books was not a happy one, Maggie felt. (*Mill* 235)

When Maggie fashions the world afresh in her thoughts, she imagines a world more in accordance with books than reality, and she is continually disappointed in that desire. The books Maggie reads are not the kind Eliot writes. Eliot's realist narrator depicts a characterological world full of commonplace and frequently disagreeable people; however, this same narrator does, we have seen, refashion generic worlds. Form is the level at which Eliot's narrator is transformative. Maggie has much more limited access to the literary past, and she lives in a

⁸ Thus, while Felicia Bonaparte is correct that Eliot believes "Art can give tragic proportions to the smallest living creature," we should account for the instances in which she refuses to do so (xiv). Susan Fraiman discusses Maggie's generic exclusion in terms of the Bildungsroman, citing the inapplicability of developmental narratives to women in a society where they "are ushered into a diminishing space" as they reach adulthood (Yousaf and Maunder 39, 42).

characterological reality that does not change according to her wishes. Thus while Nina Auerbach's argument that "Maggie's recurrent pattern of action is to enter worlds and explode them" picks up nicely on Maggie's desire to cross between her own reality and the ones she finds in books, it ignores the (characterological) world's stubborn resistance to being exploded for most of the novel—dreary normalcy will and does reassert itself (Bloom 49).

Maggie *does* explode formal worlds; realism continually comes to crisis through her desire to enter the more explicitly fictional world of a narrator. Harry E. Shaw takes up Seymour Chatman's distinction between the textual space of a narrator ("discourse space") and that of characters ("story space"), and argues that the points of contact between these spaces are one of the ways in which Eliot's narrator enters history (*Narrating Reality* 236-252). These moments of contact between the worlds of character and narrator are essential to Eliot's realism; at the same time "the rhetorical force of such moments would indeed vanish if the narrator actually made a stay in story space" (245). Shaw also sees Gwendolen Harleth of *Danial Deronda* as "a character who seems to want to act as a narrator" based on passages in which she "narrat[es] different versions of the scene as she experiences it" ("Loose Narrators" 111). We have seen this propensity for producing alternate realities in Maggie Tulliver as well, with a key difference: Maggie's understanding of what a narrator can do is not based on Eliot's realist narrator, but on the unrealistic books Maggie has read. During childhood, Maggie does not want to faithfully describe her world; she wants to transform it. The narrating powers she desires are not those of a realist.

Maggie learns early on that her tendency to imaginatively remake the world in the image of a book is insufficient to dealing with her daily life. As she grows older, she comes to want books that can broaden and deepen her knowledge of that life:

Even at school she had often wished for books with *more* in them; everything she learned there seemed like the ends of long threads that snapped immediately.... Sometimes Maggie thought she could have been contented with absorbing fancies; if she could have had all Scott's novels and all Byron's poems!—then, perhaps, she might have found happiness enough to dull her sensibility to her actual daily life. And yet they were hardly what she wanted. She could make dream-worlds of her own, but no dream-world would satisfy her now. She wanted some explanation of this hard, real life. (*Mill* 286)

Absorbing fancies might help Maggie to ignore her daily life, but they will not help her to engage with it. The book Maggie does turn to, *Thomas à Kempis*, is the only one available to her that seems to have an application to the isolated life of relative poverty that constitutes her adolescence. The book teaches humility and selflessness. This part of the novel is the only portion in which her family mostly approves of her conduct; Mrs. Tulliver is amazed to see her rebellious child “growing up so good” (*Mill* 294). In *Thomas à Kempis* Maggie has found a philosophy that dovetails nicely with the selflessness expected of a young woman of her social station. Maggie moves from refashioning the world to be more like books to, instead, refashioning herself to be more like a book. An explanation of why life is the way it is continues to elude her.

There are two problems with the way Maggie uses *Thomas à Kempis*. One, as the narrator points out, is that Maggie's selflessness is often in fact a form of egotism; “she often lost the spirit of humility by being excessive in the outward act” (*Mill* 292). The other, according to Philip Wakem, is that Maggie's reading at this time is “narrow asceticism” (*Mill* 306).⁹ Maggie resists reading beyond *Thomas à Kempis*, the Bible, and *The Christian Year* because more fanciful forms of reading will reawaken her desires for a more expansive mental and outer life. She sees this asceticism as the only possible response to an overdetermined existence. She tells

⁹ Maggie's asceticism is figured in music as well as books—though music has an almost hypnotic power over Maggie throughout the novel, at this point in her life she restricts herself to the church organ. For an analysis of music in *The Mill on the Floss* see Gillian Beer, “*The Mill on the Floss*: ‘More Instruments Playing Together’”.

Philip, “Our life is determined for us—and it makes the mind very free when we give up wishing, and only think of bearing what is laid upon us, and doing what is given us to do” (*Mill* 302). The determining forces, in this instance, are poverty, family expectations, and a resulting social immobility and isolation.

Though Maggie accepts (for the moment) the social determinism of her daily life, she rejects the generic determinism of novels. At Philip’s urging, Maggie undertakes a more varied and light course of reading; however, she resists having characters and stories mapped onto her own life in any serious way. After lending Maggie Mme de Stael’s *Corinne*, Philip asks Maggie whether she would like to be a tenth Muse, like the novel’s heroine. Maggie says she would not, and adds that she did not finish the book because of the determinism of its plot: Maggie “foresaw that the light-complexioned girl would win away all the love from Corinne and make her miserable” (*Mill* 332). Philip then maps the dark- and light-complexioned roles from the novel onto Maggie and her blonde cousin Lucy, and suggests Maggie could steal Lucy’s lover away. Maggie responds, “Philip, that is not pretty of you, to apply my nonsense to anything real” (*Mill* 333). While Maggie resists the applicability of romance plots and character tropes to her own life, Philip’s speculation that Maggie will steal Lucy’s lover is exactly what happens later in the novel. Maggie is aware of two types of determinism: firstly, the external forces that direct her life, such as poverty and her parents’ actions; secondly, the generic determinism that tells her the blonde heroine will triumph. She does not like the idea that these forms of determinism could overlap in her. On one hand, Philip’s placement of Maggie and Lucy in a competing romance plot seems to destabilize Maggie’s hard-won sense of separation between her own life and the plot of a novel; on the other hand, Philip’s plot places Maggie in the world of a novel, not as a narrator, but as a character with a limited (if central) sphere of action. This position is the one

Maggie actually occupies, in a metatextual sense, for most of *The Mill on the Floss*. Maggie must navigate not only the domestic and social problems of the world of St Ogg's, but also the weight of the literary traditions and conventions that have produced her, from which she can never entirely escape.¹⁰ While Eliot's narrator and Maggie both navigate the worlds of character and form, they do so on different terms. The narrator adapts literary forms for her own purposes while depicting a characterological world of probabilities. For Maggie, the social realities of the characterological world and the formal legacies of literary history exert pressures that give her very little room to move.

Philip's attempt to map novelistic plots onto Maggie's life turns into an attempt to embroil her in a romance plot. The discussion of books slides into a discussion of what Maggie would do if she were called upon to reject a lover, which in turn slides into Maggie's realization that Philip is asking her to be his lover. Maggie says, "I had never thought of your being my lover. It seemed so far off—like a dream—only like one of the stories one imagines—that I should ever have a lover" (*Mill* 334). The world of courtship, for Maggie, is the world of dreams and stories. Here, as in the novel's opening scene (though less drastically), the world of dreams and stories bleeds into real life. Philip is the agent for bringing these worlds together. Maggie attempts to re-separate them; the chapter ends with her thinking, "The tissue of vague dreams must now get narrower and narrower, and all the threads of thought and emotion be gradually

¹⁰ Gillian Beer discusses Eliot's determinism as relying on a "stable and irremediable" past that allows for "the possibility of a knowable world without godhead," but where "autonomy is extinguished" (Beer, *Arguing with the Past* 118, 124). As is already apparent, I take Maggie Tulliver to be subject to more than one past, and will discuss later in this essay the problems engendered by an ethical system that relies on a complex past. I agree with George Levine that Eliot's determinism is based on "the belief that every event has its causal antecedents," and that a "key" to this determinism lies in Eliot's "refusal to discount the human will" (Levine 269). However, I would argue that while Eliot's social determinism works in this way, she sees generic determinism as operating, if not on different principles, then at least in a different tradition. Maggie makes this difference apparent when she rejects the triumph of blonde heroines, whose superiority to their brunette counterparts has nothing to do with cause and effect—except as regards readerly expectations engendered by literary tradition. Maggie dismisses this form of determinism as having little to do with her everyday life, but she also cannot fully extract herself from the conventions she rejects. We should thus consider Maggie as subject to more than one variety of determinism.

absorbed in the woof of her actual daily life” (*Mill* 337). Maggie has learned that the space of fiction, like the seemingly sheltered space of the Red Deeps where she has met Philip, is neither an effective means for refashioning reality nor a safe retreat from it. Though this chapter and the realization that accompanies it mark the end of Maggie’s development as a reader, the circumstances that largely determine her life remain formal as well as social.¹¹

Though Maggie stops pursuing fiction after her final meeting with Philip in the Red Deeps, fiction does not stop pursuing her: from this point on, the novel moves gradually away from the realism that defines the first five books. Book Sixth, “The Great Temptation,” picks up in Lucy Deane’s house in St Ogg’s, two years after we last saw Maggie. In the interim, Maggie has been an unhappy schoolteacher. We never see this part of Maggie’s life; nor do we see Maggie during her brief time away at school before her father’s illness, though we do see Maggie’s visit to Tom while *he* is away at school. These invisible portions of Maggie’s education tell us that Eliot is not especially interested in Maggie’s development in relation to a world outside of her past ties. At the same time, by beginning Book Sixth with the insipid wooing of Lucy Deane and Stephen Guest over a pair of sewing scissors and a spaniel, Eliot places us in a world dominated by courtship plots: the same sort of world that Maggie has associated with books and dreams, rather than reality.

Maggie fights the effect this displacement into an unreal world will have on her own thoughts and feelings. By staying with Lucy, Maggie comes to a luxurious world where romance and its attendant trivialities are the only things going. Maggie shows that she feels this change when she tells Philip, “I am having a great holiday, am I not?...Lucy is like a fairy godmother:

¹¹ Margaret Homans picks up on the inescapability of literary determinism when she notes, “Maggie’s childhood capacity for original invention and for self-expression has by the end of her story quite vanished. Her adult self is a battleground for conflicting texts” (Bloom 94). I would argue that *The Mill on the Floss* frames Maggie’s capacity for invention and self-expression as ineffective to begin with; it is her realization of this inefficacy in relation to her own life that explodes the boundaries of social and generic determinism.

she has turned me from a drudge into a princess in no time” (*Mill* 411-412). When Lucy leaves the room, Maggie adds, “I must not stay here long. It would unfit me for the life I must begin again at last” (*Mill* 412). Philip asks if Maggie must really go back to teaching, away from everyone who loves her. Maggie says that she must, and adds, “I begin to think there can never come much happiness to me from loving: I have always had so much pain mingled with it. I wish I could make myself a world outside it, as men do” (*Mill* 413). Maggie’s first two statements show that she continues to associate the world of fairytales and luxury that Lucy inhabits as divorced from Maggie’s real life. But the distinction between romance and reality is no longer present in Maggie’s outer circumstances; instead, Maggie sustains the distinction by reminding herself constantly that her current circumstances are temporary. The collision of worlds is again a threat to Maggie; she wishes for a world outside of loving and imposes a separation between Lucy’s world and her own precisely because Maggie’s desires transcend these barriers.¹²

Since there is no world that accommodates Maggie’s desires, and since she cannot change the world to suit her, she attempts to separate her desires and pleasures from the world. Philip is, as ever, attuned to the flaw in this philosophy; he tells Maggie, “Now, you are returning to your old thought in a new form... You want to find out a mode of renunciation that will be an escape from pain. I tell you again, there is no such escape possible except by perverting or mutilating one’s nature” (*Mill* 413). Philip argues that Maggie’s renunciation, which is another way of talking about her attempts to maintain boundaries in the face of desires that transcend

¹² Maggie’s desire for a world outside of loving is also, of course, a comment on the unavailability of another direction for a woman to direct her thoughts and energies. Men, according to Maggie, can construct lives for themselves independent of loving—Tom, who has thrown himself into work, is a good example. It should also be noted, however, that Maggie’s governess job is an attempt to construct an independent life for herself outside of loving, and Maggie fails not because there is no work available to her, but because she is temperamentally unsuited to it, and because her emotional ties to her past always compete with her desire for independence. Maggie is not simply held back by societal expectations that she should value home and family above work; her character has been partially molded by those same expectations, and thus her own desires and emotions are partly what will not allow her to construct a world outside of loving.

them, will never succeed without warping her nature. Implicit in this argument is the sanctity of one's essential nature, but Eliot sees nature as inextricable from circumstance.¹³ In Book Sixth, Eliot uses tragedy to illustrate this formulation of character:

But you have known Maggie a long while, and need to be told, not her characteristics, but her history, which is a thing hardly to be predicted even from the completest knowledge of characteristics. For the tragedy of our lives is not created entirely from within. "Character," says Novalis, in one of his questionable aphorisms,—"character is destiny." But not the whole of our destiny. Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, was speculative and irresolute, and we have a great tragedy in consequence. But if his father had lived to a good old age, and his uncle had died an early death, we can conceive Hamlet's having married Ophelia, and got through life with a reputation of sanity, notwithstanding many soliloquies, and some moody sarcasms toward the fair daughter of Polonius, to say nothing of the frankest incivility to his father-in-law. (*Mill* 401-402)

A realist tragedy requires character and circumstance to converge in the hero's downfall.¹⁴

Felicia Bonaparte argues that in the *Hamlet* passage, "The categorical distinction between the tragic figure who broods in splendid isolation and Maggie whose frustrated life is cluttered with the coarse reality of circumstances is dramatically obliterated" (166). The life Eliot projects for her realist Hamlet seems, however, more comical than tragic—he gets married and leads a life of middling, sarcastic domesticity. But "the tragedy of our lives" suggests that we are all living in a tragedy—that realism is itself tragic. Immediately afterward, the narrator asserts that readers do

¹³ Stephen Guest likewise attempts to use arguments based on nature to seduce Maggie. In relation to Maggie's unofficial engagement to Philip, Stephen repeatedly says, "It is unnatural" (*Mill* 448, 449). For Stephen, the naturalness of his and Maggie's feelings for each other justifies breaking their ties to Philip and Lucy, but Maggie understands that this is an oversimplification of the world. She tells Stephen,

If life were quite easy and simple, as it might have been in paradise, and we could always see that one being first towards whom....[sic] I mean, if life did not make duties for us before love comes, love would be a sign that two people ought to belong to each other. But I see—I feel it is not so now: there are things we must renounce in life; some of us must resign love....Love is natural; but surely pity and faithfulness and memory are natural too. And they would live in me still, and punish me if I did not obey them. (*Mill* 449-450)

¹⁴ Eliot implies that this is true of all tragedies, not just realist ones. I will shortly differentiate between realist and dramatic tragedy. Eliot reiterates the malleability of character in *Middlemarch* when Mr. Farebrother says to Dorothea, "character is not cut in marble—it is not something solid and unalterable"; moreover, the narrator emphasizes the influence of circumstance on character in one of the novel's concluding remarks: "For there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it" (*Middlemarch* 686, 785). The persistence of Eliot's concept of character, which in *The Mill on the Floss* takes the form of qualifying the romantic Novalis's questionable aphorism, shows that a formulation of character perpetually shaped by circumstance is central to Eliot's version of realism.

not yet know what will happen to Maggie: “Maggie’s destiny, then, is at present hidden, and we must wait for it to reveal itself like the course of an unmapped river; we only know that the river is full and rapid, and that for all rivers there is the same final home. Under the charm of her new pleasures, Maggie herself was ceasing to think, with her eager prefiguring imagination, of her future lot” (*Mill* 402). Eliot seems to dangle in front of the reader the possibility that Maggie may not be in a tragedy after all—her destiny is hidden from us, because we do not know her entire history yet, which could easily contain a change in her circumstances (and thus a change in her fate). Maggie also experiences a sense of possibility during this portion of the novel, as evidenced by the dormancy of her “prefiguring imagination” and the lulling of her anxieties about her future. The barriers Maggie has sought to sustain between her outward circumstances and her inner life are, as she predicted, breaking down under the onslaught of pleasure and luxury. But the narrator’s insistence that we do not yet know Maggie’s destiny is belied by the figuratively weighted phrase, “for all rivers there is the same final home,” which does not encourage belief in a happy (or even indifferently domestic) ending. This is one of many moments in the novel where water imagery prefigures Maggie’s dramatic death by drowning, here with the effect of turning a passage that purports to destabilize generic determinism into a passage that participates in it.

At the moment when Maggie’s prefiguring imagination is lulled into dormancy, the narration’s prefiguring faculty is at its most active. This passage prefigures not just Maggie’s death by drowning, but the novel’s eventual departure from realist tragedy and into dramatic tragedy. The lulling of Maggie’s understanding of her own determined existence occurs, moreover, due to a temporary deviation—i.e., the move to Lucy’s luxurious household—from the conditions that produced the understanding in the first place. Maggie’s status as a character

acted upon by her immediate circumstances is itself a barrier between her and the breadth of understanding the narrator can sustain. Thus Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth notes the *Hamlet* passage as an example of the wider world of the narrator: “While the Dodson’s [sic] and Tullivers feud, the narrator quietly extends the readers’ awareness beyond these narrow margins with evidence belonging to other places and times” (79). Furthermore, there is a gap between Maggie’s circumstances as she understands them and Maggie’s circumstances as we understand them. Though the narrator now includes Maggie in the tragic tradition, no longer denying her admission based on her sphere of action, at the moment of her admission, “under the charm of her new pleasures,” Maggie is deluded into thinking herself free of a tragic fate. Maggie sees her material and emotional circumstances, whereas we with our access to the narrator see her formal circumstances as well.

We can further refine Eliot’s complex ideas about tragedy and determinism by distinguishing between dramatic tragedy and realist tragedy. Realist tragedy is “the tragedy of our lives”—it is what happens when the circumstances of one’s life make happiness or hope impossible (as in the earlier example of unmitigated misery passed down from generation to generation). Realist tragedy relies on no specific plot or outcome; it is deterministic, but that determinism has to do with the inescapability of social circumstances in shaping people’s lives. Dramatic tragedy exists in the realm of the improbable, and its determinism rests on generic rather than social causality. Eliot twice associates the world of the dramatist with improbability in *The Mill on the Floss*:

Plotting covetousness and deliberate contrivance, in order to compass a selfish end, are nowhere abundant but in the world of the dramatist: they demand too intense a mental action for many of our fellow-parishioners to be guilty of them. (*Mill* 25)

Secrets are rarely betrayed or discovered according to any programme our fear has sketched out. Fear is almost always haunted by terrible dramatic scenes, which recur in spite of the best-argued probabilities against them. (*Mill* 337)

The world of the dramatist is the world of plot, contrivance, and improbability. Circumstance is still important, as we saw in Eliot's *Hamlet* example, but dramatic tragedy unyokes circumstance from probability. In the above passages, Eliot sets up the world of the dramatist as the formal and ideological opposite of her brand of realism. But the tragic ending of Maggie's life, like the original *Hamlet*, is fundamentally dramatic: she heroically saves her brother and the two of them drown in a massive flood, clasped in each other's arms.

The question, then, is why Eliot turns to dramatic rather than realist tragedy at the end of the novel.¹⁵ The answer has to do, once again, with the collision of worlds. In both tragedy and realism, Eliot stresses the importance of past inheritances in shaping character and determining morality. But another important aspect of Eliot's realism is about showing how these inheritances do not come from single, easily traceable sources. Maggie, for instance, is the

¹⁵ Readers and critics have historically been troubled by the ending, which many have viewed as a failure or weakness of the novel. Eliot herself assented to Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton's criticism that the tragic ending, the novel's greatest departure from realism, "is not adequately prepared" (Carroll 123). F.R. Leavis, Harold Bloom, and Barbara Hardy fall into the camp of critics who see the ending as an unfitting end to the novel. Leavis calls the ending "dramatic," but relegates its significance to "a revealed immaturity" on the part of George Eliot (62). Bloom calls the conclusion "wayward and inadequate," and suggests—though he denies that Eliot could have intended it—that the "mutual immolation" of Maggie and Tom is a substitute for an impossible incestuous union between the siblings (7). Hardy argues that the wish-fulfilment of the ending is in "bad faith" with the rest of the novel, which contains "no magic" (*George Eliot* 32, 33). Barbara Guth sees Philip Wakem as the novel's true tragic figure, illustrating "the ways in which the ending fails as tragedy" (356). I would reframe this argument to suggest that Philip winds up in a realist tragedy, whereas Maggie winds up in a dramatic one. A critical trend opposed to the "failure" argument has been to show that the flood ending is prepared for by the rest of the novel. George Levine takes the middle ground; he sees the ending as "thematically consistent," but also as "external and fortuitous," a "lapse" on George Eliot's part (Bloom 19). Felicia Bonaparte calls the ending "on any literal level a rather weak conclusion," but also "clearly a symbolic statement" that "concludes the elaborate water imagery of the novel" (39). Kerry McSweeney argues that "there is much less disproportion between the realistic and the visionary parts of the novel than has been realized and that its ending—the most imaginatively powerful passage in the entire novel—is in fact grounded in the body of the text" (56). McSweeney also regards the ending as transcending or breaking out of the novel form (58). Gillian Beer also sees the ending as a formal break that "goes outside the forms of social realism to which determinism is at that period so closely linked" (*Arguing with the Past* 126). I argue that while both the flood and the tragedy are anticipated by the rest of the novel, they also constitute a formal and ideological break that is simultaneously a deliberate regression to a past form. By framing analysis in terms of realist versus dramatic tragedy, we can eschew the language of failure, and instead examine why, in a novel about the ethics of fidelity to the past, Eliot would turn in the end to a form that comes *out* of the past.

product of her combined Tulliver and Dodson blood, her upbringing at the mill, her limited access to certain books, her own imagination, and a long line of literary predecessors. In her own characterological reality, Maggie must contend with the material and ethical problems of her domestic and social world, whereas in the reality of the narrator, Maggie is the locus of a related set of formal concerns. Despite Maggie's best efforts at personal, social, and generic compartmentalization, these realities periodically overlap and bleed into each other. The narrator likewise moves across the boundaries between the realities of the characters and the narration at the beginning of the novel and, less drastically, in moments of free indirect discourse. *The Mill on the Floss* asks, then, for a mode of reading that accounts for why these barriers exist as well as why they break down at specific moments.

Eliot shows us the complexity of our inheritances and how to read them in relation to the town of St Ogg's, which is both ancient and prosaic. The narrator gives us the history of St Ogg's, purportedly "[i]n order to see Mr and Mrs Glegg at home" (*Mill* 115). But Mr and Mrs Glegg are ignorant of, or at least indifferent to the history Eliot provides: "The mind of St. Ogg's did not look extensively before or after. It inherited a long past without thinking of it, and had no eyes for the spirits that walk the streets" (*Mill* 118). Seeing Mr and Mrs Glegg at home involves an understanding of St Ogg's that goes far beyond that of the characters. The narrator provides this understanding through an inclusive "long past" that is part legend, part fact, and part memory. The oldest part of the town's history is the legend of St Ogg, which the narrator possesses in "several manuscript versions. I incline to the briefest, since, if it should not be wholly true, it is at least likely to contain the least falsehood" (*Mill* 116). Apparent in this description is the narrator's commitment to truth and the importance of fiction within history. In the legend, Ogg, a boatman, ferries an old woman across the river Floss in bad weather. The

woman turns out to be the Virgin Mary, who blesses Ogg's boat because he "didst not question and wrangle with the heart's need, but wast smitten with pity, and didst straightaway relieve the same" (*Mill* 117). The narrator comments that the legend "reflects from a far-off time the visitation of the floods" and goes on to detail the town's forgotten religious wars and the state of its residential and commercial buildings (117). To understand St Ogg's, we must know its founding myth as well as its religious, architectural, and economic history.¹⁶

The narrator is the keeper of all the aspects of this history; even the town's founding myth has a material basis in the several manuscripts within the narrator's reality. Moreover, the existence of these manuscripts once again blurs the line between the reality of the narrator and that of the characters, since the narrator claims to possess material evidence of the fictions upon which St Ogg's is built. The narrator does not physically enter her novel, as in the first chapter; instead, she depicts the world of St Ogg's as part of her (and our) own past with another temporal displacement: "Ah! even Mrs Glegg's day seems far back in the past now, separated from us by changes that widen the years" (*Mill* 118). We are separated from Mrs Glegg by time and change, but not by her status as a fictional character. On the level of readership, the circumstances of a given novel include the social and domestic worlds the novel attempts to depict as well as the perspectives through which we see those worlds. St Ogg's is untrue to the spirit of its founding myth: its citizens are judgmental, and have little patience for unsubstantiated heart's need; additionally, the natural disasters and religious wars of bygone times have faded from the town's consciousness by Mrs Glegg's time. But St. Ogg's' forgetful relation to its history is also, Eliot suggests, the way we relate to our own collective past. The

¹⁶ Rohan Amanda Maitzen picks up on the breadth of Eliot's multi-generic approach to history when she argues, "during this period writers from Agnes Strickland to George Eliot take advantage of instabilities in existing models of history—instabilities brought on by generic competition with the novel and by gender confusion due to the feminization of historical practice and subject matter—to broaden the range of meanings that could be articulated" (xiii).

temporal displacements—the time of Ogg, the time of Mrs Glegg and the other characters, and the time of the narrator, from whence the reader is addressed—dramatize the movement of history, where “history” includes the largely forgotten fictional and factual realities that make up our own, as well as a string of causes and consequences too complex for our comprehension.¹⁷ Reality is a place where people pursue their day-to-day lives, largely occupied with their own concerns, partially or wholly ignorant of the inheritances that have contributed to their existences. Eliot’s realism depicts that reality while providing us with a narrator who can tell us how the world works, where “the world” is the limited reality of the characters (which resembles our own) as well as the fictional and factual pasts they have forgotten.

It is the often-punctured separation between the limited reality of the characters and the all-knowing reality of the narrator that allows Eliot to depict and explain “real life” as she sees it, which involves the dialogic negotiation of day-to-day, ignorant existence and the inheritances that inform it despite our ignorance. Barbara Hardy picks up on this separation when she writes that *The Mill on the Floss* “is not the kind of tragedy where the tragic heroine is made to share her author’s judgment” (Hardy, *Novels of George Eliot* 55). At the same time, it is the moments where the narrator comes close to touching the world of the characters that tend to tell us what is at stake in the separation: the relationship between the world(s) of the novel and our own. Just as the characters of Mrs Glegg’s time lose the wisdom of their collective inheritance by forgetting about the legend of St Ogg and the rest of their town’s history, we would do well to see the limited, judgmental world of Mrs Glegg’s time as part of our own inheritance. Also at stake is a mode of reading: although Eliot sees most people as ignorant of their social, domestic, civic, and literary inheritances, she wants us to read Mr and Mrs Glegg, and by extension the rest of her

¹⁷ George Levine cites a useful formulation of causality from a letter Eliot sent to Charles Bray in 1857: “the true antecedent and consequent are proportionately difficult to discover as the phenomena are more complex” (Levine 270, Haight 2:403).

characters and the world of the novel, in light of these inheritances. Harry E. Shaw argues that the moments when Eliot's narrator enters the "story space" of the characters reflect "the impulse for the narrative voice to claim a place in history" (*Narrating Reality* 246). But in *The Mill on the Floss* the narrator more explicitly claims a place in history at a temporal remove from the world of her characters. Eliot depicts this remove, which makes available the manuscript versions of the legend of St. Ogg, as a source of the narrator's superior historical knowledge. The dream-memory at the beginning of the novel, which collapses the temporal remove, is a source of *personal* knowledge about Maggie and the world of the Tullivers. The personal and the historical are connected, but not the same, and the way the narrator engages with the past of her novel varies according to what she wants to say about it. If there is an authorial "lapse" in this novel, it is an intentional one, in the dream-memory, when the narrator collapses the personal and the historical by losing consciousness. The narrator of *The Mill on the Floss* generally has the historical perspective born of temporal distance, but she exists in a historical timeline that connects with that of the characters, and her personal investment those characters and their histories is apparent from the outset—they are a part of her own past.

The complexity of past inheritances and the sort of reading they ask for sheds light on how we should read Maggie Tulliver's relationship to the past. In the latter part of the novel, Maggie's ethical dilemmas invariably take the form of considering present desires in light of a sense of duty based on past ties. Water tends to be the figure for the interconnectedness of these emotional and ethical concerns. After Maggie has a near escape from giving in to her increasingly intense attraction to Stephen Guest, the narrator writes:

But there were things in her stronger than vanity—passion, and affection, and long deep memories of early discipline and effort, of early claims on her love and pity; and the stream of vanity was soon swept along and mingled imperceptibly with that wider current

which was at its highest force to-day, under the double urgency of the events and inward impulses brought by the last week. (*Mill* 436)

The stream of vanity merging with the wider current of willpower-based past claims shows Maggie's internal life figured as a river. This figure, in turn, shows Maggie's inner life, which is comprised of desire and emotion as well as ethics and consciousness of other people's feelings, as a place of interconnectedness, rather than distinct compartments. For Maggie the world is complex and characterized by ebbs and flows of emotion perpetually measured against a frequently contradictory host of past ties and obligations.

While the narrator can account for this interconnectedness, Maggie finds it increasingly impossible to acknowledge the complexity of the world while living in it. The fact that Maggie's obligations are contradictory suggests a past too long and varied to import wholesale as an ethical system. The result is an essentially negative ethical system in which Maggie knows what she must *not* do, but can discern no definite course of action. After yet another risky encounter with Stephen, Maggie announces to Philip her intention of taking another teaching position away from St Ogg's. Philip responds, "Then the future will never join on to the past again, Maggie? That book is quite closed?" (*Mill* 443). Maggie replies, "That book never will be closed, Philip...I desire no future that will break the ties of the past. But the tie to my brother is one of the strongest. I can do nothing willingly that will divide me always from him" (*Mill* 444). Philip is asking for confirmation that Maggie's leave-taking means she will never marry him. For Maggie, the book of the past that will never be closed is the real emotion she feels for Philip, though that emotion is not the passion she feels for Stephen, or the foundational love she has for her brother. Maggie will not live with Tom, will not marry Philip, and, at least for the time being, will not allow Stephen Guest's amorousness to carry her away. Maggie adopts renunciation as the only possible means of preserving *all* of these contradictory emotional ties and past claims.

She will isolate herself from everyone she loves in order to sustain a space of emotional interconnectedness, since any real-world application of her love for one man would alienate her from the others.

In a chapter whose title suggests a deterministic removal of choice, “Borne Along by the Tide,” a reductive form of determinism is revealed as a rationalization of selfish actions. Lucy attempts to play “fairy godmother” to Maggie once more by arranging things so that Maggie and Philip will go rowing alone together, but Stephen shows up instead, since Philip is too ill to go out (*Mill* 462). During this rowing scene, “Memory was excluded...and thought did not belong to that enchanted haze in which they were enveloped—it belonged to the past and the future that lay outside the haze” (*Mill* 464). Lucy’s fairy-godmothering has succeeded, though not in the way she planned: Maggie has entered an enchanted world apart from time and consequences. Since Maggie’s ethical framework depends on constantly measuring her behavior against the claims of past ties, the suspension of Maggie’s temporal consciousness also suspends her capacity for resisting Stephen. For his part, Stephen attempts to rationalize his behavior by blaming the tide and other people for bringing them together. Maggie listens,

passing from her startled wonderment to the yearning after that belief, that the tide was doing it all—that she might glide along with the swift, silent stream, and not struggle any more. But across that stealing influence came the terrible shadow of past thoughts; and the sudden horror lest now, at last, the moment of fatal intoxication was close upon her, called up feelings of angry resistance towards Stephen. (*Mill* 465)

Maggie realizes, in other words, that Stephen’s argument—the tide has brought us here, so the only thing we can do is get married—is a disingenuous form of determinism. Stephen’s argument that circumstances outside their control have brought them together is only partially true: Maggie got in the boat, Stephen rowed long past their intended docking point, and Maggie was not paying attention. But more importantly, a determined world does not eliminate the need

for making difficult choices. Maggie's understanding is predicated on cognizance of "past thoughts," which shows once again that bringing the past to bear on the present is, for Eliot, a reminder of the ethical complexity of the world, and not a reductive imposition of past values on present problems.

Stephen fares better with Maggie when he blames himself for getting her into a terrible position; her pity is aroused and she finds herself less able to resist Stephen in the face of it. At its highest point, Maggie's seduction takes the form of reducing the world to a single, dreamlike reality. Stephen has rowed long past where their boat was supposed to dock, has temporarily quelled Maggie's objections and recriminations, and has hailed a Dutch trading vessel to take them to Mudport, from whence Stephen plans to head for Scotland and elope. Once on board, Maggie passively listens to Stephen's murmured declarations of love. Under the influence of Stephen's words, Maggie thinks:

there was, there *must* be, then, a life for mortals here below which was not hard and chill—in which affection would no longer be self-sacrifice. Stephen's passionate words made the vision of such a life more fully present to her than it had ever been before; and the vision for the time excluded all realities—all except the returning sun-gleams which broke out on the waters as the evening approached, and mingled with the visionary sunlight of promised happiness—all except the hand that pressed hers, and the voice that spoke to her, and the eyes that looked at her with grave, unspeakable love. (*Mill* 469)

The reference to "mortals here below" shows that these thoughts follow upon Maggie's earlier speech about the simplicity of life before the fall, when nature could be used as a justification for all actions, as opposed to the complexity of life and ethics in the fallen world. The reduction of Maggie's inner life to a single reality constitutes an ethical regression which is both signaled and belied by Eliot's use of free indirect discourse. Maggie's inner thoughts take over the narration and construct a visionary world of beauty and love, and the reader is swept along with her. At the same time, free indirect discourse never truly exists in just one reality, since it is by nature a

convergence of the character's inner reality with the world of the narrator. Thus at Maggie's moment of greatest danger, signified by her desire for a single world hospitable to her own desires, the form of the narration reminds us that this seductively reductive worldview is impossible to sustain. But this reminder, in contrast to the earlier passage about Maggie's childhood desire to imaginatively refashion her world, is *only* implicit; the reader is swept along with Maggie's thoughts.¹⁸

Allowing Maggie's point of view to dominate the narration permanently would run counter to the ideology of Eliot's realism, which enacts the periodic collision but never the sustained convergence of the world of the narrator with that of the characters. Maggie's point of view shapes and contracts the world of the novel for the duration of the above passage, but in the very next paragraph she exhibits "the dim consciousness that the condition was a transient one, and that the morrow must bring back the old life of struggle" (*Mill* 469). Maggie's return to consciousness of transience and tomorrow is a return to consciousness of time, and thus to duty—in other words, an ethically complex world irreducible to a single reality and inhospitable to Maggie's desires. Maggie's return to the world of consequences and struggle consists of her decision to leave Stephen, despite the inevitably disastrous results to her reputation. Though Stephen tries a variety of arguments to keep Maggie with him, including the contradictory ideas that "natural law surmounts every other" and that duty must spring from what "the world believes," Maggie holds firm to "renouncing whatever is opposed to the reliance others have in

¹⁸ Kerry McSweeney argues that *The Mill on the Floss* features two modes of memory: the "personal past," or the ties and obligations of our former lives, and "visionary memory," which "provides not a guide to right conduct but a means of achieving transcendence through the repossession of the past" (56, 57). While McSweeney is right to separate Maggie's visionary tendencies from her ethical consciousness of the past, Maggie's visions exclude memory about as often as they constitute a form of memory. Maggie's visions should be considered a means of transcending the limitations of the world she lives in, but this transcendence is only endorsed by the novel when Maggie is able to put it in the service of a larger, integrative world—a world that includes the long past as well as the limited consciousness of the present. A form of transcendence that integrates the limited present is by nature paradoxical and unsustainable, which is why Maggie's visions become effective action only in the tragic conclusion, where realism and sustainability are no longer on the table.

us” (*Mill* 475, 478). Stephen cannot answer Maggie’s central question, “If the past is not to bind us, where can duty lie?” without either dismissing the wider world entirely or making it all-powerful in a way that relies on public opinion rather than care for others (*Mill* 475).

Melissa J. Ganz sees Maggie’s position, which “expands the definition of promises to include all words and actions that, one knows, raise others’ expectations concerning the existence of binding obligations,” as central to *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* as well as *The Mill on the Floss* (Ganz 584). I take this formulation of promising to be true on the level of character and, in light of Maggie’s affinity with the narrator, will consider it on the level of form. One way of thinking about genre, as Eliot shows on the many occasions when she invokes and redefines tragedy, is as a set of expectations based on the literary past. To invoke a genre, then, is to raise a set of expectations in readers—a promise. Eliot delivers on this promise in *The Mill on the Floss*, which is cemented as a tragedy after the scene with Stephen on the river. At the same time, Eliot’s formal decisions are not “bound” by the past in the same way Maggie feels her ethical obligations are. The existence of new forms of tragedy (and, indeed, the existence of a realism that accommodates tragedy) shows that Eliot can and does change past forms to suit her present purposes. If genre is a promise, it is for Eliot (if not for Maggie) a flexible one. The promise or set of expectations raised by realism, moreover, differs from the promise of tragedy, and is perhaps more difficult to fulfill. Ewha Chung cites Eliot’s comment that “some of the fault lies in the very nature of a conclusion, which is at best a negation” to suggest the difficulty of developing “a realistic world only to arrive at some point at which it is necessary to pretend that things completely and unequivocally end” (Haight 2:324, Chung 804). I argue that Eliot first gives us a glimpse of the duration of Maggie’s life as a realist tragedy, which need not definitively end, and then breaks off into dramatic tragedy, which leaves probabilities behind in

favor of an ending. This break draws attention to its own improbability, denaturalizing the artificiality of the ending in the process. The switch from realist to dramatic tragedy is also a generic regression in a work that has previously separated the world of the dramatist from the way real life works. Once Maggie has been utterly paralyzed by the combination of social determinism and the emotional complexities of her own character, Eliot turns to generic determinism to free her—and at the same time to demonstrate the flaw in turning a limited understanding of the past into an ethical system. The world becomes smaller in the process.

After the scene on the river, with Maggie's rejection of Stephen, the novel shifts to realist tragedy. For Eliot, I have suggested, realist tragedy is when character and circumstances converge so as to guarantee unmitigated misery, often without the cathartic release of death. This is Maggie's position when she returns to St Ogg's. Maggie goes to Tom for shelter, but he rejects her and she winds up lodging with Bob Jakin. Here Maggie enters a state of isolation and paralysis made all the more intense by her refusal to sever her ties with St. Ogg's. When the Reverend Dr. Kenn suggests she take a situation elsewhere rather than endure hostile public opinion, Maggie responds, "I have no heart to begin a strange life again. I should have no stay. I should feel like a lonely wanderer—cut off from the past" (*Mill* 496). But while Maggie clings to her past associations with St Ogg's, she is prevented from participating in the community by a combination of public opinion and her own feelings. Though the recently widowed Dr. Kenn provides Maggie with employment teaching his children, gossip soon leads him to advise Maggie once again to go elsewhere. And while Aunt Glegg offers Maggie a place in her household out of clannish loyalty, Maggie refuses, "shrinking from all the contact her bruised mind would have to bear" (*Mill* 500). If Maggie is unwilling to sever her ties to the past

represented by St Ogg's, she is also unwilling to engage with the community in the only capacities available to her.

Maggie's paralysis is completed by two letters: one from Philip Wakem, and one from Stephen Guest. Philip's letter expresses his belief in and continuing love for Maggie, based on the expansiveness of her character. Philip says of Maggie's attraction to Stephen, "I foresaw that he would not relinquish you, and I believed then, as I believe now, that the strong attraction which drew you together proceeded only from one side of your characters, and belonged to that partial, divided action of our nature which makes half the tragedy of the human lot" (*Mill* 502). Philip's description of Maggie's attraction to Stephen calls to mind the way Maggie felt reality contract at her greatest moment of temptation upon the river with Stephen. If Maggie felt justifying a marriage to Stephen would require her to strip the world of its moral complexity, then Philip feels the attraction that spurred the whole disaster threatened to reduce Maggie to a single part of her otherwise expansive character. Philip associates half the tragedy of the human lot with action based upon a partial set of character traits. The irony is that the unsustainability of acting with the whole of our nature makes the other half.

Maggie inhabits a tragic form of realism in which, in order to be faithful to the whole of her nature, she must renounce all that is dear to her, over and over for the rest of her life, without ever leaving it behind. It is Stephen's letter that makes Maggie realize the full awfulness of her position and spurs the novel's most radical generic shift. Stephen writes to Maggie, imploring her to marry him after all. Maggie finds in the letter a fresh temptation which she must once again renounce. She succeeds through "the sense of contradiction with her past self in her moments of strength and clearness," and burns the letter (*Mill* 514). Hao Li rightly aligns this past self with a "morally selected past," but errs when he equates Eliot's concept of "the long

past” with this moral selectivity (Li 51). Following Maggie’s sense of contradiction with her moral past self (moral because the self she selects exists in moments of strength and clearness), Eliot writes, “the long past came back to her and with it the fountains of self-renouncing pity and affection, of faithfulness and resolve” (*Mill* 515). The long past brings back the emotions and consciousness of others that allow Maggie to renounce Stephen, but it does not consist solely of Maggie’s moral self. Rather, the long past consists of the entirety of Maggie’s experience and interconnections with others and, as such, consciousness of the long past will not allow Maggie to reduce herself to the partial.

This reading is borne out by the passage that follows, in which Maggie turns first to the self-renouncing words of Thomas A Kempis, then to a prayer of forgiveness to Stephen, and finally a cry of despair. This progression suggests that while the long past has convinced Maggie once again that renouncing Stephen is the right thing to do, it has not eradicated the passionate, “non-moral” parts of Maggie so much as it has brought them to the forefront while simultaneously rendering them untenable.¹⁹ Thus while Maggie holds fast to the past as her moral compass, she despairs at the prospect of a life lived on such terms, crying out, “I will bear it, and bear it till death....But how long it will be before death comes! I am so young, so healthy. How shall I have patience and strength? Am I to struggle and fall and repent again?—has life other trials as hard for me still?” (*Mill* 515). Maggie’s despair reflects her position in a realist tragedy with no hope of release. She understands that while she can make decisions based on a morally selected self, she cannot *be* solely a morally selected self.

¹⁹ George Levine picks up on the way Maggie connects the long past with a fully realized self when he argues, “Through the past [Maggie] attempts to overcome the persistent fragmentation of self which has hitherto left her vulnerable to the past’s uncomprehended forces” (Bloom 16). I argue that Maggie is complicit in sustaining this fragmented self in the early and middle parts of the novel, but finds it impossible. Maggie faces a catch-22 in that while her fragmented self leaves her vulnerable to an interconnected long past and present, it is also impossible for Maggie to act in the world as a totally unified self, since that unification consists of a number of contradictory obligations and attachments.

Maggie falls to her knees and begins to pray, but before she can complete a sentence, the world of the novel responds, finally and powerfully, to her desire for death: the Floss has overflowed its banks, and the water is rapidly rising up to swallow Bob Jakin's house and, eventually, Maggie. This highly improbable moment of Maggie's nearly simultaneous despair and wish-fulfillment signals the novel's move out of realist tragedy and into dramatic tragedy. For this one moment Eliot grants Maggie the power to bend the world of the novel with her desires, but only to remove her from it. This removal, however, is preceded by heroic action: Maggie singlehandedly rows one of Bob Jakin's boats to Dorlcote Mill in order to save Tom, who is trapped there in the rising water. This heroic action, like Maggie's decision to leave Stephen, is preceded by a period of dream-like unconsciousness on the river:

In the first moments Maggie felt nothing, thought of nothing, but that she had suddenly passed away from that life which she had been dreading: it was the transition of death, without its agony—and she was alone in the darkness with God.

The whole thing had been so rapid—so dream-like—that the threads of ordinary association were broken... She was driven out upon the flood:—that awful visitation of God which her father used to talk of—which had made the nightmare of her childish dreams. And with that thought there rushed in the vision of the old home—and Tom—and her mother—they had all listened together. (*Mill* 517)

Once again Maggie is brought back to consciousness and action by the recollection of her past associations. But her actions this time do not consist of a series of excruciating ethical decisions; instead, Maggie must physically row for her life and for Tom's. While Maggie's actions are heroic—indeed, Tom considers them “almost miraculous divinely-protected effort”—they also remove Maggie from the realm of the probable (*Mill* 520). Maggie has effectively wished herself out of realism and into the world of the dramatist—a world Eliot's narrator incarnation has explicitly rejected.

However, this heroic version of Maggie is effective only because the world of the novel has drastically altered during the flood. The realm of circumstance consists during the flood

scene not of the realities of daily life, but of a massive convergence of the natural and the divine. Eliot does not allow this dramatic world of improbable action to remain. When Maggie turns over the oars to Tom, they get caught up in the current and are driven into a collision with floating fragments of wooden machinery. Maggie and Tom die in each other's arms, "living through again in one supreme moment the days when they had clasped their little hands in love, and roamed the daisied fields together" (*Mill* 521). This death is clearly a reversion to pastoral childhood; at the same time, the collision with machinery is a collision with an industrial future. The divinely protected effort that allows Maggie to find Tom does not allow them to navigate the future together.

The collision of past and future that characterizes the flood scene is also a collision of past and present forms. Chung argues, "the form of the novel, which is always seen in terms of process, depends heavily on the history of the characters, just as the characters themselves depend heavily on their own history," and reads the temporal tension of the flood as leading to "a final breakdown of form" based on the impossibility of literally returning to the past (809, 818). While the flood scene is certainly a departure from the rest of the novel, it is not a breakdown of form so much as a reversion or regression to a past form: tragedy in the dramatic tradition of *Hamlet* or *Antigone*. If the flood ending has been prepared for by water imagery throughout the novel, the tragic ending is prepared for—though perhaps not satisfactorily, as Eliot herself commented—by the passages I have cited throughout. By returning to a dramatic model of tragedy Eliot rescues her heroine from a realism which would require Maggie to live indefinitely with the consequences of her own choices in a world that shuns her.

When Maggie wishes for death and galvanizes the novel's transition to dramatic tragedy, she is also wishing for a literary form in which she can, finally, function effectively as a heroine.

While the flood signals the novel's shift into dramatic tragedy, the raging current of the Floss reminds us that the river connects the disparate parts of the novel, as well as Maggie's life. Most of the major scenes of transition in Maggie's life happen on or near the river, and it is while young Maggie and the dream-memory iteration of the narrator gaze upon the river that the novel first breaks through the barriers between formal and temporal realities. Maggie would, in choosing Stephen, have chosen to reduce herself to only one part of her nature, as Philip comments in his letter (Bloom 6). Maggie's final renunciation of Stephen is in the name of *not* reducing herself to the partial—she cannot eradicate her attraction to Stephen, but neither can she give into it, since giving in would mean giving up her loyalties to everyone else in her life. The Floss floods because Maggie wishes it, but also because the Floss is what connects everything—Maggie, St Ogg's, the past, the future, and the realities of character, narrator, and author. Maggie's consciousness of her own "long past" allows her to renounce Stephen, but on the Floss as it floods she comes into contact with a far longer past that encompasses a history she has never been able to access. The flood is destructive because sustaining connections and loyalties to everything all at once is, as Maggie has discovered, unsustainable on the level of character. Dramatic tragedy is likewise unsustainable on the Floss and rejected by the novel. But dramatic tragedy, unlike Eliot's brand of realist tragedy, does not seek to sustain itself.

If in writing the flood Eliot turns the novel over to Maggie, in the conclusion she takes it back. Maggie, we know, found it impossible to live in a world where the fullness of her own nature and the fidelity she felt she owed to her past ties were constantly in conflict. In the conclusion, with Maggie gone, the narrator takes a long view of the relationship between nature and the past. Though the narrator begins, "Nature repairs her ravages—repairs them with her sunshine, and with human labour," she soon qualifies her own assertion: "Nature repairs her

ravages—but not all” (*Mill* 521). Five years after the flood, the town of St Ogg’s and the local landscape have recovered, and commerce and the harvest are both in full swing. But the new growth is not the same growth; “To the eyes that have dwelt on the past, there is no thorough repair” (*Mill* 522). The narrator takes the long view that St Ogg’s never takes of itself, and it is only by dwelling on the past that one can account for change over time, and put people’s general insensibility to those changes into perspective. The conclusion thus reiterates how history moves, reinstating the gap between characters and narrator in the process.

This long view was never available to Maggie, for whom “the past” meant childhood and occasional snatches of philosophy and literature found in books. Maggie based her ethics on her past ties, which she found to be constantly in conflict with each other. This constant conflict, in combination with a character inseparable from the people and environment that created her, led to a paralysis that Maggie could only see her way to escaping through death. But to take the long view of history as the narrator can is to see the persistence of human stupidity as well as the reality of change. Nature’s failure to repair all of her ravages is also a refutation of paralysis on a larger scale. This sort of change, predicated on the notion that not everything destroyed can be recovered, is cold comfort to the individual who must live in the world.

It is perhaps more comforting to Eliot’s narrator, who sees the world of the novel in a larger context relevant but not identical to her own existence, and is not subject to the same limitations as Maggie. If we recall the opening scene of the novel, in which the narrator looks upon Maggie’s childhood as a version of her own past, it seems curious that Maggie Tulliver dies, but the narrator remains. There is no need to kill Maggie off in order for the narrator to survive; the more logical progression from the novel’s opening scene would be for Maggie to grow into the narrator. The fact that Eliot refuses this trajectory, in combination with the fact that

Maggie comes closest to the shaping power of narration when the novel departs from realism altogether, suggests that Eliot remains invested in sustaining the barriers between the worlds of narrator and characters as an integral aspect of realism. The version of Eliot that Maggie embodies finds it impossible to live within a realist novel, but neither is she qualified to narrate one.

Chapter 2

Ibsen's Squatters

"I'm afraid...he must find a new and a different road before I can have any faith in him. In *The Feast at Solhaug* he has so buried himself in the heroic ballad that he ended up by becoming a ballad incarnate. To the point where he made the language his own. Then he moved on to the saga, and now he's emerging from that with all its expressions, its language, word for word, its least nuance and its dead poetry....He has a curiously dreamy personality which can't immerse itself in life but only in dead poetry."

—Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson on Ibsen, November 1857

"It seems to me that the sculptures of antiquity, like our heroic ballads, were the product of their age rather than of this or that artist. That is why I think a great many of our modern sculptors make a vital mistake in continuing to compose heroic ballads in clay and marble nowadays."

—Ibsen in a letter to Bjørnson, September 16, 1864

In his 1857 letter to the Danish critic Clemens Petersen, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson describes Henrik Ibsen as an author who squats in dead genres (Meyer 153). Bjørnson's description is striking in its characterization of Ibsen as having utterly immersed himself in the language of outdated genres, to the point where he has become dead poetry incarnate. In 1864, in the midst of writing an epic poem that would become the closet drama *Brand* (1866), Ibsen criticizes other artists for composing "heroic ballads in clay and marble"—that is, for continuing to produce work in forms and styles ill-suited to representing the modern world. Although his dramaturgy was still (and always) developing, in 1864 Ibsen repudiated the practice of squatting in what he, like Bjørnson, had come to consider dead genres.

While epic was important to the generic experimentation that launched Ibsen's later work, he came to see epic form as incompatible with modern drama.²⁰ On November 27, 1888,

²⁰ In his biography of Ibsen, Edmond Gosse calls Ibsen's epic poem *Terje Vigen* (1862) "almost the only instance in Ibsen's works of what the Northern critics call 'epic,' but what we [the English] less ambitiously know as the tale in

Ibsen wrote to Emanuel Hansen, a translator living in St. Petersburg, to thank him for sending a translation of Tolstoy's play *The Power of Darkness* (1886):

I have no doubt that if it is given a ruthlessly honest production, it will produce a deep effect. However, it seems to me that the author does not have a full understanding of the technique of the drama. There are more conversations than scenes in the play, and the dialogue seems in many places to be more epic than dramatic, the work as a whole to be less a drama than a narrative in dialogue form. (Ibsen, *Letters* 275)²¹

Ibsen identifies epic and narrative form as the undramatic elements of Tolstoy's play. Ibsen's verse plays *Brand* and *Peer Gynt* (1867), along with the prose "world-historic drama" *Emperor and Galilean* (1873) are often also called epic, though Ibsen did not refer to them that way.²² But Ibsen's letter shows that by the late 1880s, when he had written over half of the twelve realist prose plays for which he is most remembered, Ibsen saw epic and narrative form as dramaturgical shortcomings.

The intersection of epic with multiple genres and modes during the late nineteenth century, along with Ibsen's lack of elaboration, make it difficult to know what he meant by epic dialogue.²³ But it is possible to speculate on why Ibsen felt *The Power of Darkness* on the whole

verse" (Gosse 79). But Ibsen appears to have used "epic" (*episk*) fairly loosely, since he also uses the term (*epos*, in this instance) to describe Georg Brandes' three-volume critical study of Shakespeare in 1898 (Ibsen, *Letters* 339).

²¹ Ibsen's letters are available in Norwegian from the Documentation Project at the University of Oslo. The source for these digitized letters is the same as Evert Sprinchorn's source in his English-language *Letters and Speeches*: the centenary edition of Ibsen's works, *Samlede verker: hundreårsutgaven*, edited by Francis Bull, Halvdan Koht, and Didrik Arup Seip.

²² See Mike Ingham's "Staging the Epic Self: Theatricality, Philosophy and Personality in *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*" in Kwok-kan Tam's *Ibsen and the Modern Self*. Ingham locates *Brand* and *Peer Gynt* in a tradition of epic theater between Goethe and Brecht (145).

²³ The dialogue of Tolstoy's play is written in peasant dialect scattered with proverbs; it is unclear what Ibsen thought was "epic" about it. See Andrew Donskov's essays "Dialect and Non-Standard Speech in the Peasant Plays of L.N. Tolstoi" and "Tolstoj's Use of Proverbs in *The Power of Darkness*." On the interpenetration of epic with other forms during the nineteenth century see Simon Dentith, who notes, "Not only epic in the nineteenth century but also romance, the drama and painting... were dragged into the orbit of the novel. On the other hand, an opposite usage has taken the transformations of epic, envisaged by such writers as Barrett Browning and George Eliot, and used the word to describe almost indiscriminately the novel itself, so that it has become possible to speak with apparent appropriateness of the novel as providing the epic of bourgeois life, or more generally the epic of ordinary lives. It is not far from here to contemporary usages of the term in which epic is simply equivalent to 'long'" (105). Martin Puchner notes a critical tradition of applying an "expanded notion of epic" to modern drama and identifies "two competing histories" of generic development, "one that tells of an increasing absorption of drama (and poetry) by the novel and one that describes the increasing use made of narrative elements, in particular narrative diegesis, by

was more epic than dramatic, based on the structure of the play. The plot, in brief, involves a peasant woman who poisons her husband in order to marry the family laborer, who then cheats on the peasant woman with her stepdaughter, who in turn gets pregnant and gives birth. The former laborer, assisted by his wife and his mother, murders the baby.²⁴ Haunted by the murder, the former laborer publicly confesses his sins at the wedding of the stepdaughter, just at the moment when the family will succeed in covering up its sins. The play is largely naturalistic, though it contains elements of dramatic genres such as tragedy and the morality play.²⁵ One way in which the play might be considered more epic than dramatic is in its temporal span, which traverses eighteen months in the lives and deaths of the peasant family, often skipping several months between scenes.²⁶ If Ibsen were to rewrite Tolstoy's play using the form of its contemporary *Rosmersholm* (1886), most of the story would have occurred prior to the start of the play, and the plot would consist of a few key offstage events, onstage revelations, and concentrated discussion and interpretation of the play's backstory over a couple of days. Ibsen may have seen *The Power of Darkness* as a narrative in dialogue form because the temporally dispersed story and the staged plot are largely congruent.²⁷ Ibsen's realist plays are sometimes called undramatic because they foreground discussion rather than event-based action, and

modern drama" (Puchner 82). I would add that these histories need not compete, since they point to the interpenetration of genres and modes during this period.

²⁴ Tolstoy's baby-murder scene (which directs the actress playing the peasant woman to throw the live baby, though offstage crushing is how it finally dies) was considered so gruesome that he wrote an alternate scene in which two characters uninvolved in the murder converse in the kitchen while the baby is killed offstage. This variant was published along with the original scene. Although William Archer sees the scenes as interchangeable, claiming that it is "impossible to say" which version "produces the intenser or more 'specifically dramatic effect,'" translator Nathan Haskell Dole compares the narrated variant to Ibsen's drama (Archer, *Play-making* 239; Tolstoi v). This comparison points to the ways in which Ibsen criticizes Tolstoy in terms critics frequently apply to Ibsen's own drama.

²⁵ See Paul T. Nolan's "Tolstoy's 'Power of Darkness': Genre as Meaning," which sees the play as drawing on multiple dramatic genres.

²⁶ Benjamin Bennett notes that "in the wake of nineteenth-century literary realism...reality is understood to mean substantial periods of time" (18).

²⁷ On the separation of story and plot in Ibsen's plays see Brian Johnston's "Play It Again: Past Story Re-visited as Tragic Plot: *Rosmersholm* and *The Master Builder*."

because that discussion constantly invokes a backstory of novelistic (or bourgeois epic) proportions (Lukács 125; Printz-Påhlson 185). But Ibsen's comments on *The Power of Darkness* show that event-based action is not essential to his conception of the dramatic.²⁸ For Ibsen, language is action.²⁹ And while Ibsen sees narrative form as undramatic, narration is essential to his late dramaturgy.

The difference between undramatic narrative form and Ibsen's use of narration in the realist cycle is a matter of character and, specifically, of character types. I call Ibsen's characters "squatters" because they illegitimately occupy other people's homes—the domestic interiors on the stage—by rhetorically inserting themselves into the past lives of present residents. Squatting normally refers to asserting retroactive ownership over land or property through occupation. Squatting is thus a temporal and spatial performance of ownership resulting in legal or contractual recognition of that ownership. As I use the term, squatting is also a rhetorical process, and the squatter is a character type who is also a narrator type. Ibsen's squatters perform several functions characteristic of the narrators of nineteenth-century novels: they describe and interpret past and present events, mediate relationships between character and environment, and attempt to ascertain and express the characters' motives. But Ibsen does not invest his characters with an omniscient narrator's total knowledge and access to characters' thoughts—though a few characters late in the realist cycle do approach such powers. Rather, Ibsen's squatters infiltrate other characters' stories and rhetorics and attempt to align themselves with the semantic authority of Ibsen's mimetic sets. This narration by characters sometimes invests the sets with fantastic and occult properties, despite the fact that they remain materially naturalistic. Through

²⁸ For a contemporaneous analysis of what constitutes the "dramatic" versus the "undramatic" that draws on Ibsen's dramaturgy, see William Archer's *Play-making: A Manual of Craftsmanship*, which favors the idea that the dramatic is constituted by concentrated moments of crisis.

²⁹ See for instance Moi on Ibsen's "language as action and expression" and Worthen on "using language to embody action" (Moi 33; Worthen 144).

dialogic interactions with their own and other characters' contradictory origin stories, along and in tension with the realistic sets, Ibsen's squatters distance and finally sever dramatic character from its Aristotelian alignment with and subordination to plot.³⁰

The first part of this chapter focuses on Ibsen's reception by early critics and audiences who attempted to understand his dramaturgy by comparing it to the novel. These attempts reflect the cultural dominance of the novel as a literary form; the conditions under which Ibsen's plays were published, staged, and circulated; and audiences' tendencies to identify authorial stand-ins or *raisonneur* characters in his plays. Ibsen's own responses to his critics suggest his amusement and frustration with reading and viewing practices that insist on attributing interpretive authority to a single character. Ibsen's responses also reveal the extent to which his critics' focus on pinning down backstory and motive correspond to the characterological interpretive practices that Ibsen distances from semantic authority in his plays.

In *The Wild Duck* (1884) such narrated acts of interpretation prove incidentally murderous. By squatting in other characters' stories, houses, and identities, Gregers Werle indirectly causes the death of Hedvig Ekdal. The second part of this chapter reads this play as a pivotal moment in Ibsen's development of the complex relations between narration, dramatic character, and the material set. In *The Wild Duck* Ibsen is invested in naturalistic acting and staging. At the same time, the play is full of characters who sustain their sense of self by severing language from meaning and material referents. The stage, moreover, is divided between the everyday and the fantastic. The characters' spoken and performed interactions with each other

³⁰ Aristotle writes, "For Tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life, and life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action, not a quality. Now character determines men's qualities, but it is by their actions that they are happy or the reverse. Dramatic action, therefore, is not with a view to the representation of character: character comes in as subsidiary to the actions. Hence the incidents and the plot are the end of a tragedy; and the end is the chief thing of all. Again, without action there cannot be a tragedy; there may be without character.... Again, if you string together a set of speeches expressive of character, and well finished in point of diction and thought, you will not produce the essential tragic effect nearly so well as with a play which, however deficient in these respects, yet has a plot and artistically constructed incidents" (Aristotle).

and the material set show mimetic representation to be a revisionist process of retouching.³¹ The play stages the consequences not only of divorcing language from meaning, but also of understanding character as a product of a clear and provable origin story, at one extreme, or as a foundationless fiction, at the other. Through competing character narrators the play proposes and overwrites a relational understanding of character.

In *Rosmersholm* Ibsen explicitly frames character speech as murderous action. At the same time, this form of narrated action is no longer possible in the theatrical present. Because the play consists of retrospective character narration that attempts to reconstruct backstory and motive, there is a long critical history of reading *Rosmersholm* as Ibsen's most novelistic play. My account of this critical history shifts the focus to character types and their relationship to language. In Ibsen's drama character narration has the potential to act upon other people and to challenge the semantic authority of the realistic set. But *Rosmersholm* invokes this potential as something that is no longer possible for the squatter character, Rebecca West, precisely because she has succeeded in becoming a part of Rosmersholm. The house is an atavistic locus of authority and influence that drains its inhabitants of will. The characters' rhetorical attempts to align themselves with the semantic authority of the realistic set and their subsequent flagging vitality reflect this dynamic. Embroiled in (and constructed by) this relationship between narration and set is Beata Rosmer, a dead character who was murdered by Rebecca's words prior to the start of the play, and who is metaphorically resurrected through character speech in the dramatic present. In a manner similar to *The Wild Duck*, *Rosmersholm*'s characters replace the idea of a coherent account of a character's actions and motives with proof of selfless love. But narration that purports to recover a past or a set of motivations only generates dead characters.

³¹ I use "revisionist" in its historical and not its Marxist sense; that is, to denote the amendment of an accepted version of events or condition of representation.

The Master Builder (1892) contains two squatters, Halvard Solness and Hilda Wangel, though it is primarily Hilda who functions that way in the theatrical present. The play's characters are no longer concerned with proof or a coherent backstory. Hilda and Solness replace these concepts with a mutually narrated consensus about the properties of reality. Such a consensus constitutes a binding contract; thus, at stake in character narration are one's desires as well as one's obligations to other people. The conflation of the desired and the actual that runs through *The Wild Duck* and *Rosmersholm* becomes, in *The Master Builder*, a dynamic over which Hilda Wangel, at least, exerts some control. *The Master Builder*, then, is the point at which the squatter catches up to the structure of the play in staged time. But the play does not endorse Hilda and Solness' agreed-upon reality as fact. Aline Solness, a living iteration of the dead wives of *The Wild Duck* and *Rosmersholm*, tells her own irreconcilable story and functions as a critique of Hilda and Solness' narrated consensus. But while the play does not overwrite Aline's story, it ends in the triumph of the squatter, whose narration departs not only from other people's stories, but also from the staged plot in the theatrical present.

Ibsen's early critics, particularly in England, found it difficult to understand his dramaturgy except through comparison to the novel, though Ibsen never wrote one. This difficulty was due to the centrality of the novel to the ways people thought about realism and literature generally; the conditions under which Ibsen's work was published, circulated, and performed; and the subject-matter and formal complexity of Ibsen's dramaturgy. In England, the realist novel had been a dominant force in literature for decades by the time T.W. Robertson began to experiment with stage realism in his cup-and-saucer dramas of the 1850s. Although many changes in dramatic form and staging conventions—e.g., the causal structure of Eugène

Scribe's well-made plays, the everyday speech and content of domestic melodrama, and the increased emphasis on historical detail and accuracy in stage settings by actor-managers such as Charles Keen—contributed to the development of dramatic realism, critics often compared modern drama to the realist novel.³² In an 1891 piece in *The Westminster Review* titled “Realism on the Stage: How Far Permissible?” W.J. Lawrence claims, “In treating of the progress towards the natural in literature, one cannot touch for long upon the drama without making allusion to the scientific evolution of the novel” (273, 276). Likewise, in a 1902 piece in the *Fortnightly* W.L. Courtney claims, “because novels form a tremendously powerful department of literature, they have carried along with them Modern Drama” (671).³³ These accounts correspond with what Katherine Newey has described as a “teleological narrative of dramaturgy, performance style, and production and industrial practices which focuses on the development of English theatre towards realist staging, naturalistic performance styles through internalized and psychological representations of dramatic character, and play texts that embodied high-cultural ‘literary’ qualities, rather than visual spectacle” (Luckhurst 36). The “literary qualities” plays were supposed to embody were those of the novel, and the teleological narrative was already being constructed while Ibsen was alive and writing.

The criticism that brings modern drama together with the novel frequently repudiates its own comparisons on the basis of differences in production and form. (These repudiations do not end the debate.) In an 1892 piece in the *Fortnightly Review*, William Archer argues that the arrival in England of plays by Ibsen and other talented foreign writers has spurred a call for a

³² On the well-made play and pictorial realism in nineteenth-century drama see Taylor 11-12 and Brockett 503-507. Ibsen staged many such plays (including over 20 by Scribe) when he managed the Norwegian Theatre in Bergen during the 1850s (Bentley 119).

³³ See also A. B. Walkley's “The Drama” in *The Speaker: the Liberal Review* 3 (1891): 311-2; Walkley's “Novel and Drama” in *Novel Review* 1.1 (1892): 21-9; H. Schutz Wilson's “The Novel and the Drama” in *The National Observer, and British Review of Politics, Economics, Literature, Science, and Art* 15.386 (1896): 647; the anonymously authored “The Novel and the Drama” in *The Academy and Literature, 1914-1916*.1372 (1898): 178-9; and Henry Arthur Jones' “Can the Drama be Literature?” in *The Review of Reviews* 35.205 (1907): 68.

better native drama. Archer suggests that in order to revitalize English drama, novelists should write for the stage (Archer, "Drama in the Doldrums" 160-162). In response to Archer's call for novelist-playwrights, the *Pall Mall Gazette* published a series of articles by novelists under the title "Why I Don't Write Plays." Contributors were asked:

- (1) Whether you regard the present divorce of fiction from the drama as beneficial or inimical to the best interests of literature and of the stage;
- (2) Whether you, yourself, have at any time had, or now have, any desire to exercise your gifts in the production of plays as well as of novels; and, if not,
- (3) Why you consider the novel the better or more convenient means for bringing your ideas before the public whom you address. (Millgate 120-121)

Thomas Hardy's answer to the first question is concise: "Inimical to the best interests of the stage: no injury to literature" (Millgate 121). Though Hardy states that he has "written the skeletons of several" plays, he rejects drama as a viable form for his ideas based on the commercial and material conditions of the theater, "when parts have to be moulded to actors, not actors to parts; when managers will not risk a truly original play; when scenes have to be arranged in a constrained and arbitrary fashion to suit the exigencies of scene-building, although spectators are absolutely indifferent to order and succession" (Millgate 121). For Hardy, the conditions of English theatrical production form barriers to writing for the stage. George Gissing's contribution to the "Why I Don't Write Plays" series also cites the difficulties presented by production conditions, along with distaste for (and perhaps a misunderstanding of) dramatic form. Gissing agrees with Hardy that drama suffers from a lack of closeness with the novel, but he "cannot see that the man of letters suffers in any way, except financially, under his exclusion from the stage" (Korg 71). Gissing goes on to recount his experience of reading Ibsen:

In reading some of Ibsen's plays, I have regretted that they *were* plays. 'Hedda Gabler,' for instance, seems to me a strangling of rich possibilities which might have been worked out in the generous scheme of a novel. On the stage it is admirably effective, so of course my objection stands defeated; the author has done what he purposed. I mention the thought merely to throw light upon my own way of regarding art-material.

In dealing with the complex life of to-day I am not content to offer only dialogue.
(Korg 72)

Gissing sees the “rich possibilities” of Ibsen’s plays as conducive to the novel form, and wishes for the larger scope available to a novelist—a frequent complaint among critics.³⁴ Additionally, Gissing’s characterization of plays as “only dialogue” is similar to Ibsen’s objection that *The Power of Darkness* is a “narrative in dialogue form.” In other words, what Ibsen thought of as undramatic or epic in Tolstoy’s play has a lot in common with what some critics and novelists thought of as a disadvantage of dramatic form generally.

The responses to the “Why I Don’t Write Plays” prompt (which garnered enough attention to be parodied in *Punch and Judy: the London Serio-comic Journal*) react against the idea that novelistic literary production can be readily transferred to dramatic authorship and the practical conditions of theatrical production. In March of 1893, a reviewer expresses much the same sentiment in response to an English play actually produced by a novelist in an attempt to make drama more literary. After citing “the sudden apparition of Ibsen’s ‘Doll’s House’” in England as the galvanizing spark in the widespread call for a literary drama, the reviewer notes, “It came to be taken for granted that, if English novelists of the top rank, or even of the next two or three lower strain, would only consent to write plays, the British drama would at once become the admiration of the civilized world—which is understood not to be the case at the present moment” (H.F.). But George Moore (a novelist “of the next two or three lower strain” and a proponent of literary theater) fails to provide anything but conventional drama in his *The Strike at Arlingford* (1893), leading the reviewer to the conclusion that novelists “don’t write plays

³⁴ Wilson, for instance, writes in 1896, “the novel affords so much more space; while the dramatist cannot assist his dialogue or his action by means of narrative, description, or analysis. The complexity, psychology, and profound descriptive analysis of character and of motive, which we find in the modern novel, are qualities which cannot be shown by the playwright; though, as a part compensation, he appeals direct to the eye of the spectator, while the novelist can only address the mind of the reader” (647).

because they can't" (H.F.).³⁵ The reviewer then shifts with "relief" to a discussion of Ibsen and the success of Elizabeth Robbins acting in *The Master Builder* (1892) (H.F.). While many critics of the 1890s felt that Ibsen's plays embodied the qualities they would like to see developed in British drama, their attempts to understand those plays as literary led them to repeatedly invoke and reject comparisons to the novel.

This reception also had to do with the circulation of Ibsen's plays as published texts for reading as well as performance.³⁶ (Interestingly, it is when reading *Hedda Gabler* [1890] that Gissing feels it would be better as a novel; he admits the play is "admirably effective" on the stage.) Throughout his correspondence with his publisher, Frederik Hegel, Ibsen gave careful attention to the timing of when his plays were to be published and performed. Ibsen wanted the plays to be published in advance of the first performances, since he felt that if the plays were performed before they were read people would not read or buy the published texts. In an 1877 letter to Edvard Fallesen, head of the Royal Theater in Copenhagen, Ibsen writes:

I consider it injurious to a dramatic work that it should first be made accessible to the public by means of a stage performance.... As things stand now, a new play can never be considered and judged on its own, purely and simply as a literary work. The judgment will always include both the play and its performance. These two entirely different things are mixed up together; and as a rule the public is more interested in the acting and the actors than the play itself. (Ibsen, *Letters* 169)

³⁵ Moore, with Archer and others, was involved in the Independent Theatre (1891-1898), which opened with *Ghosts* and claimed as its goal a conscious attempt to encourage a literary British theater. The results of the endeavor were mixed—almost no new plays by English dramatists resulted. John Stokes argues, "The literary drama is essentially linear; in these plays characters are obliged to explain themselves even *to* themselves through monologue (not soliloquy) and formal debate; and their explanations are often singular, either in terms of the kind of emotional expression they use or in that they can offer themselves only one set of reasons for their behaviour. This failure serves as a reminder of the complex achievement of the true playwright, who successfully inter-relates action with articulation on several levels, a playwright such as Ibsen at his greatest" (144).

³⁶ On Ibsen's relations to the period's developing international copyright conventions see his letter to Habard Berner, Norwegian State Comptroller, on March 27, 1881. The letter addresses the lack of copyright protections for Norwegian authors, and particularly dramatists. Ibsen makes the lack of such protections the basis of a request for a larger state pension (Ibsen, *Letters* 191-194). See also Martin Puchner's *Stage Fright* on the increasing importance and international circulation of printed drama and Bennett's "Strindberg and Ibsen: Cubism, Communicative Ethics, and the Theater of Readers" in *Theater As Problem* (Puchner 20-21; Bennett 17-54).

This is not to say that Ibsen was uninterested in his plays as texts for performance. He managed two theaters early in his career (though in 1867 he claimed, “For a poet, working in a theater is equivalent to repeated, daily abortions”), and later he periodically weighed in on which actors were suited to which parts in his plays, or how the settings and lighting should be handled (Ibsen, *Letters* 242-243). Ibsen also agreed with Hegel in 1879 that “the publication of a play does not hurt theater attendance” (Ibsen, *Letters* 71, 179). Ibsen was invested in his plays as literary texts for reading and for performance, though he saw these modes of circulation as ideally separable.

Though Ibsen encouraged his reputation as a serious author of published books, he discouraged readers and audiences from identifying authorial stand-ins or *raisonneur* characters in his plays. Inga-Stina Ewbank notes, “No Ibsen character is his spokesman, as he reminded William Archer à propos of *Ghosts*: ‘The people in the North are terrible. I write a play with five characters and they insist on putting in a sixth—namely Ibsen’” (Ewbank 7). Ibsen thus simultaneously raised the international profile of dramatic authorship and attempted to distance that authorship from personification in his characters. The tendency of readers and audiences to identify author characters in Ibsen’s plays shows a gap between Ibsen’s formulation of dramatic character and the way his dramaturgy was understood. Readers and audiences were picking up on Ibsen’s characters’ proclivities for interpreting, framing, and reconstructing reality for others. The characters’ attempts at framing tend to take the form of the search for a foundational truth or inner motive, and reader and audience responses to these characters tended to mimic the process Ibsen criticizes in his plays.

Conflicting representations of reality—often expressed through characters’ conflicting accounts of past events—are endemic to Ibsen’s plays and to literature of the late nineteenth century generally. Increasingly, in the realist cycle, these contradictions go unresolved, leaving

important interpretive choices to actors, directors, and audiences.³⁷ Ibsen encouraged this openness; when Archer wrote asking whether Mrs. Alving of *Ghosts* (1881) does or does not give her son the poison after the curtain falls, Ibsen “laughed, and said in his sort of unctuous deliberate drawl: ‘That I don’t know. Everyone must work that out for himself. I should never dream of deciding such a difficult question. Now, what do you think?’” (Ibsen, “Oxford” V.475, qtd. in Durbach, “Uncertainty” 126). Ibsen was invested in there being no “true,” authorially endorsed version of the events behind or subsequent to the play. It is not surprising that Ibsen laughed at Archer, for Ibsen also locates a strong interpretive drive and desire for narrative certainty in his characters who, for much of the realist cycle, try and fail to establish a baseline for what really happened. To engage in this process in Ibsen’s later realist plays is to fall into the interpretive trap he sets for his characters.

Ibsen’s characters often attempt to get to the bottom of things—to reconstruct and agree on past events and motives—through dialogic narration by characters. Far from turning Ibsen’s plays into undramatic narratives in dialogue form, these narrator characters facilitate new relationships between character speech, dramatic action, and the material set. If “mimetic narrative aims at a psychological reproduction of mental process,” then the fact that the characters’ narrated process of finding the “true” backstory is a red herring suggests that Ibsen’s plays aim at something other than a reproduction of mental process, despite their archetypal status in psychological realism (Scholes, Phelan, and Kellogg 14). Ibsen’s sets are largely mimetic, but his characters’ divergent narrated accounts of motive and meaning are not—though the characters often believe otherwise.

³⁷ See for instance Errol Durbach’s “Ibsen and the Dramaturgy of Uncertainty.” See also Elizabeth Robins’ *Ibsen and the Actress* for a discussion of the ways Ibsen’s dramaturgy necessitates and encourages actors’ interpretive choices.

Central to Ibsen's dramaturgy throughout the realist cycle are the relations between representations of domesticity and the characters who inhabit it. Ibsen represents domestic space through the interactions between the material stage, character dialogue, and performance, and these modes of representation are in tension as often as they are in agreement. In *A Doll House* (1879), to take an early and iconic example, a realistic "*comfortable room, tastefully but not expensively furnished*" is revealed through dialogue, plot, costume, and dance as a stunting doll house (Ibsen, *Complete* 125). Helmer takes exception when the rhetoric of the house merges with the way Nora speaks of their marriage, as she explains why she is leaving him:

NORA. [...] When I lived at home with Papa, he told me all his opinions, so I had the same ones too; or if they were different I hid them, since he wouldn't have cared for that. He used to call me his doll-child, and he played with me the way I played with my dolls. Then I came into your house—

HELMER. How can you speak of our marriage like that? (Ibsen, *Complete* 191)

Nora repeatedly announces that it is the house, as much as the marriage, that she is leaving; she tells Helmer "that when a wife deserts her husband's house just as I'm doing, then the law frees him from all responsibility," and freely admits that she is "sure I'll think of you often, and about the children and the house here" (Ibsen, *Complete* 195, 196). The final "*sound of a door slamming shut*" brings the set into alignment with Nora's rhetoric by concretizing her absence from the marriage as her absence from the house and the stage (Ibsen, *Complete* 196).

In subsequent plays, characters come into other people's houses under different conditions—as tenants, nurses, and mysterious travelers—and with different relationships to the set. Like Nora, these characters tend not to own the houses they enter. But they also attempt to make these domestic and theatrical structures their own in a way that is not possible for Nora. *A Doll House* dramatizes Nora's move from the doll-wife type to a more naturalistic formulation of character incompatible with the material set and its associated ideologies. Nora's relationship to

language also changes over the course of the play; she goes from confirming Helmer's characterization of her as a twittering lark in the opening scene to asserting that "we've never exchanged a serious word on any serious thing....I'm saying that we've never sat down seriously together and tried to get to the bottom of anything" (Ibsen, *Complete* 125, 190, 191). The change in Nora's speech also marks the change in her character; for Nora, having a serious discussion and trying to get to the bottom of a problem are part of leaving her doll-wife identity behind. Explaining her own backstory—"When I lived at home with Papa"—is part of this process. But in many of Ibsen's later plays, trying to get to the bottom of things is depicted less positively, as a self-interested process of attempting to control how reality is represented, and how other people inhabit it.

The best example of the idea that getting to the bottom of things or constructing a coherent backstory is a red herring is in *The Wild Duck*, in which the eponymous bird famously galvanizes and resists interpretation by characters and critics alike. The play, which Ibsen saw as a new direction for his dramaturgy, stages dueling representations of reality through confrontations and convergences between narration and theater (Ibsen, *Letters* 237). Old Werle, a wealthy industrialist, wants his son Gregers to become a partner in his business and move back home. Their conversation reveals that old Werle is losing his sight, and that he had an affair with Gina, the housemaid who is now Hjalmar's wife, during the year of Gregers' mother's death. The purpose of making Gregers a partner is to legitimate old Werle's marriage to his housekeeper, Mrs. Sørby, in the eyes of the town:

GREGERS. So that's it! That's why I—damn it all!—had to make my personal appearance in town. On account of Mrs. Sørby, family life is in order in this house. Tableau of father with son! That's something new, all right!

WERLE. How dare you speak in that tone!

GREGERS. When has there ever been family life here? Never, as long as I can remember. For who could deny what a fine impression it would make to hear that

the son—on the wings of piety—came flying home to the aging father’s wedding feast. What’s left then of all the stories about what the poor dead woman suffered and endured? Not a scrap. Her own son ground them to dust. (Ibsen, *Complete* 409)

Gregers frames his role in his father’s plan first as a character in a melodramatic tableau, and then as an unwitting accomplice to erasing extant stories about his mother’s past suffering. Having put forth the idea that a melodramatic tableau in the theatrical present can grind stories about the past into dust, Gregers sets out to resurrect the “true” past by exposing all the illusions and lies his father has molded into a life for Hjalmar Ekdal. Gregers muses that Hjalmar is “living under the same roof with that creature, not knowing that what he calls his home is built on a lie” (Ibsen, *Complete* 409). Gregers believes that a happy home and marriage must be built on a foundation of truth. He finds “a mission to live for” in breaking down the illusions his father has set up in order to enable Hjalmar to rebuild his marriage and his home along lines of truth (Ibsen, *Complete* 409). In theory, this exposure will turn what Gregers sees as an illusion of domestic happiness into actual domestic happiness. Having rejected the melodramatic tableau as erasing the past, Gregers values stories as a means of preserving or recovering it.

The subsequent action of *The Wild Duck* stages the consequences of who frames reality for others, and how. Notably, there is no actual tableau in the scene between Gregers and old Werle; instead, tableau functions as a discourse that Gregers associates with an illusionistic way of framing family life. This distinction distances the representational strategies Gregers invokes from those employed by the play. What’s more, Gregers’ notion of reality is framed by his dead mother:

WERLE. You’ve seen me with your mother’s eyes. (*Dropping his voice.*) But you should remember that those eyes were—clouded at times.

GREGERS (*faltering*). I know what you mean. But who bears the guilt for Mother’s fatal weakness? You, and all those—! The last of them was that female that Hjalmar Ekdal was fixed up with when you had no more—ugh!

WERLE (*shrugs*). Word for word, as if I were hearing your mother. (Ibsen, *Complete* 409)

The insane or hysterical dead wife whose perspective and words haunt the living is a recurring Ibsen character type, the most notable of which is *Rosmersholm*'s Beata.³⁸ Although the dead wives' words haunt the living, the wives themselves do not speak or appear on stage; what characters, readers, and audiences accept as words from the past haunting the present is actually characters constructing a past in the theatrical present. Readers and audiences tend to accept this past to the extent that the present characters' interactions with each other and their environments appear to endorse or at least not contradict it. But the past being constructed, in the case of Ibsen's dead wife characters, takes the form of a person, a character that is effectively born dead.

The way Ibsen's dead wife characters structure representations of reality for the living suggests a new relationship between language and dramatic character. Ibsen's dead wives generally turn out to have been at least partially correct about whatever people called them insane for saying, and so insanity labels sit uneasily upon them. In the case of Gregers' mother, the clouded eyes, "fatal weakness," and abortive references to old Werle's infidelities, in conjunction with the fact that old Werle is going blind, suggest syphilitic insanity. At the same time, Gregers says that his father's eyes have "always been weak," which suggests the cause of the blindness is genetic rather than venereal (Ibsen, *Complete* 407). Ibsen's dialogue invites speculation on cause and motive but tends to evade definitive backstories and diagnoses. What is interesting about the exchange between Gregers and old Werle is not whether the dead mother's perspective is correct (it appears correct in this scene, though later Mrs. Sørby claims that old Werle's first wife's "sermons were aimed at the most imaginary failings," and Gina agrees), but the idea that Gregers sees with her eyes and speaks with her words (Ibsen, *Complete* 463). In

³⁸ On Ibsenite realism as itself hysterical see Elin Diamond's "Realism's Hysteria" in *Unmaking Mimesis* (3-39).

Nightwood, a novel whose language and characters are famously opaque, Djuna Barnes identifies a character called “The Squatter,” a person whose “present is always someone else’s past, jerked out and dangling” (Barnes 105). Barnes’ squatter is also a storyteller whose words “seemed to have been lent to her,” and who consistently misses the meaning of her own stories (Barnes 73). Gregers squats in his dead mother’s eyes and words and, as the play goes on, he squats in other people’s stories, not to mention their households.

The Ekdal household, where the rest of the play is set, runs on a combination of Gina’s pragmatic good management, fourteen-year-old Hedvig’s relentlessly pre-adolescent cheer, and Hjalmar’s prevarications, which are aimed toward sustaining the fiction of his own importance. When he gets home, Hjalmar turns a series of humiliations he suffered at old Werle’s dinner party, where he was the unlucky thirteenth guest and embarrassed himself with a lack of worldly knowledge, into a night where he “told a thing or two” to the wealthy, schooled them about the production of fine wines, and graciously treated their ignorance with kindness (Ibsen, *Complete* 416). The Ekdal family supports Hjalmar in his face-saving lies; as Erik Østerud notes, “[a]s Hjalmar relates his triumph it becomes clear that the actual story itself captures their imagination, so that they applaud enthusiastically and comment on the narrator” (Østerud 156). For the audience, Hjalmar is discredited as soon as he begins because the past he narrates is part of and diverges from the prior action of the play. But Hjalmar’s self-serving narration is also one of the elements holding his home life together because the family agrees to endorse it.

Immediately after Hjalmar’s narration of his success at the dinner party, the play emphasizes the consequences of building a household on the foundation of a consensus about reality. Hedvig, who has gone without hot food in her father’s absence, eventually grows impatient and asks him for the treat he promised to bring her:

HJALMAR. So help me if I didn't forget. But wait a minute! I've got something else for you, Hedvig. (*Goes over and rummages in his coat pockets.*)

...

HEDVIG. That? But that's just a piece of paper.

HJALMAR. It's the bill of fare, the complete bill of fare. Here it says "menu"; that means "bill of fare."

HEDVIG. Don't you have anything else?

HJALMAR. I forgot to bring anything else, I tell you. But take my word for it: it's bad business, this doting on sugar candy. Now, if you'll sit down at the table and read the menu aloud, I'll describe for you just how each dish tasted. How's that, Hedvig?

HEDVIG (*swallowing her tears*). Thanks. (Ibsen, *Complete* 418)

Hedvig knows that the story of dinner is not dinner. Hjalmar fails to make the distinction, and his family suffers for it. Toril Moi characterizes Hjalmar in terms of "empty language...that cannot keep the promises of meaning it makes," and notes that "a menu is itself a promise....To hand the menu to Hedvig in *this* situation, however, is simultaneously to make and break the menu's promise" (Moi 263, 264). Moi argues that Hjalmar and Gregers' actions throughout the play cause Hedvig to lose faith in language. When Hedvig kills herself in response to her father's and Gregers' overheard call for proof of her love, Moi adds, she "tries to teach them how to mean what they say. They will not heed her lesson" (Moi 265). As this scene and the play's many discussions of eating, drinking, and working show, in *The Wild Duck* Ibsen's develops dramatic speech that is both prosaic and estranged from the everyday referents it invokes.

Does the play mean what it says? Does it make or keep promises of meaning? What a play says or promises is necessarily a matter of acting and staging as well as language. If losing faith in language (a response to constantly encountering language that does not keep its promises of meaning) involves severing it from material referents, what is the relationship between language and the material set in *The Wild Duck*? In an 1884 letter to Hans Schrøder, head of the Christiana Theater, Ibsen advises, "In both the ensemble acting and in the stage setting, [*The Wild Duck*] demands truth to nature and a touch of reality in every respect" (Ibsen, *Letters* 242).

Ibsen's letter therefore suggests a gap between his play's linguistic departures from and resistances to referentiality and his commitment to a material set that mimics reality.³⁹ The ensemble actors, who are supposed to inhabit realism both as a material setting and as a style of performance, mediate this gap, because it is the actors who speak the language as though it too is naturalistic. In other words, if the characters use language in a way that distances it from meaning and material referents, the actors cannot (or at least are not supposed to) depart from a mimetic depiction of character. While there is no necessary correlation between referential or meaningful language and a mimetic depiction of character, there is a customary one. What makes a menu a promise is not a formal contract, but a set of expectations grounded in custom and context. Character in *The Wild Duck* is thus a formally generative broken promise insofar as the naturalistic acting and staging (in conjunction with the intermittently—and sometimes simultaneously—everyday and metaphorical dialogue) lead audiences to expect a realistic depiction of character, only to cast doubt on what is being represented.⁴⁰

If the increasing departures of the play's language from meaningful and material referents work in tension with Ibsen's naturalist stage setting, a conventional understanding of naturalism also cannot fully account for how this setting functions in the play, particularly in the Ekdals' loft. Gregers, I have noted, feels the Ekdals' home is built on lies, and must be cleansed so the family can move forward on the "solid ground" of truth (Ibsen, *Complete* 484). The Ekdal household *is* built on lies or, more broadly, fictions. But the relationships between those fictions and the household's continuance is not what Gregers believes it to be, as shown by the fact that the family does not reunite in enlightened harmony after Gregers tells Hjalmar about Gina's past

³⁹ Ibsen's language, which in this play oscillates between the everyday and the downright cryptic, both invokes and thwarts the realism of the acting and setting. Eric Bentley writes that the "very naturalness" of Ibsen's prose dialogue "is the final artifice, the art that conceals art" (124-125).

⁴⁰ On *The Wild Duck*'s reception by its bewildered first audiences see Moi 248-249.

affair with old Werle. What is fascinating and difficult to parse about the Ekdal household's fictions is that they are material as well as linguistic. For instance, the play's most everyday objects and props—bread and butter, beer, sandwiches, hats and coats—are also deployed by characters as a form of storytelling designed to preserve and perpetuate the domestic status quo. Gina, whose verbal slips reveal her lack of education at various points in the play, is a master at this type of storytelling. When Hjalmar declares that he can no longer live with Gina and Hedvig, after Gregers reveals the affair with old Werle, Gina assents and then brings Hjalmar a loaded breakfast tray. As Gina and Hjalmar talk about his preparations for moving out, Gina suggests courses of action that will not really constitute moving out while simultaneously emphasizing the domestic comforts Hjalmar will be leaving behind. Gina advises, "So leave everything else for the time being, and just take a shirt and a pair of shorts with you," and a moment later she prompts Hjalmar, who has refused to eat, drink, or sleep under the same roof with Gina, that his coffee is getting cold (Ibsen, *Complete* 481). As the scene progresses, Hjalmar "*Unthinkingly takes a sip and then another*" sip of the coffee, eats Gina's bread and fresh butter, and agrees to stay in the living room for a couple of days while he looks for lodgings (Ibsen, *Complete* 481). Gina deploys material props in the service of this story of acclimatization and domestic comforts. The story is both true and a lie; Hjalmar really will have everything comfortable and just as he likes it at home, but the story of the household itself is not one of comfort and plenty, as Gina and Hedvig's economizing and forgoing hot food in Hjalmar's absence shows. Both Gina's language and her interactions with the physical set are consistently committed to the everyday, but the everyday is not a referential rock against which the play's more symbolic, abstract, and fantastic elements are pitted. The everyday in *The Wild Duck* is both a set of material and

economic conditions and a mode of domestic performance designed to make those conditions seem better than they are.

The play's treatment of photography adds more layers to the relationship between mimetic and revisionist representation. The Ekdals' apartment is also a photography studio, and the stage directions specify that there is photography equipment scattered throughout the room. Photography is part of the everyday insofar as it is the family's primary means of economic support. But the play also gestures toward photography's potential for technological and perhaps artistic innovation, since one of Hjalmar Ekdal's fictions of self-importance is that he will one day create an amazing photographic invention that will restore his family's honor and wealth. The invention never materializes, even as a formed idea. Photography is thus a material stage presence as well as another empty promise. Moreover, while photography, like realism, has often been viewed in terms of its capacity to represent life as it is, the primary photographic activity Ibsen's characters engage in on stage is retouching. Ibsen criticized audiences' insistence on plays that "bear a photographic resemblance to reality" as early as 1857, when he was the artistic director of the Norwegian Theatre of Christiania (Meyer 147). By 1884, Ibsen had moved beyond this understanding of photography as naïve realism. Photography is thus revisionist as well as mimetic or, more accurately, it reveals that illusionistic mimetic representation actively changes the referent.

This characterization of photography is particularly interesting in light of the way Ibsen associates it with kept and unkept promises. Hjalmar's broken photographic promises are not restricted to his unthought-of invention; he also neglects his retouching duties even though the prints have "been called for so many times already" (Ibsen, *Complete* 418). On the other hand, Gina explicitly associates photography with a kept promise. At the beginning of Act Four, "A

photograph has just been taken....GINA is standing in the hall doorway with a plate-holder and a wet photographic plate in her hand, talking with someone outside” (Ibsen, Complete 453).

Gina’s first lines are, “Yes, that’s definite. When I promise something, I keep my word. On Monday the first dozen will be ready” (Ibsen, *Complete* 453). If Gina keeps her promises, they are not the promises of a naïve realism that claims to represent life as it is. Presumably, these photographs will also be retouched. The promises Gina makes and keeps are the production and maintenance of a carefully constructed and retouched everyday. Gina is invested in keeping her home and family afloat; her promises have little to do with abstract or absolute notions of truth and everything to do with her understanding that the prosaic, like the fantastic, must be stage-managed.

These already intricate relations between character and setting are further complicated by the division of the Ekdals’ home into the domestic (yet still theatrical) downstage and a fantastic, occluded upstage. At the back of Hjalmar Ekdal’s photography studio there is an attic room full of dead Christmas trees, live birds, and other small animals. The attic is accessed by a set of wide double doors and further screened by a curtain made of sailcloth and fishing net. As Moi also notes, the attic loft means something different to each character (Moi 251). It contains everything except for the everyday (and Gina is not interested in it). For old Ekdal, Hjalmar’s father, the attic room is a version of the vast forests of his youth, before old Werle ruined him. He and Hjalmar go hunting there and rig contraptions for the animals. The attic (which is generally referred to as the loft, though at other times the whole Ekdal apartment is called the loft) is a built environment constructed in response to the desire for escape from old Ekdal’s degraded reputation and the family’s everyday obligations. But the attic is also an inherited space containing the books and belongings (including a clock that no longer runs) of the “Flying

Dutchman,” the apartment’s previous tenant.⁴¹ This timeless fantasy space is a competing center of family life. It is also a metatheatrical part of the set that reveals much about the Ekdals’ relations to each other and their environment without ever giving the audience a clear picture of what is inside. The division of the set thus suggests an interior it refuses to provide.

The similarly unseen “star” of the loft is the wild duck, who is a spoken story as well as an obscured stage presence. The whole family (again, except for Gina) tells Gregers the story of how the wild duck came to be in the Ekdals’ loft: old Werle, the source of most things in the household, winged the wild duck while hunting and his “remarkably clever dog” dove down into the weeds and sea moss and retrieved the bird (Ibsen, *Complete*) 427). The wild duck did not do well at Werle’s house, so his servant brought it to the Ekdals’, where the bird is thriving. With Gregers’ help, the wild duck takes on a profound symbolic significance; however, the story’s referents are never clear or stable. Hedvig insists, whenever the wild duck is brought up, that it is her own particular property. Hjalmar unconsciously associates the duck with himself when he remarks, “She’s gotten fat. I think she’s been in there so long, too, that she’s forgotten her old wild life, and that’s what it all comes down to” (Ibsen, *Complete* 427). The duck has gotten used to life in the loft just as Hjalmar has acclimatized himself over the years to life with Gina and the rest of the family. When Gregers rents the Ekdals’ spare room and Gina warns him that the other tenants, Molvik (a “demonic” former divinity student) and Relling (a doctor), keep late hours, Gregers responds, “One gets used to that soon enough. I’m hoping things will go for me the

⁴¹The story of the flying Dutchman and his book, which Hedvig calls *Harryson’s History of London*, is largely autobiographical. Ibsen and his sister, whose name was also Hedvig, had a copy of this book, whose full title is *A New and Universal History, Description and Survey of the Cities of London and Westminster, the Borough of Southwark, and Their Adjacent Parts*. Ibsen’s childhood copy of the book likely belonged to the shipmaster Nils Jørgen Hirschholm (1782-1828), who was known as the flying Dutchman and whose personal library remained intact in Ibsen’s childhood home, where Hirschholm had once lived (Hanssen). See Matthew Wilson Smith’s “The Wild Duck: A Play of Play” on the loft as a space of play, in the senses of childhood as well as theatricality.

same as with the wild duck—” (Ibsen, *Complete* 428). This remark would seem to confirm the wild duck as a symbol of acclimatization.

However, a few lines later, Gregers shifts his affiliations in the story. Gregers expresses disgust for his own name, calling it his cross to bear, in an attempt to distance himself from his father. Hjalmar asks who Gregers would want to be, if not himself.

GREGERS. If I could choose, above all else I'd like to be a clever dog.

GINA. A dog!

HEDVIG (*involuntarily*). Oh no!

GREGERS. Yes. A really fantastic, clever dog, the kind that goes to the bottom after wild ducks when they dive under and bite fast into the weeds down in the mire.

...

(GREGERS and HJALMAR go out through the hall.)

GINA (*gazing into space, her sewing in her lap*). Wasn't that a queer business, his wanting to be a dog?

HEDVIG. I'll tell you something, Mother—it seemed to me he meant something else by that.

GINA. What else could he mean?

HEDVIG. I don't know—but it was just as if he meant something else from what he said, all the time. (Ibsen, *Complete* 428-429)

As Gregers frames the story of the wild duck here, Hjalmar is the duck at the bottom of a mire of lies, and Gregers is the clever dog who will pull him up to see the truth. Hedvig's involuntary “Oh no!” suggests she feels Gregers' wish to be a clever dog to be a threat—and it is one, in a household sustained by carefully tended illusions—though she does not understand the precise nature of that threat. What Hedvig does understand, as her remarks to Gina show, is that Gregers speaks in metaphors with unclear referents. Moi sees Gregers' speech in terms of flight from the everyday or the ordinary, where “(inspired by Cavell, Austin, and Wittgenstein), the opposite of the ordinary is not the unusual, the technical, the scientific, or the literary, but metaphysics, or language that means nothing” (Moi 360). Perhaps the question to ask about *The Wild Duck*, then, is not what language means, but how it performs in conjunction and in tension with the material set and the characters who inhabit it.

If Hjalmar's language elides the difference between a menu and dinner, Gregers' language acts more radically to make the material basis of Hedvig's reality into a narrated one. Within the loft, according to Hedvig, the wild duck is a character without an origin story. While even the chickens have grown up with sibling chicks, the wild duck is "so completely apart from any of her own. So you see, everything is so really mysterious about the wild duck. There's no one who knows her, and no one who knows where she's come from, either" (Ibsen, *Complete* 438). Gregers responds, "And actually, she's been in the depths of the sea" (Ibsen, *Complete* 438). The depths of the sea are another metaphor with multiple possible referents. The water from which the clever dog extracted the duck is a likely candidate, since that is the wild duck's origin story as we know it. But then Hedvig comments:

HEDVIG. That was because always, when all of a sudden—in a flash—I happen to think of that in there [the attic], it always seems to me that the whole room and everything in it is called "the depths of the sea"! But that's all so stupid.

GREGERS. Don't you dare say that.

HEDVIG. Oh yes, because it's only an attic.

GREGERS. Are you so sure of that?

HEDVIG (*astonished*). That it's an attic!

GREGERS. Yes. Do you know that for certain?

(HEDVIG, *speechless, stares at him open-mouthed.*) (Ibsen, *Complete* 438)

If the entire loft is the depths of the sea, then the wild duck comes from exactly where she already is. In Gregers' eyes, this is true, in that the loft and all the illusions it supports are the same as the muck and mire from which the dog extracted the duck. But when Hedvig distinguishes between a metaphorical understanding of the loft as the depths of the sea and a literal understanding of it as an attic, Gregers questions her, to Hedvig's astonishment. For the second time in as many days, Hedvig is faced with an adult who seemingly cannot tell the difference between dinner and the story of dinner, or a metaphorical sea and an attic room. This scene gets to the heart of Gregers' paradoxical understanding of the world and his role in it, since

diving to the bottom of the sea like a clever dog is both a metaphor for unearthing the true story of the Ekdal family's past and utterly nonsensical. This scene also brings Hedvig and the play to a momentary standstill because it takes a lack of consensus about the properties of reality—a situation common to Ibsen's characters in terms of their disparate understandings of the past—and brings it to bear on the material set in the theatrical present. Faced with a narrated present at odds with the material environment she inhabits, Hedvig is unable to respond.

Hedvig posits an alternate logic as she becomes the character most closely affiliated with the wild duck. After Gregers reveals Gina's relations with old Werle, Hjalmar vows never to set foot in the loft again, and to do nothing but work for the rest of his life. Hjalmar immediately makes exceptions to these vows for Hedvig, who has been promised a birthday party in the loft the following day. Celebrating Hedvig's birthday in the loft aligns her own origin story with the loft's space of unclear time and origin. (Hedvig's relations to time and development are vexed throughout the play; she is a curiously young fourteen, and plans to always live with her parents—essentially, to never grow up.) The association between Hedvig and the wild duck is apparent in Hjalmar's speech, which begins to confuse them. Hedvig cries out in alarm when her father says he would like to wring the wild duck's neck, reminding him that the wild duck is hers, and that he should have pity on it. Hjalmar responds, "You heard me say I'd spare it—for your sake. It won't be hurt, not a hair on its—well, anyway, I'll spare it" (Ibsen, *Complete* 455). The wild duck has no hair on its head, but Hedvig does. Additionally, when Hjalmar asks Gina whether Hedvig is truly his biological daughter, Gina responds that she does not know. This lack of certainty (which reads more like refusal to answer on Gina's part, but which infects the other characters anyway) effectively turns Hedvig, like the wild duck, into a character without an origin story. Once Hjalmar doubts Hedvig's parentage, he rejects her, walking out as Hedvig

tearfully begs him to stay. At this point Hedvig shifts from talking about the wild duck as her possession to talking about it as analogous to herself:

HEDVIG. Perhaps I'm really not Daddy's child.

GREGERS (*disturbed*). How could that ever be?

HEDVIG. Mother could have found me. And now maybe Daddy's found out. I've read about these things.

GREGERS. Well, but if that was the—

HEDVIG. Yes, I think he could love me even so. Or maybe more. The wild duck was sent us as a present too, and I'm terribly fond of it, all the same. (Ibsen, *Complete* 470)

While Gregers is disturbed by Hedvig's unclear origin story, Hedvig casts herself and the wild duck as fairytale foundlings. The idea that she is not her father's child suggests to Hedvig not infidelity or broken promises, but parentlessness, which for her is no barrier to love. In order to arrive at this understanding of love, Hedvig locates herself in a type of story where meaning and character are independent of a parental progenitor. Hedvig can use language and story logic to constitute an identity in a way Gregers cannot, or will not.⁴² Cementing this relational identity requires Hjalmar to express his love for Hedvig. Thus, Hedvig does not operate independently from narrated consensus so much as she links consensus to the logic of love rather than origin.

Doctor Relling's concept of the "life-lie" is yet another way of structuring reality for others, and is the play's most clearly theorized iteration of the logic of consensual reality and identity. Relling (who also rents a room from the Ekdals) calls the life-lie the "animating principle of life"; life-lies are the lies we tell ourselves, bolstered by the people around us, in order to continue to function (Ibsen, *Complete* 476). The life-lie Relling prescribes for Hjalmar is the delusion about his invention; old Ekdal, Relling adds, found his own life-lie in the form of the loft. And Relling has diagnosed Molvik as "demonic" to keep him marginally functional

⁴² Gregers' disgusted relations to "the cross of a name like Gregers—'Gregers'—and then 'Werle' coming after" show that while he would like to sever his identity from his own parental progenitor, he feels it is impossible (Ibsen, *Complete* 428).

despite his dissipated life and failure as a divinity student. Relling tells Gregers, “don’t use that exotic word *ideals*. Not when we’ve got a fine native word—*lies*” (Ibsen, *Complete* 477). In Relling’s worldview, there is no truth to be sought after; instead, there are lies that sustain and lies that destroy. But Relling’s life-lie, unlike Hedvig’s relational identity, presumes and perpetuates mediocrity.

If Relling’s life-lie casts character as an unselfconscious fiction plastered over mediocrity, Gregers’ mission demands a self that is inherently remarkable, but also capable of being sacrificed and reconstituted. Gregers’ mission depends on Hjalmar being an extraordinary person who will first take up the “spirit of self-sacrifice” and subsequently “pull himself together” to become an upholder of Gregers’ ideals (Ibsen, *Complete* 478, 474). When Hjalmar responds to Gregers’ revelations with a night of drinking rather than enlightenment, Gregers cannot understand why. When Relling claims that he has not noted any particular “spiritual upheaval” in Hjalmar, Gregers objects:

GREGERS. Wait! At a time of crisis like this, when his life has been recast? How can you believe that a rare personality like Hjalmar—?

RELLING. Pah! Personality—him! If he’s ever had a tendency toward anything so abnormal as what you call personality, it was ripped up, root and vine, by the time he was grown, and that’s a fact. (Ibsen, *Complete* 475)

Although Relling believes that Hjalmar has no inborn personality, Relling is also one of the primary people to encourage Hjalmar’s belief in his own specialness—primarily through the fiction that Hjalmar will one day create a great invention in the field of photography. But Hjalmar’s belief in his specialness has been encouraged all his life, according to Relling, who also claims that as a student Hjalmar “was so cute and clever at declaiming other people’s poems and ideas” that the girls all liked him (Ibsen, *Complete* 475). In Relling’s account Hjalmar too squats in other people’s language, and his personality (*personlighet*, which also means

“individuality” or “character”) appears to be a fiction that others have constructed, and which Hjalmar inhabits and performs.

While Hjalmar’s shabby behavior throughout the play seems to largely confirm Relling’s diagnosis, Ibsen’s own account of how Hjalmar must be played complicates the idea that Hjalmar’s personality is entirely a fiction constructed by others. Hjalmar, Ibsen instructed, “must definitely not be rendered with any touch of parody nor with the faintest suggestion that the actor is aware that there is anything funny about his remarks. He has a warm and sympathetic voice, as Relling says, and that should be maintained above all else. His sentimentality is genuine, his melancholy charming in its way—not a bit of affectation” (Ibsen, *Letters* 242). It is up to the actor to mediate (or perhaps mitigate) the play’s (particularly Relling’s) gestures toward the idea that Hjalmar is an empty mask or vessel with a naturalistic performance style grounded in voice and emotion. If Hjalmar’s words are not his own, his voice is genuine. This relationship of language to voice suggests that Hjalmar is a particularly un-self-conscious representation of an actor.⁴³ Moreover, Ibsen’s actual actors do not only mediate the gap between language and performance, but sometimes must also work against the play’s linguistic constructions of character.

Operating under Gregers’ influence, Hjalmar conflates Hedvig’s unclear origin story with the idea that she does not really love him:

HJALMAR. I was so unspeakably fond of her—and so I dreamed and deluded myself into thinking that she, too, was fond of me beyond words.

GREGERS. Can you call *that* just a delusion?

HJALMAR. How can I tell? I can’t get anything out of Gina... There’s this horrible doubt—maybe Hedvig never really, truly has loved me.

GREGERS. She may perhaps give you proof that she has. (*Listening.*) What’s that? I thought I heard the wild duck cry. (Ibsen, *Complete* 485)

⁴³ I discuss “personality” as both an inborn quality and an actor-like mask in chapter four, in relation to Oscar Wilde’s theories of dramatic character. Østerud sees Hjalmar as an expert stage artist, noting that multiple characters “play the part of actor, director, prompter and the audience for one another” (152).

Hjalmar's "I can't get anything out of Gina" conflates the truth about Hedvig's parentage with the truth about whether she really loves him. By this logic, proof of Hedvig's love constitutes proof of who she is (by way of whose daughter she is). At the same time, for Hjalmar, who is operating under Gregers' influence, proof of Hedvig's love involves self-sacrifice. Gregers has instructed Hedvig to sacrifice the wild duck by shooting it, thus sacrificing the thing that is most important to her. Instead, Hedvig shoots herself. Right after she hears her father say to Gregers, "If I asked her then: Hedvig, are you willing to give up life for me?" the stage directions instruct, "*A pistol shot is heard in the loft*" (Ibsen, *Complete* 486). Because Hedvig is out of sight in the loft, the logic of her death is somewhat up for debate: has she carried the conflation of metaphorical and material to its logical conclusion by shooting herself instead of the duck? Has she (conversely, but by a similar logic) decided to teach her father and Gregers to mean what they say, as Moi argues? In the first formulation Hedvig gets infected by Gregers and Hjalmar's unclear metaphors, whereas in the second formulation Hedvig is smarter than both of them. In either case there is an implicitly if equivocally causal relationship between Hjalmar's words and the unseen pistol shot.

The play both invites and rejects the idea that Hjalmar's words are what kills Hedvig. Hjalmar's response to Hedvig's death shows that he has embraced Gregers' idea that self-sacrifice leads to self-reconstitution to the extent that he expects Hedvig to wake up after she has shot herself in the heart: "No, no, she *must* live! Oh, in God's name, Relling—just for a moment—just enough so I can tell her how inexpressibly I loved her all the time!" (Ibsen, *Complete* 488). Ibsen points to the ridiculousness of the idea that words can kill when the logic is reversed and words are expected to resurrect. But even if we see Hedvig's death as a consequence of such logic, that death is still being seen as the consequence of something other

than (or in addition to) the unseen bullet. In other words, if audiences are expected to engage in interpretation at all, dramatic speech—even and perhaps especially the confused and confusing speech of Gregers and Hjalmar—cannot be divorced from dramatic action. If the play stages the dangers of conflating the material with the metaphorical, Ibsen’s dramaturgy invites and at times enforces the interpretive practices it warns against.

Ibsen expected his readers, audiences, and critics to interpret. In an 1884 letter to Hegel, Ibsen writes, “In some ways this new play occupies a position by itself among my dramatic works, its plan and method differing in several respects from my former ones. . . . I hope that my critics will discover the points alluded to. At any rate, they will find several things to squabble about and several things to interpret (Ibsen, *Letters* 237). Ibsen models this projected squabbling and interpretation in his characters after Hedvig’s death. Though Hedvig shoots herself offstage, Hjalmar, Gina, and Gregers drag her body out of the loft and into the studio room. Gina and Hjalmar then carry Hedvig’s body to her room. As they carry Hedvig off stage, Gina tells Hjalmar, “We must try to help each other. For now she belongs to us both, you know” (Ibsen, *Complete* 489). This is an odd statement, coming from Gina, since it seems to endorse the idea that Hedvig has proven herself to be her father’s daughter by killing herself. Perhaps Gina has already shifted back, after her first horror at Hedvig’s death, to her usual strategy of supporting Hjalmar’s self-deluding and self-constituting narratives while completing the practical work of the household. The process of dragging Hedvig’s body out on display and then hiding it from view again is singular in the realist cycle; Ibsen’s other female suicides occur offstage and stay there.⁴⁴ If the presence of Hedvig’s dead body on the stage is a stark reminder of the

⁴⁴ Ibsen does leave one male corpse visible on stage in *John Gabriel Borkman*; in contrast to Hedvig’s body, Borkman’s corpse spurs reconciliation between estranged elderly sisters. Other characters—Solness in *The Master Builder* and Irene and Rubek in *When We Dead Awaken*—are indistinctly seen as they fall to their deaths, but are not left visible on stage.

consequences of Hjalmar and Gregers' use of language, her removal from the stage spurs a debate between Gregers and Relling over the meaning of her death.

This debate over the meaning of Hedvig's death actually amounts to yet another debate over whether Hjalmar is a personality. While Gregers claims that "grief freed the greatness in him," Relling asserts, "In less than a year little Hedvig will be nothing more to him than a pretty theme for recitations" (Ibsen, *Complete* 489, 490). Certainly Hedvig has already become a theme for recitations from Gregers and Relling. As Østerud notes, a persistent question in Ibsen criticism has been whether Gregers or Relling is Ibsen's mouthpiece within the play (170). Ibsen, again, did not want there to be authorial stand-ins in his plays.⁴⁵ But critics' responses to the play—and Ibsen's anticipation of those responses in his letter to Hegel—suggests that Ibsen's "plan and method" in *The Wild Duck* expects its readers and audiences to engage in the types of interpretation it condemns. Just as Ibsen wanted the actor's depiction of Hjalmar to be more than the fool Relling describes, he wanted critics to see versions of their own interpretive practices modeled and unconsciously parodied by the characters. These interpretive practices are a generative and lethal part of the dramaturgy they fail to wholly account for. What is not accounted for is primarily Hedvig, whose relational identity becomes impossible if her father believes that love must be proven through self-sacrifice.

Hjalmar, as much as the duck, is a red herring because the final discussion of his character replaces Hedvig's body on the stage. In the last lines of the play, Gregers says his destiny is "To be the thirteenth man at the table," at which point Relling tells him to go to hell (Ibsen, *Complete* 490). This cryptic pronouncement evokes Judas (by legend, the thirteenth man at Jesus' table) and Loki (a shape-changer; the thirteenth and uninvited guest at the feast of the

⁴⁵Thomas F. Van Laan provides a useful account of interpretive tendencies and the ways the play subverts them in "The Novelty of *The Wild Duck*: The Author's Absence."

gods), but also Hjalmar, who was the thirteenth man at old Werle's table at the beginning of the play.⁴⁶ At the end of the play Gregers is still squatting in other people's stories and at other people's tables. And Gregers seems primed—inasmuch as his language means anything—to squat in Hjalmar's identity. *The Wild Duck* thus depicts shaping representations of reality for others as a process of narrated and performed squatting designed not to sacrifice the self and then reconstitute it, but to absorb other selves into the squatter. Meanwhile, the most promising formulation of character is dead and off stage.

No character in *The Wild Duck* exists in isolation, though Gregers claims lone crusader status. The play departs from its immediate predecessor, *An Enemy of the People* (1882), which ends with the declaration, “the strongest man in the world is the one who stands most alone” (Ibsen, *Complete* 386). Even in *An Enemy of the People* Ibsen qualifies this claim; after Thomas Stockmann declares his independence his daughter grips his hands “*buoyantly*” and answers with the final word of the play, “Father!” (Ibsen, *Complete* 386). The daughter's approval of her father's aloneness is also a one-word assertion of his relational identity. In *The Wild Duck* such mutually constitutive declarations are replaced by the narrated logic of origins, which Ibsen aligns with characters who depend on but fail to understand relational meaning. In the process, stage narration becomes incidentally murderous.

Rosmersholm's characters are centrally engaged in the investigation of motive and character through language. The play's set, the eponymous ancestral home of the Rosmer family, is completely naturalistic, though its characters frequently discuss it in supernatural terms. Traditional readings of Ibsen's realist plays tend to map representations of psychological

⁴⁶ On Loki and unlucky thirteen see E. Cobham Brewer's *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* (1220-1221), first published in 1870.

interiority onto his representational interior sets. Frederick J. Marker and Lise-Lone Marker articulate this understanding of Ibsen's dramaturgy: "In staging his own early saga dramas, he taught himself to write a carefully visualized, highly charged *misc-en-scène* into his plays, aimed at concretizing the psychological states and spiritual conditions of the characters, and designed to create a specific mood that would enhance and strengthen the inner action" (McFarlane, *Cambridge* 183).⁴⁷ Moi also discusses interiority in relation to *Rosmersholm* (and *The Lady from the Sea* [1888]), though she is concerned with language rather than the material set. Moi's focus is on skepticism and the gradual loss of faith in language; she writes, "Ibsen's modernist plays...tell us that the death of idealism gave free reins to modern skepticism, and that skepticism makes us doubt the power of words" (Moi 13). I would argue that in Ibsen's late plays the power of words is not diminished, but increased—even as Ibsen increasingly complicates the relationship between language and referentiality. Worthen comes closer to the way language works in Ibsen's dramaturgy in reference to *Rosmersholm*: "Although the play is about the failure of language, it requires a commitment to using language to embody action—to *mean* something in/through action—that Ibsen's skeptical dramaturgy finally refuses to specify in words" (144). Language in *Rosmersholm*, I argue, has generative potential but arrogating and enervating effects. Ibsen posits narration that can transform reality through the medium of character as a foreclosed possibility. In the process, he takes the squatter type as far as it can go in dramatic realism.

⁴⁷ See also Bert O. States' *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms*, in which furniture—exemplified by the chair—is central to modern drama's "new relationship between character and milieu"; the mimetic rooms of modern drama "must inhabit the people who inhabit them" (States, "Reckonings" 44, 46). See also Una Chaudhuri's *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama*: "Ibsen's famous interactive architectural symbols—his climbable towers, slammable doors, and burnable buildings—help to construct domestic space as a problematic: both the *condition for* and the *obstacle to* psychological coherence....The fully iconic, single-set, middle-class living room of realism produced so closed and so *complete* a stage world that it supported the new and powerful fantasy of the stage not as a place to pretend in or to perform on but a place to *be*, a fully existential arena" (8, 10).

Ibsen's words function in dialogic relations to his realistic sets. In her study of interiority and architecture in the modernist novel, Victoria Rosner notes, "the generally accepted critical view of modernist interiority...emphasizes the mind's ability to craft an individual reality, to live in a world exclusively populated by personal associations and memories" (Rosner 11). Rosner argues instead for a broader account of "modernist interiority in a tension between abstraction and materiality, between metaphor and literality" (Rosner 11). The materialities Rosner is concerned with, such as domestic "acts like rearranging the furniture," are already central to considerations of interiority in Ibsen's late drama (Rosner 129). The materially substantial representations of domestic interiors on Ibsen's stage function in tension with character rhetoric that undermines the ideological foundations of domestic space. In the process, not only the meaning of domestic space, but dramatic character itself is reshaped. Worthen notes that "Ibsen shows language at once projecting a world and rendering its surface doubtful; the use of language in the *role* opens and complicates dramatic *character*" (Worthen 147, emphasis in original). The metaphor of a home with untenable foundations runs throughout the realist cycle. Thus if these plays produce an illusion of psychological interiority through the relations between character and set, it seems likely that this interiority is something of a red herring.

If Ibsen's characters craft individual realities through their language, they are not content for those so-called realities to remain individual. They constantly draft others into those realities, and demand that others endorse their versions as true. The characters who assert ownership over representations of reality in this way also tend to move into other people's houses and behave as though they are the rightful occupants. Ibsen's late plays, then, tend to denaturalize links between psychological interiors and the theatrical sets. Ibsen's dramaturgy is centrally concerned not only with representing interiors, but appropriating them through the medium of character.

Seeing interiority in terms of appropriation rather than (or rather in dialogue with) mimetic representation casts new light on Peter Szondi's account of inwardness as incompatible with dramatic form:

But because [Ibsen] tried to reveal this hidden life dramatically, to enact it through the *dramatis personae* themselves, he destroyed it. Ibsen's figures could survive only by burrowing into themselves and living off the 'life lie.' Because he did not enclose them in a novel, because he did not leave them within their life but instead forced them to publicly declare themselves, he killed them. (Szondi 17-18)

Szondi reasons that the dramatic representation of inner life is a vexed project when characters are the vehicles for declaring their own inner lives. In a novel, the narration could communicate the characters' inner lives through omniscience and free indirect discourse. But Ibsen's characters are not declaring themselves—or are not *only* declaring themselves. More often than not, they are declaring each other, or the process of expressing what is inside oneself is revealed to actually be a process of squatting in somebody else's story. What is interesting in Szondi's account of Ibsen's characters is the extent to which he sees them as subject, on the level of plot, to formal problems that are independent of plot. Although Szondi describes Ibsen's dramaturgy in terms of failure, he recognizes that the formal crux of that dramaturgy is a new relationship between language and character.

My account of this relationship differs from traditional readings of the retrospective or novel-like qualities of Ibsen's drama, and particularly of *Rosmersholm*. The action of *Rosmersholm* is “almost entirely retrospective,” and features gradual shifts in the relationship between its central characters, Rebecca and Rosmer (Fjelde in Ibsen, *Complete* 492). These qualities lead Georg Lukács to call *Rosmersholm* “really a novel, the last chapter of which Ibsen has clothed in the outward form of drama with great mastery over scene and dialogue” (Lukács 125). Göran Printz-Påhlson responds to this account of the play: “Lukács seems to be saying that

certain character *types* are more naturally suited to the novel, others to drama, and that the characters of *Rosmersholm*, being more acted upon than acting, do not properly belong to the drama but to the novel” (Printz-Påhlson 187, emphasis in original). If we see language as action, Ibsen’s characters no longer appear to be more acted upon than acting; rather, they appear to be constantly acting with and upon each other through their speech. Lukács and Printz-Påhlson’s comments point to character types for whom retrospective narration is a special form of action. What Lukács calls Ibsen’s “mastery over scene and dialogue” is Ibsen’s revolutionary capacity for harnessing character narration to make a story that is epic in scope (in the temporal sense of the word, which Ibsen used to characterize *The Power of Darkness*) into concentrated, language-based dramatic action.

Printz-Påhlson traces a recurring tendency among readers and critics to contextualize *Rosmersholm* in novelistic terms: August Strindberg sees in the play the influence of Edgar Allen Poe; Raymond Williams compares it to the psychological novel; and George Bernard Shaw “extrapolates wildly about [the characters’] lives and thoughts before the play starts and his retelling of the plot is not so much of the drama as of a projected novel” in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (Printz-Påhlson 187, 188). While Printz-Påhlson is correct about the manner of Shaw’s analysis, the method of retelling the plot—or, more accurately, the story—is not unique to Shaw’s piece on *Rosmersholm* (and is particularly notable in his writing on *The Master Builder*). Shaw asserts, “The practical utility of this book is due to the fact that unless the spectator at an Ibsen play has read the pages referring to it beforehand, it is hardly possible for him to get its bearings at a first hearing if he approaches it, as most spectators still do, with conventional idealist prepossessions” (175). But Shaw’s method of analysis based on filling in the backstory suggests that one of the other ways *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* helps potential spectators to

get their bearings is through a sequential statement of the action prior to the play. Spectators' conventional prepossessions have to do with sequential narrative as much as idealism, and many early critics to the play respond by reconstructing its backstory as the key to its meaning.

Though Strindberg cites Poe's influence on *Rosmersholm* in an 1889 letter, it is in the essay "Soul Murder (Apropos *Rosmersholm*)" that he discusses the play.⁴⁸ Strindberg sees Ibsen as having "unwittingly" written a play about the modern, psychological form of the struggle for power, which now takes the form of "legal agreements" rather than "physical violence" (Strindberg, *Essays* 66, 69). *Rosmersholm* is the occasion for rather than the consistent subject of the essay, though Strindberg does characterize Rebecca West as "an unconscious cannibal who has devoured the dead wife's soul.... Presumably, she employed the time-honored method of inducing the weaker mind to believe that it was sick, until it was possessed by an imaginary sickness, and then she showed or convinced Beate that death was a blessing" (*Essays* 68). Though he does not extend this characterization of Rebecca to the structure of *Rosmersholm*, Strindberg employs variations of soul murder as a character trait and a formal structure in his plays and novels. Soul murder is carried out in a number of ways, but most of Strindberg's examples involve language: "Phrases like 'tortured to death', 'driven him crazy', 'killed with silence', 'boycotted', and 'torn to pieces' are becoming more and more commonplace, and these tiny, innocent words conceal or reveal as many crimes, and just as great ones, as the *oubliette* of medieval castles" (Strindberg, *Essays* 67). Thus while Strindberg does not do an extensive reading of *Rosmersholm*, he sees the play as symptomatic of a modern world in which words and

⁴⁸ Strindberg's letter is addressed to Swedish poet, novelist and essayist Ola Hansson. Strindberg wonders whether it is possible that he himself is Poe reincarnate, despite the fact that Poe was still alive when Strindberg was born, and asserts that Poe has "fertilized" his plays *The Father* (1887) and *Creditors* (1888) as well as *Rosmersholm*, despite having just read Poe for the first time (Strindberg, *Letters* I: 300-301). Strindberg's account of the way literary influence works is itself quite squatter-like.

thoughts are instruments of murder. What Strindberg does not consider is that the soul-murdering language that kills Beata is not *in* the play so much as *described* in the play.

Williams' reading of *Rosmersholm* does not merely compare the play to the psychological novel; it points at every turn to the presence of narrator characters within the play:

For what a novel has, and this kind of play has not, is the faculty of commentary and analysis. Even where the action and characters of a novel are presented in a generally naturalistic way, the novelist can at any moment use a different voice, introduce different kinds of evidence, bring in facts other than those communicable in direct or probable speech. In reaching out, in *Rosmersholm*, to that kind of substance—not simply the presented characters, but the characters developing and reflecting on their development, which they yet do not, in their simple capacity as characters, wholly understand—Ibsen drew on all his powers, and went as far as the method could take him; but still, inevitably, not really far enough. (Williams 60)

Differentiation between character voices is an important aspect of Ibsen's realism; in his letters to translators he repeatedly stresses the importance of his characters' distinct "manner[s] of expression" in creating an illusion of reality (Ibsen, *Letters* 222).⁴⁹ Likewise, Ibsen makes use of many physical and theatrical communicative modes, in addition to character speech. The characters' polyvocality and the sophistication of their interactions with the material stage are nonetheless quite different from the way an omniscient narrator can move easily between the internal and the external through free indirect discourse, for instance. But while *Rosmersholm* lacks this particular form of novelistic narration, commentary and analysis are the primary activities of the play's characters. Commentator characters in drama are not external to the action of the play, though they may be temporarily or permanently distanced from that action through any number of devices—asides, soliloquies, movement, lighting, and the division of the stage into distinct spheres or levels, to name a few. The "kind of substance" Williams identifies in *Rosmersholm* is a tendency on the part of the characters to attempt to perform functions of omniscient novelistic narrators—to comment on the action of the play from a position

⁴⁹ See also Ibsen, *Letters* 144, 301.

impossibly external to themselves. Though Williams never uses these terms, his reading of *Rosmersholm* points toward a tragedy of omniscient narration, or rather the lack of it; the characters can never articulate the truths they strive for because they *are* characters.

Reconstructing the play's backstory, principally though not entirely through attempts to reconstruct the dead wife Beata's thoughts, emotions, and motives, is the form this characterological striving takes. But Ibsen distances this process from the meaning of the play even as he invites it as an audience response: to reconstruct the play's backstory as its meaning is to engage in the sort of narrativizing and drive to discover motive that entraps the characters.

Freud's reading of *Rosmersholm* is characteristically invested in reconstructing backstory and motive, but he also frames the play in terms of character types. In "Some Character-Types Met with in Psycho-analytic Work" (1916), Freud cites Rebecca West as one of the main examples of a character type he calls "Those Wrecked by Success" (Freud 157). Brian Johnston characterizes Freud's reading of *Rosmersholm*, which focuses on incest as one of Rebecca's motivations, as similar to Shaw's insofar as "Freud resembles many critics and interpreters who, not really interested in dramatic art, rearrange Ibsen's structures with their careful sequences and replace them with another, *novelistic* one" (Johnston, *Text and Supertext* 55, emphasis in original). Again, this process of constructing a novelistic backstory concerned with motives and "what really happened" is precisely how the characters spend their time in Ibsen's play.

Rosmersholm is a play featuring characters engaged in a narrated process of uncovering and constructing the past. Because the characters are in a play and not a retrospective, third-person omniscient novel where they are ontologically separated from the narrator, they are subject to the consequences of their own narration. In *Rosmersholm* there is a gap between the plot, which stages a series of narrated revelations that destabilize the past and present, and the characters,

who are haunted by the impossible project of constructing a coherent story about the past.

Ibsen's dramaturgy in *Rosmersholm* is comprised by the characters' failed efforts to reconstruct a coherent backstory, the effects of those efforts in the present of the play, and the enervating force of an atavistic but materially solid naturalistic set.

Freud intentionally treats Rebecca West "as if she were a living person and not a creation of Ibsen's imagination" (171). But he also declares *Rosmersholm* "the greatest work of art of the class that treats of this common phantasy in girls," the fantasy being a conscious or unconscious desire on the part of "a girl who enters a household as servant, companion or governess" to replace the mistress of the house in her master's affections and marry him (Freud 173). In addition to the literary and psychological type of the character wrecked by success, Freud thus identifies a type associated with a more specific plot. This plot runs right through the rise of the novel; some of its most famous variations appear in *Pamela* (1740), *Mansfield Park* (1814), *Vanity Fair* (1847-48), *Jane Eyre* (1847), and *Bleak House* (1852-53).⁵⁰ The servants, companions, and governesses of these novels tend to be either narrators or characters that are closely aligned with the narration. They each marry into social mobility, becoming legitimate mistresses of the types of houses they formerly occupied as contingent laborers and/or dependents. These characters' partial or total alignment with the narrative points of view of their respective novels is one way these texts negotiate the characters' claims on the formal, domestic, and social worlds they inhabit. Freud thus locates Rebecca West in a novelistic tradition of character types whose class mobility and movement into other people's houses is bound up with their relationships to narration. The novel characters to whom Freud compares Rebecca West are formal cousins of the squatter.

⁵⁰ See also Printz-Påhlson 190. Ibsen is known to have read Dickens; there is no record in Meyer's biography of him having read Richardson, Austen, Thackeray, or Brontë.

Ibsen's dramatic presentation of this character type is necessarily different from a novelistic one, and Rebecca West's relationship to narration diverges from that of her novelistic predecessors. Drawing on Ann L. Ardis's work on the ways New Woman novelists shatter the "Victorian conceptualization of 'character' or identity" as a "seamless" and "unified" construct that "imitates reality and represents something both external and prior to the work of fiction," Kirsten Shepherd-Barr claims, "*Rosmersholm* reflects this reappraisal of realism, part of the early modernist impulse in all the arts, and the reactions to it reveal the tension inherent in this shift....Although set in the very heart of bourgeois patriarchy, the play features a woman in conflict with her surroundings, trying to forge her imagined world into reality through sheer will" (Shepherd-Barr 67). This account of Victorian (which seems here to be shorthand for naïve realism) formulations of character is incorrect, since novelistic realism tends, insofar as one can generalize about it, to depict characters as having some inborn traits that are then formed and shaped over time and in relation to environment—as in the *bildungsroman*, for example. Likewise, Victorian novels are full of women characters who are in conflict with their surroundings and who respond by imagining different worlds. Occasionally these imagined worlds *do* become "real" in Victorian novels—as in the flood ending of *The Mill on the Floss*—albeit in ways that break with the conventions of realist representation. Omniscient narration tends to be the formal vehicle for such transformations, as it mediates between character and environment. In Ibsen's drama narration does not move between character and environment but rather comes *from* characters who speak in ways conditioned by and in opposition to their environments. And unlike the multiple character narrators of a novel such as *The Moonstone* (1868), the characters in Ibsen's drama speak not to a reader, but directly to each other in real time. In Ibsen's drama character narration takes on the performative potential to act upon other

people and to challenge the semantic and representational authority of the environments they inhabit.

In *Rosmersholm* this potential is invoked as something that is no longer possible for the squatter character, Rebecca West. Rosmersholm is an old-fashioned family home which, despite the political reticence of its owner, is central to the social and ideological structure of the surrounding community. Thus the conflicts in *Rosmersholm* are not just for the allegiance of John Rosmer, but for the ideological weight of the wealthy family home, which remains a locus of power despite its waning vitality. The set represents and carries this ideological weight in the present of the play. The play takes place entirely at the house, and begins a year after the death of Rosmer's wife, Beata. The cast is small: John Rosmer, a former pastor from an old family; Rebecca West, who has risen above her origins and now lives at Rosmersholm; Dr. Kroll, Rosmer's conservative brother-in-law; Ulrik Brendel, Rosmer's radical childhood tutor who has fallen in the world; Peter Mortensgaard, a liberal newspaper editor, and Mrs. Helseth, housekeeper at Rosmersholm. The play opens with Rebecca and Mrs. Helseth at the living room window, watching Rosmer taking a walk outside. Mrs. Helseth notes that Rosmer is "beginning to use the old mill-path again," though he will not yet "dare go over the footbridge" (Ibsen, *Complete* 498). The ensuing conversation reveals that Rosmer's wife, Beata, committed suicide by jumping off the footbridge into the mill-stream. The mill-path and the footbridge are thus associated with Beata's posthumous grip on her husband:

REBECCA (*gathers up her crocheting*). At Rosmersholm they cling to their dead.

MRS. HELSETH. To my mind, miss, it's the dead that cling to Rosmersholm.

REBECCA (*looking at her*). The dead?

MRS. HELSETH. Yes, it's, so to say, as if they couldn't quite tear themselves free from the ones that stay on. (Ibsen, *Complete* 498)

In Rebecca's formulation, Rosmersholm is stuck in the past because its living inhabitants cling to it; in theory, then, Rosmer has the power to move forward. She assigns agency to character. In contrast, Mrs. Helseth's supernatural rhetoric assigns agency to no one; the dead cling to the living and cannot tear themselves free, and they have Rosmersholm itself in a vice grip. The set, by contrast, is entirely naturalistic with no signs of haunting. The play's divergent character rhetorics compete with each other to control the meaning of Rosmersholm.

These character rhetorics also compete with and capitalize on Rosmersholm's status as a wealthy ancestral home with "the aura of the old family name" (Ibsen, *Complete* 509). Rosmersholm's affiliation with the past is heightened by its connection to the dead; as Rosmer says of his dead wife, "To us, it's as if she's still part of the house" (Ibsen, *Complete* 504). The representative of conservatism in the present is Dr. Kroll, Beata's brother and Rosmer's longtime friend, who is active in local politics. Counteracting these conservative forces is Rebecca West, who has neither family nor money of her own, who has inherited nothing but radical books from her dead foster father, and who nursed Beata until her death. Rebecca too affiliates herself with the house, when asked if she is going to remain there: "I've become so very much a part of this place, I almost feel I belong to it" (Ibsen, *Complete* 501). Ulrik Brendel, Rosmer's radical childhood tutor (who Rosmer's father expelled from the house) makes an appearance to ask for money and to make an impotent gesture toward stirring up trouble in the surrounding community. Mentioned but not present is the liberal newspaper editor Peter Mortensgaard, to whom Brendel is referred as a means of publicizing his ideas. Two representatives of the past, one dead and one alive, face off against liberals, radicals, and freethinkers. In a development from *The Wild Duck*, the battle in this play is not just for Rosmer's allegiance, but for the ideological weight of Rosmersholm as represented by the material set. To "belong to" or be "part

of” the house—and thus to be aligned with the naturalistic set—is a catch-22 that grants the character in question the ideological authority of the house and also numbers her among the powerless dead.

If the dead are powerless, their words continue to hold weight with the living. Rosmer is not actively political; however, his name and community standing as a pastor have until the present of the play implicitly aligned him with Dr. Kroll and protected his reputation, living alone as he is with an unmarried woman. While Kroll is under the impression that he and Rosmer hold essentially the same beliefs, Kroll does not see Rebecca as a threat. When Rebecca says she belongs to the house, Kroll responds, “And you do. I quite agree” (Ibsen, *Complete* 501). Kroll also implies repeatedly that Rebecca’s marriage to Rosmer is the expected and desirable outcome of their relationship; Rebecca can “fill the empty place” Beata has left (Ibsen, *Complete* 502). Kroll’s idea is that Rosmersholm will absorb Rebecca as one of its own; the house and its traditions are strong enough to assimilate her. Kroll’s attitude changes quickly when he realizes Rebecca’s liberal ideas have influenced Rosmer. At Rebecca’s urging, and in response to Kroll’s insistence on Rosmer’s political support, Rosmer declares his loss of faith and belief in democracy and the liberation of the masses. Kroll responds, “This is a break with everyone who’s stood by you in the past. Now you can take the consequences” (Ibsen, *Complete*). Rosmer, for his part, seems not to understand that there *are* consequences to his break with the past, aside from the damage to his personal relationship with Kroll. This break also introduces Kroll’s first suspicion about the nature of Rosmer’s relationship with Rebecca; when Rosmer tells Kroll that he is not completely alone, the stage directions indicate, “(A suspicion flashes through him [Kroll].)...Beata’s words—!...No, no—that’s indecent. Forgive me” (Ibsen, *Complete* 520, 521). In other words, Rebecca becomes a sexual and moral threat at the moment when it becomes clear

that by becoming a part of Rosmersholm, Rebecca may have also gained influence over it. Kroll resurrects Beata's words in response to this threat.

Beata's words return in the present of the play as accurate predictions. The second act begins with Rosmer in a position analogous to one of Ibsen's earlier protagonists—Karsten Bernick or Thomas Stockmann—of feeling relief at having told the truth. Though Rebecca did not manage to sleep until near morning, Rosmer says, "I haven't felt so light-hearted in I don't know how long. It was certainly good to have talked this out" (Ibsen, *Complete* 523). This sense of release based on truth-telling is short lived; first Kroll and then Mortensgaard appear to shatter the illusion that Rosmer's political shift will have no repercussions to his position within the community and to the way his relationship with Rebecca is perceived. These visits also reveal Beata's actions prior to her suicide: she visited Kroll to say that Rosmer was on the verge of apostasy, to predict her own death, and to cast doubt on Rosmer's relationship with Rebecca. Rosmer believes Beata's knowledge of his loss of faith is "impossible...Because as long as Beata lived, I kept all this turmoil and doubt bottled up inside of me" (Ibsen, *Complete* 529). Beata seemingly intuited Rosmer's loss of faith, and predicted it before Rosmer articulated it. Kroll then reports Beata's prediction of her suicide in her own words, adding his own emphasis the second time: "I don't have much time. Because now John *has* to marry Rebecca, *at once*" (Ibsen, *Complete* 531). Kroll's implication is that Beata thought Rebecca was pregnant, or at least having a sexual relationship with Rosmer. The play does not support this idea in any literal way; Rosmer reacts to the memory of Beata's sexual passion with disgust, and conceives of his relationship with Rebecca as built on innocence. Kroll's repetition, once without italics and once with his own emphasis added, foregrounds the process of interpretation that has led him to the conclusion that Rebecca's relationship with Rosmer is sexual. Beata may have seen Rebecca as a

better partner for Rosmer, since Beata herself could not have children; she may also have picked up on the emotional and intellectual intimacy and unconsummated desire between Rosmer and Rebecca. The play raises these questions, but makes them unanswerable because Beata is only accessible through a series of posthumous interpreters. Thus, Worthen writes, “*Rosmersholm* foregrounds words as an instrument for exposing motive, character, interiority, for reading beneath the texture of behavior, physicality, embodiment. And yet the play’s action directly challenges this use of words, proceeding through a series of confessions, which paradoxically dramatize the extent to which interiority can and cannot be signified in words” (152). If Beata’s words do not expose or construct her as a coherent, psychologized character, her words *do* predict and even demand a plot that almost (but never) comes to pass: Rosmer’s marriage to Rebecca.

Beata also sent a letter to Mortensgaard prior to her death which, like her conversations with Kroll, indicates knowledge of infidelities that have not physically happened:

MORTENSGAARD. According to the letter, if I should hear rumors about anything disreputable going on at Rosmersholm, I mustn’t put any stock in them, because they’d only be the work of spiteful people out to make you miserable.... Well, secondly, she writes—and it’s a bit confused here—that she knows of no illicit relationship at Rosmersholm. That no wrong has ever been committed against her. And if rumors to that effect should circulate, she begs me not to report them in the *Beacon*. (Ibsen, *Complete* 539)

As an attempt to prevent rumors of infidelity from circulating publicly, writing such a letter is counterproductive, since it is most likely to fuel the rumors it purports to preemptively silence. Additionally, while Mortensgaard offers to let Rosmer read the letter, Rosmer never reads it; nor do we have access to Beata’s exact words. Mortensgaard’s qualification that the letter is “a bit confused” at the point where Beata denies any illicit relationship at Rosmersholm is itself a bit confusing, since we do not know in what way the letter is confused or in what ways

Mortensgaard has interpreted the confusion in his narrated summary. Beata's letter is a prediction that tells story through negation, and that story comes to pass—and contributes to bringing it about—in the present of the play.

Beata is not quite a narrator, though the play's characters narrate using her words. Beata is a much more developed iteration of old Werle's dead wife. Like Gregers' mother, Beata seems to have sensed her husband's infidelity despite the fact that Rosmer never physically acted upon it in her lifetime. And even more than Gregers' mother's version of old Werle's relationship with Gina, Beata's understanding of her husband's relationship with Rebecca is a wrench thrown in the characters' understanding of their past actions and present relations to each other. But where Gregers saw his father as attempting to erase his mother's version of the past with a domestic tableau, Rebecca and Rosmer see the fragmented emergence of Beata's version of events as resurrecting her:

REBECCA (*vehemently*). Oh, stop talking about Beata! Don't think of Beata anymore!

Here you've finally been freeing yourself from her. Because she's dead!

ROSMER. Since I've heard these things, I have the eerie sense that she's come alive again.

REBECCA. Oh, no—you mustn't, John! You mustn't!

ROSMER. Yes, I'm telling you. We have to try to get to the bottom of this. How could she arrive at that fatal misconception? (Ibsen, *Complete* 541)

Mortensgaard and Kroll's reports of Beata's words have brought her back to life for Rosmer, who in turn makes her presence stronger for himself and Rebecca by talking about Beata. Beata is effectively being talked back into life through a process of reconstructing what her own words meant. Those words, in turn, are an indication of Beata's own process of interpretation. Worthen calls Beata a "narrative character"; I would call her, rather, a "narrated" character, since she is produced over the course of the play through the narration of others (Worthen 162). The complex part of this process is that the characters produce Beata through her own words, or iterations and

summaries of her own words, and so she appears to have some kind of agency in the reconstruction despite being dead. As a narrated character, Beata's identity is all words; hers and others'. Thus even as Rebecca and Rosmer speak Beata back into life, she remains incorporeal.

If talking about Beata metaphorically resurrects her, it is the impossibility of fully articulating her character and motives that keeps her alive (or perhaps undead). The incompleteness of the narrative Beata has left behind means that Rosmer will never "get to the bottom" of Beata's thought processes. Rosmer realizes this impossibility, but remains determined:

ROSMER....And the way she must have pieced it together. How methodically she built the pattern. First, she began doubting my faith—though how could she have known at the time? But she did. And then it grew into a certainty. And after that—yes, then it was easy enough for her to find all the rest of it credible....Oh, all these wild speculations! I'll never be rid of them. I can feel that. I just know it. All of a sudden, they'll swarm in on me, reminding me of the dead.

REBECCA. Like the white horse of Rosmersholm.

ROSMER. Yes. Rushing out of the darkness. Out of the silence. (Ibsen, *Complete* 544)

In this formulation, the white horse of Rosmersholm indicates not just the eruption of the past into the present, but the uncertain status of that past. Because Rosmer cannot reconstruct the full narrative of Beata's suspicions and how they led to her death, he will never be rid of her.

Rosmer's abstract darkness and silence suggest the impossibility of reconstructing Beata who, like the white horse, purportedly haunts Rosmersholm but is neither seen nor heard on stage.

Deprived of the possibility of basing his present actions on a complete—and thus dead—reconstruction of Beata's character, Rosmer attempts to replace Beata with a new character. Rosmer believes he can "liberate" himself "from the whole sad past...By overpowering it with a new, living reality" (Ibsen, *Complete* 545). This living reality consists primarily of marrying Rebecca, who will fill "Beata's place" (Ibsen, *Complete* 546). Though Rebecca is initially overjoyed, she refuses to marry Rosmer "because then I'll go the same way Beata went" (Ibsen,

Complete 547). The living reality Rosmer believes will overpower the past will actually, according to Rebecca, repeat it. To fill Beata's "place," and not just her role as Rosmer's wife, suggests the idea of a new living reality is also defeated by Rosmersholm itself. Rosmersholm is a place where, legend has it, "children never cry" and adults "never laugh" (Ibsen, *Complete* 551). The house and the monied conservatism it represents are both static and draining.

Rebecca's own past also undermines her ability to create a new living reality with Rosmer. Kroll reveals to Rebecca that Dr. West, her foster father, was probably her biological father. This revelation involves a series of corrections to the dates when Rebecca's mother and Dr. West could conceivably have met, and even a correction in the year of Rebecca's birth. Rebecca "*walks about, clenching and wringing her hands*" and denies the possibility that Kroll's revelation is true. Kroll cannot account for this reaction: "But, my dear Miss West—why in heaven's name are you so upset? Really, you frighten me! What do you expect me to think—?" (Ibsen, *Complete* 561). Rebecca resists the idea that Dr. West is her father with an intensity that suggests, without ever stating, she had a sexual relationship with Dr. West. This implied incest destabilizes Rebecca's identity and beliefs; by the end of her conversation with Kroll she admits that she may not be as freethinking as she purports to be. Like Hedvig, Rebecca becomes a figure with a hazy—but in this case illicit—origin story that throws her present identity and situation into question.

Once Kroll has destabilized Rebecca's character, Rebecca confesses to having used language to murder Beata, the character she wanted to replace. Rebecca states her intent, upon coming to Rosmersholm, of joining forces with Rosmer "to go forward in freedom. Always onward. Pioneering the future" (Ibsen, *Complete* 564). Beata was the "insurmountable barrier" to this entry into the future, and so Rebecca suggested to Beata that Rosmer was moving away from

his “old hidebound ideas” and implied a relationship between herself and Rosmer, despite the fact that neither statement was (yet) true (Ibsen, *Complete* 564, 565).

REBECCA. I didn’t want to go. I wanted to stay right here. But I told her, it was probably best for all of us—if I went away in time. I indicated to her that, if I stayed much longer—it could be—it could be that—anything could happen.

ROSMER. You said—and did that?

REBECCA. Yes, John.

ROSMER. It’s what you meant by having “acted”?

REBECCA (*in a broken voice*). What I meant, yes. (Ibsen, *Complete* 565-566)

Rebecca “acted” prior to the play through implication and suggestion.⁵¹ She is the source of the fragmented narrative of infidelity and apostasy Beata left behind. Once again, then, there is no coherent narrative to discover or reconstruct, since the source of the story of Rosmer’s infidelity is not a story at all, but a series of suggestions and inferences. Rebecca’s actions toward Beata were words that suggested a narrative which Beata, in turn, constructed for herself and left in fragmented form for others to find. This narrative of a past that never happened—at least not in the way and at the time Rebecca first suggested—has become more and more powerful with time, both in the lives of the characters and within the present of the play, to the point where it now threatens the current inhabitants of Rosmersholm. The story, more than Beata herself, has come back to haunt them.

Rebecca’s stated reason for her confession is a desire to restore “the joy of innocence” to Rosmer (Ibsen, *Complete* 563). But the timing of her confession suggests that Kroll’s revelation is also at least partly the impetus. Rebecca intends for her confession to enable Rosmer to go forward in freedom on his own by taking the blame for Beata’s death onto herself. This course of action suggests that after Kroll’s revelation about Rebecca’s parentage, Rebecca can no longer pioneer the future. Freud famously argues that Kroll’s revelation is the last straw for Rebecca

⁵¹ Though it is tempting to say that Rebecca also “acted” in the theatrical sense—and of course, she has—Van Laan points out that the Norwegian words for verb-acting and theatrical acting are not the same (“Tragic Vision” 382).

because she feels guilt about incest (Freud 170). While Rebecca certainly recoils from the idea that Dr. West was her biological father, it is not clear in Ibsen's text why this knowledge renders her unable to move into the future, according to her own ideology, as Kroll is quick to point out. I would argue that Kroll's revelation is such a problem for Rebecca not only because of the implied incest, but also because of how that incest positions Rebecca in relation to her own past. Rebecca now knows, for instance, that Beata is not the first dead woman whose place she has occupied—Rebecca has also been in her mother's place with Dr. West. Rebecca's intellectual, political, and socioeconomic progression has taken the form of occupying other women's roles and houses. She is more of a squatter—and more of a type—than she thought. Moreover, Rebecca's liberal ideas, gleaned from Dr. West's books, are a hereditary as well as intellectual inheritance. Thus Rebecca can be said to be as embroiled in family traditions as Rosmer, though the content of those traditions is politically opposite to Rosmer's. A Rebecca who is the illegitimate (yet adopted) child of a political and intellectual movement she previously claimed as her own by choice must suddenly contend with a past she thought was dead. That is, her past has become uncertain, talked into life by Kroll. In the process, Rebecca becomes subject to the same constraints as Rosmer: she is unable to progress based on her own past. This past is a story that is never quite told which, in *Rosmersholm*, takes the form of a narrated character.

Rebecca foresees a future in which she is more narrated than narrating and loses her capacity for reframing the meaning of Rosmersholm. Rebecca decides to leave, and Mrs. Helseth slots Rebecca into yet another character type, the fallen woman:

REBECCA (*looks at her*). Now listen, Mrs. Helseth. Tell me straight—why do you think I'm leaving?

MRS. HELSETH. Good Lord, miss, I expect because you *have* to. Oh, my, my, my! But, really, I think he's not doing right, the Pastor. Mortensgaard you could excuse, because her husband was still alive—so they couldn't get married, much as they wanted to. But now, the Pastor—hm!

REBECCA (*with a faint smile*). Could you actually believe something like that about me and Pastor Rosmer?

MRS. HELSETH. No, never! I mean—not before today.

REBECCA. But today—?

MRS. HELSETH. You know—after all those ugly stories I heard they wrote about him in the papers—

REBECCA. Aha!...But then how about me? What do you say about me?

MRS. HELSETH. Oh, goodness, miss—I don't see much point in blaming you. I mean, it's none too easy for a single woman to stand a man off. We're only human, all of us, Miss West. (Ibsen, *Complete* 570)

In words that echo Beata's, Mrs. Helseth assumes Rebecca is leaving so suddenly because she has to—that is, because she is pregnant. The newspaper stories lend authority to this characterization, despite their inaccuracy. Mrs. Helseth also places Rebecca in the position of another woman: Mortensgaard's one-time mistress. At this point, though Rebecca of course knows Mrs. Helseth's assumptions are wrong, she does nothing to correct them. Rebecca's "Aha!" seems to be a confirmation that the newspapers and the opinions they sway now have more power to frame her life than she does. In losing control over these various types of narrated framing, Rebecca sees herself as having lost her place at Rosmersholm.

If Rebecca's ability to shape events in speech was the source of her advancement, in the end she cedes that power to Rosmersholm itself. At the same time, she remains the primary narrator in the present of the play. Before leaving, Rebecca decides to tell Rosmer "the crux of everything....The thing that pulls the whole picture together" (Ibsen, *Complete* 572). This crux is Rebecca's "wild, uncontrollable desire" for Rosmer (Ibsen, *Complete* 573). Rosmer responds, "And out of this—and under its power it was, that—you 'acted,' as you call it" (Ibsen, *Complete* 573). Rebecca's desire is what allowed her to act—to overpower Beata through words—and is also the key that is supposed to render the whole story coherent. Rebecca does not believe this coherence will enable her to move forward into the future with Rosmer; she has, after all, been in

possession of this particular “whole story” from the beginning, and is well aware of Rosmer’s distaste for Beata’s sexual passion.

Instead, Rebecca’s intent seems to be to *sever* the story she is telling from her capacity for action. Rebecca tells Rosmer that she cried out in joy, but then in despair when he proposed, because “Rosmersholm has stolen my strength. It’s crippled my courage and smothered my will. The time is over for me when I could dare anything. I’ve lost the power to act, John” (Ibsen, *Complete* 574). Rebecca sees her desire or will, the crux of her story and the thing that enabled her to act, as “infected” by the Rosmer way of life to the point where “[a]ll those turbulent passions quieted down and grew still” (Ibsen, *Complete* 575). This change has left Rebecca “a slave to laws that never had mattered to me before” (Ibsen, *Complete* 575). These laws, the laws of Rosmersholm, have both ennobled Rebecca and made happiness impossible for her (Ibsen, *Complete* 575). It is Rebecca’s adoption of the values of Rosmersholm that make it impossible for her to marry Rosmer.

This impossibility is compounded by what Rebecca calls “something in my past,” which is likely an allusion to her affair with Dr. West (Ibsen, *Complete* 575). Rosmer’s response shows that he no longer seeks the whole truth about the past as a means of moving into the future:

REBECCA. If you want, I’ll tell you all about that as well.

ROSMER (*recoiling*). No, no! Don’t say a word. Whatever it is, let me forget about it.

REBECCA. But I can’t forget.

ROSMER. Oh, Rebecca—!

REBECCA. *That’s* the awful part of it, John. Now, when I’m offered all the joy of life with open arms—I’ve changed, so that my own past seals me off from it.

ROSMER. Your past is dead, Rebecca. It has no hold on you anymore. No connection with you. You’re a different person now.

REBECCA. Oh, my dearest, that’s only empty talk. What about innocence? How can I get *that* back?

ROSMER (*sadly*). Innocence—

REBECCA. Innocence, yes. The ground of all joy and contentment. Wasn’t that the very teaching you wanted to bring to life in all those noble, happy human beings of the future?

ROSMER. Don't remind me of *that*. It was only a half-baked dream, Rebecca. A harebrained notion I don't believe in anymore. Human beings can't be ennobled from without.

REBECCA (*quietly*). You don't think, even by selfless love?

ROSMER (*reflectively*). Yes, of course that's the one great hope. About the most magnificent thing in life, I guess—if it really exists. (Ibsen, *Complete* 576)

Rosmer at first seems to operate under the idea that Rebecca's past can remain dead if she does not tell him about it. But Rebecca cannot un-know her own story, and after her time at Rosmersholm she no longer has the will to overpower it with a new one. Rosmer, for his part, rejects innocence as the foundation for future happiness—which only makes sense, in a play that has demonstrated repeatedly that innocence is not recoverable, if it ever existed as anything but a delusion.

Selfless love is the only foundation for the future that Rosmer seems not to reject, but he is no longer sure it is possible. Like Hjalmar Ekdal, he demands proof: "Then give me my faith again! My faith in *you*, Rebecca! Faith in your love! Proof! I've got to have proof!" (Ibsen, *Complete* 577). This demand leads to a mutual suicide pact; Rosmer asks Rebecca "to go the same way Beata went" in order to prove her love for him is selfless (Ibsen, *Complete* 582). Rosmer declares them married (another spoken action) and goes with her to jump off the bridge. Selfless love, in *Rosmersholm*, is dead love; as such, it too is a poor foundation for future action. This final outcome brings into relief the flaw in the idea that a certain past is necessary in order to move forward: the drive toward a totally known past, in the form of a totally known person, only leads to death.

In *Rosmersholm* proof and character are shown to be incompatible in a way that gets to the heart of the play's form. Here and in *The Wild Duck*, characters frame proof of selfless love as a substitute for clear origins and a stable identity. This idea is inherently contradictory; it replaces character with selflessness. In these plays Ibsen is developing a formulation of character

that is independent of backstory and motive—or rather, a formulation of character in which backstory becomes something to be performed rather than revealed. To successfully perform backstory through narration is to construct a character in a way that troubles realistic, causal plotting. Narration reveals the incompatibility of character and proof of selfless love because in order for Ibsen’s language to act, it must come from a person, or a fiction of a person. In *Rosmersholm* Rebecca West is the character who comes closest to a self-constituting, performative mode of character narration, but she loses this power before the present of the play. As she tells Rosmer and Kroll:

I was a different woman then than I am now, standing here, telling about it...I wanted Beata out of here, one way or another. But even so, I never dreamed it could happen. With every step ahead that I gambled on, it was as if something inside cried out: “No further! Not one step further!” And yet I *couldn’t* stop. I *had* to try for a tiny bit more. Just the least little bit. And then again—and always again—until it happened. That’s the way these things *do* happen. (Ibsen, *Complete* 567)

Lukács cites this speech as the reason why, “as far as subject-matter, structure, action and psychology are concerned,” *Rosmersholm* “is really a novel” (125). Rebecca’s “struggle, tragic collision and conversion” happen gradually and prior to the start of the play, which is therefore “undramatic” (Lukács 125). Lukács does not address what is perhaps more novelistic about this speech: the gap between Rebecca’s present, telling self and her past, narrated self evokes the structure of the first-person bildungsroman. But the story Rebecca narrates does not show how her past self came to be her present self; rather, Rebecca’s narration severs the present, telling self from the past, told self. *Rosmersholm* is more like an inversely autobiographical bildungsroman that shows how the squatter’s development and success mean that she can no longer exist. Moreover, Rebecca’s past self is, on the one hand, able to turn desire into reality and, on the other hand, curiously passive or helpless in this process. “What is extraordinary about this confession,” Worthen writes, “is its inability to specify what drives Rebecca” (155). Also

extraordinary is the way Rebecca constructs a dead self who is both more powerful and more helpless than the present speaking one. Rebecca reconstructs herself as an iteration of Beata, and she narrates the story of how she grew up to be someone else.

Rebecca's upward mobility narrative, the play stresses, is also the story of many women who have preceded her. But Rosmersholm itself, though it remains standing and immovable after all of its occupants above the servant class are dead, is no longer solid ground to build on. This lack of solidity, despite the house's status as an ancestral home, lends irony to the characters' battle for the house's ideological weight. Rosmersholm drains the vitality of its inhabitants and fills them with doubt. Thus Rebecca is unable to act—which is to say, to induce change through narration—once her “outlook is shaped by Rosmersholm” (Ibsen, *Complete* 583). She is reduced to articulating a dead self. In their final moments together, Rebecca asks Rosmer whether his decision to die with her is “only a delusion? One of those white horses of Rosmersholm?” (Ibsen, *Complete* 584). Rosmer responds, “It's always possible. Because we'll never be free of them—we of this house” (Ibsen, *Complete* 584). Though the vitality and family life have been drained from the traditional family home, it continues to structure reality for the characters. But the characters' speech, though it cannot act to save them, distances the semantic authority of the play from the solidity of the realistic set.

The play does not follow Rebecca and Rosmer outside—it stays throughout with Rosmersholm's interior set. Instead, Rebecca and Rosmer's deaths are narrated by Mrs. Helseth, who stands watching at the living room window, and who speaks the final dialogue of the play:

Oh, sweet Jesus! Over there, the white—! My Lord, it's them, both, on the bridge! God have mercy on the sinful creatures! Embracing each other like that! (*Screams.*) Oh! Falling—both of them! Into the water. Help! Help! (*Her knees shaking, she holds on tremulously to the back of a chair, barely able to form her words.*) No. No help now—the dead wife—she's taken them. (Ibsen, *Complete* 585)

The final version of Rosmer and Rebecca's story as spoken by Mrs. Helseth is a supernatural morality tale. Her reference to something white suggests the legendary white horse (though it could conceivably also refer to Rebecca's white shawl, which she has crocheted throughout the play and which she throws over her head in her last scene with Rosmer). Mrs. Helseth's description makes Rebecca and Rosmer's death sound like a carnal embrace followed by a punitive fall. Finally, Mrs. Helseth transfers the agency for this fall to Beata.

The discrepancies between this version of events and the version agreed upon by Rosmer and Rebecca moments before are clear. Within the world of the play, Mrs. Helseth's version is the one that will survive, bolstered no doubt by accounts from Kroll and perhaps Mortensgaard. But readers and audiences have seen enough to question Mrs. Helseth's interpretation of the events outside the windows of Rosmersholm. Thus while I would disagree with the assertion that Mrs. Helseth "concludes the play not with her voice but with the general voice of the determining structure," Williams is right to associate Mrs. Helseth with a determining or framing function (Williams 61). But the play does not fully endorse Mrs. Helseth's determinations. Van Laan notes that Mrs. Helseth has been compared to the messenger figure in a Greek tragedy, and that such a figure is "about as close as a dramatist can get to the omniscient narrator of fiction" ("Tragic Vision" 379). But Mrs. Helseth, Van Laan qualifies, in contrast to a messenger or disembodied narrator figure, is "a fully characterized figure who has been a part of the action" ("Tragic Vision" 379). Mrs. Helseth is a narrator, but narration in *Rosmersholm* is neither univocal nor omniscient. And yet, some character speech does take on the occulted properties of omniscience that led Strindberg to describe the play in terms of "soul murder" and "psychic suicide." But it is primarily (and paradoxically) the dead, narrated characters—Beata and Rebecca's past self—whose speech has these properties. Mrs. Helseth's living narration, on the

other hand, is aligned with the house and the social and domestic status quo. Her narration is still a form of action, a reframing of the meaning of Rebecca and Rosmer's death, but its function is to put Rebecca and Rosmer back into a conventional Gothic plot. By aligning Mrs. Helseth's narration with Rosmersholm, the play emphasizes the ways in which her Gothic plot and the realistic set both enforce a conservative status quo that does not fully account for Rebecca and Rosmer. As in *The Wild Duck*, Ibsen leaves audiences and readers with reductive narrated framing of the preceding action. Unlike *The Wild Duck*, the squatter is no longer the reductive narrator.

The Lady from the Sea (1888) pursues the theme of free will in human relationships, heightens the suggestions of the uncanny that are also present in *Rosmersholm*, and extends *The Wild Duck*'s rhetoric of contracts, bargains, and promises. These promises are of various types and rest upon different premises; some are legal or conventional, whereas others have to do with past understandings imbued with the binding power of a fairytale contract. In the main plot, freely given mutual agreement eventually triumphs over the inflexible logic of fairytale contracts. In *Hedda Gabler* the fairytale or folk element recedes; so too does the possibility of realigning the past as a foundation for present action. Hedda is repeatedly confronted by her life's (and other people's) failure to match up to the stories she constructs, and when she finds herself trapped within Judge Brack's narrated frame, she commits suicide. Tesman and Thea Elvsted, the characters who end the play determined to reconstruct a history of the future that has already been destroyed, are engaged in a futile project.

The Master Builder is more clearly related to *The Lady From the Sea* than *Hedda Gabler*, its immediate predecessor; the play even brings back a character from *The Lady from the Sea*,

Hilda Wangel, and makes her central in the later play. *The Master Builder* takes up *The Lady from the Sea*'s rhetoric of bargains and contracts as well as its suggestions of uncanny, desiring compulsion. Like *Rosmersholm*, *The Master Builder* consists almost entirely of retrospective narration between characters. The stories the characters narrate return in the present as bargains or contracts that only one character remembers entering into. To endorse another character's narrated version of the past in this play is to admit a present obligation or debt to that character. Most of these pasts are narratives of desire, and admitting to mutual desire becomes a form of narrated consensus that threatens to overwrite individual identity.

As in *The Wild Duck*, the play makes use of a workroom that is also a living space. In *The Master Builder* this relationship is even more intertwined, since master builder Halvard Solness's work is to imagine and construct domestic spaces—"homes for human beings," as he says later in the play (Ibsen, *Complete* 855). But Ibsen's set also distinguishes Solness' rhetoric about building homes for human beings (rather than churches) from the homes Solness has actually built. Solness began his building career by dividing up the garden of his wife's family home into plots, after her house burned down. In the third act the stage directions note "*a street with small, low, dilapidated houses*" visible beyond the garden fence (Ibsen, *Complete* 840).⁵² The play thus distinguishes the houses constructed by character speech from those constructed by Solness, even or especially when they are supposedly the same structures.

Solness feels his identity as a master builder is threatened by modernity and youth. Brovik, a former architect who is now Solness' assistant, pleads for his son Ragnar's independence as a builder. Solness needs Ragnar to continue working for him, and so has not

⁵² I am indebted to Mark Sandberg's "Ibsen and the Mimetic Home of Modernity" (45) for this insight. See also Arvid Nærø, who notes, "At one time the 'values' of the home were invested in the workshop's activities, but in the present of the play the relationship between 'workshop' and 'home' is markedly negative, characterized by conflicts, absence and loss" (36).

encouraged Ragnar in any independent work. When Solness reneges on a commission, Brovik suggests that Ragnar could take the job instead. The clients are excited about Ragnar's modern building plans, which contrast with the "old-fashioned stuff" Solness builds (Ibsen, *Complete* 789). Solness suddenly decides he wants the commission back and erupts, "Give up! I!," and then again, "I—give up for your son!" (Ibsen, *Complete* 789). Solness frames granting Brovik's wish as a loss of self. Solness confirms this reading when he tells Brovik, "Don't you see—what else can I do! I'm made the way I am!" (Ibsen, *Complete* 790). Solness sees standing in the way of the younger generation's desires for independent, modern creation as both an identity and a course of action necessary to protecting his identity as the master builder.

Solness also sees his own desires as capable of imposing themselves on other people. This dynamic is apparent in Solness' extramarital affair with Kaja, his bookkeeper, who is also Brovik's niece and Ragnar's fiancée. Solness describes his first encounter with Kaja, when he "just stood looking at her—every ounce of me wishing that I had her here. I made a little friendly conversation about one thing or another. And then she went away....But the next day...she came to see me again, acting as if we'd already struck a bargain" (Ibsen, *Complete* 797). This professional and sexual bargain, if we believe Solness, is based not on the conversation that did happen, but a wish made real. This sort of magical thinking is the opposite of a contract, yet Solness presents it as a bargain. By using the language of bargaining, Solness invokes an expected mutuality of exchange, which he then exempts himself from by basing the bargain on a past that, according to him, never happened. In a development from previous plays, Solness is aware of the divergence of past narratives from the beginning, yet benefits from acting on a past he does not remember. *The Master Builder* abandons the searches for proof and coherence that characterize *The Wild Duck* and especially *Rosmersholm*. Or, more accurately, the characters

abandon those searches, and their acts of narration become more consciously performative and aligned with Ibsen's dramatic form in the process.

A one-sided bargain in *The Master Builder* is a past narrative that does not reflect remembered experience, but which still makes demands on characters in the present. Hilda Wangel brings such a bargain to bear on Solness' fears of modernity, youth, and other people's creations. Solness predicts, "change is coming....Someday youth will come here, knocking at the door—...Well, then it's the end of Solness, the master builder" (Ibsen, *Complete* 800). Just after Solness foretells this self-effacing change, Hilda Wangel, young and vivacious in a sailor dress, knocks at the door in what Richard Hornby notes is "the literal representation of a metaphor" (37). Critics' treatments of Hilda have variously identified her with the uncanny or impossible, the poetic or mythic, and expressionism.⁵³ Joan Templeton calls Hilda "both person and summoned spirit, not in the sense of a 'symbol' of Solness' longings, but as the embodiment of them. She is both a realistic character and an expressionist figure, and the power of the play, which comes close to being Hilde's power, comes in her partaking of these two kinds of representation" (Templeton, "Genre" 60). Hilda's status as the embodiment of Solness' desires is complicated by the fact that frequently, it is Hilda who seems to be the desiring party. Thus if *The Master Builder* partakes of realist and expressionist types of representation, these modes are enacted through competing (and sometimes cooperating) narrator characters.

The change Hilda brings is not what Solness expects: Hilda moves into one of Solness' three empty nurseries, making room for herself through the domestic rather than the professional sphere, and the creation she demands he sanction is a past of his own purported authorship. She squats in the Solness household, in their stories, and in the representational modes through which

⁵³ See for instance Hornby on expressionism (37); E.M. Forster's account of Hilda as a herald of poetry and the non-human (McFarlane, "Discussions" 68); Nærø on impossibility (38-39); Johnston on the mythic and metaphoric ("Play it Again" 322).

the play tells those stories. Hilda narrates a shared past that may or may not have happened. The past Hilda narrates takes the form, as with Kaja, of a bargain Solness does not remember making. But unlike Kaja, Hilda articulates the bargain and gets Solness to agree to his own responsibility for it. Hilda reminds Solness of the time she watched him climb to the top of a great church tower in her town ten years prior, when she was a child of 11 or 12:

HILDA. And then you said that when I grew up, I could be *your* princess.⁵⁴

SOLNESS (*with a short laugh*). Really—I said that too?

HILDA. Yes, you did. And when I asked how long I should wait, then you said you'd come back in ten years, like a troll, and carry me off—to Spain or someplace. And there you promised to buy me a kingdom.

...

SOLNESS. What on earth did I do next?

...

HILDA. You caught me up and kissed me, Mr. Solness.... You can't deny it, can you?

SOLNESS. Yes, I most emphatically do deny it!

HILDA (*looking scornfully at him*). I see. (*She turns and walks slowly over close by the stove and remains standing motionless, face averted from him, hands behind her back. A short pause.*)

SOLNESS. (*going cautiously over behind her.*) Miss Wangel—? (*Hilda stays silent, not moving.*) Don't stand there like a statue. These things you've been saying—you must have dreamed them. (*Putting his hand on her arm.*) Now listen—(*Hilda moves her arm impatiently. Solness appears struck by a sudden thought.*) Or else—wait a minute! There's something strange in back of all this, you'll see! (*In a hushed but emphatic voice.*) This all must have been in my thoughts. I must have willed it. Wished it. Desired it. And so—Doesn't that make sense? (*Hilda remains still. Solness speaks impatiently.*) Oh, all right, for God's sake—so I *did* the thing, too!

HILDA (*turning her head a bit, but without looking at him*). Then you confess?

SOLNESS. Yes. Whatever you please.

HILDA. That you threw your arms about me?

SOLNESS. All right!

HILDA. And bent me back.

SOLNESS. Way over back.

HILDA. And kissed me.

SOLNESS. Yes, I did it.

HILDA. Many times?

SOLNESS. As many as you ever could want.

...

⁵⁴ Ibsen referred to several young women—Helene Raff, Emilie Bardach, Hildur Andersen, and Rosa Fitinghoff—as princesses in his letters. Raff and Bardach may have been models for Hilda Wangel and Hedda Gabler (Ibsen, *Letters* 279, 286, 288, 345, 347).

HILDA. And the ten years are up. And you didn't come—as you promised me. (Ibsen, *Complete* 806-808)

I quote this scene at length because it demonstrates the dynamics of bargaining, desire, and narration I have addressed thus far, with different results. Like Kaja, Hilda turns up as though she and Solness already have a bargain, but this bargain is a fairytale contract—i.e., the troll will return after ten years to carry the princess away—rather than a workplace arrangement. This fairytale element couched in Hilda's series of biblical "ands" allows Solness to play along with his role in a past he does not remember. While the story is about princesses and trolls, Solness laughs and asks questions that grant Hilda's power to narrate his past. The fictional, timeless quality of fantasy effectively masks the stakes of narrated consensus, where those stakes are authority over present obligation. Only at the mention of the kiss does Solness withdraw his consent from Hilda's narrative: mutual desire, not to mention some sexual advances on a questionably pubescent girl, have entered the story. This encounter with his own past desire in the story of a narrator who returns it in the present thrusts Solness back into awareness that Hilda's narrative is not without consequences for his present self. Solness then tries to neutralize Hilda by shifting to the causal logic of "And so—Doesn't that make sense," attributing her story to his own will in the process. Hilda's demand for a confession refuses this subordinate position and Solness' logic; Hilda insists, instead, on Solness' total endorsement of her authority as a narrator.

Solness' "Whatever you please" suggests that his confession is based on Hilda's demand, rather than any suddenly recovered memory on his part. He does, nonetheless, confess to each element of the story Hilda proposes, eventually even embellishing it with the "Way over back." The quick dialogue has the air of finalizing a difficult negotiation, and what has been agreed upon is not only a mutual past, but a shared language. There is an equality of sorts: it is Hilda's

narrative and rhetoric that Solness must endorse, but within this narrative, Solness is the god-like creator and sexual instigator.⁵⁵ Hilda shows her awareness of the balance of this arrangement in a later exchange with Solness:

SOLNESS. You were only just now saying that no one but me should be allowed to build.

HILDA. *I* can say that—but *you* mustn't. (Ibsen, *Complete* 353, emphasis in original)

For their relationship to work, Solness' status as an independent creator must be articulated within Hilda's narrative. As Johnston notes, "The play shows [Solness] hesitantly internalizing and developing the subversive challenge of her version, fusing it with his remembered past, until it becomes a reality he acknowledges as his own" ("Past Story" 321). Whether the past Hilda narrates fuses with Solness' memory is debatable, but his agreement to it is clear. This mutually agreed-upon past, which creates and is created by present narrative, is Hilda's foundation for demanding that Solness keep his promise and deliver her up a kingdom. For his part, Solness can acquiesce to the terms of Hilda's narrative without losing his sense of himself as the master builder. Hilda has found a way to make Solness admit to mutual desire without feeling his identity is threatened, because in her story he has created not just buildings, but also the princess identity Hilda has purportedly worked to inhabit for the past ten years. If Solness keeps his promise to Hilda, he fully launches her as a character and preserving his own master builder identity.

Aline Solness, the master builder's ill-looking (but formerly beautiful) wife, has no place in Hilda's narrative. If Solness is characterized by desire so powerful that it potentially takes over the desires of others, then Aline is the result of marriage to such a will: any desire she once

⁵⁵ Regarding a parallel scene, Theoharis C. Theoharis writes, "Through most of the narration in the two exposition scenes Solness relates his past under Hilde's questioning" (161). Theoharis also refers to Solness' "narrative self creation" as well as a scene in which Hilda "continues narrating Aline's life," but does not take up the topic of narration explicitly (167, 203).

had has been replaced by “duty,” the word she invokes as the reason for everything she does. Duty is another sort of one-sided contract, only seen from the other side; that is, duty is a contract one fulfils based on conventional morality rather than prior agreement, and without expectation of earthly return. If in the B plot of *Pillars of Society* duty is rejected in the name of living a life unweighted by the past, in *The Master Builder* the representative of duty has been ground down to nearly nothing. Aline expects no return for doing her duty, but Solness feels that he is “going to sink under this awful burden of debt” to his wife, who protests that her husband is “not in debt to anyone” (Ibsen, *Complete* 818). This rift in their marriage boils down to a rift in their narrated pasts. Aline, whom Solness does not desire, is the only person to whom he independently admits an obligation. Solness tells Hilda of an opening in the flue of his and Aline’s old house (which Solness knew about but never fixed) that caused the house to burn to the ground, the shock of which gave Aline a fever that affected her breast milk, which caused their twin babies to die, but also freed up Solness to subdivide the old house’s garden into lots and begin his business as a builder. This absurd chain of events has robbed Aline of what Solness calls her “lifework,” a talent “[f]or building up the small souls of children, Hilda. Building those souls up to stand on their own” (Ibsen, *Complete* 826, 827). Since the twins were still breastfeeding at the time of their death, Solness’ claim for his wife’s talent for building up small souls into adulthood is difficult to support. But for Solness, the death of the twins was the end of his wife’s power to create, and thus the end of her lifework.

In Aline’s own version of the story, the loss of the babies is “an act of Providence” for which she can “be grateful” (Ibsen, *Complete* 842). The real losses, for Aline, were her home with its portraits and clothing of past generations, as well as the nine dolls that, she tells Hilda, she “used to carry...under [her] heart. Just like little unborn children” (Ibsen, *Complete* 842,

843). Aline's mourned dresses and doll-children depict her as a descendant of Nora, if Nora had lived and remained in a house like Rosmersholm. For Aline life and futurity depend not on creation, but on the material survival of her doll home in the present; the fire has consumed her connection to the past as well as the future. Thus Solness, in Aline's own account, owes her nothing. Aline is reduced to duty, an outdated morality severed from individual experience.

At the same time, Solness' narrative of his wife's loss does not override Aline's account of events—indeed, the placement of Aline's account after Solness' tends to replace his story with hers, though the play never endorses either one. But since Aline makes no real claims on Solness, she does not need him to endorse her narrated past. But both versions of the house fire are presented to Hilda who, confronted by divergent narratives outside her purview, threatens to leave Solness. Aline's narrative is responsible for this change of heart; Hilda says that she “just *can't* hurt somebody I *know!*” (Ibsen, *Complete* 845). Hearing Aline's story has created in Hilda a sense, however short-lived, that she knows Aline, and that she has a responsibility not to hurt her. As a character who is outside of the play's most dominant and dynamic narrative, but who still gets to tell her own story, Aline is the strongest barrier to narrated consensus, and to Hilda's kingdom.⁵⁶

Aline is a staged iteration of the dead wives of *The Wild Duck* and *Rosmersholm*. She knows about Solness's affair with Kaja, and becomes suspicious of his relationship with Hilda, though she also asks Hilda to be friends. If Gregers preserves his mother's narrative by acting on it, and Rosmer's attempt to reconstruct Beata's story and motivations metaphorically resurrects her, Aline is physically alive, if not flourishing. Solness claims that the “devils” and “troll

⁵⁶ For a useful analysis of the dynamics of plot and story, past and present in *The Master Builder*, see Johnston, “Past Story.” However, Aline's narrative is absent from his account. This omission creates a version of the play in which consensus is achieved, and the past's “affirmative energies” are allowed to emerge (“Past Story” 323). Considering Aline's unreconciled story is a necessary counterpoint to the agreed-upon narrative of Hilda and Solness.

inside” him have “sucked all the lifeblood out of her....And now she’s dead—thanks to me. And I’m alive, chained to the dead” (Ibsen, *Complete* 845). This dynamic, which is similar to Strindberg’s use of vampire characters, depicts Aline as walking, undead backstory. The dead wives of *The Wild Duck* and *Rosmersholm* are arguably insane, but their insanity takes the form of reading existing undercurrents of desire as actual infidelities. In Ibsen’s later plays, this conflation of the desired with the actual tends in fact to be how the world works—though not, until *The Master Builder*, how most of the main characters believe it works in the theatrical present.⁵⁷ *The Master Builder*, then, is the point at which the main characters catch up to the structure of the plays—or at least the point at which Hilda and (to a lesser extent) Solness catch up.

Solness convinces Hilda to stay with him through a promise of mutual future creation that does not require her to reconcile divergent narratives:

SOLNESS (*getting up*). From this day on we’ll build together, Hilda.
 HILDA (*with a skeptical smile*). A real castle in the air?
 SOLNESS. Yes. One with solid foundations. (Ibsen, *Complete* 848)

In contrast to Gregers’ “solid ground to build on” and Ulrik Brendel’s warning that Rosmer must not build his castle on the shifting sands, *The Master Builder* moves the castle to the air—the characters have abandoned the increasingly shaky ground of a coherent past. The “solid foundations,” since the building will take place “from this day on,” are present agreement. A future built on present agreement could conceivably be built on a single, mutual narrative that requires no historical reconciliation. This plan requires Solness to not only entrust his past to Hilda’s narration, but to break with the past altogether and take the present as a starting point. Solness begins by climbing the tower of his new house, at Hilda’s urging, despite his terrible fear

⁵⁷ In *Rosmersholm* conflation of the desired with the actual is how Rebecca “murders” Beata—but Rebecca has lost this power by the present of the play.

of heights. But this attempted break with the past is actually a return to the original scene of Solness' declaration of creative independence. Ten years prior, according to the story Hilda told upon her arrival, Solness climbed a church tower and declared, "Hear me, Thou Almighty! From this day on, I'll be a free creator" (Ibsen, *Complete* 854). To climb the tower again, to declare his independence again, is to entrench himself in an old story. Solness' latter-day performance of creation is actually a repetition.

Solness does climb the tower, despite his fear, but when he reaches the top he falls to his death. The other characters are paralyzed or offstage: Brovik lies in an offstage coma attended by Kaja, Aline faints, Herdal runs offstage to the place Solness has fallen, and Ragnar is so shocked he "can't move" (Ibsen, *Complete* 859). Only Hilda, who stares at the place Solness fell from in "*dazed triumph*," is capable of motion (Ibsen 384). She says to Ragnar, "But he went straight, straight to the top. And I heard harps in the air. (*Swings the shawl up overhead and cries with wild intensity.*) My—my master builder!" (Ibsen, *Complete* 860). Solness is Hilda's in that he dies reenacting a scene from her narrated past.⁵⁸ With Solness' fall from the tower, which is "indistinctly seen plunging down between the trees," his body necessarily becomes a prop (Ibsen, *Complete* 859). But unlike Hedvig's body, Solness' corpse is not displayed for the audience. Instead the audience is faced with Hilda, who continues to tell the story of the master builder's ascent to the top of the tower after his fall. As the most successful narrator, Hilda can still move in the present. While Hilda is the "change" that Solness correctly predicts will be the end of him, the scene she demands Solness play out is a repetition. Hilda does not try for a future independent of the past. Instead she self-consciously navigates a present in which she is simultaneously a narrator, a character in someone else's story, and a spectator, reshaping what

⁵⁸ As Theoharis notes, "Solness and Hilde see the nature of reality itself at stake in the climb" (237).

she sees until it is in line with the story she tells, and taking pleasure in a past she is hell-bent on repeating, or perhaps simply materializing.

The play's final scene occurs outdoors; this move out of domestic space is a trend in the remainder of the realist cycle.⁵⁹ *Little Eyolf* (1894) is in many ways an exploration of the replaceability of people within the family unit, and the play ends with a resolution to open up the space of the household to the poor children of the neighborhood. *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896) moves from a stifling house to a deadly freezing outdoor space. The play again takes up the dream of a kingdom, but Borkman's kingdom consists not of homes for human beings or a consensus about past and present, but instead is all the factories and industrial operations he never built. The kingdom is not a narrated future, but an opportunity lost. Ibsen's final play, *When We Dead Awaken* (1899), leaves the bourgeois home behind entirely, but does contain a castle, which in this play is an actual place: a hunter's hut on a mountain. The play resolves the cycle, or rather refuses to resolve it, by sending two idealists climbing up a mountain while two sensualists descend; the climbers die in an avalanche while the earthy pair sings about freedom offstage.

The Master Builder is a key moment in this trajectory, since it stages the failure of homes and those who build them. As the cycle moves away from bourgeois homes, so too does it move away from narrator characters. Perhaps as Ibsen's characters move away from houses and their stories become less rooted in domestic fictions, narrating loses some of its capacity for action in the theatrical present. While the plays that follow take up many of *The Master Builder*'s themes—debt, unhappy marriages, artistic creation as supplanting sexual reproduction—never, after *Hilda Wangel*, do a character's storytelling powers so closely approach Ibsen's dramatic

⁵⁹ The move outdoors does not begin with *The Master Builder*; though *Hedda Gabler* is an indoor play, *The Lady From the Sea* takes place in borderline domestic/outdoor spaces such as verandas, conservatories, and gardens.

form. Nor does any play after *The Master Builder* end in a visible triumph overwriting what has already become an invisible tragedy. Hilda's triumph is amoral, destructive, and by far the most compelling thing on the stage. As with Hedvig's presence in *The Wild Duck*, Solness's death shows the consequences of a reality founded upon narrated consensus; the major difference is that we no longer care, especially, because the false reality has killed nothing innocent. *The Master Builder* aligns us, finally, with the squatter, who is also the most successful narrator.

Through Hilda's triumph *The Master Builder* launches a new relationship between character, language, and dramatic form. The low, dilapidated houses that populate Aline Solness' subdivided garden, I have noted, belie the noble rhetoric of Solness' old mission to build homes for human beings. But by the end of the play the relationship between character speech and the set has changed. When Hilda narrates Solness' triumph as her master builder despite the fact that the audience has already seen his prop body fall to earth, Ibsen posits a more radical gap between narrated and material representations of reality in present time. But here Ibsen undermines the semantic authority of the set. This is not to say that the audience doubts whether Solness has really fallen. Rather, Hilda's narration—even though and because it is divorced from the present plot—has equal and, I would argue, more power to determine the meaning of the play. Through narration in *The Master Builder* Ibsen severs dramatic character from plot. In so doing, the play is able to express more of the generative potential of squatting than its predecessors.

Chapter 3

Strindberg's Vampires

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, in the 1887 essay “Soul Murder (Apropos *Rosmersholm*), August Strindberg discusses the historical shift from a “purely physical [...] struggle for power” to “something more psychological” (Strindberg, “Essays” 66).⁶⁰ One of the results of this shift is the use of words as weapons: “Phrases like ‘tortured to death’, ‘driven him crazy’, ‘killed with silence’, ‘boycotted’, and ‘torn to pieces’ are becoming more and more commonplace, and these tiny, innocent words conceal or reveal as many crimes, and just as great ones, as the *oubliette* of medieval castles” (Strindberg, “Essays” 67). Strindberg calls this form of killing “modern soul murder, or psychic suicide” (“Essays” 66). The vehicle for soul murder tends to be language, which has developed as a form of self-interested deception intrinsic to the structure of the modern world.

This conception of language is a presence and formal problem in Strindberg's writing from the start. Though Strindberg is known outside Sweden primarily as a dramatist, he launched his career—and Sweden's entry into realism and modern literature—with *The Red Room* (1879), a novel of social critique whose style is often compared to Dickens.⁶¹ The novel emphasizes society's total inseparability from deceptive rhetoric through a cast of characters made up of writers, editors, actors, artists, and businessmen who use language to further their own best interests. Ulf Olsson writes that *The Red Room* “stages a fight over the word, its meanings and

⁶⁰ Parts of this chapter are forthcoming in *Genre*, and are used with permission. Due to Strindberg's frequent use of ellipses, I place my own in brackets throughout this chapter.

⁶¹ Eric O. Johannesson notes, “Reading Dickens, Strindberg conceived the idea of using the form of the novel to launch an attack on a society whose values he was unable to accept” (28). I lack the scope to treat Strindberg's evolution as a novelist (or to fully treat *The Red Room*) here. For a useful investigation of the role of language in *The Red Room*, see Ulf Olsson, “Learning to Speak: Strindberg and the Novel” in *The Cambridge Companion to August Strindberg* and especially Olsson's “The Blue Void: Dialogicity, Narration and the Future in Strindberg's *Röda rummet*.” See also P.A. Holmes's “A. Strindberg: *The Red Room* (1879),” which is more useful for its attempt to situate *The Red Room* in the context of European realism than for its thematic and formal analysis of the novel.

the right to speak. It seeks to unmask society by unmasking its language” (39). Like many nineteenth-century realist novels, *The Red Room*’s third-person narrator moves between external and internal states, between the social and the individual, and between reflections upon art, commerce, marriage, and civic duty. Late in the novel, however, characters take over the narration, frequently in the form of letters. Olsson relates this shift to formal tensions between the extradiegetic narrator, whose “authoritative gaze [...] can see through closed doors” and into the characters’ minds, and the “parodical, dialogical and carnivalesque layers of the novel, where the position and function of the narrator are conquered by and spread among the characters themselves” (Olsson, “Blue Void” 27). Such a relationship between narrators and characters is one way of approaching the problem of narrative point of view for an author who sees deceptive rhetoric as an omnipresent structuring principle of society, and yet who also wants to write a novel that tells the truth about society.

Even in the earlier parts of the novel, Strindberg’s narrator frequently drops out of the picture altogether for extended scenes that resemble dramatic dialogues. One dialogue-driven scene in *The Red Room* centers around an actor, Falander, whose verbal genius is such that everything else becomes “stale” for those who fall under his spell (Strindberg, *Red Room* 132). Rehnholm, an aspiring actor, comes to Falander (who is drinking absinthe) for advice. Under pretense of warning Rehnholm away from the profession, Falander seduces him into it, and gains an acolyte in the process. Falander’s success is based on his ability to speak from a position of seeming omniscience:

“Oh, it’s all so different from what you suppose! You are young; your blood runs swiftly; your mind is full of pictures, bright and beautiful as fairy-tales. But you don’t want them to be hidden there; you want to bring them out into the light, bear them on your arms and show them—above all show them to the world and thereby experience a great joy. Isn’t that right?”

“Yes, yes, you are expressing my very thoughts.”

“I assume yours to be a genuine and perfectly normal case. I am not one to look for bad motives in everything—although I have a low opinion of things in general. Well then this—inclination of yours is so strong that you would rather suffer want or humiliation or be sucked dry by vampires, rather lose your social reputation, go bankrupt—go to the dogs in fact—than give this up. Isn’t that right?”

“Yes. Ah, how well you know me!”

[...]

“Will you believe that I knew what you were going to say to me when you came in at that door? And that I know what you will ask me next, as we’re on Shakespeare?”

“You’re an extraordinary person. I must admit you’re right, although I don’t agree with what you say.”

“Well, what do you make of Antony’s speech over Caesar’s bier? Isn’t it remarkable?”

“That’s just what I was going to ask you about. You seem able to read my thoughts.”

“Well, I told you I could just now. And is that so extraordinary, when everyone thinks or rather says the same thing?” (Strindberg, *Red Room* 136, 137)

Falander’s seemingly telepathic ability to report Rehnghjelm’s thoughts resembles the omniscience we conventionally associate with the extradiegetic narrators of realist novels.⁶² But while the temporary withdrawal of Strindberg’s narrator and the tagless dialogue strengthen the impression that Falander is running the show in this scene, there remains a significant difference between Falander’s apparent omniscience and that of the novel’s narrator: Falander’s seemingly uncanny ability to read Rehnghjelm’s thoughts is based on the unoriginality of people’s (and particularly Rehnghjelm’s) thoughts and speech, whereas an extradiegetic narrator’s omniscience is bestowed by the author as needed.

Nonetheless, it is significant that Falander, an actor, temporarily inhabits the role of a narrator. In his study of character narration in novels, James Phelan describes some basic “narrator functions”; namely, “the narrator acts as reporter, interpreter, and evaluator of the narrated for the narratee, and those actions are constrained by the narrative situation (a character

⁶² Jonathan Culler argues that omniscience is an umbrella concept that tends to obscure a wide variety of narrative techniques that could be better denoted by terms more specific to their functions. Following Nicholas Royle, Culler suggests “telepathy” as a more specific term for when a narrator has access to the thoughts of characters (Culler 22–23). Telepathy is certainly an appropriate term for discussing Falander’s interactions with Rehnghjelm in this scene. The third-person narrator of *The Red Room* has many more “omniscient” functions—such as the ability to move across space in non-human ways—for which I will not attempt to coin new terms.

narrator, for example, cannot enter the consciousness of another character)” (*Living to Tell* 12).

A character that was truly telepathic could of course enter the consciousness of another character. But this is not what Falander does, despite what Rehnholm says and what Falander himself suggests, since Falander’s knowledge of Rehnholm is actually premised on the idea that entering other people’s thoughts is unnecessary, because those thoughts are essentially identical. Falander himself, in contrast, is an “extraordinary person,” and is exempt from his own generalizations in the ears of his listener. Omniscient narration is a role Falander can play because he has read and performed extensively, because he has observed the ways in which others value the things he has read and performed, because he has observed the types of people who desire to be actors, and because he understands the effects of the sordid realities of the profession on such people. Falander reports, interprets, and evaluates his way into a position of verbal power that mimics the omniscient or telepathic functions of a narrator. But in the process he suggests telepathy is really jaded observation, and access to consciousness, one of the salient characteristics of realist narrators, is redundant. If “mimetic narrative aims at a psychological reproduction of mental process,” then we might see Falander’s mode of operation as a sort of inverse realist narration that dazzles the narratee with seemingly total knowledge, only to declare that knowledge worthless (Scholes, Phelan, and Kellogg 14).⁶³ Falander’s followers come to feel existence is stale because they are under the spell of an actor who, in performing functions of a realist narrator, drains reality of value and meaning for his listeners, gaining power for himself in the process. Having established that Rehnholm is willing to be sucked dry by vampires in

⁶³ Following F.K. Stanzel, David Herman discusses figural (character) narration as a “distinctively modernist narrative technique” that filters third-person or extradiegetic narration through “a particularized center of consciousness” (“Basic Elements” 140). Strindberg often makes use of this technique in his novels, along with the related techniques of intradiegetic and hypodiegetic narration, with the result that watching the characters tell stories is often also a process of watching one center of consciousness prey upon another.

pursuit of an acting career, Falander loses no time in sucking the vitality from Rehnghjelm through his speech.

Character narration is inherently concerned with the relationship between tale and teller. When the teller is an actor, the tale is likely to be considered in the light of a performance. The ability to perform a parodic version of a narrator's omniscience is quite valuable to Falander, who has a huge amount of influence over his narratee, Rehnghjelm, by the end of their first conversation. Readers, who have seen Falander referred to as "the Devil" and who lack Rehnghjelm's investment in becoming actors, are not affected by Falander's speech in the same way. The performance of omniscient narration that seduces Rehnghjelm is identifiable to the reader *as* a performance, and a sinister one at that. By making Falander an actor and eschewing dialogue tags around his speech, Strindberg suggests, firstly, the performative nature of narrating in a society structured by self-interested rhetoric and, secondly, the utility of a dramatic frame in revealing the stakes of that rhetoric.

Strindberg is both a novelist and dramatist, and narrative and dramatic modes are intertwined in his work.⁶⁴ In Falander Strindberg depicts a character that performs some of the functions of a narrator. By implicitly yoking these narrator functions to vampirism Strindberg also suggests a type that recurs and develops throughout his writing. In this chapter I examine vampiric narrator characters in the plays *Miss Julie* (1888), *The Dance of Death* (1900), and *The Ghost Sonata* (1907), as well as in the novel *Black Banners* (1907). Through a sequence of works that share thematic and formal concerns and yet span Strindberg's career, I can trace the impact of the vampiric narrator type as Strindberg moves away from the realism whose modes of knowing and telling that type appropriates and repurposes. In *Miss Julie* the ability to tell a self-

⁶⁴ Strindberg's writing is by no means confined to novels and plays, and also encompasses short stories, poetry, painting, journalism, and autobiographical texts that cut across multiple genres. See Robinson's *Strindberg and Genre* for discussions of these genres.

interested, stylistically elastic story corresponds to the ability to navigate a world of changing class structures whose inhabitants have nonetheless been shaped by outdated social and formal structures. In *The Dance of Death* the ability to advance oneself through narration becomes explicitly vampiric; it sustains the play's narrator character and the domestic status quo while draining the vitality from the house and its inhabitants. In *The Ghost Sonata*, narration by characters is not only a means of sustaining the domestic status quo, but a means of entry into and authority over a house that functions as a locus of power even as its inhabitants fall into paralysis, silence, and death. Strindberg exposes domestic ideals as a harmful myth, and puts the acts of narration sustaining that myth in the service of destroying the house that embodies it.

By reading across genres I can better trace the persistence and significance of the vampiric narrator type in Strindberg's work. The full scope of such a project is larger than I can do justice to here; as such, an analysis of the narration in *Black Banners* is my primary example for the formal properties of Strindberg's novels. The novel, which was until recently unavailable to English language readers, takes up themes and problems present in *The Red Room* more than two decades later. *Black Banners* was published in 1907, the same year Strindberg wrote his chamber plays, and was intended partially as source material for future plays. Thus while Strindberg's prose fiction is too stylistically diverse to admit of a prototypical example, *Black Banners* does undertake thematic and formal concerns that span Strindberg's career. It also provides rare instances of non-vampiric narration by characters; thus, *Black Banners* should change the way we think about character narration in Strindberg's late drama, including the chamber plays.

Existing discussions of narrators in Strindberg's drama by Peter Szondi and Egil Törnqvist have viewed the coming together of dramatic and epic form as a literary-historical

crisis, or have focused on the unreliability of narration. Neither critic considers the models of narration present in Strindberg's novels. Szondi's argument hinges on *The Ghost Sonata*, and I discuss it with my analysis of the play. In "Strindberg's Secondary Text," Törnqvist distinguishes between "primary text," or dialogue, and "secondary text," or everything that is not dialogue. Törnqvist sees the distinction between primary and secondary text as having "a certain affinity to the distinction between the author's and the characters' points-of-view in narrative texts" ("Secondary Text" 487). In a subsequent article Törnqvist extends this affinity to a discussion of two types of narrators in Strindberg's drama: figural narrators (i.e., characters) who appear in the primary text, and the authorial narrator, who appears in the secondary text ("Unreliable Narration" 62). Both types of narrators are unreliable, Törnqvist argues; the figural narrators because they lie or withhold information, and the authorial narrator insofar as he sometimes provides information that "manipulate[es] the audience into taking something for granted which is later principally refuted," as when a familial relationship stated by the *dramatis personae* turns out to be false ("Unreliable Narration" 77). The pervasiveness of both types of unreliable narration, Törnqvist argues, reflects "the growing awareness, at the end of the last [nineteenth] century, of the complexity of the human psyche and the subjectivity and relativity of what we call truth" (Törnqvist, "Unreliable Narration" 78). Törnqvist is not wrong that the unreliability of narration in Strindberg's plays reflects an increasingly subjective understanding of truth, though similar claims could be made for Ibsen's plays or, for that matter, the works of Wilkie Collins, Oscar Wilde, and Robert Louis Stevenson, to name a few writers who were similarly fond of multiple narration by characters and subjective understandings of truth.

If Strindberg finds truth to be subjective, he still wishes to tell it, and his authorial voice tends to be a strong presence in his novels and dramatic texts. This authorial presence, in

combination with Strindberg's position in Sweden's literary culture, often creates unclear lines between the positions of author and narrator. When considering narrative fiction, critics commonly divorce authors from narrators, whereas in historical and autobiographical works this distinction is less valid.⁶⁵ If, like Törnqvist, we consider the secondary text in drama as a type of authorial narration, things become murkier, since stage directions are generally read as the voice of the author, and yet they need not be autobiographical or factual. For Strindberg in particular, fictional, autobiographical, dramatic, and narrative modes are fluid and overlapping. Like Ibsen, Strindberg wrote drama for readers as well as spectators; Sweden had relatively few theaters, and Strindberg frequently published his plays for a reading public before he could present them to an audience (Törnqvist and Steene 12). Indeed, when late in his career he founded the Intimate Theatre with August Falck, Strindberg stipulated that play texts should be sold at the theater during performances (Meyer 490). A reading public could conceivably experience the interaction between primary and secondary text in a way akin to the interaction between narrative levels in novels, although the fluid movement between the world of the characters and the world of the narrator achieved in the novel through free indirect discourse does not occur between the authorial narrator and the characters in drama.⁶⁶ A theater audience would necessarily experience

⁶⁵ See Lejeune, Philippe. "The Autobiographical Pact." *On Autobiography*. Trans. Katherine Leary. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1989. 3-30. Print. For a useful discussion of Strindberg in light of Paul de Man and Phillipe Lejeune's work on autobiography, see Kerstin Dahlbäck, "Strindberg's Autobiographical Space," in *Strindberg and Genre*. Dahlbäck notes that even though Strindberg "often ruthlessly exploited intimate autobiographical material," he is also "aware that he exploits those closest to him, and expresses his abhorrence for the 'vampirism' that his writing compels him to undertake" (Robinson, "Genre" 82). See also Linda Haverty Rugg, "August Strindberg: the Art and Science of Self-Dramatization," in *The Cambridge Companion to Strindberg*.

⁶⁶ Some recent work on narrative, influenced by cognitive science, argues for a definition of realism that is not concerned with "the art of revealing 'how things are,' nor the art of imitating real-world speech acts, but the art of getting the reader involved with narrated events" (Ryan 161). While readerly involvement with the world of the characters is certainly a pervasive property of realist fiction, it is also true that realist novels frequently draw attention to their own narrative strategies; as Hillary P. Dannenberg points out, immersion does not only occur in realist texts, and "realism and immersion are not automatically equatable" (24). There is no reason why readerly immersion cannot work in conjunction with attempts to say "how things are" or to imitate everyday speech. Immersion is, however, a useful way of thinking about the differences between the narrative strategies of novels versus plays. The immersive process of reading realist fiction cuts through narrative levels; "The reader's immersive

this interaction quite differently, since in performance the secondary text ceases to be text at all and becomes, instead, settings, sounds, and costumes. Nonetheless, the professional and economic conditions of Strindberg's career, the autobiographical content of much of his work, and his own emphasis on the authorial text tend to blur distinctions between author and narrator.

The status of narrator characters, with which this chapter is more concerned, is less dependent on whether the play is being read or performed; if anything their status as storytellers is more apparent in performance, since the secondary text is no longer present in a form that resembles narrated framing. At the same time, it is in some ways less intuitive to refer to characters in a play as narrators at all. Törnqvist's justification is, "Although we usually think of drama as an art form concerned with 'showing' rather than 'telling', it is evident that virtually every play contains a certain amount of narration in addition to what is being shown" ("Unreliable Narration" 61). Narration here is anything that is told rather than shown, and any character who participates in the telling is a narrator. While it is true that Strindberg's characters are remarkably unreliable speakers, it is not clear why their speech, as opposed to the speech of all dramatic characters, should be called narration, or why they should be considered as narrators.⁶⁷

interaction with the text is a mental journey across boundaries, and as long as the narrator does not draw attention to his own separate level, he also recedes to a less conscious level even though the information he provides allows the reader to simultaneously construct and explore the narrative world in her mind" (Dannenberg 23-24). The immersive quality of novel-reading is less present when reading drama because the typographical barriers between primary and secondary text are clearly demarcated, and because the secondary text functions *both* as a set of instructions for staging and—as of the nineteenth century—as literature. An immersive experience of viewing plays is much more probable, though dependent on the play's content and, as Ryan points out, "the arrangement of theatrical space" (298). Strindberg was interested in giving his audiences a more immersive theater experience; see for example his recommendations for making sets look less artificial and banishing distractions from the theater in the preface to *Miss Julie*, or his support for abolishing long intermissions in which the audience gets drunk and "the half-hypnotized theatre goer is awakened to banal reflections" in his *Memorandum to the Members of the Intimate Theatre from the Director* (Törnqvist and Steene 125). Strindberg brings the immersive qualities of realist fiction to drama not through a narrator as such, but through management of theatrical space on the stage and in the auditorium.

⁶⁷ In the useful article "Strindberg and Subjective Drama" in *Strindberg and Genre*, Törnqvist focuses on point of view rather than narration, and considers the epic elements in turn-of-the-century drama in terms of their tendency to be structured according to characters' perspectives. Törnqvist identifies Indra's Daughter from *A Dream Play* as a

The simplest answer, I argue, is that it is useful to consider characters as narrators when they tell stories, and Strindberg's characters, like the characters of several dramatists of the period, tell lots of stories that are important to the themes and forms of the plays. In the context of a discussion of W. B. Gallie, Paul Ricoeur writes that "[a] story describes a sequence of actions and experiences done or undergone by a certain number of people, whether real or imaginary. These people are presented either in situations that change or as reacting to such change" (150). Moments when dramatic characters tell stories or narrate differ from simple dialogue (though they are also dialogue) in their structure, since dialogue is not necessarily characterized by sequence of action or change. Scholes, Phelan, and Kellogg state that narrative works "are distinguished by two characteristics: the presence of a story and a story-teller. A drama is a story without a story-teller" (4).⁶⁸ But it is also possible to invert this fundamental distinction between dramatic and narrative literature in order to argue that in the absence of a third-person narrator, dramatic characters all take on the burden of telling the story. Keir Elam essentially takes this position when he writes, "In the absence of narratorial guides, providing external description and 'world-creating' propositions, the dramatic world has to be specified *from within* by means of references made to it by the very individuals who constitute it" (100). In the absence of external commentary—and with the help of various audiovisual aspects of staging and production—characters in drama possess some of the world-creating powers of a novelistic narrator. This power is spread among many characters, rather than a single narrator; therefore it

narrator based on her simultaneous "epic distance to humanity" and status as protagonist (Robinson, "Genre" 105). While I essentially agree with Törnqvist's analysis here, my primary interest is in stage characters who actively tell stories, as distinguished from the larger category of "subjective drama," which deals with characters whose perspectives structure their respective plays. Indra's Daughter comments on the human world she sees, becomes entrenched in its problems, and extricates herself again, but her commentary and involvement change nothing within the world of the characters.

⁶⁸ I use the terms "storyteller" and "narrator" interchangeably in reference to dramatic characters that perform such functions, with the understanding that a character who tells a story in a play is related to but not the same as a narrator in the novelistic sense. In discussions of Strindberg's novels I distinguish between characters who perform narrator functions (e.g., Falander), figural narrators, and the more traditional third-person narrator.

is by implicit or explicit consensus about the properties of the world being proposed that dramatic characters specify that world.

But again, this property of character narration is present in drama generally, and is not specific to Strindberg. Strindberg's plays feature a frequent lack or disruption of consensus about the properties of the world.⁶⁹ This lack of consensus, in conjunction with Strindberg's tendency to make his characters tell stories, makes it profitable to think about Strindberg's characters as narrators. A novelistic narrator does not actually create the world of the novel; the author does that. Likewise, the characters in a play do not actually create the play world through their speech. In both instances it is the fiction of a person that speaks worlds into being that is of interest. When Strindberg's characters posit versions of their environments that do not agree, they draw attention to the fictionality of dramatic world-building as such. They become storytellers rather than conveyers of information, and in the process they reveal the high stakes of narrating when the stories we tell structure our realities. Stage narrators do not only tell stories that involve sequence and change; they *enact* change by telling those stories.

But Strindberg's stage narrators are distinguished by their vampirism, and their largely unsuccessful attempts at resisting vampirism. The changes Strindberg's characters enact through narration tend to advance them to positions of power within the households and social institutions they inhabit, even as they drain those spaces of vitality and meaning. At the end of a century whose dominant mode, narrative fiction, provides a ubiquitous and powerful form for considering domesticity and its relation to the social world, Strindberg depicts narration as

⁶⁹ It is this lack of consensus, I would argue, that leads Törnqvist to identify the figural narrators as unreliable. Törnqvist discusses "the dramaturgic law of reliability and its rather rigid insistence that while narrative statements early in the play may well prove (retrospectively) unreliable, late statements should be truthful—so that in the course of the play we experience a sense of gradual revelation" ("Unreliable Narration" 77). Strindberg's contravention of this gradual movement toward truth is essentially a contravention of the idea that by the end of the play the characters (and the audience) should be in a state of agreement about the world of the play and how it works. Ibsen's later dramas also participate in this disruption of the dramatic movement toward truth; *The Master Builder*, for instance, ends in the triumph of a liar and leaves the facts of the play's pre-history in doubt.

simultaneously integral to perpetuating those institutions and instrumental in their collapse. Developments in drama throughout the nineteenth century also lead up to Strindberg's simultaneous obsession with and rejection of domestic space. In melodrama, as in Greek tragedy and realism, social problems are worked out through the figure of the family. In social problem plays later in the century, domestic space tends to be a site of tragedy. Ibsen continues this trend, and his late plays tend to move out of domestic space and into nature. Strindberg sees domesticity, like deceptive language, as inextricably tied to the structure of modern life, and largely inescapable except through death. Domesticity is itself a deceptive myth, a powerful set of discourses relating to class, gender, and wealth. These social discourses combine with various genres and modes to determine the style and intentions of the characters' speech, which in turn shapes the stories they generate and the play worlds altered by those stories.

By investing his characters' dialogue with some of the world-building properties of a narrator's speech, then, Strindberg creates play worlds determined by ideas and forms as well as by the environmental and hereditary factors essential to naturalism. This contradictory iteration of naturalism is present in *Miss Julie*, where characters are products of genres and aesthetic movements as well as social class, gender, and heredity. The characters and their play worlds retain these properties as Strindberg moves toward the expressionism of his later drama; at the same time, the move away from realism is accompanied by characters who take on more of the telepathic abilities and storytelling functions of extradiegetic narrators. What Strindberg likes about these narrator characters is their potential to facilitate movement across worlds—to escape, destroy, and transcend the social and formal structures that produce them. But such escapes are impossible as long as the characters in question participate in the deceptive discourses that permeate and poison the society Strindberg despises. To narrate one's way into fame, power, or

domestic space within that society is to become a vampire who sustains his own life by draining others of vitality and meaning. To narrate non-vampirically in Strindberg's later work, then, is to narrate in the service of withdrawing from domestic space, from society, and even from life—effectively, to talk oneself to death, or a state of mind approaching it.

By assigning formally generative movement across genres to characters that perform the functions of narrators, Strindberg renders character a locus of formal change. By making these same narrator characters vampires that survive by draining life and energy from people, from professional and domestic institutions, and from the linguistic conventions that constitute and sustain them, Strindberg assigns physical and formal consequences to character narrators' peculiar relations to the temporal experience of dramatic action. Locating forms in characters allows Strindberg to characterize forms—that is, to connect form and formal change to particular centers of consciousness and, at the same time, to ubiquitous domestic and social institutions and ideologies. The specificity and flexibility of this approach suggest the utility of a generically integrated mode of analysis and, moreover, the fruitfulness of character narration as a lens for mapping formal change in modern drama.

In *Miss Julie* (1888), which Strindberg subtitles “A Naturalistic Tragedy,” the secondary text extends to the preface, a foundational manifesto of stage naturalism. In the preface, Strindberg attributes Miss Julie's death to a “multiplicity of motives” which, he notes, “is in tune with the times” (Strindberg, *Julie* 58). The aristocratic Miss Julie's death is a product of her family history, her genetics, and her immediate environment, in addition to her decision to have sex with the servant Jean. Strindberg calls Miss Julie a “half-woman,” a “type who thrusts herself forward and sells herself nowadays for power, decorations, honours, or diplomas as

formerly she used to do for money” (Strindberg, *Julie* 60). Strindberg’s description of the half-woman sheds light on the play’s contradictory subtitle. (Contradictory, since in naturalism social conditions determine human existence, whereas in tragedy a human flaw or choice leads to the protagonist’s downfall.)⁷⁰ Strindberg writes of the half-woman:

The type is tragic, offering the spectacle of a desperate struggle against nature, a tragic legacy of Romanticism which is now being dissipated by Naturalism, the only aim of which is happiness. And happiness means strong and sound species. But Miss Julie is also a relic of the old warrior nobility that is now giving way to the new aristocracy of nerve and brain; a victim of the discord which a mother’s ‘crime’ has implanted in a family; a victim of the errors of an age, of circumstances, and of her own deficient constitution, which together form the equivalent of the old-fashioned concept of Fate or Universal Law. (Strindberg, *Julie* 61)

For Strindberg naturalism is deterministic, but it is also a scientific discourse and aesthetic movement that is succeeding other discourses and movements that still hold power over the people they have produced. Miss Julie is a character in a naturalistic play, but struggles against nature as though she is in a Romantic tragedy. Her social class and upbringing are invested in a dead or dying world order. Some of the factors that determine Miss Julie’s fate under naturalism are not themselves naturalistic, with the result that Miss Julie is doomed *by* naturalism to struggle *against* naturalism, and to fail.

In the primary text Jean and Julie’s fates correspond to their respective abilities to narrate. Jean narrates to get what he wants; even when the stories he invents are about the past, his storytelling is future-directed. His first story is a tale of class difference and desire in which a young Jean steals some apples, breaks into the count’s luxurious private privy, and gets caught: “I sneaked in, looked about, and marveled. And just then I heard someone coming! There was only one way out—for the upper-class people. But for me there was one more—a lower one”

⁷⁰ For a useful discussion of the genre contradiction in *Miss Julie* see Göran Stockenström, “The Dilemma of Naturalistic Tragedy: Strindberg’s Miss Julie.”

(Norton 174).⁷¹ In the story, Jean escapes through the sewage pit under the outhouse and finds himself in the rose garden, where he sees Miss Julie in white stockings and a pink dress, and has an epiphany about class difference: “it’s strange that a labourer’s child here on God’s earth cannot enter the hall park and play with the Count’s daughter” (Strindberg, *Julie* 83). Miss Julie’s response to Jean’s story reveals her romanticized notion of class difference:

MISS JULIE (*sentimentally*). Do you suppose all poor children feel the way you did on that occasion?
 JEAN (*at first hesitant, then with conviction*). If *all* poor—yes—of course. Of course!
 MISS JULIE. It must be a tremendous misfortune to be poor.
 JEAN (*with deep pain, and powerful emotion*). Oh, Miss Julie! Oh!—A dog may lie on the Countess’s sofa, a horse may have its nose stroked by a young lady’s hand, but a common drudge!— (Strindberg, *Julie* 83)

Miss Julie sentimentally generalizes Jean’s story into the narrative of an entire class of people. Jean’s reaction shows Miss Julie’s ignorance as well as his own ability to manipulate narration to his own advantage. Seeing Miss Julie’s response to his story, Jean adopts exaggerated, sentimental rhetoric that casts him as the dog who wants to lie on Miss Julie’s sofa and the horse who wants his “nose” stroked. Jean finishes his story with a description of an attempt “to die beautifully and pleasantly” for love of Miss Julie by going to sleep in an oat bin under an elder bush (Strindberg, *Julie* 83).

Jean’s narrative is effective and demonstrates not only his understanding of the class difference between him and Julie, but also how that difference translates to literary genres and modes of speech. When Jean has finished his story, Julie responds:

MISS JULIE. You’re a charming storyteller, you know. Did you go to school?
 JEAN. A bit. But I’ve read lots of novels and been to the theatre. Besides, I’ve heard posh people⁷² talk. That’s what’s taught me most. (Strindberg, *Julie* 83-84)

⁷¹ I use Sprinchorn’s translation here for its emphasis on the rhetoric of high and low that corresponds to the class conflicts within the play. Robinson’s translation reads, “I crept inside, saw, and marveled. But then I heard someone coming! There was only one way out for the gentry, but for me there was another, and I had no choice but to take it” (Strindberg, *Julie* 82).

⁷² The phrase reads “educated people,” in Sprinchorn’s less British translation (Norton 175).

Jean's storytelling reflects his assimilation of novels, theater, and the language of the upper classes. This exposure to different genres and linguistic discourses has enabled him to tell stories that lie outside his personal experience. Later in the play, after Jean and Julie have had sex, Jean reveals the story of the oat bin as "just talk.... Women always fall for pretty stories!... I read it in the paper once about a chimney-sweep who lay down in a wood-chest with some lilacs, because he'd had a paternity order brought against him— — —" (Strindberg, *Julie* 90). In order to seduce Julie, Jean changes a common story he read in a newspaper into a romance that ends in attempted suicide; in other words, he adapts the story into a genre Julie understands and portrays it as part of his own life in order to get what he wants.

Jean's other significant narrative is a projected future in which he and Julie emigrate and become hotel proprietors. Jean tells this story immediately after he has had sex with Julie, since he knows it will be impossible for them to continue to live as mistress and servant in the Count's house. Jean tells Julie she will be

The mistress of the house; the jewel of the establishment. With your looks, and your style—why—we've got it made! Tremendous! You'll sit in the office like a queen, setting your slaves in motion at the push of a bell; and the guests will file past your throne and humbly leave their tribute on your table—you've no idea how people tremble when they're handed a bill.—I'll salt them all right, and you'll sugar them with your sweetest smile.—Oh! let's get away from here (*Takes a timetable from his pocket*) at once, by the next train! (Strindberg, *Julie* 87)

Jean projects a future that would be a clear social step down for Julie, but portrays it as an ascent to queendom. But while this story, like the story of the oat bin, is meant to spur action (in this case, departure), it is less successful. As the play goes on, this joint future seems less and less possible. Jean can assimilate languages and adapt to other genres, but Julie cannot. Julie needs Jean to sustain the rhetoric of romance:

JULIE. That's all very well. But Jean—you must give me courage.—Tell me you love me! Come and take me in your arms!

JEAN (*hesitating*). I'd like to—but I daren't! Not in this house, not again! I love you—of course I do—you don't doubt that, do you, Miss Julie? (Strindberg, *Julie* 87)

Jean is not immune to the pull of his own social station; the Count's house (and the presence of the Count's boots on stage) constantly reinstates the class status Jean would like to rise above. The house exerts pressure on Jean's language, rendering him temporarily unable to sustain the rhetoric of romance Julie requires in order to act. Jean's ability to assimilate and adapt genres and discourses for his own ends is countered by the fact that he is invested in class hierarchies that enforce his own class status and at least partially constrain his speech.

Miss Julie's narration is an imitation of Jean's, and is even more constrained by her class status and heredity. Julie tells Jean, "We'll run away. But first we'll talk, that's to say, I'll talk, for up to now, you've done all the talking. You've told me about your life, now I want to tell you about mine. Then we'll know all about each other before we set off together....Besides, everyone knows my secrets" (Strindberg, *Julie* 93). Julie proceeds to tell the story of her birth and childhood, including a commoner mother who had sex with the Count out of wedlock before marrying him; this same mother was a proponent of women's emancipation and raised Julie "to learn everything a boy has to learn" before committing adultery, getting the Count into debt, contracting a venereal disease, and burning their old house down (Strindberg, *Julie* 93-94). It is clear from the content of the story and from Strindberg's preface that Julie's story is supposed to explain her behavior and determine her fate; as Martin Puchner notes, "the backstory of Miss Julie...serves to justify her ultimate downfall" (Norton 155). If the absent Count is represented on the stage as a pair of boots, Julie's mother is present as a narrative that lingers after her death.

However, it is unclear what Julie hopes to accomplish within the play by telling her story, since she admits from the start that her background is known to everyone. Unlike Jean's oat-bin

tale of seduction, which plays on Julie's romanticized notions of class difference, it is unclear why telling the story of Julie's mother will enable her to run away with Jean. Perhaps the idea is that by telling the story of a mother who burned the house down, Julie will be able to leave the house—telling the story of the destruction of domestic space will free her from that space. But this explanation makes only limited sense, since in the same story, the house is rebuilt and Julie's mother is "forced to pay for her actions" (Strindberg, *Julie* 94). The story Julie tells is one of entrapment in the punitive, class-bound conventions of marriage and domesticity, not escape from them. The unclear relationship between Julie's narrative and her ability to leave with Jean, then, is part of the point: Julie does not fully realize the implications of her own story.

Nor does Miss Julie retain control over telling that story. The narrative becomes collaborative until it is finally taken over by Jean:

MISS JULIE. [...] Then mother advised [father] to ask for a loan from one of her old friends, a brick merchant who lived nearby. Father borrowed the money, but wasn't allowed to pay any interest, which surprised him. And so the house was rebuilt. (*Drinks again*) Do you know who burned it down?

JEAN. Your mother.

MISS JULIE. Do you know who the brick merchant was?

JEAN. Your mother's lover?

MISS JULIE. Do you know whose the money was?

JEAN. Wait a moment—no, I don't.

MISS JULIE. My mother's!

JEAN. The Count's too, then, or was there a settlement?

MISS JULIE. There was no settlement.—My mother had a little capital of her own, which she didn't want my father to administer. Therefore she invested it with her—friend.

JEAN. Who pinched it.

MISS JULIE. Exactly! He kept it. [...] I loved my father, but I sided with my mother, because I didn't know the real circumstances. She taught me how to hate men—I'm sure you've heard how she hated men—and I swore to her I'd never be a slave to any man.

JEAN. But then you got engaged to that lawyer.[...] So what shall we do?

MISS JULIE. Leave.

JEAN. And torment each other to death?

MISS JULIE. No. Enjoy ourselves, for a couple of days, a week, for as long as it lasts, and then—die.

JEAN. Die? That's daft! Better the hotel than that! (Strindberg, *Julie* 94-95)

The story of Julie's mother develops into a question-and-response format that emphasizes Jean's prior knowledge of most of the story, or at least his understanding of the conventions of sensational plotting. Jean then turns the conversation from the story of Julie's mother to the story of Julie's failed engagement—an event he witnessed and can speak about with authority. Julie emerges from the whole exercise with no better answer to the question “what should we do?” than the answer Jean has already provided—they should leave. Just as for the rich there is only one way out of the privy, the story of an upper-class fallen woman can only have one ending. Julie can imagine no future beyond the romantic elopement plot because for her, there isn't one. Jean rejects Julie's projected plot out of hand because it is not a future.

Jean's hotel plot *is* a future, but Julie is unable to adopt this story as her own. When Kristin (the cook who is also Jean's fiancée) returns and catches Jean and Julie preparing to run away, Julie resurrects Jean's hotel story with the desperate intention of convincing Kristin to go with them. As Miss Julie repeats the story, the stage directions instruct the actress to speed up her speech from “*tempo presto*” to “*tempo prestissimo*” (Strindberg, *Julie* 104, 105). Meanwhile, Jean, visible shaving in the wings, “*listens with satisfaction to the conversation and now and then nods approvingly*” (Strindberg, *Julie* 105). Julie is endorsing Jean's vision of the future, and is attempting to get Kristin to do the same; thus Jean's approval. But Julie can sustain neither Jean's narrative nor her tempo:

MISS JULIE. [...] And you—you'll sit like a queen in the kitchen.—You won't have to stand over the stove yourself, of course—and you'll be nicely and neatly dressed when you appear before the guests—and with your looks—I'm not flattering you, Kristin—one day you'll get hold of a husband, a rich Englishman, you'll see—they're so easy to (*slowing down*)—catch—and then we'll get rich—and build ourselves a villa on Lake Como—it rains a little there now and then, of course—but (*subsiding*) the sun must shine there too, sometimes— — —though it looks dark— — —(*pause*) — — —here—or somewhere else— — —

KRISTIN. Listen, Miss Julie, do you really believe all this? (Strindberg, *Julie* 105)

As Miss Julie works Kristin into the hotel narrative, it becomes increasingly improbable and fragmented until Julie loses the thread. Kristin, for her part, is clearly unconvinced. This failure to recruit Kristin to the hotel narrative is also another failure of narration as a resource Miss Julie can exploit in her own interest. Unable either to imagine a future based on her own past or to inhabit and convincingly parrot the future Jean projects, Julie “*Collapses on to the bench; puts her head on the table between her arms*” (Strindberg, *Julie* 105).

With the return of the Count, indicated by the ringing of the servants’ bell rather than by his physical presence, Jean once again feels the pressure of his social station, and Julie becomes totally dependent on Jean’s language in order to take any action. Both Jean and Julie see suicide as her only option, but neither party has the agency to make it happen until Julie talks herself into a hypnotic state: “I’m already asleep—it’s as if the whole room were full of smoke; you look like an iron stove, dressed all in black with a top hat—your eyes glow like coals in a dying fire—and your face is a white spot, like ashes” (Strindberg, *Julie* 109). Julie’s language renders the room obscured or insubstantial; indeed, in Sprinchorn’s translation the room is not full of smoke but “turned to smoke” (Norton 192). Stockenström attributes the room’s insubstantiality to the play’s genre contradiction; he notes that the sunlight in this scene falls on Jean rather than the room, and argues, “To allow the spectators to experience a tragic heroine torn between being in this world and out of this world at the same time, Strindberg needed to remove the focus on the realistic set.” It is true that Julie enters a hypnotic state between worlds in this scene the better to fulfill the tragic imperative of suicide. However, it is also true that in Julie’s description, Jean becomes a kitchen appliance who is nonetheless invested with the power of suggestion. He is then able to tell Julie to kill herself; he gives her the razor while she is in her hypnotic state and

tells her it is a broom, another common household object. What Julie actually does, then, is align Jean with the naturalistic set while simultaneously rendering that set non-naturalistically insubstantial. Jean is temporarily able to use his figurative merger with the house to order Miss Julie out of it.

This moment emphasizes domestic space more as a discourse than as a naturalistic set; the material becomes rhetorical, and retains its power to influence Miss Julie. This transformation is helped along by the lighting, which focuses on Jean even as Julie's speech aligns him with the kitchen. The broom-razor strengthens the impression. I would argue, then, that Julie's hypnotism does not allow tragedy to hold sway long enough for her to commit suicide so much as it intertwines tragedy and naturalism still further, with Jean as the focal point of the generic instability. This reading is supported by the fact that when Julie awakens from her trance-like state, she still cannot quite bring herself to commit suicide. She begs again, "Tell me to go, just one more time!" to which Jean responds, "No, I can't now either" (Strindberg, *Julie* 109). In aligning Jean with the kitchen Julie has aligned him with a domestic hierarchy in which she no longer has a place; however, that same domestic hierarchy robs him of authoritative speech. The material house, in fact, reasserts itself until the end of the play through the repeated ringing of the Count's bell which, Jean notes, is "not just a bell—there's somebody behind it" (Strindberg, *Julie* 110). It is the Count, not Jean, who can best deploy the house as an extension of his power. Jean's final line is spoken not as an extension of the house, but in spite of it:

Two loud rings on the bell.

JEAN (*cringes, then straightens himself up*). It's horrible! But there is no other way!—
Go!

(*Miss Julie walks resolutely out through the door* (Strindberg, *Julie* 110))

Jean is by no means free of the domestic hierarchy that enslaves him; presumably he is about to answer the Count's summons. But Jean is able, despite his instinctive cringing and the bell's

insistent assertion of Jean's class position, to straighten up and use a plot not his own in order to spur action. This plot, in which the dishonored upper-class woman must die, is of course a reinstatement of class and gender disparity. But Jean's ability to galvanize that plot in a moment when his environment is pushing him toward subservience shows that he is at least less trapped than Julie.

In the preface, Strindberg projects a future for Jean beyond the scope of the play in which Jean's dream of becoming the proprietor of a hotel is fulfilled (Strindberg, *Julie* 62). Jean's fantasy hotel is notable in its status as a place to live that does not fall within the confines of domesticity, that mire from which few of Strindberg's characters escape alive. Jean does not escape either, within the primary text of *Miss Julie*; it is in the afterlife Strindberg narrates for him that Jean emerges explicitly as a type who will get on in the world. But both the primary and secondary texts of *Miss Julie* suggest Jean's advantage over Julie has to do with his greater ability to make use of discourses and forms of storytelling outside his own social station and experience. Jean shares this ability with the narrators of realist novels, who assimilate and adapt an array of literary forms and discourses as they tell their stories.

Jean's narrator-like attributes facilitate Julie's death, though murder is not his intent. In other plays, particularly as Strindberg moves away from naturalism, the narrator characters become more deliberately vampiric and more invested in manipulating the realities of their fellow characters. Though Scandinavia does not have a strong vampire tradition in its folklore, it was not exempt from the international proliferation of vampires in paintings and literature during the nineteenth century.⁷³ Perhaps the most famous Scandinavian work of art with the vampire as

⁷³ In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries vampires become more of a presence in Scandinavian film, including Carl Dreyer's classic horror film *Vampyr* (1932) and the recent *Let the Right One In* (2008).

its subject is by Strindberg's friend Edvard Munch, who painted *The Vampire* in 1893-1894. The painting depicts a nude female with her face buried in the neck of a clothed man.⁷⁴ Vampires were also an established presence in gothic melodrama and fiction.⁷⁵ Walter Pater had also made da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* famous as a vampire who sucks time and history into herself.⁷⁶ Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), on the other hand, features an ancient vampire who attempts to enter modernity through mastery over language, legal knowledge, property ownership, and home invasion.⁷⁷ *Dracula*'s defeat is thematized on the level of form by the fact that once he arrives in England, he never narrates. There is no biographical evidence to suggest Strindberg read and was influenced by Stoker's novel; nonetheless, it is striking that the salient trait of Strindberg's vampires is their mastery over precisely the fields of knowledge *Dracula* pursues.⁷⁸ If Stoker's monster is an old-world evil poised to invade modernity and domestic space, Strindberg's

⁷⁴ Reidar Dittman points out that a vampiric interpretation of the painting, along with its title, was not Munch's original intent so much as an adaptation to "the prevailing misogynist interpretation of his works" (Blackwell 105). Stanislaw Przbyszewski, also Strindberg's friend, named the painting in an essay on Munch (Butler 149). Dittman also suggests *The Vampire* is indicative of a pivotal moment in Strindberg's influence on Munch's ideas about women (Blackwell 104).

⁷⁵ See Roxana Stuart's *Stage Blood: Vampires of the 19th-Century Stage*, which includes a list of dramatizations by country, though Strindberg is not represented. See "The Eroticism of Evil: the Vampire in Nineteenth-century Melodrama" by the same author in *Melodrama* for a more focused account. See also Erik Butler's *Metamorphoses of the Vampire in Literature and Film*.

⁷⁶ The relevant passage in Pater is:

All the thoughts and experience of the world have etched and moulded there... She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants; and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary; and all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes, and lives only in the delicacy with which it has moulded the changing lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands. (Pater 122-123).

Strindberg refers to Pater in *A Blue Book (En Blå Bok)*, which is only partially available in English under the title *Zones of the Spirit*. The full Swedish text is digitally available via Project Runeberg's scans of the Swedish publishing house Bonnier's 55-volume edition of Strindberg's collected works, *Samlade skrifter av August Strindberg*, originally published 1912-1921. The discussion of Pater (which does not focus on vampirism) is in the section titled "The Final Act (From the Renaissance Man's Life)," or "Sista akten (Ur Renässansmannens liv," (651).

⁷⁷ See chapter 2 of *Dracula* for *Dracula*'s desire for mastery over the English language, legal system, and home ownership in the modern metropolis of London.

⁷⁸ For Strindberg's known reading habits, see Hans Lindström's *Strindberg och böckerna*. The only existing article to put Strindberg's work in dialogue with *Dracula*, Jan Holmberg's "Remote Control: Contextualising a Modern Device," does not discuss Strindberg's use of vampires. Holmberg discusses Strindberg's novel *Alone* (1903), and compares the first-person narrator's use of telepathy and modern technologies of communication to Mina Murray's status as a database and telepathic communication device in *Dracula*.

characters are vampiric to the extent that they use modern tools—laws and debts, home ownership, communication technologies, manipulation of public opinion through newspapers—to drain others of life. Nor are Strindberg’s vampires literal bloodsuckers; language is their primary medium. If Stoker enlists modernity in the fight against Dracula, for Strindberg vampirism is a property of modernity itself.

Three years after the publication of *Dracula* Strindberg wrote two plays called *The Dance of Death* (1900), which he also considered titling “The Vampire” (Strindberg, “Letters” 670). I focus on the first play here due to its more explicit statements of how vampirism works in conjunction with narration by characters. *The Dance of Death* is often seen as unusually naturalistic among Strindberg’s post-Inferno writing (Robinson, *Cambridge* 100). Patricia Scott notes that both parts of the play “stand between the naturalistic plays Strindberg wrote in the 1880s and the extremely expressionistic *Ghost Sonata* and *The Dream Play*, using dramatic techniques from and focusing on the concerns of both periods” (68). *The Dance of Death* also posits a non-naturalistic relationship between narration and the body; as such, it is an excellent play for examining Strindberg’s vampiric stage narrators as he transitions from naturalism to the expressionism of his later work.

The main vampire character in *The Dance of Death* is Edgar, an old artillery captain. With his wife Alice, a former actress, the Captain lives in the tower of a granite fortress on an island. Within the fortress, which was once a prison, language is a script drained of energy through endless repetition. The Captain tells Alice, “Haven’t you noticed that we say the same thing every day? Just now, when you made the same old reply, ‘In this house, anyway,’ I should have answered with my old, ‘It’s not just my house’. But since I’ve already given the same answer five hundred times already, I yawned instead” (Strindberg, *Julie* 121). Edgar and Alice

live in a house of theatricalized stasis; to deviate from the domestic script is merely to remark upon it. Their language is as much of a prison as their household.

The house is temporarily somewhat revitalized by the arrival of a spectator who exposes the false basis of the script. The spectator is Kurt, Alice's cousin, for whom the Captain initially puts on a flimsy show of prosperous domesticity, offering food they do not have and faintly praising Alice as a wife.⁷⁹ If the Captain and Alice have already revealed the scripted status of their interactions, then Kurt's position as an active spectator reveals the script's basis in fictions about the past. For instance, the Captain talks as though Kurt is responsible for his miserable marriage to Alice:

CAPTAIN. Well, well, well, you talk a load of rubbish and forget things you don't want to remember. Don't take it amiss, now, I'm used to ordering people about and swearing at them, but you know me, you won't take offence, will you?

KURT. Not at all. But I didn't bring you together, quite the contrary.

CAPTAIN (*without letting himself be interrupted*). All the same, don't you think life's odd?

KURT. I suppose it is. [...] Lucky the man who has a wife to grow old with!

CAPTAIN. Lucky? Yes, I suppose so; after all, the children also flee the nest. You shouldn't have left yours like that.

KURT. But I didn't. They were taken from me.

CAPTAIN. Now, you mustn't get angry when I say that...

KURT. But it wasn't like that... (Strindberg, *Julie* 128-129)

It comes out over the course of the play that not only is the Captain's version of events false, the Captain himself is responsible for having Kurt's children taken away from him after his divorce. The Captain puts forward a version of the past that never happened, eliding his own villainy in the process. Later in the play, the Captain links the way he overwrites the past to his continued existence: "for me the art of living has meant blotting out the past. That's to say: cross out and go on!" (Strindberg, *Julie* 167). The captain crosses out and goes on by telling false stories about the

⁷⁹ I am indebted here to Eszter Szalczer, who also notes the theatricality of the Captain and Alice's domestic interactions, and identifies Kurt as a welcome spectator (Robinson, *Cambridge* 101-102).

past, substituting them for reality, and living as though that reality is true. In the process, he takes others' lives away, as he took Kurt's children.

The Captain is a vampiric narrator because the stories he tells sustain his own life at the expense of the lives of others. The metaphor he uses to describe this process yokes the authorial or editorial act of "crossing out" to the ability to sustain life—and, perhaps, theater—by "going on." Narration and authorship in this formulation are fundamentally parasitic rather than creative processes. This parasitic quality is visible in the play's non-naturalistic relationship between the act of narrating and the bodies of its characters. For instance, if the Captain sustains his own life through fictional versions of a past he adopts as reality, Kurt's differing description of that reality robs the Captain of his strength:

KURT. You don't seem very content with your existence?

CAPTAIN (*sighs*). Content? The day I die, I'll be content.

KURT (*gets up*) You don't know that.— — —But tell me, what are you two up to in this house? What's going on here? The walls smell of poison—one feels ill the moment one comes in. I'd rather leave now, if I hadn't promised Alice I'd stay. There are corpses under the floorboards; there's so much hatred here it's hard to breathe.

The Captain crumples up and stares vacantly ahead. (Strindberg, *Julie* 130)

It is after Kurt's description of the poisonous qualities of the house that the Captain first crumples up and becomes temporarily insensible. The Captain has these fits, during which "he can neither hear nor see," throughout the play, and Strindberg later provides a naturalistic explanation for them in the form of a bad heart (Strindberg, *Julie* 131). The walls are not literally poisoning the Captain, and there are no actual corpses under the floorboards. There is nonetheless an implicitly causal relationship between Kurt's description of the poisonous house and the Captain's collapse.

The Captain does not only invent new pasts and attempt to implement them as the basis of present reality; he also mines the pasts of others and adopts them as his own. In this he

resembles Strindberg's conception of authorship more than a narrator, though the two positions are linked in Strindberg's frequently autobiographical work. In the second scene, the morning after the Captain's conversation with Kurt, Kurt and Alice discuss whether the Captain actually wants to die:

KURT. I don't think he does, for just now, when he felt his life was slipping away, he clung tightly to mine and began to root around in my affairs, as if he wanted to creep into my skin and live my life.

ALICE. That's him precisely, a vampire— — —seizing hold of other people's destinies, sucking excitement out of other people's lives, ordering and arranging for others, because his own life is quite devoid of interest. (Strindberg, *Julie* 152)

The Captain sucks the life out of people not through their blood, but by rooting around in their affairs. Szalczer sees the Captain's "tendency to rewrite and dramatize his own past as well as other people's" as a "theatricalizing device... These are not simply lies, but the fictionalization of past events, a cruel game that creates occasion for further playacting. This is how the vampire appropriates other people's lives in order to sustain his own" (Robinson, *Cambridge* 102). Narration and authorship, in other words, are in the Captain's hands theatricalizing devices that bring him physical strength, and which at the same time generate the conflict and action of the play. But if the Captain's stories and Kurt and Alice's responses to them are the primary content of the play, Strindberg leaves us with the impression that Edgar's mode of operation is not ultimately effective. The house is still void of children and food, and the Captain still hovers on the edge of death.⁸⁰ Vampiric narration generates the domestic theater of Edgar and Alice's lives, but Edgar deploys that theater in the service of the domestic status quo.

While the Captain excels at verbally reassembling the past in order to benefit him in the present, he cannot deploy purely physical theater in the same way. The Captain's most serious

⁸⁰ In *The Dance of Death Part II*, Edgar rises to new heights of power and prosperity before he finally dies. The first play, however, is much more characterized by a sense of perpetual degeneration and re-invigoration that actually amounts to a theatricalized form of stasis.

collapse occurs during one of the play's most theatrical moments, when no one is speaking. At Kurt's request, the Captain dances to Johan Halverson's *Entry March of the Boyars* (1895) while Alice accompanies him on the piano. Dracula is also a Boyar, which suggests the possibility that the Captain collapses performing a theatrical, non-verbal version of the vampire role that normally sustains him. In any case, the Captain is physically performing the titular metaphor of the play when he collapses; what he intends as a show of strength and vigor becomes instead an acute reminder of mortality. Sarah Webster Goodwin notes that by the nineteenth century, the dance of death is a kitsch presence in many forms of art, and in many households: "The nineteenth-century dance of death is a bourgeois motif which also embodies an anti-bourgeois esthetic" (22). Regarding Strindberg's use of the dance of death, Goodwin writes,

What Strindberg knows is that the dance of death is the great cliché about clichés: using undifferentiated language to speak of private experience, we stare death in the face. [...] The grinning corpse [...] mocks us with the indifference of indifference, and invites us over the threshold into a free-fall where no language applies because no language adheres, and words are only ironies. Death in the *dans macabre* exposes the fiction of personal identity, even as it grants the occasion for life's parade. (12)

We might see Edgar's dance, then, as harmful to him because as a performance it is reflexive and self-negating. It crosses out, but does not go on. The play's fluid relationship between the metaphorical and the physical remains intact, in that Edgar falls into a state resembling death while performing a figural dance of death. But this physical performance, unlike Edgar's narrated speeches, does not produce its intended effect. Dance lends itself well to the play's slippage between the metaphorical and the material, but not to vampirism, which for the Captain relies on the ability to narrate, or to incorporate himself into the narratives of other people's lives. As much as their domestic script forms part of the structure of Edgar and Alice's prison, language is the most powerful tool in Edgar's arsenal.

The Captain's policy of crossing out and going on is his primary weapon in the out-and-out domestic warfare that develops in the play's later scenes. He claims at various points to have filed for divorce, to intend to marry Kurt's ex-wife, to have been given a clean bill of health, and to have arranged for Kurt's son to be transferred to the island as his subordinate; subsequently, Edgar denies all knowledge of these claims before admitting they were lies. For her part, Alice rises to new heights of theatricality, with Kurt in tow: she claims Edgar has beaten her and pushed her into the sea, arranges for him to be arrested, and seduces Kurt by donning the laurel wreaths of her aborted acting career, taking down her hair, and unbuttoning her blouse (Strindberg, *Julie* 162). Kurt "*rushes over to her, seizes her in his arms, lifts her high in the air, and bites her throat, so that she screams*" (Strindberg, *Julie* 162). The bite is repeated when Kurt and Alice kiss again in the following scene. Kurt has effectively been seduced into a physical performance of Edgar's verbal vampirism. But while this seduction scene is one of the play's most dramatic moments, Kurt lacks all of the qualities that make Edgar an effective vampire. The purpose of infecting Kurt with a version of the Captain's vampirism is mostly to show the infectiousness: if the walls are poison, so are the people. After a series of revelations about Alice's character, including a scene of foot-kissing sadomasochism reminiscent of Miss Julie's reported treatment of her fiancée, and a farcical scene of violence in which Alice and Edgar vie explicitly for Kurt's allegiance, Kurt becomes so horrified by both Edgar and Alice that he flees altogether. Kurt's short-lived physical vampirism (which still never quite extends to the actual sucking of blood) is theatrically effective, but that effectiveness does not ultimately prove useful to him within the world of the play.

What the seduction scene and the confrontation that leads to Kurt's flight have in common is that they are moments when narratives Alice constructs erupt into physical performances. Alice delivers the following speech during her seduction of Kurt:

Wait for it? Until he's taken your son from you? Look at my grey hair...yes, and feel how thick it still is too!...He intends to remarry, so I'm free—to do the same!—I am free! And in ten minutes he'll be sitting down there, under arrest; down there (*stamps on the floor*), down there...and I'll dance on his head, I'll dance the 'Entry of the Boyars'...(She performs a few dance steps with her hands on her hips) Ha, ha, ha, ha! And I'll play the piano so he hears it! (*Hammers on the keys*) Oh, the tower will open its gates, and the sentry with the drawn sword will no longer stand guard over me, but over him...Meli-tam-tam-ta, meli-ta-lia-lay! Him, him, him, over him! (Strindberg, *Julie* 161-162)

The scene Alice narrates for Edgar contains elements of a demonic one-woman melodrama, complete with dancing, singing, and speech punctuated by piano chords. More than that, she depicts these theatrical tools as weapons in her war against Edgar. Alice's transformation of narrated speech into theatrical violence is still more apparent in her confrontation with Edgar:

ALICE. [...] Watch now, Kurt, I'm going to finish him off. This'll do for him!— — — First I load—I know the drill, you see, the famous rifle-manual that didn't even sell five thousand copies— — —then I take aim: fire! (*She aims with the parasol.*) How is your new wife? That young, beautiful, unknown girl? You don't know. But I know how my lover is! (*Puts her arms around Kurt's neck and kisses him; he pushes her away*) He's fine, but still a little shy. — — —You swine, I never loved you, you were too vain to be jealous, you never saw how I led you by the nose!
The Captain draws his sabre and rushes at her, hewing wildly, but only succeeds in hitting the furniture. (Strindberg, *Julie* 170)

Alice figures her own words as a loaded gun aimed at killing the Captain, though she also illustrates with a prop in the form of her parasol. She succeeds in producing physical violence, though only the furniture is harmed. Unlike Edgar, Alice can turn narrated scenarios into acted drama without physically collapsing.

The effectiveness of Alice's sensational theatricality is short-lived, however; when Kurt runs out on her, she declares him a "wretch and hypocrite" and turns back to Edgar, who is at

least “a man” (Strindberg, *Julie* 171). When Edgar reveals that he lied about the doctor’s prognosis that he could live for many years, Alice panics because she believes the arrest she arranged will still be carried out. Edgar pronounces, “There’s nothing that can’t be put right, as long as you cross it out and go on” (Strindberg, *Julie* 171). Once the apparent danger of arrest has passed, and Alice has agreed to help Edgar clean up the house, he pronounces, “So you didn’t escape this time. But you didn’t get me put away either! (*Alice is amazed*) Oh, I knew you wanted to have me put in prison; but I’ll cross that out!” (Strindberg, *Julie* 173). While Alice occupies much of the audience’s attention with her antics during the latter part of the play, she is outmaneuvered by Edgar, who is crossing out infidelities and betrayals left and right. In crossing out the parts of the preceding action that would make it impossible to continue cohabitating, Edgar returns them to a domestic status quo that Alice calls “everlasting hell” (Strindberg, *Julie* 173). Edgar raises the possibility of release in death—“Perhaps when death comes, life begins”—but death never comes (Strindberg, *Julie* 173).⁸¹ Within the world of the play, Edgar’s narration is more powerful than Alice’s sensational theatricality. This is not to say that Alice does not narrate, or Edgar is not an actor of sorts; Edgar and Alice are too bound up in each other’s daily lives and machinations for these modes to be clearly separable. The value in distinguishing between Edgar’s tendencies toward narrative erasure versus Alice’s tendencies toward theatrical histrionics lies in the fact that one form is more effective than the other within the world of the play. The greater effectiveness of crossing out and going on suggests Strindberg’s sense of vampiric narration as the mode more suited to maneuvering in the modern world.

At the same time, Edgar’s narrated erasure of anything that could permanently rupture his domestic situation is also what drains domesticity of vitality. Edgar and Alice’s final scene, after

⁸¹ Edgar does die in Part II; however, Alice finds herself tied to him even after his death.

Kurt's departure, makes it clear that the "go on" part of "cross out and go on" does not indicate progression, but continuation. In his last speech, Edgar extends his philosophy to domesticity and modern life more generally:

CAPTAIN. [...] How banal life is nowadays! In the old days one used to fight; now one merely shakes a fist.—I'm pretty sure that in three months we'll be celebrating our silver wedding...with Kurt as best man. [...] But don't you remember Adolf's silver wedding...that fellow in the Rifles? The bride had to wear her wedding ring on her right hand because in a tender moment the bridegroom had cut off her ring finger with a billhook. (*Alice holds her handkerchief to her mouth to stifle a laugh*) Are you crying?—No, I believe you're laughing!—Yes, child, we laugh and we cry! Which is more proper? Don't ask me!— — —The other day I read in the paper that a man had been divorced seven times, consequently he'd married seven times as well...Finally, at the age of ninety, he ran off and remarried his first wife. There's love for you!— — —I've never been able to figure out whether life is serious or just a joke. When it's a joke it can be most painful, when it's serious it can be quite tranquil and pleasant.— — —And then, when you finally take it seriously, along comes someone and makes a fool of you. Like Kurt.— — —Do you want to celebrate our silver wedding? (*Alice says nothing*) Say yes now.—They'll laugh at us, but what does that matter? We'll laugh, too. Or be serious, whichever seems best!

ALICE. All right!

CAPTAIN (*seriously*). So, our silver wedding!— — —(*Gets up*) Cross out and go on!— All right then, let's go on!

Curtain. (Strindberg, *Julie* 174)

When the Captain says "in three months we'll be celebrating our silver wedding," he projects a future in which he is not dead, and he and Alice are still married. When he predicts Kurt will be their best man, Edgar crosses out Kurt's recent flight, or at least dismisses it as temporary. By telling the stories of the bride whose ring finger was cut off with a billhook and the man who was divorced seven times, Edgar suggests the domestic warfare that constitutes much of the play is a normal aspect of marriages everywhere. Alice's laughter tells him that his narrative is succeeding. The whole normalizing, universalizing speech, including Edgar's inconclusive ruminations on whether life is serious or a joke, leads up to the attempt to get Alice to agree to the projected silver wedding celebration. Though Alice has few if any other options than to

continue to live with Edgar at this point, it is important to him that she verbally consents. Alice's consent turns Edgar's projected account of their silver wedding into a mutually agreed-upon future, even though that future is a reaffirmation of—and even a pledge to sustain—the domestic stasis that both Alice and Edgar have equated with hell at various points during the play. Alice's agreement gives the narrative power even as it places Alice herself in a position of domestic subservience—for her agreement also amounts to an agreement to serve as Edgar's nurse, and the house is still void of servants.

The Dance of Death is a portrait not only of domestic hell, but also of the relations between that hell and the theatrical and narrative structures employed to resist and sustain it. Alice acts out the stories she constructs. Those stories tend to be in the service of escape, whether by running away with Kurt or by causing Edgar's death. But Alice's washed-up acting career corresponds to the type of sensational acting she performs; she can galvanize dramatic scenes, but those scenes do not lead to substantive change. The inefficacy of Alice's domestic drama is largely due to Edgar's narration-based “cross out and go on” strategy, which proves capable of containing Alice's theatrical resistance. The form of narration that sustains domesticity (and the vampiric Captain) perpetuates itself through systematic erasure of anything that threatens its continuance. This erasure is a form of vampirism that drains the vitality from the marriages and households that nonetheless remain loci of social status and personal relationships. Vampiric narration is not a tool that can move us out of the domestic warfare that constitutes reality because it is the formal structure sustaining that reality, with our consent.

Making this claim about the relationship between narration and domesticity on a stage denaturalizes the narrator character's alignment with the fabric of reality, since that character does not constitute the audience's primary access to that reality. Moreover, Edgar's explicit

explanation of his “cross out and go on” philosophy shows that the play does not proceed on the same formal principles as Edgar’s narration. Alice and Edgar’s reconciliation does not necessarily cross out the prior events of the play for the audience; at the same time, the audience may well share Edgar’s question about whether life (and perhaps the play) is serious or a joke, as Strindberg provides no answer. Readings that suggest Alice and Edgar’s reconciliation resolves the problems posited by the play implicitly cast the play itself as crossing out and going on.⁸² The play at least partially invites such a reading with the shared laughter and agreed-upon future with which it concludes. Such a reading raises the possibility of marshalling the narrative erasure of truth that characterizes domestic and social life in order to keep the peace, rather than to destroy people’s lives. At the same time, the future the play projects is little more than an eternal present, poised on the verge of annihilation without actual change. As such, it is difficult to see the ending as unequivocally redeeming the very narrative strategies that constitute Edgar’s vampirism. A better reading sees Edgar and Alice’s reconciliation as re-instantiating the problems it gestures toward resolving, perhaps with more understanding of the forms we use to perpetuate them, and certainly with more humor.

The protagonist of *Black Banners*, a roman à clef written in 1904 and published in 1907, is a vampiric writer; however, the novel ultimately arrives at a model of character narration that is not vampiric. The world of the novel and its realistic style are similar to *The Red Room*; the characters occupy positions in literary, artistic, and professional life, all of which are tainted by

⁸² Susan Brantly reads the play as a narrative of “conversion and rebirth” followed by resignation; following Sprinchorn and Lindström, Brantly notes, “the Captain has, like Job, made a spiritual spiral upward” (*Strindberg’s Dramaturgy* 172). The fact that the conversion and resignation take the same form as the Captain’s villainy—combined with the fact that Strindberg wrote a sequel in which Edgar attains new heights of vampirism—should make us question this conclusion. Ross Shideler notes the ubiquity of the “conversion drama” reading, “in which the couple unite at the end and look forward to a better life,” but reads the play’s ending instead as a reinstatement of patriarchal order in which “Edgar and Alice reach a bittersweet acceptance of their home and marriage as a prison for the comically insane” (86, 87).

corruption. At the center of this corruption is Zachris, a writer who has infiltrated nearly every aspect of Stockholm society. His activities consist of various forms of “vampirizing,” mostly centered on the literary world (Strindberg, “Banners” 198). Zachris is at one point in the novel called “Cinnober”; the name, which refers to an E.T.A. Hoffman fairy story, is one Strindberg explicitly associates with vampirism in *A Blue Book*, the four-volume work Strindberg wrote partly as a commentary on *Black Banners* (Strindberg, “Banners” 176). Zachris has many victims, most notably his wife, Jenny: “The mere contact with his children and wife had restored his vitality and strength, and he could already imagine himself at his desk writing his novel, wreaking vengeance and drawing strength out of her, viewing her with hostility and nastiness” (Strindberg, “Banners” 166). For Zachris, novel writing is a vampiric process that draws physical strength out of his wife, who eventually dies. Late in the novel, Strindberg uses free indirect discourse to express Zachris’s thoughts on the writing process; Zachris decides “to write her [Jenny] out of himself...It would be the beginning of a new life, while erasing the old one” (Strindberg, “Banners” 146). The idea that Zachris will write himself a new life to erase the old one resembles Edgar’s “cross out and go on” philosophy, and the free indirect discourse temporarily aligns this process with the novel’s narration.

Zachris’s alignment with the narration is short-lived, however, and never goes beyond the ontological no-man’s-land of free indirect discourse. In an essay on Strindberg’s interest in theosophy, Eszter Szalczer draws on the novel’s depiction of Zachris in order to argue that “Strindberg took the metaphor [of the vampire] and applied it to the nature of the writer; he problematized the authorial self as a hollow shell that continuously forms itself into various shapes by devouring others’ selves, acting out others’ roles” (Houe, Rossel, and Stockenström 102). This argument is true insofar as it applies to Zachris, who resembles Strindberg in the way

he draws from his marital life for his writing. But Zachris is not the only writer in *Black Banners*; nor is he the writer most closely aligned with the novel's narration. In *Black Banners*, as in *The Red Room*, Strindberg's third-person narrator frequently drops out of the picture for extended periods during which the characters' dialogue carries the story. In the latter part of the novel, Strindberg's narrator disappears almost entirely, returning primarily at the beginnings of chapters, or in chapters featuring Zachris. This structure distances Zachris from the narration and from narrative authority. Though Zachris is described as having a "magic mouth," the voice (or, more accurately, voices) of the novel never comes from that mouth (Strindberg, "Banners" 22).

The bulk of the narration shifts, instead, to the residents of the cloister, a for-men-only retreat from the tribulations of social and domestic life.⁸³ The cloister is located outside of the city in the house of Count Max; it is an "intellectual experiment," and anyone admitted there must abide by the "regimen of the house" (Strindberg, "Banners" 98, 90). This regimen involves clean living and a "spiritual diet" that allows the inhabitants to avoid the ugliness of the outside world, including the "ugly memories" of their own lives (Strindberg, "Banners" 95). Upon arriving at the house, guests purge the poison of the outside world through storytelling. The writer Falkenström, whose cynicism and despair lead Eric O. Johannesson to compare him to Falander, undergoes this treatment (Johannesson 238). Count Max "sat beside the 'patient' and asked him to tell his story.[...] Count Max was receptive, acted sympathetic, threw in a question here and there, gave fresh suggestions, and had Falkenström go over certain points again in order to thoroughly rid him of the contents of the abscess" (Strindberg, "Banners" 95). Falkenström's

⁸³ These tribulations include, for instance, having one's fiancé and livelihood stolen by Zachris, and having one's wife and children stolen by lesbians. The novel's lesbians, leaders in the women's movement, are also depicted as vampires. The women of *Black Banners* are never allowed to narrate, though Hanna Paj, leader of the local women's movement, does have some scenes of steamrolling oratory; moreover, "By knowing everybody's secrets, she appeared almost omniscient" (Strindberg, "Banners" 80). One can be a vampire in Strindberg's work without being a narrator; the question this novel is more concerned with is whether (and how) one can be a writer or narrator without being a vampire.

rehabilitation through storytelling resembles Zachris's attempt to write the poison of his marriage out of him in order to erase the past, only here the purgative is effective. Strindberg suggests this effectiveness is due to Count Max's mode of listening: "During Falkenström's long tirade, Max had absorbed all of his misery, diverted some of it and returned some of it, cleansed through a filter, so that when Falkenström had finished, there was little of his enormous sorrow left" (Strindberg, "Banners" 96). Strindberg's narration also functions as a filter for the reader, who does not have direct access to Falkenström's story. (The reader is also already familiar with the events of this story, since they comprise part of the plot of the novel.) Only after cloister residents are purified does Strindberg allow them to carry the novel's narration.

The cloister residents spend their time in spiritual and alchemical contemplation, and their narration takes the form of written dialogues, which they recite to each other and publish in their own journal.⁸⁴ In the cloister chapters the characters' speech tends to be tagless, even in scenes featuring multiple speakers, whereas in the Zachris chapters dialogue is accompanied by conventional third-person tags. The first spoken version of a written dialogue, recited by Count Max to Kilo the bookseller, is a meditation on storytelling and its relationship to memory and identity. Max tells the story of a hunter and egg collector who has, in turn, told Max the story of an incident in which he stole a bird's nest. Twenty years after telling Max the story, the hunter denies all memory of the incident. Max reflects, "Sometimes I've thought that he read that story or heard it from someone else and adapted it for his own use that long winter evening in order to be interesting, and later was ashamed [...] Maybe, I tell myself further, I was the first person to whom he told the story, and in telling it he had liberated himself so completely from a painful

⁸⁴ Barbro Ståhle Sjönell notes, "Before Strindberg began *Svarta fanor* [*Black Banners*], he wrote several fugues which he collected under the title 'Fugor med preludier' (Fugues with Preludes), and sought to publish. They were later slotted into *Svarta fanor* as dialogues in the cloister sections" (Robinson, "Genre" 55). I do not see the fact that the dialogues were composed for publication in another context as a barrier to examining their impact on the form of the novel, particularly since much of the cloister section (and *Black Banners* as a whole) is about the ways in which people can be poisoned, vampirized, or purified through narration.

remembrance that it was erased from his memory” (Strindberg, “Banners” 91). Max follows this story with an incident from his own life in which he was given a whipping for failing to do his homework; this incident has been reported to Max by someone else, but Max has no memory of it. Max adds, “But since I considered the story to be in keeping with my other experiences, I often told the story myself later, as proof of my bad luck.[...] I’ve begun to wonder if the narrator confused me in his memory with someone else. If so, the matter becomes even more interesting, because then I’ve spun the thread of another life into my life’s fabric, and that is certainly not so very unusual” (Strindberg, “Banners” 91, 92). The act of narrating can obliterate a story from the narrator’s memory, implant it into the memory of the narratee, and/or become part of the narratee’s life despite belonging to the life of somebody else. Such narrating practices are common to Strindberg’s vampire characters; however, in Count Max’s dialogue these types of narration are not vampiric. Max is careful to note that the hunter has little to gain from denying the bird’s nest story; likewise, Max hurts no one by adopting the whipping story as his own. The tone of the dialogue is neutral, accepting of and interested in the way the act of narrating can make one life part of another. There is no *theft* of life in this process as Max describes it.

Subsequent cloister dialogues, such as Kilo’s treatise on the nature of truth, Count Max’s “Matter as Living Essence,” and Falkenström’s “duel with himself” about religion, are announced by the extradiegetic narrator, and are typographically separated from the other text, but are not presented in quotation marks (Strindberg, “Banners” 129, 135). Instead, quotation marks are used for reported speech within the characters’ respective dialogues. As cloister dwellers become more spiritually advanced, they more closely resemble extradiegetic narrators on the level of typography and punctuation.⁸⁵ The cloister residents—primarily Count Max and

⁸⁵ The typography and punctuation of Strindberg’s published works is idiosyncratic at the best of times, and there are variations between Weaver’s English translation and previous Swedish editions. In the Project Runeberg scans

Kilo, who have been there the longest—also develop some of the telepathic powers of omniscient narrators. Max has “developed certain skills that the average persons would call supernatural” (Strindberg, “Banners” 95). We see these skills best exercised when Max filters the poison out of Falkenström’s story. Kilo has become actively telepathic; he predicts Falkenström’s arrival at the cloister and communicates psychically with Jenny, Zachris’s wife, in order to redeem her on her deathbed. Max and Kilo use their telepathic powers for good, in contrast with Falander’s sinister parody of telepathy in *The Red Room*. I do not propose that all instances of character telepathy indicate alignment with narration; however, the connection should not be ignored in a novel where characters develop telepathy concurrently with a tendency to take over the novel’s narration.

Strindberg depicts the cloister as a healing retreat from the world, but he does not believe the cloister is a solution to the world’s corruption; nor does the cloister provide its inhabitants with a viable way of living outside its walls. One day the inhabitants leave the cloister for a walk in the forest, and they see a steamer bearing Jenny’s coffin, complete with black-clad mourners. The sight introduces Zachris into their conversation, and it is only with difficulty that the men of the cloister eradicate him in order to restore peace to their thoughts and speech. Falkenström in particular “had relapsed into his savage ways and forgotten all of the spiritual exercises once outside the cloister walls” (Strindberg, “Banners” 187). Cloister residents can enact change in the outside world, as evidenced by Kilo’s remote purification of Jenny, but they seem unable to do so while participating actively in society. Moreover, it is unclear whether the change they can enact remotely extends beyond purification in preparation for death—another form of leaving society behind.

of the posthumous edition of Strindberg’s work, for instance, m-dashes are used in place of quotation marks. The points at which the m-dashes are and are not used to indicate character dialogue are consistent with Weaver’s English text, however.

Strindberg presents this problem on the level of form by ending the novel neither in the voice of his third-person narrator nor in the voice of a cloister man. Instead the novel ends with a letter from Smartman, Zachris's erstwhile companion in corruption. The letter is not quite a suicide note, since Smartman simply "fell from a chair one day and was dead," but it is written to Smartman's son in anticipation of death, and is found in his pocket (Strindberg, "Banners" 199). The letter contains expressions of despair as well as hope, though Smartman sees no place for himself in the world as it moves forward. The letter also reflects on the purpose of authorship: "As a writer, you have the right to play with ideas, experiment with perspectives, test opinions, all without tying yourself down because freedom is the poet's lifeblood. Therefore, don't stay in any school of thought or go in any one direction; the subject you choose will give itself form, and the liberal arts do not tolerate any laws, but rather make their own" (Strindberg, "Banners" 201). Such experimentation with perspectives and ideas is of course what Strindberg has done in the novel, and Smartman's advice to his son bears the stamp of Strindberg's own opinion, though it is not written in his narrator's voice. The passage, which suggests that all and none of the characters' perspectives are Strindberg's, is the novel's closest approach to an explanation of its own form.

Despite claiming not to give advice, Smartman's letter contains quite a bit of concrete counsel about how to live in the world. Samples of this advice include: "You should work for your country without forgetting that you are a citizen of the world [...] You should serve the class you were born into. [...] Don't avoid marriage, but don't stay in it if it demeans you" (Strindberg, "Banners" 200-201). This advice comes not from a cloister man, but from a man who, like Zachris, has lived as a modern vampire, preying upon his fellow citizens. But Smartman's letter, and thus the narration that ends the novel, is not vampiric. The novel ends not

in the voice of a vampire, but that of a dead man, and it is no coincidence that he is the only narrator to provide concrete advice for how to live non-vampirically in the world beyond the cloister walls. The novel's non-vampiric modes of narration by characters require leaving the world behind. If vampiric narration sustains the life of the narrator at the expense of others, non-vampiric narrators speak and write from states of mind approaching death.

In his preface to *Black Banners*, Strindberg calls the book an “epic, from which themes and variations for the theater and novels will be drawn” (Strindberg, “Banners” 4). Though some of the works Strindberg drafted based on *Black Banners* never fully materialized, he did draw from the novel for what became his most famous chamber play, *The Ghost Sonata*. A version of the “ghost supper” that begins *Black Banners* becomes a pivotal scene in the play, for instance. Regarding the version of the ghost supper that appears in *Black Banners*, Johannesson writes, “The words exchanged among the guests have assumed concrete physical form” (234). Johannesson’s statement is not literally true, though it is figuratively true. This sort of slippage between language and material reality is also present, I have shown, in *The Dance of Death*; it is endemic to Strindberg’s work as he moves away from naturalism. But never in *The Dance of Death*, and rarely in *Black Banners*, do we get the sense that material reality itself might disappear or become transformed. The set in *The Dance of Death* remains firmly in place regardless of whether Edgar, Alice, and Kurt refer to it as a house, a fortress, or a prison. The cloister dialogues in *Black Banners* bestow telepathic abilities on their narrators, allowing them in some respects to transcend material realities, but they mostly do not change those realities in the world of the novel. The single alchemical cloister dialogue *does* suggest the possibility of

transforming material reality—as alchemy must—though again it is only within the cloister walls that such experimentation is possible.

The Ghost Sonata follows through on the possibility of transforming reality, if only to transcend or demolish it. Onstage narration has the power to destroy not only the characters, but the domestic reality and theatrical set they inhabit. Strindberg sees this destruction as an escape from a material world in which the houses we want structure the stories we tell. The stories we tell, in turn, all feed into myths about domesticity that are neither true nor meaningful, though they remain powerful. To narrate in the service of gaining access to or power over domestic space is to narrate as a vampire. To extricate oneself from this poisonous space is to demolish the fictions that support it, unmooring oneself from mortal life, and from a world that can be narrated, in the process.

The Ghost Sonata begins with the façade of a modern apartment building, with many of its inhabitants visible in the windows and doorways.⁸⁶ This opening signals an external perspective on domestic life, in contrast to the interiors that had become familiar settings in many realist plays. The opening also aligns the audience's perspective with that of the Student, a character who can see the world of the dead, though his vision does not penetrate the world behind the house's façade. A Milkmaid enters and takes a drink at the fountain, followed shortly by the Student. The Student asks her to give him some water and to bathe his swollen eyes for him with a handkerchief—he has been out all night “binding up wounds and tending the injured. I was there, you see, yesterday evening, when the house collapsed” (Strindberg, *Julie* 252). Strindberg introduces the Student as a hero, and also introduces a collapsing house in seeming counterpoint to the modern building visible on the stage. The Student's exchange with the

⁸⁶ *The Ghost Sonata* was first staged by Strindberg's Intimate Theatre in Stockholm, 1908, but was not staged effectively until Otto Falckenberg's 1914 Munich production and, more famously, Max Reinhardt's 1916 Berlin production, both after Strindberg's death (Marker and Marker 119, 121, 129).

Milkmaid is interrupted, for the audience, by the Old Man, who sits in a wheelchair reading a newspaper: “OLD MAN (*to himself*). Who is he talking to?—I can’t see anyone!—Is he mad?” (Strindberg, *Julie* 252). The Old Man’s speech to himself establishes for the audience that while they and the Student can see (and, in the case of the Student, touch) the Milkmaid, the Old Man cannot. The Old Man identifies the Student as a “Sunday child,” one who “can see what others can’t” (Strindberg, *Julie* 257). By staging the Milkmaid as a fully embodied character, yet having the Old Man announce her invisibility, Strindberg grants the audience as well as the Student access to seeing beyond the material world of the other characters.

Running counter to the Student’s ability to see is the Old Man’s ability to speak. Like Edgar and Zachris, the Old Man substitutes his own narratives of past events for what really happened in order to get what he wants:

OLD MAN. You’ve often heard my name mentioned in your family?

STUDENT. Yes!

OLD MAN. And with a certain animosity, perhaps? (*The STUDENT remains silent*) Yes, I can imagine!—I suppose they said I ruined your father?—People who’ve ruined themselves with idiotic speculations always put their ruin down to the one person they couldn’t fool. (*Pause*) The fact is, your father swindled me out of 17,000 crowns, all my savings at the time.

STUDENT. It’s strange how a story can be told in two such different ways.

OLD MAN. You surely don’t think I’m lying, do you?

STUDENT. What am I to think? My father didn’t tell lies!

OLD MAN. That’s true, a father never lies...I’m a father, too, though, so...

STUDENT. What are you driving at?

OLD MAN. I saved your father from destitution, and he rewarded me with all the terrible hatred that a debt of gratitude breeds...he taught his family to speak ill of me.

STUDENT. Perhaps you made him ungrateful by poisoning your help with needless humiliations.

OLD MAN. All help is humiliating, young man.

STUDENT. What do you want of me?

OLD MAN. I’m not after the money; if you would just do me some small favours, though, I’d be well paid. (Strindberg, *Julie* 254)

The Old Man changes the version of the past known to the Student, in which Hummel ruined his father, to a story in which the Student’s father ruined Hummel. The Student immediately

understands that the Old Man's story does not match up with his father's version, and is not at first inclined to believe the Old Man. But as Hummel speaks, his story gains more of a foothold. When the Student asks what the Old Man wants of him, he opens up the door to the idea that the Old Man has some kind of claim on his help, based on a version of past events that no longer seems certain. Later in the play, the Student says, "I don't want to be ungrateful... This man once saved my father, and now he's only asking a small favour in return..." (Strindberg, *Julie* 263). The Old Man's story has effectively replaced the Student's father's version of events, and has convinced the Student to serve the Old Man. At stake in whether or not the Student endorses the Old Man's version of the past is a debt that will affect the Student's present course of action.

The Old Man does not merely invent a past for the Student in order to claim his gratitude, but also lays claim to the story of the Student's heroism in order to gain power for himself. Hummel explains, "I want you to be happy, rich and renowned. Your debut yesterday as the brave rescuer will bring you fame tomorrow, and then your name will be worth a great deal" (Strindberg, *Julie* 255). The Old Man plans to trade on the future value of the Student's name, based on the story of his heroism. The Old Man has not left the circulation of this story to chance: when his servant, Johansson, returns from an errand, the Old Man's dialogue reveals that he has planned to trade on the Student's fame from the beginning: "Six o'clock this evening? That's good!—Special edition?—With his full name! Arkenholz, a student, born...parents...excellent" (Strindberg, *Julie* 261). The Student's heroism has value primarily insofar as it circulates publicly in the form of a narrative. Hummel makes himself the structuring and disseminating force behind the publicly circulated story of the Student's life.

What Hummel hopes to gain by trading on the story of the Student's heroism is entry into and power over the affluent looking household on the stage. The house contains Hummel's

illegitimate daughter, and he hopes to marry her to the Student. The Student also wants to enter the house, for similar if more romantically framed reasons:

OLD MAN. Do you see that house?

STUDENT. Yes, I've seen it before...I walked past here yesterday, when the sun was shining on the windows—and imagining all the beauty and luxury inside, I said to my companion: 'Fancy having an apartment there, on the fourth floor, a beautiful young wife, two pretty little children, and a private income of 20,000 a year...'

OLD MAN. Did you indeed? Did you, now? Well, there you are. I also love this house...

STUDENT. Do you speculate in houses?

OLD MAN. Mm—yes. But not the way you mean... (Strindberg, *Julie* 255)

The house, viewed from the outside, is the Student's ideal of affluent domesticity. Hummel does not clarify in what way he speculates in houses, but Johansson later tells the Student,

He wants power...All day long he rides around in his chariot like the god Thor...he looks at houses, pulls them down, founds new streets, and builds over squares; but he breaks into houses, too, creeps in through the window, ravages people's lives, kills his enemies and never forgives.[...] Sowing a little word here, removing a stone at a time there, until the house collapses...figuratively speaking, of course. (Strindberg, *Julie* 262, 263)

While both the Student and Hummel seek entry into the house, the Student sees it as a bourgeois dream fulfilled, whereas Hummel sees houses less romantically as a source of power. But Hummel's means to power destroys the houses and people he uses to gain it; he plants "little words" and removes stones which, over time, bring houses down. The conflation of words and stones suggests a relationship between language and the material world in which planting a word and removing a stone are part of the same destructive process.

This collapse of domestic structures is in one sense figurative, as Johansson claims, but the qualification is also a joke on Strindberg's part, since the figurative impacts the material throughout *The Ghost Sonata*. Anna Westerståhl Stenport notes the close relationship between the metaphorical and the material in the chamber plays, and writes that wild real estate speculation in Stockholm during the 1890s "fueled low-quality building practices that in some cases made newly constructed apartment buildings uninhabitable behind their ostensibly solid,

stone-clad exteriors, and even potentially lethal due to the risk of collapse” (40). In such a context, the Old Man’s role in inducing the collapse of houses also paints him as a character who exploits the structural instabilities already present in domestic life. Moreover, the Intimate Theatre “was located in the basement of precisely such a new apartment building upon which Strindberg focused his investigation. The stage room thus came to function, arguably for the first time in modern European drama, not only as an integral part of the dramatic action but also as a formal necessity” (Stenport 38). Strindberg did not write the chamber plays with the specific space that became the Intimate Theatre in mind; he had anticipated a theater considerably larger than the 161-spectator facility actor-manager August Falck acquired (Marker and Marker 118). The Intimate Theatre’s location must nonetheless have added another rich layer to the conflation of domestic and theatrical space that is already present in *The Ghost Sonata*, since the domestic collapses thematized on the stage could just as easily refer to the structure of the building containing the theater.

In the context of this domestic and theatrical space, the Old Man functions as a narrator who depicts his own life as a work of fiction. Still watching the house from the outside, the Old Man points out the Colonel, who is visible in the window of the round drawing-room. The Student responds, “Is that—the Colonel? I don’t understand any of this, it’s like a fairy tale...” (Strindberg, *Julie* 256). The Old Man tells the Student, “My whole life is like a book of fairy tales, young man; and though all the tales are different, they hang together on a single thread, with a leitmotif that recurs over and over again” (Strindberg, *Julie* 256). Through the metaphors of the book of fairytales and the leitmotif, the Old Man connects the narrative of his life story to musical form, and in the process forges a connection to the dramatic form of *The Ghost Sonata*. The leitmotif that recurs over and over again is akin to the sonata form which the title suggests is

a structural component of the play.⁸⁷ Hummel provides the first iteration of the stories of the people who live in the house when he tells the Student about the other characters, though he frequently obscures his own role in their lives. The house is the locus of all these connections, and functions as the space over which the Old Man asserts his narratorial authority by drawing it into his own life story.

The house and its inhabitants are or once were desired objects. When the Student sees the Young Lady enter the house, and he despairs of ever attaining her, the Old Man responds, “I can open doors and hearts, if only I find an arm to do my will... Serve me, and you shall have power.[...] become my son, inherit me while I’m still alive, enjoy life and let me look on, at least from a distance” (Strindberg, *Julie* 259-260).⁸⁸ The house and the Young Lady are linked by the zeugma of doors and hearts; the Old Man implies both will belong to the Student. The Student, in return, will be an arm to do the Old Man’s will; like Edgar, Hummel’s strength lies in language and requires the bodies of others. The play suggests the consequences of this arrangement just prior to the Old Man’s offer; at the end of the Old Man’s relation of the stories of the inhabitants of the house, he asks the Student not to leave him. The Student responds, “But let go of my hand, you’re taking all my strength away, you’re freezing my blood, what do you want of me?” (Strindberg, *Julie* 259). The Old Man’s offer to the Student will drain the Student

⁸⁷ The play’s title “alludes to Beethoven’s Piano Sonata No. 17 in D minor (Op. 31 No. 2), usually called The Tempest. In his letter to Schering on 27 March 1907, Strindberg refers to it as the *Gespenster* (Ghost) sonata” (Törnqvist, “Strindberg’s *The Ghost Sonata*” 23-24). For a discussion of sonata form in the play, see the introduction to Sprinchorn’s *The Chamber Plays*, which identifies three movements in *The Ghost Sonata*: a “brisk allegro,” a slow-tempoed largo, and a “quiet andante, which stresses the principal theme of the whole sonata and brings it to a close with a brilliant coda that restates all the themes” (Strindberg, “Chamber Plays” xxx). However, I would agree with Törnqvist and with Robinson, who points out that “attempts to explain *The Ghost Sonata* in terms of sonata form... remain—in spite of the play’s title—impressionistic analogies” (Strindberg, *Julie* xxxii). As Lynn R. Wilkinson points out, “If a three-part structure is common to sonata form and Strindberg’s play, it also characterizes *Miss Julie*” (Robinson, *Cambridge* 112).

⁸⁸ A similar line in *The Dance of Death* suggests Strindberg’s conception of the vampiric nature of inheritance; when Kurt suggests the Captain should make a will so that Alice can keep the furniture, the Captain responds, “Going to inherit me while I’m still alive, is she?” and refuses (Strindberg, *Julie* 147).

of his vitality and strength. To inherit the Old Man is to rise to power, where power spans money, houses, and hearts and yet is fueled by vampiric dependence on the strength of others.

The outdoor scene ends, much as it begins, by using the visible presence of a ghost to show the gap between narration and truth. The Old Man “(*enters, standing in his wheelchair, drawn by one beggar and followed by all the others*). Hail to the noble youth, who risked his own life to save so many in yesterday’s disaster! Hail, Arkenholz!” (Strindberg, *Julie* 264). Through a combination of visual spectacle and oratory, the Old Man gains the attention of the people inside the house, who wave handkerchiefs, hoist flags, or simply stare. Having cemented his bargain with the Student, the Old Man is now standing; he gains physical power through the link. The spectacle of the Old Man in a wheelchair chariot drawn by a beggar drives home, once again, that his power derives from the subjugation of others. The Old Man continues, “although I’m not a Sunday child, I possess both the spirit of prophecy and the gift of healing for I once summoned a drowned person back to life...it was in Hamburg one Sunday morning just like today...” (Strindberg, *Julie* 264). Hummel begins, in other words, to capitalize on the attention garnered by the spectacle of the chariot by narrating the story of his own life as though he, like the Student, is a hero. But Hummel is interrupted by a visual manifestation of the true story of his past: the Milkmaid appears, and the stage directions stipulate that she is “*seen only by the Student and the Old Man; she raises her arms as if she were drowning, and stares at the Old Man,*” who immediately “*sits down and shrinks back in horror*” (Strindberg, *Julie* 264). The fact that Hummel can now see the Milkmaid is presumably a result of his link with the Student. The Milkmaid’s pantomime suggests the true story of what happened in Hamburg is about her death, rather than her resurrection. The sight of this silent counter-story deprives the Old Man of some of his newfound strength: he sits and shrinks.

The Milkmaid's pantomime suggests a purely visual—and, perhaps more importantly, a dead—form of storytelling that the Old Man cannot harness. She acts out a story, but does not narrate. While the Old Man is clearly not averse to theatrical spectacle, his primary tools are twisted words and borrowed bodies; the Milkmaid, silent and dead, has neither. The Milkmaid is one of Hummel's victims, and as such her pantomime can hardly be considered a viable resistance to vampiric narration; however, her presence and its effect on Hummel suggest an afterlife full of (true) forms of storytelling the Old Man cannot harness. The play, which stages glimpses of the world of the dead, therefore operates on formal principles larger and more varied than Hummel's vampiric narration.

This gap between Hummel's narration and the form of the play sheds new light on the most famous examination of Hummel's status as a narrator. Peter Szondi, whose analysis rests on the thesis that the thematic concerns of one period become the formal concerns of the next, reads *The Ghost Sonata* as

[t]he moment when middle-class salon Drama, which had taken over the formal principles of the neoclassical Drama, was transformed, of necessity, into the epic because of the form-content contradiction that had arisen in the course of the nineteenth century. Within this process, Hummel's presence may well be the first example of the epic *I* appearing on stage, albeit disguised as an ordinary dramatic character.[...]

It is difficult to understand, however, why Strindberg remained unaware of this character's formal function. In the second act, he lets the traditional unmasking of the unmasker end in Hummel's suicide. The work thereby loses, on the level of its content, the formal principle on which it is built. The third act had to fail, because, with no epic support, it could not generate dialogue of its own.[...]

Whereas in Ibsen's plays the *dramatis personae* had to die because they had no epic narrator, Strindberg's first stage narrator dies because he is not recognized as such—he wears the mask of a *dramatis persona*. More than anything else, this demonstrates the internal contradictions in the Drama at the turn of the century and precisely designates Ibsen's and Strindberg's historical position. The former comes just before, the latter just after the sublation of these contradictions via a conversion of the thematic epic into epic form. (Szondi 31, 32)

Szondi is correct that Hummel is a character as well as a formal principle, and that slippage between theme and form is endemic to the drama of this period. Thematic concerns of the nineteenth-century novel do become formal principles in Strindberg's drama; e.g., domesticity is a setting as well as a set of discourses that affect language, character, and plot. If the realist novels of the nineteenth century tend to put people in houses, drama at the end of the century tends to use narration, the dominant mode of those novels, in order to gain entry into, to sustain, to expose, and eventually to destroy domestic space. This movement is more interpenetrative than the conversion of the thematic epic into epic form. In a play—and in a Dickens-inflected literary-historical context—where narrating is the most effective way to arrive at domesticity, narration becomes linked to domestic space.

There is no real reason, moreover, why the epic *I* must reside with a single character without whom the play fails. The narrating functions that Szondi associates with the epic *I* are distributed among multiple characters in *The Ghost Sonata*, despite the Old Man's dominance during the first part. Törnqvist criticizes Szondi's characterization of Hummel as a narrator, arguing, "It is true that Hummel's speeches carry a strong epic note. But since he has close, guilty relations to the people he is commenting on, he is not an impartial, reliable narrator" (Törnqvist, "Strindberg's *The Ghost Sonata*" 22). Törnqvist arrives instead at the idea that the Student is the character who most resembles a narrator: "In particular we may think of its [*The Ghost Sonata*] breaking down the generic barrier between novel and drama by making use of a subjective observer and implied narrator (the Student), whose gradual involvement in and eventual unmasking of life we are invited to share" (Törnqvist, "Strindberg's *The Ghost Sonata*" 170). I would argue that both the Student and the Old Man resemble subjective narrators. The Mummy also takes on a narrating function in the second act—that is how she defeats the Old

Man. (The Student's stint as a narrator character is most pronounced in the third act.) The narrating *I* does not reside with a single character, but is instead a series of voices whose divergent stories create debts and accrue vitality and power to themselves and away from others.

My aim is not to debate which characters are and are not narrators, but rather to establish why these distributed narrator functions are central to the meaning of the play. I have shown that in *Black Banners*, multiple character narration can be a redemptive model of storytelling, provided it is accompanied by a purifying withdrawal from the society that poisons thoughts and language. In *The Ghost Sonata*, as in many nineteenth-century novels, the house and its accompanying domestic relations are the figure for society at large; contrary to many nineteenth-century novels (and particularly contrary to Dickens, who tends to apply domesticity as a cure-all), this house is too entrenched in the structure of Strindberg's poisoned society to act as a purgative. The Old Man uses narration to gain access to the house, but narration is also the tool he uses to make houses collapse—he plants words and pulls out stones. In the process, narration becomes the vehicle for the collapse of domesticity in *The Ghost Sonata*.

The second part of the play moves us to the interior of the house, and exposes domestic space as comprised of half-dead people, empty formalities, and language drained of meaning. In the round drawing-room, Bengtsson, a manservant, and Johansson, who has volunteered to wait at table, are preparing for a dinner party in the Student's honor. Johansson establishes affluent domesticity as an ideal that ranges across classes when he tells Bengtsson, "it's always been my dream to get into this house" (Strindberg, *Julie* 265). But the house's inhabitants, both servants note, are "a bit out of the ordinary"; Bengtsson describes the evening they are preparing for as "Just the usual ghost supper, as we call it. [...] They drink tea and never say a word, or the Colonel talks all by himself [...] They look like ghosts...And they've kept this up for twenty

years, always the same lot saying the same things, or else keeping quiet so as not to be shown up” (Strindberg, *Julie* 265). The ghost suppers are characterized by the empty forms of domesticity; speech itself has become one of these forms, to the point where the characters often don’t bother. These silent suppers sustain the fictions of the household in a ghostly approximation of family life; though most of the inhabitants have cheated on their respective spouses with each other, and some have raised the children of their infidelities under the same roof, everyone still meets for supper and drinks tea.

The Old Man, who appears now on crutches rather than in a wheelchair, brings powerful language back into the household by exposing its fictions. Before supper, the Old Man reverses his power dynamic with the Colonel in a familiar way: Hummel has bought up all the Colonel’s notes of hand, putting the Colonel in his debt. Hummel announces his ownership over everything in the house, and finally strips the Colonel of the life story he claims as his own:

COLONEL. Are you running my house?

OLD MAN. Yes! Since I own everything here—furniture, curtains, china, linen...other things, too!

COLONEL. What other things?

OLD MAN. Everything! Everything you see, it’s all mine!

COLONEL. Very well, it’s yours! But my coat of arms and my good name, they’re still mine!

OLD MAN. Not even those! (*Pause*) You’re no nobleman!

[...]

COLONEL (*reads*). I’ve heard rumours to that effect, yes, but I inherited the name from my father. (*Reads*) It’s true; you’re right...I’m not a nobleman!—Not even that!—Then I’ll take off my signet ring.—It’s true, it belongs to you— — —Here you are!

OLD MAN (*puts the ring on*). Now we’ll continue.—You’re not a colonel, either! [...] Take off your wig and look in the mirror, but take out your teeth first and shave off your moustache, get Bengtsson to unlace your corset, and then we’ll see if a certain footman, Mr XYZ, doesn’t recognize himself; the one who used to scrounge food in a certain kitchen... (Strindberg, *Julie* 270-272)

The Colonel’s property is undercut by debt, his family name is an inherited falsification, his daughter (one of the “other things”) is Hummel’s, and his class identity is a costume. Though the

Colonel believes he is in Hummel's power because Hummel has bought up all his notes of hand, for readers and spectators the transfer of power occurs during the verbal exchange as each piece of the Colonel's identity is stripped away. The scene shows the performativity of class identity and exposes the domestic status quo as predicated on the erasure of narratives of class mobility.

At the ghost supper, where everyone but the Student and the Young Lady is in attendance, characters succeed in harnessing language to alter physical realities. The Old Man continues his rise to power with his longest speech in the play, which I shorten here:

I prefer silence, then you can hear thoughts and see the past; silence cannot conceal anything...unlike words[...]How quiet it's gone! (*Long silence*) All of us sitting here, we know who we are...isn't that so?...I don't have to tell you...and you know me, although you pretend you don't...In there sits my daughter, *mine*, you know that, too...Without knowing why, she'd lost the will to live...she simply withered in this air that reeks of crime, deception, and every kind of falsehood...that's why I sought a friend for her, someone with whom she might experience the light and warmth of a noble deed...(*Long silence*) That was my mission in this house: to root out the weeds, expose the crimes, settle past accounts, so that these young people may make a fresh start in this home, which I have given them! (*Long silence*) Now I grant you leave to go, each of you in turn and order; whoever stays will be arrested! (*Long silence*) Listen to the ticking of the clock, like a death-watch beetle in the wall. Do you hear what it says? 'Time's up! Time's up!' When it strikes, in a little while, your time will be up. Then you can go, but not before. But it raises its arm before it strikes!—Listen! It's warning you: 'The clock can strike.'— — —I, too, can strike...(He strikes the table with his crutch) Do you hear? (*Silence.*)⁸⁹

The Old Man's purpose in entering the house is to expose the pasts of its inhabitants, with the goal of purifying the place so that the Young Lady and the Student can thrive there. The Young Lady is his natural daughter, and he has chosen the Student as his heir; thus, Hummel's intended purification of the household is a self-interested extension of his own life. The Old Man intends his speech as a sort of incantation that will end in his total ownership of the house, which is to be emptied of its inhabitants, with the exception of the Young Lady and, now, the Student. By the

⁸⁹ This pivotal passage as well as the Mummy's upcoming speech are adapted from *Black Banners*, specifically from Count Max's dialogue, "Matter as Living Essence," which connects the material objects in a house to the dispositions of its inhabitants. The clock, which "sets itself by your heart and disposition" and "reigns over the home's order," is particularly prominent (Strindberg, "Banners" 132).

end of his monologue, the Old Man aligns himself with the power of time, which he characterizes as malevolent. The long silences that punctuate the Old Man's speech, during which he presumably hears thoughts and sees pasts, also suggest the disempowerment of everyone at the table.

But in exposing the truth about the past, the Old Man also recalls the Mummy to life. Until this point, the Mummy is the character rendered least animate by her long residence in a house where known truths lie dormant. The Mummy has been replaced in the house proper by an inanimate stand-in, a statue of her younger self. The Mummy lives, instead, in a closet, "both to avoid seeing and being seen" (Strindberg, *Julie* 268). The closet is invisible on the stage; Strindberg stipulates a "*jib-door in the wall*" which, Robinson notes, stands "flush with the surrounding wall and [is] usually painted or papered over to appear indistinguishable from its surroundings" (Strindberg, *Julie* 287).⁹⁰ For spectators, the Mummy appears to be part of the house.⁹¹ In addition to disappearing into the wall, the Mummy has lost or given up meaningful forms of language; she talks (at the stage directions' behest) at first like a baby, and then like a parrot. When Hummel appears in the round drawing-room, the Mummy recovers an adult voice:

MUMMY (*appears behind the Old Man and pulls his wig*). Currrrr-e! Is it Currrrr-e?
 OLD MAN (*gives a jump*). Dear God in heaven!—Who is it?
 MUMMY (*in a normal voice*). Is it Jacob?
 OLD MAN. My name is Jacob, yes— — —
 MUMMY (*with emotion*). And mine's Amalia! (Strindberg, *Julie* 268)

This is the first time the Mummy has asserted her name; previously she has responded to the parrot name "Polly." Hummel's entry into the house is also the return of the story of the Mummy's past infidelity; his presence is itself an exposure of the known but unacknowledged

⁹⁰ Sprinchorn simply refers to "*a wall-papered door*" ("Chamber Plays" 125).

⁹¹ In the 1924 Provincetown Playhouse production of *The Ghost Sonata* (in which Eugene O'Neill was heavily involved), the Mummy's cupboard is inside a pedestal underneath the statue of the Mummy's younger self (Marker and Marker 131). Though this is not Strindberg's staging, it is illustrative of the extent to which the Mummy's representation as a statue is aligned with her representation as part of the house.

truths that have figuratively mummified Amalia and entombed her in the wall. (The Mummy also tells Hummel that she once tried to tell the Colonel about her infidelity, but the Colonel did not believe her.) Thus Hummel's return makes the Mummy visible and audible as more than a motionless statue and disempowered speech.

At the ghost supper, the Mummy reveals that the Old Man's truth is incomplete, and she fights his version with her own:

MUMMY (*goes up to the clock and stops it; then lucidly and seriously*). But I can stop time in its course—I can wipe out the past and undo what's been done, not with bribes, not with threats, but through suffering and repentance! — — —(*Goes up to the Old Man*) We are poor miserable creatures, all of us; we have erred and we have sinned, like everyone else; we are not what we seem, for at heart we are better than ourselves, since we hate our faults; but that you, Jacob Hummel with your false name, can sit here in judgement [sic] on us proves how much worse you are than us! You are also not who you seem to be!—You're a stealer of souls—you stole me once with your false promises; you murdered the Consul who was buried here today, you strangled him with notes of hand; and you've stolen the student by binding him with an imaginary debt of his father's, who never owed you a penny...

The Old Man has tried to get up and interrupt her, but has crumpled over and fallen back in his chair; he shrinks more and more during what follows. (Strindberg, Julie 275)

The Mummy posits an alternative to the Old Man's form of purifying the house. If Hummel seeks to cleanse the place and settle past accounts with threats and blackmail, the Mummy sees her own martyrdom through suffering and repentance as able to accomplish the same thing. The Mummy ends her speech by exposing truths about the Old Man and his role in ruining the people of the household. Just as Hummel has physically strangled the dead Consul with notes of hand, through her narrative exposure of the Old Man's past, the Mummy drains Hummel of the physical strength he has gained throughout the play. This turning of the tables is also enabled by the fact that the Old Man has fallen into the trap of aligning himself with time, ownership, and patriarchal authority through the medium of the house. Hummel assumes the power of time by

aligning his arms and crutches with the hand of the clock in the round drawing-room; he rises to power based on ownership of the house and its contents, but at the height of his rhetorical power and physical strength he also merges with the furnishings. Thus when the Mummy wants to stop Hummel, she stops the clock. Manipulating the financial and personal fictions that underwrite domesticity is the most effective means to gaining entry into it; however, those who engage in this process become vulnerable to the vampiric narration that sustains domestic space.

With help from Bengtsson, who reveals that the Old Man was once the household's cook who "drank the juice from the meat, which then had to be eked out with water—he sat there like a vampire sucking all the goodness out of the house, and turned us all to skeletons," the Mummy continues to reverse her position with the Old Man (Strindberg, *Julie* 275). Bengtsson reveals the Old Man's true class narrative, which is no more respectable than the Colonel's, and which continues the process of causing the Old Man to physically shrink. Bengtsson's language also ties the servants to the vitality of the house and its inhabitants. The Mummy completes the reversal of her position with Hummel's when she demands he turn over the notes of hand and his will, and addresses him as though he is a parrot:

MUMMY (*strokes the Old Man's back*). Polly! Is Jacob there?

OLD MAN (*like a parrot*). Jacob's there! Cacadora! Dora!

MUMMY. Can the clock strike?

OLD MAN (*clucks*). The clock can strike! (*Imitates a cuckoo clock*) Cuck-oo! Cuck-oo!
Cuck-oo! — — —

MUMMY (*opens the closet door*). Now the clock has struck!—Get up and go into the closet where I've been sitting mourning our misdeed for twenty years—You'll find a rope in there like the one with which you strangled the Consul upstairs, and with which you thought to strangle your benefactor...Go! (*The Old Man goes into the closet*)

MUMMY (*closing the door*). Bengtsson! Put up the screen! The death screen!
(*Bengtsson places the screen in front of the cupboard door*)

MUMMY. It is finished!—God have mercy on his soul!

ALL. Amen! (Strindberg, *Julie* 276)

Having recovered her own ability to narrate—that is, to use language meaningfully, in this instance truthfully, to recount past events and enact change in the present—the Mummy deprives Hummel of his ability to do the same. Once Hummel can only parrot the words of others, he is powerless and docile. Hummel’s body is absorbed into the house: he goes into the Mummy’s invisible cupboard in the wall, which is covered over yet again with the death screen. The death screen, a Japanese screen that is put up, by house custom, every time someone is going to die, ensures no dead bodies are visible on the stage. Characters do not become corpses—they become furniture. If the characters in *The Dance of Death* wish for release through a death that never comes, characters in *The Ghost Sonata* are granted deaths that are narrated rather than seen. These narrated deaths are bodiless, and work in conjunction with staging that has the power to absorb the bodies of the actors.

The fact that the characters themselves call for the death screen when one of them is on the verge of death suggests the living are complicit in the absorption of the dying into the house—and into the narratives that underwrite the domestic space to which everyone still clings. The result of the Mummy’s narrated counterstrike, after all, is that everyone gets to remain in the house. This continuing investment in domesticity—along with the fact that the play has a third scene—belies the Mummy’s pronouncement, “It is finished!” once the Old Man is stored and screened. Tonally, however, the second part of the play ends in what appears to be the successful purification of the household for the next generation. The play’s focus shifts to the hyacinth room, where the Young Lady is visible accompanying the Student on a harp while he sings a version of the medieval Icelandic “Song of the Sun” (Strindberg, *Julie* 276, 310):

The sun I saw, and so it seemed
As if I saw the Hidden One;
Man must reap what he has sown,
Blest be he whose deeds are good.

For deeds you have done in anger
 No penance do with evil;
 Comfort him you have distressed
 With your goodness, solace bring.
 None need fear who did no ill;
 Good it is to be innocent. (Strindberg, *Julie* 276-277)

The conventional morality of the Student's song, accompanied by the harp music of the Young Lady, suggests that the two young people are in accord, and occupy a space of innocence. The invocation of the sun likewise suggests the pair will bring light to the household, whose open secrets have been made explicit and thus drained of the power to harm.

This impression is soon contradicted in the third part, which takes place in the excessively floral hyacinth room, with the round drawing-room visible upstage right. The Young Lady, sitting at her harp, and the Student, standing, discuss their love in terms of the hyacinths that surround them. The Student experiences the hyacinths as poisonous; "Their fragrance...confuses my senses, deafens me, blinds me, drives me from the room, assails me with poisoned arrows that sadden my heart and set my head on fire! This flower—don't you know its story?" (Strindberg, *Julie* 278). The hyacinth room, where the Young Lady spends all her time, is not exempt from the poisons that permeate the house. Moreover, the flower has a story of its own which, the Student implies, is part of the poison that permeates the room.

The poison of the house likewise thwarts any attempt to use language in a generative way within its walls. Using the hyacinths as a starting point, the Student and the Young Lady perform a sort of free-associative duet, marking correspondences between stars, flowers and their petals, the earth, the contents of the hyacinth room, and each other. They end by figuring their verbalized thoughts as childbirth:

YOUNG LADY. How magnificent! Whose thought was that?
 STUDENT. Yours!
 YOUNG LADY. Yours!

STUDENT. Ours!—We've given birth to it together, we're married...

Robinson notes the Student and the Young Lady use the intimate form of “yours,” “*din*,” for the first time in this scene (Strindberg, *Julie* 311). The child they produce together is a thought spoken in tandem. For the first time in the play, characters use language to create, rather than as a means to controlling past narrative and present domestic space. But the Young Lady cannot sustain this reproductive use of language; when the Student pronounces them married, she responds:

YOUNG LADY. Not yet...

STUDENT. What else remains?

YOUNG LADY. The waiting, the trials, the patience!

STUDENT. Good! Try me! (*Pause*) Tell me. Why do your parents sit in there so silently, without saying a word?

YOUNG LADY. Because they've nothing to say to each other, because neither believes what the other says. My father once said: 'What's the point of talking, we can't pull the wool over each other's eyes?'

STUDENT. That's horrible... (Strindberg, *Julie* 280)

The Young Lady understands marriage as an inability to move or to use language in an active way; her parents spoke only so long as they could deceive each other, and the alternative is inert silence.

The middle section of the play, from Hummel's exposure of the Colonel to the Mummy's exposure of Hummel, depicts the conventions of middle-class domesticity as erasing past narratives of sexual and class relations. To tell these stories is to destabilize the household (or rather to exploit the instabilities which already exist within it), which enables a reorganization of domestic hierarchies. But the household is not cleansed, either through the purgative power of truth or the martyrological power of repentance and suffering. Thus the Young Lady and the Student are unable to unite in marriage and sustain generative mutual conversation; the house continues to poison them. Likewise, though Hummel has been defeated, the Cook, who the

Young Lady identifies as “One of the Hummels—a vampire; she’s devouring us...” repeatedly interrupts the Student and the Young Lady in the hyacinth room. The Cook is a version of Hummel in his early stages, years before the start of the play. The Young Lady says,

She boils the meat until there’s nothing left but sinews and water while she drinks the stock herself, and when there’s a roast, she cooks all the juice out of it, eats the sauce, and drinks the broth; everything she touches loses its strength; it’s as if she sucked it out with her eyes, we get the dregs after she’s drunk the coffee; she drinks the wine and fills the bottles with water... (Strindberg, *Julie* 280)

Instead of sucking the vitality from the household through language the Cook drains life-sustaining properties from the food. We know from Bengtsson’s revelations at the ghost supper that vampirically sucking the juice from the meat before serving it is also the way Hummel began his rise to power within the household long ago. The intrusions of the Cook in Scene 3 show that control over the underlying narratives of domesticity begins as control over the domestic labor that sustains the household; put another way, class mobility is a matter of understanding the power of household labor and, over time, transforming that power into narrative mastery. Food becomes words, and to command words is to be part of a class that commands servants. It is no coincidence, then, that the Cook’s intrusions in the hyacinth room punctuate a scene in which the generative use of language collapses.

This form of mobility is not ultimately effective, as we have seen already with Hummel. Thus when the Cook enters holding what the stage directions call a “*Japanese soya bottle*,” she tells the Student and the Young Lady, “You suck the life out of us, and we out of you, we take the blood, and give you back the water—with colouring. This is the colouring!—I’m going now, but all the same I’ll stay as long as I want!” (Strindberg, *Julie* 283). The Cook’s “we” emphasizes that her relationship to the family is emblematic of mutually destructive class relations within middle-class domesticity. The soya bottle, which has “scorpion-like lettering” on

it, is what the Cook uses to make the food look appetizing without imbuing it with nutritional value (Strindberg, *Julie* 283). The soya bottle with its fancy, poisonous lettering is a servant-class version of the narrated deceptions which, while supposedly sustaining life within the household, actually drain the vitality from its occupants.

During the Young Lady's descriptions of the trials of domestic life, which include a maid she has to clean up after as well as the vampiric Cook, the Student repeatedly calls for "A song!" (Strindberg, *Julie* 281, 282, 285). The Student calls, in other words, for a return to creation, to the mutual music—the Young Lady at her harp, he singing—that enabled the linguistic duet that began the scene. The Young Lady repeatedly tells the Student to wait or have patience: "Wait!—First the drudgery, the drudgery that keeps the dirt of life at bay" (Strindberg, *Julie* 282). She then lists all of the chores she must do in order to keep the house running. We never see the Young Lady at her drudgery; for readers and audiences, the Young Lady's domestic labor is a discourse, rather than a set of performed actions. The drudgery that keeps the dirt of life at bay stands in the way of a generative marriage, figured here as the ability to meet in music and language and create something new. A domesticity built on lies and labor has infected the Young Lady's language and rendered her infertile. Strindberg makes this connection more explicit when the Young Lady and the Student discuss having a child:

YOUNG LADY. [...] Life's hard, I get so tired sometimes...Imagine having a nursery as well!

STUDENT. The greatest of joys...

YOUNG LADY. And the dearest— — —Is life worth that much trouble?⁹² (Strindberg, *Julie* 282)

⁹² Sprinchorn's translation reads:

YOUNG LADY. (...) Imagine, if on top of it all one had a nursery and a baby crib.

STUDENT. The dearest of joys!

YOUNG LADY. The dearest in more ways than one....Is life really worth so much trouble? (Strindberg, "Chamber Plays 146, 147).

In the first line the Young Lady expresses the idea of a child as both a room and a piece of furniture, a growth of the house rather than a human child. By having the Young Lady echo the Student's use of the word "dearest" with a

The Young Lady's euphemistic substitution of a nursery for a baby replaces the prospect of a child with the prospect of another part of the house to maintain. Her speech can produce no children; only rooms. Domesticity in *The Ghost Sonata*, and in the chamber plays more generally, propagates itself through narrator characters who invest their desire and energy into it even as they and the domestic space they covet are drained of life.

The gap between the Student and the Young Lady's rhetorical constitutions is their undoing, in a world where narrating has physical consequences. The Student's fundamental impulse is toward truth, whereas the Young Lady's is toward sustaining the domestic status quo:

STUDENT. You have many secrets in this house...

YOUNG LADY. Like everyone else...let us keep ours!

[...]

STUDENT. Sometimes I'm seized by a passionate desire to say exactly what I'm thinking; but I know that if people were absolutely frank the world would come to an end.[...] Do you know what I'm thinking now about you?

YOUNG LADY. Don't tell me, or I'll die!

STUDENT. I must, or I shall die!— — — (Strindberg, *Julie* 283, 284)

For the Young Lady, domesticity and life itself are built on kept secrets and unspoken truths. The Student likewise understands saying exactly what he is thinking in real time as a world-destroying proposition; however, he also sees his own life as dependent on it, despite the risk of killing the Young Lady. Törnqvist notes that "even the Student becomes a vampire" in this scene; "Like the Old Man, the Student cannot 'let go' once he has got his teeth into someone" (*Strindberg's The Ghost Sonata* 48). But the Student's vampirism, unlike the Old Man's, does not sustain the system that produced it. If what will destroy the Young Lady and the world is necessary to the continued life of the Student, the principles or forces that govern the Student's existence are different than those governing the world he threatens to destroy. To be silent, to

different meaning—costliness as opposed to love—Sprinchorn suggests the ideological separation indicated by the rhetorical gap between the Young Lady and the Student.

spare the Young Lady, would make the Student part of the household and subject to its laws; only by destroying domesticity and the Young Lady along with it can he escape this fate.

When the Student does say exactly what he is thinking, his thoughts are a narrated recapitulation of his own past and the past action of the play. He frames his speech as an attempt at purification:

STUDENT. [...] Keeping silent for too long creates a pool of stagnant water, which rots. There's something very rotten here. And yet, when I first saw you come in, I thought it was paradise... That Sunday morning when I stood out there gazing in I saw a colonel who was not a colonel, I had a noble benefactor who was a crook and had to hang himself, I saw a mummy who wasn't one, and a virgin who—speaking of which, where is virginity to be found? And beauty? In nature and in my mind when it's in its Sunday best. Where are faith and honour? In fairy tales and children's plays. Where does anything fulfil its promise?... In my imagination!—Now your flowers have poisoned me, and I've poisoned you in return—I begged you to be my wife and share my home, we wrote poetry and sang and played together, and then the Cook appeared... *Sursum Corda!*⁹³ Try once more to strike fire and purple from your golden harp... try, I beg you. I implore you, on my knees... Come, I'll do it myself! (*He takes the harp but no sound comes from the strings*) It's deaf and dumb. To think that the most beautiful flowers are so poisonous, are the most poisonous; all creation, all of life is cursed... Why wouldn't you be my bride? Because the very source of life in you is sick... That vampire in the kitchen, I can feel it now, beginning to suck my blood, it's like a Lamia, giving suck to children. The kitchen, that's where children's hearts are nipped in the bud, unless it's the bedroom, of course... There are poisons that blind and poisons that open the eyes. I must have been born with the latter, for I can't see the ugly as beautiful, or call what's evil good, I just can't! Christ descended into hell, that was his pilgrimage on earth—to this madhouse, this prison, this charnel-house the earth; and the madmen killed him when he wanted to set them free; and let the robber go, the robber who always gets our sympathy!—Alas for us all, alas! Saviour of the World, save us, or we perish! (Strindberg, *Julie* 285).

YOUNG LADY (*has collapsed and appears to be dying. She rings. Bengtsson enters*).
Bring the screen! Quickly—I'm dying!
Bengtsson returns with the screen which he unfolds and places in front of the Young Lady.

In the Student's speech the previous action of the play becomes a narrated past that kills the Young Lady in the present. The Student understands that his narrated purgative—which, in light

⁹³ Robinson notes *Sursum Corda!*, or “Lift up your hearts!”, comprises the “introductory words to the Roman Catholic Mass” (Strindberg, *Julie* 312).

of the Christian elements, might also be seen as a linguistic martyring or even a gentle exorcism—is also a poison for the Young Lady. The Student also understands that he is being poisoned by exposure to the house and its inhabitants; like the Old Man, the desire for privilege and happiness through domesticity has made the Student vulnerable to the soul-killing customs of the household.

The Student's speech to the Young Lady intersperses its recapitulation of the action of the play with truths that extend beyond that action. Virginity and beauty are to be found in the Student's mind in its "Sunday best"; in other words, when the Student sees beyond the world perceived by most of the characters. Faith and honor are in fairy tales and children's plays, and promises are kept only in imagination. Strindberg links the Student's mind, which the audience also partially inhabits, to these worlds outside domestic and material reality. These worlds and Strindberg's play are also outside the forms and ideologies of the domestic realism with which they are still concerned, despite the fact that realism and naturalism no longer adequately convey Strindberg's sense of the relations between material reality and the human mind. Instead, Strindberg creates a play in which the act of narrating changes the physical world—thus the Young Lady's collapse, and the harp's failure to make music under the Student's hands. But domesticity and the narrative forms with which it is most closely associated during and after the nineteenth century do not drop out of Strindberg's drama so much as they become hyper-present in a way that shows what he perceives as their destructiveness.

The Young Lady becomes part of the house when Bengtsson places the death screen in front of her, absorbed by the vampiric domesticity that has infected her language. But Strindberg does not allow the house to remain standing. As the Student continues to talk in a spiritual vein, invoking Buddha as well as Christ, the stage directions note, "*The harp's strings begin to rustle;*

the room is filled with a white light” (Strindberg, *Julie* 286). The Student then reprises the Song of the Sun. Though the Student could not make the harp play when he took it in his hands, it responds to his speech; something about his purification is working, since music is returning. But the Young Lady can no longer help him to produce the song. When the Student has finished singing, the stage directions note, “*A whimpering sound can be heard from behind the screen*” (Strindberg, *Julie* 286). This sound, neither language nor music, is all that remains of the Young Lady, whose body is hidden by the death screen. The Student then narrates the Young Lady’s death and journey into the afterlife:

STUDENT. Poor little child, child of this world of illusion, guilt, suffering and death; this world of endless change, disappointment and pain. May the Lord of Heaven have mercy on you on your journey...

The room disappears. Böcklin’s painting The Isle of the Dead appears as the background. Music, soft, tranquil, and pleasantly melancholy is heard from the island. (Strindberg, *Julie* 282)

The Student’s speech begins as description or commentary and ends as a blessing that is also, by the logic of *The Ghost Sonata*, a world-altering directive. The process of narrating the Young Lady out of the material world and into the realm of the dead also causes the room to disappear. Once the Student has the power of a narrator—which in this play is not just a person who tells a story, but rather a person who, in telling a story, can access forms of truth and meaning that alter and destroy worlds from the inside—domesticity and the stage properties that support it collapse or fade away. Like the Old Man before him, the Student is a destroyer of houses; also like Hummel, the Student accomplishes this destruction through narration. Unlike Hummel, the Student is no longer invested in domesticity as an institution or in houses as a source of power and wealth. Because the Student is a Sunday child who sees beyond the world in which he exists—which in this play is also a way of bringing disparate formal and ontological realities together—his narration sends the play into a metaleptic space beyond the structuring principle of

the house. Thus while the hyacinth room scene recapitulates the prior action, it also suggests that in demolishing the theatrical, narrative, and architectural structures that cloud our sight there is escape, if not life.

This escape is into the afterlife, but also into a painting. Strindberg's stage directions indicate Arnold Böcklin's *The Isle of the Dead* appears as the background, and that music is heard from the island. By any standard a shift in the reality of the stage world has occurred; the ghost world we have had glimpses of through the Student now replaces the domestic altogether. By using Böcklin's painting, Strindberg renders the realm of the dead not a world beyond aesthetic forms, but a world *of* forms where narration disappears, and theater merges with painting to enable the production of music. When the play was first staged in Strindberg and Falck's Intimate Theatre, Böcklin's painting did not appear as a backdrop at the end; a generic "landscape with pines" was revealed in lieu of the house's transformation into the realm of the dead (Marker and Marker 120).⁹⁴ Instead, the proscenium was hung with replicas of two Böcklin paintings, "to the left the Isle of the Living, to the right the Isle of the Dead," effectively locating the journey of the play in a border space between stage and audience (Törnqvist, "Strindberg's *The Ghost Sonata*" 77). In the play as written, this journey between the world of the living and the world of the dead is figured finally as a collapse or transfiguration of generic and ontological worlds: the Student's narration becomes a vampiric force that physically drains the Young Lady, the Young Lady becomes part of the house, the house becomes a painting that is also the land of the dead, and from the land of the dead comes music, the creative, collaborative production that could not be sustained within domesticity.

⁹⁴ Nor did the third scene take place in the Hyacinth room; the round drawing room set was used until the end. This staging undercuts the play's gradual exposure of the illusions of domestic realism in each scene (from a desired exterior of the house, to a communal interior in which secrets are exposed, to a dream-like space in which material reality fades away). For more on the ways in which the Intimate Theatre's production of *The Ghost Sonata* diverged (with mixed results) from Strindberg's text, see Marker and Marker 118-120 or Törnqvist, *Strindberg's The Ghost Sonata*, chapter 3.

Strindberg replaces a play that traverses generic and ontological boundaries with a painting which, in the context of theatrical space, thematizes such traversals. The world of the dead in this play is always non-verbal, from the Milkmaid's pantomime to the shift from the Student's narration to the painting. Narration and the domesticity with which it is linked have become vampiric. Thus the scene in which the Student most resembles an extradiegetic narrator—the scene in which he extricates himself from the world of the characters—is also the scene in which he becomes a vampire who destroys the world he narrates. In the absence of a cloister space or a letter from the dead, *The Ghost Sonata* presents us with a model of narration that is most generative when it destroys the domestic interiors it once supported.

In 1907, the same year he wrote the chamber plays, Strindberg sent a letter to Emil Schering, his German translator. In the letter Strindberg asserts the interpenetration of epic and dramatic forms throughout his career, and proposes a more literal movement of narrators to the stage:

Yes, that is the secret of all my novels, stories, and tales, they are plays. During those long periods when, as you know, the theatre was closed to me, I hit upon the idea of writing my plays in epic form—for future use.

I have told my grown-up children (who write a little) this secret, and encouraged them to turn their stories into plays, like Charlotte Birch-Pfeiffer.⁹⁵ But they daren't!—For they believe the old notion that a play must be a conventional 5-acter with set roles and act endings (for applause). Now I believe that with a more modern, informal notion of drama, it might be possible to take the narratives *exactly as they are!* That would be novel!—There would be frequent changes of scene, but that is after all only Shakespeare's *ubiquité*; the author's reflections would become monologues. Or one could also introduce a new character (corresponding to the Greek chorus), who would be—the Prompter, half visible, reading the descriptions (of landscapes, etc.), and narrating or reflecting on events while the scenery was changed (in so far as one need employ any). (Strindberg, "Letters" II: 741-742)

⁹⁵Charlotte Birch-Pfeiffer dramatized the works of novelists such as Charlotte Brontë, Victor Hugo, George Sand, and Alexandre Dumas (Strindberg, "Letters" II: 894). Siri von Essen, Strindberg's first wife, starred in Birch-Pfeiffer's stage adaptation of *Jane Eyre* in 1877 (Strindberg, "Letters" I: 35).

Strindberg suggests changes in dramatic form over the course of his career make it possible not only to stage novels—a practice with many precedents—but to actually put the narrators of his novels on the stage. These half visible narrators (or prompters) could exist in a stage space somewhere between the world of the characters and that of an extradiegetic narrator. Though Strindberg never followed through on staging his prose fiction exactly as written, his excitement about the increased fluidity between the novel and drama over the course of his career is clear. As Strindberg moves from the naturalism of *Miss Julie* to the expressionism of *The Ghost Sonata*, narration remains the structuring principle of the material world, and the characters who narrate to advance themselves in that world are vampiric. Narration can be redemptive in its capacity to move between generic and ontological worlds, which for Strindberg are generative spaces akin to death.

Chapter 4

Wilde's Personalities

“The stage is not merely the meeting place of all the arts, but is
also the return of art to life.”

—Oscar Wilde, “The Truth of Masks” (1885; 1891)

“No one can criticize drama who is not capable of receiving
impressions from the other arts also.”

—Wilde, in a January 1895 interview by himself and Robert Ross

“Does any considerable section of Society today wait on any man’s
moods, hang on his words, fear them, treasure them, quote and
keep them alive as thousands did in the days of Wilde and
Whistler? We do not hear of it.”

—Elizabeth Robins, “Oscar Wilde: An Appreciation”

For Oscar Wilde, the positions of critic, author, and dramatist—positions he occupied as well as wrote about—are fictional personae. Wilde learned the power of inhabiting such personae early in his career. His 1882 lecture tour of North America in advance of Gilbert and Sullivan’s *Patience* (1881) framed Wilde (for American audiences unfamiliar with the aesthetic movement) as the model for the aesthete poet character Bunthorne, though in fact Bunthorne “was the model that Wilde attempted both to imitate and to prefigure” (C. Williams 165).⁹⁶ The tour launched Wilde as an international public figure, as opposed to a brilliant and eccentric Oxford student. Wilde thus became famous as a real-life dramatic character, a character who, moreover, was an author in his living as well as his fictional incarnations.

Wilde was also a brilliant speaker, as the success of his lecture tour attests. Deirdre Toomey notes the roots of Wilde’s orality in Irish culture, which values the oral over the written (Sandulescu 406). In her fragmentary memoir “Oscar Wilde: An Appreciation,” the actress

⁹⁶ On Wilde’s American tour see Carolyn Williams’s *Gilbert and Sullivan: Gender, Genre, Parody* (165-167). See also Kerry Powell’s “Posing and Dis-posing: Oscar Wilde in America and Beyond” chapter in *Acting Wilde*. On Wilde as a dramatic character—in his own career and in plays that feature him as a character—see Francesca Coppa’s “The Artist as Protagonist: Wilde on Stage” in Bristow’s *Oscar Wilde and Modern Culture*. Coppa notes that “there are more plays featuring Wilde than he wrote” (261). See also Angela Kingston’s *Oscar Wilde as a Character in Victorian Fiction*.

Elizabeth Robins praises Wilde's verbal compositions over his written ones, and remarks on Wilde's astounding dinner table conversation: "He did what he liked with people: he could make them shine, he could make them shrink—a king among his subjects for that hour" (Robins and Powell 105). In Robins' account Wilde prefigures a diner at one of Strindberg's ghost suppers, where characters physically shrink as they are skewered by the narration of other characters. Robins is of course speaking metaphorically, but it is intriguing that Wilde's speech, in a moment when he is expertly performing the role of Oscar Wilde, suggests the types of powerful character speech that I argue are a nexus of formal change in modern drama.

For Wilde, then, character speech and performative authorial or compositional speech are overlapping modes. Linda Dowling situates Wilde's speech and writing amid a more widespread "return to the voice" in Aestheticist and Decadent writing of the 1890s (*Language and Decadence* 181). This return to the voice also suggests the importance of performative and dramatic modes of presentation, since oral narrative is necessarily performed and since dramatic dialogue is generally filtered through characters and spoken through actors' voices.⁹⁷ If the stage for Wilde is "the return of art to life," it is also the return of writing to spoken dialogue. Character speech, particularly dialogue, is the form toward which Wilde's best writing tends, from the dialogic essays "The Critic As Artist" and "The Decay of Lying," to the long stretches when Lord Henry Wotton's speech dominates the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, to the first-person narration and frame structure of the short story and essay "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." to, of course, the plays. Character speech in Wilde's work is frequently (though by no means

⁹⁷ On oral narrative as performance see "The Oral Heritage of Written Narrative" in Scholes, Phelan, and Kellogg's *The Nature of Narrative*. Manfred Pfister notes, "The figures [i.e., characters] in drama appear predominantly as people who portray themselves rather than exist in their own right—that is, they generally appear in terms of the way they interact with others rather than as solitary individuals and they generally appear as speakers" (162-163). At the same time, "a dramatic figure is presented implicitly not only through what it says and how it says it, but also through its appearance, its behaviour and the context within which it operates (clothing, properties, interiors, etc.)" (Pfister 190).

always) indistinguishable from his critical and authorial voice, which makes sense in light of the public emergence of that voice as a fictional persona in the first place.

A fictional voice through which an author speaks in order to tell a story also describes a narrator, and in Wilde's fiction it is often a character or group of characters that carry out the functions of a narrator—telling the story as well as interpreting and evaluating the people and events within it.⁹⁸ Some of Wilde's dramatic characters retain these narrator functions and, as a result, exist in altered relations to the environments and personae around them. These altered relations induce a conflict between character and material stage that suggests the usefulness of considering Wilde's writing in relation to the emergence of modern drama.

Though Wilde's influence on later dramatists is well noted, accounts of the emergence of modern drama do not usually give his plays much consideration.⁹⁹ Peter Szondi does not discuss Wilde at all in *Theory of the Modern Drama*, Maurice Valency deploys him as a comparative example three times (once in the context of a discussion of Eugene Scribe's use of *raisonneurs*) in *The Flower and the Castle*, and Raymond Williams mentions him only as an antecedent to Christopher Fry in *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* (Valency 79, R. Williams 206-207). And while W.B. Worthen includes *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) and an excerpt from "The Critic As Artist" (1891) in his *Modern Drama: Plays/Criticism/Theory* anthology, he does not discuss Wilde in his opening essay on the emergence of modern drama.

In his recent book *Acting Wilde*, Kerry Powell addresses this relative omission in an epilogue on Wilde's place in modern drama. Powell discusses Wilde's "perceived failure to

⁹⁸ In his study of character narration in novels, James Phelan describes some basic "narrator functions"; namely, "the narrator acts as reporter, interpreter, and evaluator of the narrated for the narratee, and those actions are constrained by the narrative situation" (*Living to Tell* 12). Character narrators also have "character functions": the mimetic ("the ways in which characters work as representations of possible people"), the thematic (characters as "representative of larger groups or ideas"), and the synthetic (characters as "artificial constructs within the larger construct of the work") (Phelan, *Living to Tell* 12-13).

⁹⁹ On Wilde's influence on subsequent dramatists, particularly Tom Stoppard, see Richard Allen Cave's "Wilde's Plays: Some Lines of Influence" in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*.

achieve” the sort of “representational fidelity” associated with Strindberg, Ibsen, and Chekhov as leading “many critics to perceive his plays as belonging to an outmoded past rather than an emergent modern drama” (Powell, *Acting* 170). Powell ties this representational fidelity to characterological realism when he claims, “that in rejecting a characterological core for his *dramatis personae* Wilde might have been anticipating the theatre of the future rather than retreating into the theatre of the past” (Powell, *Acting* 171). Wilde “altered the course of drama by strategically abandoning its age-old mimetic basis, seeking not to imitate life but to create new worlds and perform new selves” (Powell, *Acting* 171). I agree that Wilde’s eventual abandonment of mimetic dramatic characters is essential to his contribution to modern drama. But by aligning a mimetic understanding of character with the mimetic basis of drama itself, Powell glosses over the conflict between character and environment that is central to Wilde’s drama. Wilde was closely involved in the staging and costuming of his plays, which “sought to reproduce...an acceptable mock-up of smart Society” in order “to query the aesthetic and moral values” of the audience (Kaplan in Raby, *Cambridge* 249, 250). Wilde’s society dramas increasingly juxtapose pictorial mimeticism with a rejection of characterological realism. In most of Wilde’s plays, the still-mimetic environment of the stage proves unsuitable to or irreconcilable with the dandy characters who seem most capable of creating new worlds and performing new selves.

Powell does discuss conflict between character and environment as a defining trait of modern drama, though he does not consider that conflict in terms of Wilde’s concrete and generally mimetic use of settings and costumes. Powell writes that Wilde’s

work as a playwright was defined by the “structure of feeling” that Raymond Williams has argued is the distinctive core of modern drama. It was not the mere reproduction of contemporary, lifelike characters and environment on stage that changed the direction of drama and made it “modern,” Williams asserts, but rather the discovery that there is

something alienating and destroying in this so-called world that makes us yearn for a different one. The essence of modern drama, then, is its expression of the dramatic tension “between what men feel themselves capable of becoming, and a thwarting, directly present environment.” While naturalism in the theatre appeared to be setting a new agenda for drama, with a representational style implying a stable, manageable, even comfortable reality, it was Wilde who struck the distinctively modern note that the point of drama was no longer the imitation of action and character in life, but their making and unmaking. (Powell, *Acting* 172; R. Williams 335)

Despite the representational fidelity of its pictorial style, in the naturalist drama of Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov reality often is not especially manageable or comfortable. Wilde’s drama participates in this tension between a mimetic stage world and characters who are at odds with it, though he approaches the problem with a focus on a different segment of society, and with a different linguistic style.

Continuing the theme of the making and unmaking of character, Powell argues that “After Wilde, the door stood open to a distinctively modern drama, not copied from the surfaces of life, but exposing those surfaces as an illusion peopled with characters of tenuous reality who...experience the need to be constantly creating and recreating themselves and the insubstantial world they live in” (Powell, *Acting* 173). The idea (frequently put forth by critics) that Wilde’s characters constantly recreate the worlds they live in suggests the usefulness of considering Wilde’s drama in light of expressionism as well as naturalism, since it is in expressionism that we encounter the fiction of a stage materially transformed by its characters. Expressionism crested after Wilde’s time; however, as Williams points out, naturalism and expressionism “coexist in the same drama: often, indeed, in the same theatres, the same companies, the same actors, the same writers” (R. Williams 339). Expressionism emerged, that is, from the naturalist drama and dramatists who did influence Wilde and who were his contemporaries, though not his countrymen. Expressionism “moved on to transform, in a surprising way, the ‘truth of objects’, using the stage physically to realize ‘inner’ images” (R.

Williams 340).¹⁰⁰ Strindberg's expressionist drama, for instance, depicts thwarting, directly present domestic environments that burn down and fade away when characters respond to their yearnings for a different world by narrating the current one out of existence. What is notable in Wilde's drama is that character is constructed out of and in resistance to various genres and art forms, whereas environment (with the important exception of *Salome* [1893]) is generally concrete and representational, though the worlds being represented are revealed as shallow and hypocritical. Wilde depicts characters who succeed in transforming reality, but the transformation is usually not physical or spatial: the set remains as it always was. The transformation is semantic; we see the representational stage as illusionary and artificial not because it has changed, but because the characters' journeys through that space have changed our understanding of it.

Only in *The Importance of Being Earnest* (and, to a lesser extent, *An Ideal Husband* [1895]) does Wilde arrive at a drama where the material stage and the domestic interiors it represents are not to be abandoned by the characters who most excel at performing new selves and worlds into being. In *The Importance of Being Earnest* Wilde renders the stage and domesticity inhabitable by divorcing the mimeticism of the material stage from a mimetic understanding of character. What we have from Wilde, then, is a drama taking off from naturalism but with opposite trajectories to expressionism. Expressionism is sometimes called "I-dramaturgy," and renders the stage a projection of inner experience (though, as I argue in my Strindberg chapter, the speaking "I" of expressionism need not constitute a single framing center of consciousness).¹⁰¹ But a central project of Wilde's writing across genres is to construct the "I"

¹⁰⁰ See also Worthen: "Rather than showing characters whose inner vitality is crushed by the bourgeois environment, expressionist plays try to show the mind and heart of the character visually, to express it directly in the objects and actions of the stage" (*Modern Drama* 17).

¹⁰¹ On I-dramaturgy see Szondi 22.

or, as he puts it, to fully realize personality. What is remarkable about the way Wilde pursues this project is its resonance with the ways Strindberg's expressionist vampires drain the vitality from other characters, and from domestic space: through character narration. If at the end of *The Ghost Sonata* the Student narrates the Young Lady to death and the domestic set out of existence, at the end of *The Importance of Being Earnest* the characters collectively narrate an imaginary person capable of inhabiting the metaphorically illusionary but materially substantial domestic set *into* existence.

Existing theorizations of stage narration discuss the ways in which a stage narrator can generate a world, but do not consider the narrative production (or destruction) of a person. In "Voice and Narration in Postmodern Drama" Brian Richardson discusses "generative narrators," stage characters who, in telling a story, "[generate] a fictional world...in a manner similar to that of an omniscient narrator" (685). Richardson identifies "two types of generative narrator: one who is part of the story world he or she describes, as in Tennessee Williams's memory play *The Glass Menagerie*; the other more closely resembles a third-person narrator and exists outside (or above) the storyworld that the narration creates" (Richardson, "Drama and Narrative" 152). Wilde's narrator characters are part of the story worlds they describe, but they do not function in the manner of Williams's memory play, in which the narrator character speaks directly to the audience before stepping into the dramatic action. Rather, Wilde's narrator characters perform the functions of narrators without being officially ontologically distinguished from the other characters. These narrator functions overlap with the functions of the critic to engender parasitic as well as generative dynamics within and on the worlds of the plays, and within and on the persons of the plays.

Wilde's assertion that the dramatic critic must receive impressions from other arts suggests the utility of a generically integrative approach to reading his plays, criticism, and narrative fiction. I will begin therefore with a reading of "The Portrait of Mr. W.H.," a short story that is also a critical essay about an imaginary actor. The imaginary actor is Willie Hughes, whom Wilde's characters are determined to prove is the famous and mysterious Mr. W.H. to whom Shakespeare dedicates his sonnets. "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." is unique in Wilde's writing because of its form, in which the first-person narrator, the literary critic, and the main character are the same person. Through this convergence of personae "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." performs on the level of form the project of realizing personality that is central to much of Wilde's work. "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." reveals (and does not resolve) two outcomes or trajectories for Wilde's personality project: firstly, a generative process of imagining and constituting the self, when art or criticism succeeds in turning existing ideas and forms to new account and, secondly, a physically and spiritually depleting process of attempting to constitute that self for other people in a society and in a critical idiom that valorizes proof over performance. Narrating the theory and the (imaginary and real) lives of the men who pursue it is elemental to each of these trajectories and suggests that Wilde sees narration, like his own speech, as capable of making people shine and shrink.

The personae of narrator, critic, and character also tend to converge in Wilde's ubiquitous dandies (among whom the narrator of "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." numbers). The second part of my chapter will track this character type through several of Wilde's plays with attention to the dandy's relations to domestic, social, and theatrical space and aesthetic types. The dandy characters in most of Wilde's drama are not fully fledged narrators like the characters of "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, though they exhibit in varying

degrees the traits of storytellers, critics, and performers. The dandies of *Vera* (1880), *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), and *An Ideal Husband* show Wilde's development of dramatic characters who embody, invoke, and resist an array of formal types and genres, and demonstrate the difficulty of sustaining the dandy's presence in domestic, social, and theatrical space.

I will then turn to *The Importance of Being Earnest* which, along with *Salome*, is seen as Wilde's most significant contribution to modern drama. It is when Wilde integrates the resources of Victorian farce with the other formal tools and thematic preoccupations in his arsenal that he produces a drama full of generative narrators. Where in "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." the results of the project of generating a person are equivocal, in *The Importance of Being Earnest* the project succeeds. This success is due not only to Wilde's transference of his personality project to a farcical idiom, but also to the characters' collective narrative efforts toward producing a person.

Finally I will consider *Salome*, in which the primary narrator character is not a dandy at all and in which, for the only time in Wilde's dramatic writing, character narration enacts material changes in the set. If the generative trajectories that result from character narration in "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." play out in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the compelling yet depleting energies of character narration are dominant in *Salome*. In this play Wilde distances his authorial speech from Jokanaan, the character who most resembles an omniscient narrator, and aligns himself instead with the desiring energies of the other characters, particularly Salome. The result is a drama in which characters talk past each other, and yet their speech continues to have consequences within the world of the play and in its form. These consequences suggest that Wilde's contribution to modern drama has to do with character speech that performs more than it communicates.

The Critic as Character Narrator: “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.”

“The Portrait of Mr. W.H.” (1889) is both a short story and a critical essay. The story is about several men who become obsessed with the fictional subject of the critical essay: Willie Hughes, the addressee of Shakespeare’s sonnets. The story was published in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* in 1889, revised and extended immediately afterward for a frequently deferred re-publication, used against Wilde as evidence of perversion during his libel suit against the Marquess of Queensbury in 1895, mysteriously lost until 1920, and finally published in extended form in America in 1821.¹⁰² The work employs a string of passionate conversions to the Willie Hughes theory of Shakespeare’s sonnets to establish a philosophy of criticism that engages extensively with history without rendering criticism dependent on historical fact. The highest criticism, according to Wilde, is an artistic production with aesthetic and personal truth as its aim.

The narrative frame of “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.” consists of a series of literary conversions. The story begins with a conversation about literary forgeries between the nameless narrator and Lord Erskine. Erskine tells the narrator the story of Cyril Graham, the beautiful friend of Erskine’s youth, who first developed the theory that “Mr. W.H.,” the mysterious “begetter” and dedicatee of Shakespeare’s sonnets, was a boy-actor named Willie Hughes. But eventually Erskine realizes perfecting the theory requires independent evidence that an actor named Willie Hughes actually existed. No evidence can be found and Cyril commissions a forged portrait of Willie Hughes in order to corroborate the theory. Erskine is converted, but soon discovers the forgery and loses faith. Cyril Graham then kills himself,

¹⁰² See Horst Schroeder’s *Oscar Wilde, The Portrait of Mr. W.H.—Its Composition, Publication and Reception* for a detailed account of the work’s publishing history. See also the 1921 *New York Times* article, “Oscar Wilde’s Lost Manuscript Found,” which contains a succinct history of theories about the identity of Mr. W.H. See also Bristow’s “Wilde’s Fatal Effeminacy” in *Effeminate England* and Danson’s “Oscar Wilde, W.H., and the Unspoken Name of Love” for accounts of “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.” and its use in Wilde’s trials. Both versions of the work are still in circulation.

leaving behind a letter proclaiming his continued faith in Willie Hughes, in hope that his martyrdom or, perhaps, his letter will re-convert Erskine to the theory. Cyril's death fails to re-convert Erskine, but Erskine, in telling Cyril's story, has converted the narrator, who launches his own investigation into the theory. The narrator sends his findings to Erskine in a letter. The act of sending the letter simultaneously drains the narrator of his faith in the theory and restores Erskine's own faith. Erskine leaves for Germany to pursue proof of the narrator's findings, fails to find any, and sends the narrator a letter stating his intent to martyr himself for literature in hopes of re-converting the narrator. The attempt, like Cyril's, fails. Moreover, the suicide letter turns out to be a forgery in its own right, since Erskine actually dies of consumption. Erskine bequeaths the forged Willie Hughes portrait to the narrator, and the portrait partially succeeds where the suicide letters have failed: the narrator does not publicize the theory, thus halting the string of literary conversions, but when the narrator looks at the portrait he feels the Willie Hughes theory does have value.

Wilde situates "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." in a tradition of literary forgeries. The narrator and Lord Erskine begin the story talking over cigarettes:

I cannot at present remember how it was that we struck upon this somewhat curious topic, as it was at that time, but I know we had an long discussion about Macpherson, Ireland, and Chatteron, and that with regard to the last I insisted that his so-called forgeries were merely the result of an artistic desire for perfect representation; that we had no right to quarrel with an artist for the conditions under which he chooses to represent his work; and that all Art being to a certain degree a mode of acting, an attempt to realise one's own personality on some imaginative plane out of reach of the trammeling accidents and limitations of real life, to censure an artist for a forgery was to confuse an ethical with an aesthetical problem. (Wilde, *Collins* 302)

James Macpherson wove fragments of ancient Scottish poetry into full-blown epic narratives and called himself the translator rather than the author of these texts (Haywood 73). William Henry Ireland's forgeries purported to discover a number of Shakespeare manuscripts, including one in

which Shakespeare recorded that one of Ireland's ancestors had saved him from drowning; in gratitude, the bard bequeathed several plays to the Ireland family (Haywood 187-188). This forgery, which creates a biographical tie and literary legacy between Shakespeare and Ireland, is similar to the narrator's work on Shakespeare's sonnets in "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." The narrator aligns his theory of artistic representation most strongly with Thomas Chatterton, a forger of medieval poetry who committed suicide via arsenic at the age of 17 (Dix 180). Chatterton was a hero to the Romantic poets, including Wordsworth, who christened him the "marvelous boy" (Haywood 11). Chatterton's story resonates particularly well with Wilde's characters, who, except for the narrator, successively martyr themselves (or pretend to martyr themselves) to prove a fictional literary theory. Chatterton's "desire for perfect representation" creates an imagined past that posits itself as historically true in order to free the artist from the limitations of real life and allow him to fully realize his own personality. Desire for this perfect representation produces the work of art.

The relationships the narrator posits between art, acting, and personality are central not only to "The Portrait of Mr. W.H.," but also to much of Wilde's work.¹⁰³ The idea that all art is to some extent a mode of acting casts art as a pose. But the idea that the pose is an attempt to realize one's own personality puts the pose (and the acting) in the service of self realization. For Wilde, this self realization is not opposed to inhabiting the role of a fictional character, for the personality being realized—one that is outside the "limitations of real life"—essentially is a fictional character, albeit one inseparable from the actor or artist. Wilde draws on Walter Pater for his paradoxical understanding of personality. In the conclusion to *The Renaissance* Pater

¹⁰³ See Yvonne Ivory's "Wilde's Renaissance: Poison, Passion, and Personality," which traces the importance of the Renaissance to Wilde's theory of personality and discusses it as a justification for crime and sexual dissidence. Ivory notes, "If there is one text in which Wilde weaves together all of the strands of his theory of individualism, its underwriting of crime and deception, its privileging of non-conventional sexual expression, its aesthetic dimension, and its debt to the Renaissance, it is his 1889 short story 'The Portrait of Mr. W. H.'" (Ivory).

writes, “Experience, already reduced to a group of impressions, is ringed round for each one of us by that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced”; however, he also notes a “continual vanishing away, that strange, perpetual, weaving and unweaving of ourselves” (Pater 221, 222). Personality in Wilde’s work, Lawrence Danson writes, is therefore “simultaneously the proof of a remarkable individuality which sets its possessor apart from the world of persons who are not necessarily personalities, and also a foundationless fiction that can make a pose more real than the supposed stability of Victorian earnestness” (Sandulescu 90). As the goal of art and acting, then, to realize one’s personality is to discover who (or what) is already there and, at the same time, to construct something (or someone) new.

“The Portrait of Mr. W.H.” is the text in which Wilde’s theory of personality in relation to art and identity most explicitly drives the fictional plot. Cyril Graham constructs a literary past in the form of the Willie Hughes theory. Erskine tells the narrator the story of his young friend Cyril, an actor in Trinity College’s Shakespeare productions. Erskine says, “He told me that he had at last discovered the true secret of Shakespeare’s Sonnets; that all the scholars and critics had been entirely on the wrong track; and that he was the first who, working purely by internal evidence, had found out who Mr. W.H. really was” (Wilde, *Collins* 305). Cyril begins by discrediting dominant Victorian theories about the identity of Mr. W.H. Wilde first writes “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.” in 1889, when support for William Herbert, the third Earl of Pembroke, as the “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.” of Shakespeare’s dedication was at its height (Schiffer 25). Another popular candidate was Henry Wriothesley, third Earl of Southampton (Schiffer 24). Cyril cites Sonnet 25 (“Let those who are in favor with their stars/ Of public honor and proud titles boast”) as evidence that the addressee of the sonnets could not have been someone of high birth, which disqualifies Pembroke and Southampton; in other words, he uses literary

evidence to disqualify historical figures. Like most nineteenth-century Shakespearean scholars, Cyril follows the assumptions of Edmund Malone in his 1780 and 1790 editions of the sonnets: the speaker of the sonnets is Shakespeare, the sonnets are an autobiographical narrative, and the addressee is the Mr. W.H. of Shakespeare's dedication (Schiffer 20-23).¹⁰⁴ But where Pembroke and Southampton supporters look to history for figures that to some extent fit in with these assumptions, Cyril constructs a figure based in fiction from the sonnets themselves. And by constructing Willie Hughes as a boy actor in Shakespeare's plays, Cyril constructs a "prefiguring type of himself," as Wilde calls the hero of the yellow book in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Wilde, "Dorian" 108).

The construction of this literary past converts Lord Erskine to the Willie Hughes theory, but is insufficient to sustain Erskine's belief. Erskine's understanding of Cyril's critical methodology is clear when he tells the narrator, "This was Cyril Graham's theory, evolved as you see purely from the Sonnets themselves, and depending for its acceptance not so much on demonstrable proof or formal evidence, but on a kind of spiritual and artistic sense, by which alone he claimed could the true meaning of the poems be discerned" (Wilde, *Collins* 308). This statement follows Erskine's narration of Cyril's initial reading of the sonnets, and reiterates the importance of internal evidence as the source of the theory. At the end of Erskine's narration of Cyril's method, Erskine adds,

Of course I was converted at once, and Willie Hughes became to me as real a person as Shakespeare. The only objection I made to the theory was that the name of Willie Hughes does not occur in the list of the actors of Shakespeare's company as it is printed in the first folio. Cyril, however, pointed out that the absence of Willie Hughes' name from this list really corroborated the theory, as it was evident from Sonnet LXXXVI, that he had abandoned Shakespeare's company to play at a rival theatre, probably in some of Chapman's plays. (Wilde, *Collins* 308-309)

¹⁰⁴ Wilde was up to date on the Shakespeare criticism of his time. See Russell Jackson's "Oscar Wilde and Shakespeare's Secrets" (p. 302) in *In the Footsteps of Queen Victoria* for works of Shakespeare criticism owned by Wilde.

Hearing Cyril narrate the process of constructing Willie Hughes out of fiction converts Erskine to the theory. Hughes, like Shakespeare, now exists for Erskine in reality as well as fiction.

Wilde juxtaposes this shift to the real with Erskine's objection: there is no historical record of Willie Hughes. Erskine prioritizes empirical reality and wants to make historical fact the foundation of the theory, whereas Cyril constructs the theory with historical considerations in mind, but makes literature its foundation. Cyril takes Hughes' absence from history as confirmation of internal evidence, but refuses the idea that internal evidence requires historical confirmation.

Cyril responds to the gap between his own and Erskine's philosophies by commissioning a forged portrait of Willie Hughes, a device that temporarily satisfies both men's criteria for perfect representation. Erskine tells the narrator,

It is quite clear from Sonnet XLVII that Shakespeare had a portrait of Mr. W.H. in his possession, and it seemed to me more than probable that here we had the very "painted banquet" on which he invited his eye to feast; the actual picture that awoke his heart "to heart's and eye's delight." It never occurred to me for a moment that Cyril Graham was playing a trick on me, or that he was trying to prove his theory by means of a forgery. (Wilde, *Collins* 310)

While the portrait Cyril commissions is a forgery in that it is not a relic of the Elizabethan era and does not depict a historical Willie Hughes, the portrait, like the theory, is rooted in internal evidence. Cyril has created (or rather, has commissioned the creation of) the portrait out of sonnets just as he has created Willie Hughes out of the sonnets. But for Erskine, the portrait constitutes historical evidence of the theory until he discovers the forgery. Cyril sustains the deception for three months, which he and Erskine spend happily preparing Cyril's edition of the sonnets for publication (Wilde, *Collins* 310). These months are the only extended period of mutual belief in the story. Paul K. Saint-Amour thus misrepresents the story's structure when he

argues, “Tellingly, each man *professes* his belief in the theory only as long as he *possesses* it; the moment he transfers the theory to another person, he can no longer own it in either sense” (Saint-Amour 110). This formulation does not explain Cyril Graham’s conversion of Erskine, which leaves Cyril no less convinced of the truth of the theory. Saint-Amour claims, “even the blissful three months shared by Erskine and Cyril are blighted, in retrospect, by Cyril’s knowledge that his co-religionist’s belief rests on a forged piece of evidence,” but there is no evidence in “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.” that Cyril is unhappy about deceiving Erskine (Saint-Amour 110). Cyril and Erskine’s period of mutual happiness while preparing the Graham edition of the sonnets shows that the conversions and de-conversions in “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.” are less about property than they are about the purpose of art and criticism.

Cyril and Erskine agree that the theory must be shared and are both invested in publishing the truth, but they disagree over what constitutes truth. This disagreement is apparent in their disparate opinions on internal versus external evidence as well as in the failure of Cyril’s suicide letter to re-convert Erskine. At the end of Erskine’s tale, the narrator asks what was in the letter. Erskine answers:

“Oh, that he believed absolutely in Willie Hughes; that the forgery of the picture had been done simply as a concession to me, and did not in the slightest degree invalidate the truth of the theory; and that in order to show me how firm and flawless his faith in the whole thing was, he was going to offer his life as a sacrifice to the secret of the Sonnets. It was a foolish, mad letter. I remember he ended by saying that he intrusted to me the Willie Hughes theory, and that it was for me to present it to the world, and to unlock the secret of Shakespeare’s heart.”¹⁰⁵

“It is a most tragic story,” I cried, “but why have you not carried out his wishes?” (Wilde, *Collins* 311)

¹⁰⁵ The idea of the sonnets as “the secret of Shakespeare’s heart” is from Wordsworth’s “Scorn not the Sonnet” (1827). The lines read, “Scorn not the Sonnet; Critic, you have frowned,/ Mindless of its just honours; with this key/ Shakespeare unlocked his heart.” Gerald Massey includes the line “With this key Shakespeare unlocked his heart” on the title page of *Shakespeare’s Sonnets Never Before Interpreted: His Private Friends Identified: Together with A Recovered Likeness of Himself* (1866), which Wilde owned.

While we do not have access to the actual text of the letter, if Erskine's narration is accurate, Cyril considers his suicide a proof of faith and truth sufficient to re-convert Erskine. This logic shows that Cyril never understands Erskine's concept of truth, which requires factual rather than affective evidence to sustain belief. For the narrator, however, the process of hearing the "tragic story" of Cyril Graham enacts the conversion that Cyril's letter fails to inspire in Erskine. For both Erskine and the narrator, hearing the narrative of Willie Hughes (in the narrator's case, the narrative of Willie Hughes within the narrative of Cyril Graham) for the first time spurs conversion. These conversions bestow not only belief in the theory, but also belief in the necessity of disseminating the theory to the world at large.

The narrator's investment in the theory is both larger in scope than Erskine's and less concerned with material proof. The narrator wants not only to establish the truth of the Willie Hughes theory, but also to redeem Cyril, whose suicide Erskine has covered up along with the theory. The narrator tells Erskine, "By keeping it back you wrong the memory of Cyril Graham, the youngest and most splendid of all the martyrs of literature" (Wilde, *Collins* 312). Erskine tells the narrator, "As for bringing the matter before the world,—the world thinks that Cyril Graham shot himself by accident. The only proof of his suicide was contained in the letter to me, and of this letter the public never heard anything" (Wilde, *Collins* 312). Erskine has contained the story of Cyril's suicide by containing the textual proof of its existence. The effectiveness of this containment aligns the wider world's concept of truth with Erskine's, but the story without the material proof of the letter is enough for the narrator.

The narrator is less excited about the fact of Willie Hughes' existence than he is about what the idea of a Willie Hughes can do for the way we read Shakespeare's drama. The narrator describes his feelings about the theory:

I remember what joy I had in feeling that these wonderful Sonnets...were no longer isolated from the great aesthetic energies of Shakespeare's life but were an essential part of his dramatic activity, and revealed to us something of the secret of his method. To have discovered the true name of Mr. W.H. was comparatively nothing; others might have done that, had perhaps done it: but to have discovered his profession was a revolution in criticism. (Wilde, *Collins* 313-314)

The narrator conflates Shakespeare's life with his drama, and feels joy in connecting the sonnets with both. Here the narrator responds to the trend in Shakespeare criticism of seeing the sonnets as entirely separate from the drama, often for moral reasons, as when Henry Hallam writes of the sonnets, "it is impossible not to wish that Shakespeare had never written them. There is a weakness and folly in all excessive and misplaced affection, which is not redeemed by the touches of nobler sentiments that abound in this long series of sonnets" (Schiffer 22).¹⁰⁶ The above passage from "W.H.," which is not in the 1889 version of the story, also responds to the fact that Wilde did not invent the Willie Hughes theory. Thomas Tyrwhitt pioneered the theory in 1766, and Edmond Malone reaffirmed it in 1790, but by 1889 the theory was out of favor (Chedgzoy 152).¹⁰⁷ Wilde's Cyril Graham was the first to suggest Willie Hughes was an actor, so the narrator stresses the profession, which connects Shakespeare's biography, poetry, and drama, as the important aspect of Cyril's critical contribution. This connection means that critics would have to stop separating the "excess of misplaced affection" they see in the sonnets from the virtually unassailable reputation of Shakespeare's drama.

In both the 1889 and the revised version, the narrator does not merely seek to re-prove Cyril's theory, but also adds to it. The narrator at first, like Cyril before him, turns to lines from the sonnets. For instance, the narrator settles to his own satisfaction what he sees as one of the

¹⁰⁶ Wilde responds explicitly to Hallam later in "W.H.," accusing him of being unable "to interpret either the language or the spirit of these great poems" (Wilde, *Collins* 326). Edmond Malone also worried about the excessive male/male affection in the sonnets, but came to the conclusion that such addresses between men were common in Shakespeare's time, and thus could not be construed as immoral (Chedgzoy 152).

¹⁰⁷ Massey mentions Tyrwhitt's "William Hughes" theory in his overview of the critical history of the sonnets (4).

biggest objections to the Willie Hughes theory: the early sonnets repeatedly urge the addressee to marry and have children, but Shakespeare's own marriage was unhappy, and it seems unlikely that Shakespeare would wish the same on Willie Hughes. The narrator comes to the conclusion, based on Sonnet 82 ("I grant thou wert not married to my Muse") that the marriage Shakespeare proposes in the early sonnets is a marriage to a muse, not a mortal woman (Wilde, *Collins* 315-316). While the narrator continues in this vein he adds to Cyril Graham's analysis, but does not depart from Cyril's methodology.

After an analysis of the sonnets, however, the narrator widens his scope to look for historical evidence of Willie Hughes. He says, "One evening I thought that I had really discovered Willie Hughes in Elizabethan literature" (Wilde, *Collins* 327). Like Erskine, the narrator seeks historical proof. But here the 1889 version and the revised version of "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." diverge. In the 1889 version, the narrator mourns:

But the proofs, the links—where were they? Alas! I could not find them. It seemed to me that I was always on the brink of absolute verification, but that I could never really attain to it.

From Willie Hughes's life I soon passed to thoughts of his death. I used to wonder what had been his end. (Wilde, "Blackwood's" 17)

This frustrated call for proof undermines the value of the research that precedes it, casting the narrator's approach to the Willie Hughes theory in the same mold as Erskine's. In the revised version, Wilde replaces this text with a chapter investigating the history of boy actors on the Renaissance stage and a chapter on the dark lady, the subject of many of Shakespeare's later sonnets. Wilde replaces the narrator's frustrated call for proof with extensive historical research and more textual analysis that nonetheless never attain absolute verification. The theory becomes more complete without drawing attention to the proof it seeks but never finds, without devaluing the research process. Both versions of the work then construct a possible narrative for

Willie Hughes' death that extends beyond the time frame of the sonnets. In the narrator's hands, the critical method moves far beyond internal or historical evidence and begins to produce narrative independent of that evidence.

Wilde's choice to remove the narrator's frustration with the lack of proof during the research process is more consistent with the story's conversion structure, and differentiates the narrator's investment in the Willie Hughes theory from Erskine's. Having gone as far as he can in his research, the narrator puts his findings in a letter and sends it to Erskine:

I have not any copy of my letter, I regret to say, nor have I been able to lay my hand upon the original; but I remember that I went over the whole ground, and covered sheets of paper with passionate reiteration of the arguments and proofs that my study had suggested to me.

It seemed to me that I was not merely restoring Cyril Graham to his proper place in literary history, but rescuing the honour of Shakespeare himself from the tedious memory of a commonplace intrigue. I put into the letter all my enthusiasm. I put into the letter all my faith.

No sooner, in fact, had I sent it off than a curious reaction came over me. It seemed to me that I had given away my capacity for belief in the Willie Hughes theory of the Sonnets, that something had gone out of me, as it were, and that I was perfectly indifferent to the whole subject. (Wilde, *Collins* 345)

The research process is a period of faith rather than doubt for the narrator; the lines about the lack of proof in the 1889 version of the story lessen the impact of the de-conversion upon sending the letter. The letter transfers faith from the narrator, who no longer believes once it is sent, to Erskine, whose faith in the theory is restored upon reading. The narrator cannot explain why he loses faith at this juncture, but he hazards some guesses: "Perhaps, by finding perfect expression for a passion, I had exhausted the passion itself. Emotional forces, like the forces of physical life, have their positive limitations. Perhaps the mere effort to convert any one to a theory involves some form of renunciation of the power of credence" (Wilde, *Collins* 345).

These musings seem plausible enough explanations for the narrator's loss of belief, but they do not explain why Cyril Graham is able to transmit the theory to Erskine without losing faith, or

why Erskine undergoes the conversion process more than once. Either the narrator has not quite hit on the reason for his own loss of faith, or we simply cannot apply the narrator's reasons to the (de-)conversion structure of "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." as a whole.

The narrator identifies the letter as the perfect expression of his passion for the Willie Hughes theory. He never attains absolute verification of the theory, but absolute verification is not, in the revised version of the story, a criterion for the narrator's concept of perfect representation. The thing being expressed perfectly is not the theory, but the narrator's passion for it. The perfect expression of the narrator's passion does not require historical proof of Willie Hughes, but rather the construction of a complete life of Willie Hughes independent of such proof. The construction of this speculative biography becomes an act of autobiography for the narrator:

Art, as so often happens, had taken the place of personal experience. I felt as if I had been initiated into the secret of that passionate friendship, that love of beauty and beauty of love, of which Marsilio Ficino tells us, and of which the Sonnets in their noblest and purest significance, may be held to be the perfect expression.

Yes: I had lived it all. I had stood in the round theatre with its open roof and fluttering banners, had seen the stage draped with black for a tragedy, or set with gay garlands for some brighter show. (Wilde, *Collins* 343)

As "an attempt to realise one's own personality on some imaginative plane out of reach of the trammeling accidents and limitations of real life," the narrator's research into the Willie Hughes theory is a success. The sonnets are a "perfect expression" of passion, and in constructing the life of Willie Hughes, boy-actor in Shakespeare's plays, the narrator has constructed a life for himself. The narrator thus situates himself in a history of passionate male friendship, where such friendship is noble and associated with high art. Nicholas Frankel notes a critical tradition of

reading “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.” as an attempt to queer the canon (17).¹⁰⁸ This tradition is well borne out by the text and in particular by Wilde’s investment in bringing the homoerotic sonnets together with the respectable drama. When the narrator inhabits the role of Willie Hughes in the above passage, he aligns Wilde’s queering of the canon with his formulation of personality; that is, Wilde understands the history of homoerotic friendship both as an already existing literary-historical phenomenon and as a narrative of his own construction through Willie Hughes and the narrator.

Notably, while we have access to something that probably resembles the contents of the narrator’s letter in his detailed and lengthy account of his contributions to the Willie Hughes theory, we do not have access to the letter itself. The exact text of the object that enacts the narrator’s de-conversion and Erskine’s re-conversion to the Willie Hughes theory is unavailable to the reader. This lack of access parallels the reader’s (and the world’s) lack of access to Cyril’s suicide letter, another object intended to spur re-conversion. Yet a third conversion narrative, Cyril’s initial version of the Willie Hughes theory, is also filtered through Erskine’s narration. By denying readers access to these agents of conversion Wilde suggests that the purpose of the story is not to convert readers to the Willie Hughes theory, or at least not to convert readers in the same fanatical way he converts his characters. If readers are converted to the Willie Hughes theory through reading “W.H.,” the conversion will not be enacted by direct access to textual artifacts, but instead through the impression conveyed by the work as a whole.

However, this screening from the reader does not explain why some agents of conversion are effective, and some are not. The intended agents of conversion we do have direct access to are forgeries. The portrait is the most obvious forgery, and gets passed from Cyril to Erskine to

¹⁰⁸ On the sonnets’ role in the history of sexuality in relation to the canon see Bruce R. Smith’s “Shakespeare’s Sonnets and the History of Sexuality: A Reception History.” See also Lawrence Danson’s “Oscar Wilde, W. H., and the Unspoken Name of Love” and Russell Jackson’s “Oscar Wilde and Shakespeare’s Secrets.”

the narrator. Wilde intended to make the reader's access to the forged portrait more direct; he commissioned an "Elizabethan" picture of Willie Hughes from Charles Ricketts for the frontispiece to the much-delayed revised edition (Schroeder 23).¹⁰⁹ Wilde also provides direct access to Erskine's forged suicide letter to the narrator:

The concluding words of the letter were these: "I still believe in Willie Hughes; and by the time you receive this I shall have died by my own hand for Willie Hughes' sake: for his sake, and for the sake of Cyril Graham, whom I drove to his death by my shallow scepticism [sic] and ignorant lack of faith. The truth was once revealed to you, and you rejected it. It comes to you now, stained with the blood of two lives—do not turn away from it." (Wilde, *Collins* 348)

This letter is a forgery in that Erskine does not kill himself by his own hand; when the narrator travels to Germany (where Erskine has gone to try and verify the narrator's extended version of the Willie Hughes theory), he finds that Erskine actually died of consumption. The letter is also a forgery in that it mimics Cyril Graham's suicide letter: Cyril's real suicide letter, which readers do not have access to, failed to re-convert Erskine. Erskine hopes that his forged suicide letter, which readers do have access to, will re-convert the narrator. Erskine's letter fails as well, however. Thus, while Wilde is clearly invested in blocking readers' access to anything that might constitute absolute proof, the effectiveness of agents of conversion in the story cannot be said to depend on their status as forgeries.

Erskine, whose journey through the story is characterized primarily by failures, may provide a key to understanding Wilde's dynamics of conversion and de-conversion. Erskine is converted to the theory upon hearing Cyril's narrative, but is de-converted when he cannot find historical proof. Erskine is re-converted by the forged portrait, and de-converted when the forgery is revealed. Erskine is re-converted by the narrator's expanded version of the theory, and

¹⁰⁹ The 1921 *New York Times* article announcing the reemergence and forthcoming publication of Wilde's revised version of "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." claims (based on Stuart Mason's 1914 *Bibliography of Oscar Wilde*) that the painting Wilde commissioned was sold (for one guinea) with his other effects during his imprisonment, and has not been seen since.

dies on a journey to find historical proof on an international scale. Erskine's conversions occur when he is exposed to creative productions: Cyril's narrated theory, the portrait, and the narrator's letter containing the life of Willie Hughes. But Erskine's approach to the theory does not add to these creative productions; his idea of proof amounts to historical confirmation of something that has already been created. And because Erskine sees the portrait primarily as proof of the Willie Hughes theory, rather than a creation in its own right, the portrait loses its power to inspire Erskine's faith when he discovers the forgery. Erskine's suicide letter is the closest he comes to independent creation, since in the letter Erskine departs for the first time from his search for historical fact. But Erskine's forged suicide letter does not re-convert the narrator because, like Cyril's authentic suicide letter, it adds nothing to the narrative of Willie Hughes. The "truth" that Erskine says was once revealed to the narrator comes back not with additional evidence (forged, fictional, or otherwise), but "stained with the blood of two lives." The narrator confirms that death cannot produce truth when he says, "No man dies for what he knows to be true. Men die for what they want to be true, for what some terror in their hearts tells them is not true" (Wilde, *Collins* 349). Dying for the theory, as opposed to telling the story of Willie Hughes and Cyril Graham's lives and deaths, cannot spark re-conversion. Likewise, in presupposing that death imbues a textual remnant with meaning or truth, the suicide letters (one sincere, one a forgery) both fail to re-inspire faith.

Effective forgeries and forms of criticism thus enhance existing artworks in the service of realizing one's personality. Ineffective forgeries and forms of criticism employ absolutes such as historical proof and death. These absolutes paralyze artistic production rather than generating more. This distinction is consistent with Wilde's argument in "The Critic As Artist" (1891), another dialogue over cigarettes. The dialogue stresses that criticism is necessary to innovation:

“For it is the critical faculty that invents fresh forms. The tendency of creation is to repeat itself” (Wilde, *Collins* 1119). The essay also asserts that “it is only by intensifying his own personality that the critic can interpret the personality and work of others” (Wilde, *Collins* 1131). But this claim follows directly on the heels of a passage about the need to understand Shakespeare in his historical context:

And he who desires to understand Shakespeare truly must understand the relations in which Shakespeare stood to the Renaissance and the Reformation, to the age of Elizabeth and the age of James...he must know the materials that were at Shakespeare’s disposal, and the method in which he used them, and the conditions of theatric presentation in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, their limitations and their opportunities for freedom. (Collins 1130)

In *The Critic as Artist* Wilde advocates individuality and subjective interpretation, but historicism and stage archeology are notions that he never completely leaves alone. “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.” shows its awareness of the shifts between critical methods in a way *The Critic as Artist* does not, through its characters’ debates over what constitutes evidence, but its methodological contradictions are not much closer to being resolved. The unresolved contradictions of Wilde’s critical method throw readers back onto “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.”’s narrative frame, and specifically onto character. In *Victorian Interpretation* Suzy Anger argues that “[t]he frame story works to subordinate the theory to the characters and the relationships between them and sets the theory in a temporal mode, thereby underscoring the relational nature of intellectual activity” (Anger 159). I would add that characters and fictional narrative are Wilde’s main contributions to the theory, which otherwise already existed. Wilde’s additions are overlapping character types and the stories told by and about those character types. The types are the actor—who Wilde in *The Critic as Artist* calls “a critic of the drama” because “[h]e shows the poet’s work under new conditions”—the dandy-critic, and the narrator. To put it simply,

these character types and the narratives they project produce the “fresh form” of “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.”

The ending to “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.” displays the Willie Hughes theory in a way that encourages further artistic production without inspiring the fanatical conversions of the preceding narrative. Erskine bequeaths the portrait to the narrator before he dies, and this legacy, unlike the letter, has an effect on the narrator’s faith:

This curious work of art hangs now in my library, where it is very much admired by my artistic friends, one of whom has etched it for me. They have decided that it is not a Clouet, but an Ouvry. I have never cared to tell them its true history, but sometimes, when I look at it, I think there is really a great deal to be said for the Willie Hughes theory of Shakespeare’s Sonnets. (Wilde, *Collins* 350)

The portrait does not now add to the Willie Hughes theory, and does not inspire the sort of total conversion the narrator underwent earlier in the story. The narrator contains the string of unproductive martyrdoms by refusing to tell his friends the portrait’s “true history” and his part in it. By displaying the portrait as mysterious art, rather than proof of a theory, the narrator has imbued the portrait with the ability to inspire etchings, admiration, and discussion. As such, there is a great deal to be said for the Willie Hughes theory, though the theory must be contained in a world invested in historical proof.

The portrait, displayed but no longer narrativized in personal and critical histories, is both what contains the theory and what (when looked upon by the narrator) suggests the theory’s value. Wilde’s unrealized plan to publish the revised version of “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.” with the Ricketts portrait as frontispiece suggests that he wanted the material text to perform a similar simultaneous containment and suggestion of aesthetic value by supplying at the beginning of the text a visual representation of the portrait that ends the narrative. The narrator’s claim that one of his friends has etched the portrait for him is not in the 1889 version, and it is likely that Wilde

added this detail as a reference to the Ricketts portrait. As in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), the portrait in “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.” both galvanizes and halts narrative; moreover, in both texts it is only the narrators, finally, who know the portraits’ true histories. Unlike the narratives they contain, the portraits seem able to stand by themselves in the end, perhaps because they are non-narrative art forms.¹¹⁰

Narrating in “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.” is itself a mode of acting that is also a mode of criticism, an attempt to represent a self both existing and constructed, and an assertion of a homoerotic history that links theatrical, poetic, and autobiographical artistic production. Narration in this text is not distanced commentary; rather, it enacts conversions that directly and indirectly impact the characters. To shift out of that structure, and perhaps to move us out of the diegesis and back to the frontispiece of an edition that never materialized, Wilde shifts to a visual rather than narrative art form, and to a focus on the narrator’s gaze rather than his words as the vehicle for meaning. The words, of course, remain the vehicle for the gaze, which imbues the preceding text with indeterminate value by slyly projecting future Willie Hughes criticism: there is “really a great deal to be said.” As a way of containing the dissemination of the theory, the ending is therefore quite slippery, particularly if in moving readers out of the diegesis Wilde intended to bring us back to the frontispiece.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ Wilde distinguishes between narrative and portraiture in “The Critic As Artist,” where he writes, “The image stained upon the canvas possesses no spiritual element of growth or change...the secrets of life and death belong to those, and those only, whom the sequence of time affects....It is Literature that shows us the body in its swiftness and the soul in its unrest” (Wilde, *Collins* 1124).

¹¹¹ Kerry Powell sees the containment of the portrait as “a serious compromise of Wilde’s own stated principles, leaving his portrait of W.H. in the barren realm of art for art’s sake, to be enjoyed on a purely aesthetic plane by an elite group with no attention to its social or artistic meanings and purposes” (“Acting” 34). I would argue that the ambiguity of the ending, in conjunction with Wilde’s attention to the form and circulation of the text and his attention to the reading experience, suggest the containment of the portrait is not so absolute. Patrice Hannon writes that “the meaning of ‘The Portrait of Mr. W.H.’ cannot be detached from the experience of reading it,” and we can extend this idea to Wilde’s concern with the way that experience is shaped by the material text (Gagnier, “Critical Essays” 198).

The Dandy as Dramatic Character: *Vera*, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, and *An Ideal Husband*

"The Portrait of Mr. W.H." and "The Critic As Artist" suggest an affinity between criticism and performance. A basic distinction in drama is the relationship between the dramatic text, which is relatively stable (though infinitely interpretable), and the theatrical performance, which is repeated yet variable.¹¹² Performance, like the critical faculty as Wilde formulates it, creates something new out of something existing. If art is to some degree a mode of acting, acting is to some degree a mode of criticism. For Wilde, the point of art is to realize personality, realizing personality involves uncovering what is there as well as constructing something new, and constructing something new exercises the critical faculty. In addition to casting "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." as a textual performance of the critical faculty, this formulation suggests one aspect of the attractiveness of drama for Wilde, since each production has the potential to create his work anew through different actors and interpretations.

The project of perfectly realizing personality, which in "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." is rooted in the literary criticism of a fictional actor and the character narrator who resembles him, becomes especially resonant in Wilde's writing for the stage. "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." is

¹¹² There is a substantial body of criticism on performance and iterability. Anne Ubersfeld begins her study of the text-performance relationship with this distinction: "Theatre is a paradoxical art....Theatre is both eternal (indefinitely reproducible and renewable) and of the instant (never reproduced identically)" (3). Richard Schechner discusses performance as "restored behavior" that "can be rearranged or reconstructed" in a manner "independent of the causal systems...that brought them into existence"; restored behavior is "either a projection of 'my particular self'...or a restoration of a historically verifiable past...or—most often—a restoration of a past that never was" (35, 38). This conception of performance resonates well with Wilde's formulation of criticism as "both creative and independent"; moreover, the idea that performance creates a past that never was is particularly applicable to the Willie Hughes theory (Wilde, *Collins* 1124). Judith Butler argues that "gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (179, emphasis in original). Elin Diamond notes "the terminology of 're' in discussions of performance, as in *reembody*, *reinscribe*, *reconfigure*, *resignify*. 'Re' acknowledges the pre-existing discursive field, the repetition—and the desire to repeat—within the performative present, while 'embody,' 'configure,' 'inscribe,' 'signify' assert the possibility of materializing something that exceeds our knowledge, that alters the shape of sites and imagines other as yet unsuspected modes of being" (2). Powell goes so far as to assert that "late-twentieth-century theories of performance can be seen as an elaborate footnote to Wilde, who produced art, including the art of life, in performative terms without the benefit of a theory of performance to guide him" (Powell, *Acting* 3). To see theatrical performance as criticism in the Wildeian sense is to circumvent the New Criticism-inflected model of performance as textual interpretation that performance studies reacted against (see Worthen, *Drama: From Poetry to Performance*, 52-56).

unique in Wilde's writing because of its form, in which the protagonist, the literary critic, and the narrator are the same person.¹¹³ The overlapping positions of actor, critic, character, and narrator are integral to its status as a text that performs the theory it expounds. In performed drama, the positions of actor and character necessarily overlap, whereas the positions of critic and narrator are not necessarily present.¹¹⁴ But in Wilde's drama all four positions meet in the figure of the dandy, who functions as Wilde's interlocutor in his critical essays, appears as a character type in his fiction, and takes on the character narrator functions of interpretation and evaluation filtered through a fictionalized first-person voice. When Wilde's dandy characters appear on stage, the performative aspects of their criticism become explicit and embodied. Wilde's most developed stage dandies do not only evaluate and interpret; they also tell stories that project and destroy worlds, and place them in peculiar relations to the temporal experience of dramatic action.

Modern theories of dramatic character overlap in suggestive ways with Wilde's personality project, including their use of its key term. In "The Anatomy of Dramatic Character," Bert O. States identifies three main aspects of dramatic character: personality, character, and identity.¹¹⁵ Though States notes the impossibility of abandoning the "synonymic aspects" of personality and character, in general he sees personality as something that is constant and "born with the person," whereas character has moral connotations and is "formed over time" (89, 90). But personality also has to do with surface; it is "the skin of the Character...one of the roots of

¹¹³ Wilde partially approaches this form in his dialogic criticism ("The Decay of Lying" [1889] and "The Critic As Artist"), in which young aesthetes function as Wilde's interlocutors. But the only actions of these interlocutors are to go out on the terrace, to eat supper, to smoke cigarettes, and to gaze at dawns and sunsets; they retain aesthetic distance from their subject matter even as they discuss its relevance to the soul of the critic.

¹¹⁴ Brian Richardson argues that in addition to mimetic, formal, and ideological approaches to character, theories of dramatic character should consider "an *enacted* 'fourth dimension' where the physical body of the actor may alter the status of the character he or she portrays" (Herman, *Cambridge* 143, emphasis in original). See also Richardson's "Beyond Poststructuralism: Theory of Character, the Personae of Modern Drama, and the Antimonies of Critical Theory."

¹¹⁵ States is cognizant of the awkwardness of using the term character to denote an aspect of itself and differentiates between usages by capitalizing his sub-categories. I have not reproduced his capitalization outside of quotations.

the word personality is the Latin *persona*, meaning mask and/or actor... Taken in one direction, it becomes synonymous with 'role' or 'part' or 'guise,' in another it becomes synonymous with the substance of the self" (States 92). In his writing for the stage Wilde thus benefits from a medium that already suggests the personality paradox for which he strives. For States, character and personality have to do with "being" and "having," respectively, whereas identity has to do with "doing," since it implies a quest for the self and a "continuity of purpose that gives being a meaning in time" (States 95, 69). Identity is "one's end" or destiny (States 97). For Wilde, the quest for self is the quest for personality, with all its slippery meanings attached; States would call the project an example of the "spectacle of Personality," a tradition in which he places Restoration comedy and Harold Pinter's plays (94). To realize or arrive at personality, for Wilde, is to inhabit paradox and thus to revise what one's end means. States argues that "ontologically, we envy all dramatic characters, good and bad alike—not that we want to be in their shoes; we would simply like to coincide as they do. We would like to have the slack of indeterminate being taken up, to arrive at something, to be rather than to be forever becoming" (87-88). But "being" is the desired state attained by the characters at the end of Wilde's final and most famous play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The eradication of indeterminacy is not Wilde's goal; if we envy his dramatic characters, it is because they have eaten all the cucumber sandwiches with impunity.

William Storm traces the role of personality in theories of character from States to O.B. Hardison to Seymour Chatman, noting that for "Chatman, 'personality' is not so much an aspect of theatrical spectacle, as States would have it, as something that we give to the characters: 'Characters do not have 'lives'; we endow them with 'personality' only to the extent that personality is a structure familiar to us in life and art'" (Storm 245). Personality in this

formulation is an authorial, readerly, and/or spectatorial construct, since the characters are not real. Storm's position is that while dramatic characters do not have lives, they are our "experiential surrogates" who "accomplish an extremely varied range of surrogate missions on our behalf—adventurous, romantic, intellectual, philosophic, and so forth" (Storm 245, 246). Storm stresses the unresolvability of debates over "the degree to which the artistic depiction of character delivers a 'real' person to the eye or imagination" in relation to characters whose surrogate missions are scientific in nature (Storm 241). Wilde would of course reject the idea that the goal of character is to deliver up a real person, or even a representation of a real person. The surrogate missions he sends his dramatic characters on vary from play to play, though he tends to deploy his dandy characters in the service of revealing the hypocrisy of conventional Victorian morality. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the play most closely aligned with the personality project, the characters become embodied authorial, readerly, and spectatorial constructs. Theories of dramatic character tend to eat their own tails when applied to Wilde not only because their constitutive parts are Wilde's endgames, but also because Wilde works against the mimetic bases at the theories' cores.

States is cognizant of the problems non-mimetic understandings of dramatic character pose to his formulation:

it does seem legitimate to ask how my scheme of character anatomy might apply to a theatre that deliberately abandons a mimetic representation of human beings. Until recently, we have been comfortable with the assumption that the unique thing about drama is that everything in it must pass through its characters. Yet it is now clear that the medium of theatre—its material cause—is not necessarily the actor playing a character who has Character and Personality. Still, I doubt this represents a rejection of artistic principles as much as a new mode of defamiliarization. (States 94)

Wilde's drama certainly engages in a great deal of defamiliarization: of linguistic and social conventions, of dramatic and generic conventions, of gender roles, and of Victorian morality.

Humor, incisive social commentary, and formal self-consciousness result from this defamiliarization. But Wilde's formulation of dramatic character in relation to the dandy goes beyond defamiliarization and becomes by turns (and sometimes at once) generative and destructive.

The dandy often functions as a(n a)moral arbiter and as a liminal figure who is nonetheless a defining voice of the social milieu he appraises. In "The Painter of Modern Life" (1863), Baudelaire writes, "the word 'dandy' implies a quintessence of character and a subtle understanding of the entire moral mechanism of this world; with another part of his nature, however, the dandy aspires to insensitivity" (9). Baudelaire, who along with Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly remade "dandyism into an intellectual and antibourgeois pose" during the late nineteenth century, aligns the dandy with superior knowledge of how morality works in the world and, at the same time, with a distancing insensitivity to that world (Glick 131). Terence Brown similarly understands the dandy as distanced moral arbiter in Wilde's drama: "Wilde invests a good deal of the moral authority of his plays in such figures. For in their languid, sardonic, worldly knowingness they create for themselves a position in their world that implies an observational, superior status to the other characters...and to the social order" (Wilde, *Collins* 354). But dandies are also dependent on the social order they observe and inhabit; as Michael Patrick Gillespie notes, "Dandies do not in fact act as iconoclasts. Rather, they serve as mediators between independence and conformity. In this way, they secure both the indulgence and the protection of society" (Wilde and Gillespie 167). Dandies observe and comment, but they tend not to fully transcend or destroy the social structures they comment upon; by the same token, they can make a reader or audience powerfully aware of what is at stake in those

structures by defamiliarizing or trivializing them. Arguably, then, and depending on context, dandies may transform their subjects (or the meaning of those subjects) through their speech.

If dandies serve as mediators between independence and conformity, they also mediate between and across social and literary forms. Barbey d'Aurevilly's 1845 essay on George Brummell distinguishes between eccentricity, which is "the revolt of the individual against the established order," and dandyism, which, "while still respecting the conventionalities, plays with them" (Barbey d'Aurevilly 33). Wilde extends this play with conventionalities to authorial play with literary conventions. Wilde's drama thrives on using old forms to new ends, transforming them in the process.¹¹⁶ It makes sense, then, to consider Wilde's formal practices as a dramatist in light of the dandy's distinctive mode of speech. Jerusha McCormack thus uses the idea of the dandy to "designate not only the insolently witty figures of Wilde's comedies, but also to specify the personae Wilde created in his prose fictions and as voices for his critical essays. Dandyism, as such, has to do with a certain linguistic style deployed in a certain context and may thus be extended to Wilde's invention of himself" (Sandulescu 272). The "certain context" in which Wilde's dandies deploy their linguistic style, which is characterized by epigrammatic irony and deflationary devotion to high culture, is often high society. Wilde's conception of the dandy is a character type as well as an authorial persona that cuts across plays, critical essays, and prose fiction. Put another way, Wilde's dandies function partially as personifications of the movement across and between genres and modes that characterizes his writing, and particularly his drama.

The dandy's epigrammatic mode of speech is central to his status as a character type that generates and deconstructs worlds. Camille Paglia argues that the dandy, which she calls the

¹¹⁶ See for example Peter Raby on tension between the worlds of high society and melodrama and Richard Allen Cave on how stylistic fractures create meaning in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde* (Raby 154, 225); Katharine Worth on Wilde's use of melodrama, farce, and burlesque (20); Kerry Powell on Wilde's plays "as struggles against literary precedent, contests in which Wilde himself is sometimes overwhelmed" (*Theatre of the 1890s* 7); and Joseph Donohue on the need to consider French symbolist theatre and post-Elizabethan poetic drama, from Webster to Shelley (Sandulescu 124).

“Androgyne of Manners[,] inhabits the world of the drawing room and creates that world wherever it goes, through manner and mode of speech” (Wilde and Gillespie 116). This epigrammatic mode of speech, according to Paglia, “thwarts real dialogue, cutting itself off from a past and a future in its immediate social context and glorying in its aristocratic solitude....In form and in content, the Wildean epigram is a triumph of rhetorical self-containment” (Wilde and Gillespie 118). The world the dandy’s speech creates and carries, by this logic, is equally self-contained. But Wilde’s performative understanding of self, as “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.” shows, has an ambiguous and slippery relationship to containment; it is a mix of the essential and the constructed that reaches across historical periods, literary forms, and reading practices.

Like Paglia, Francesca Coppa stresses epigram as a particularly authorial and authoritative form of speech when she argues that the central function of epigrams is to “illustrate their author’s mastery of discourses” (Coppa 12). But for Coppa this mastery is transformative, aims to be conversant with the reader or audience¹¹⁷ more than with the other characters, and requires a rhetorical and intellectual past, if not necessarily an immediate social past:

[T]he epigram derives authority from the audience’s familiarity with the proverbial ideas upon which it is built....The interventionist position of the epigram gives the author all the powers of both a creator and a critic: one appreciates the originality with which the epigram writer is able to recreate an already mapped-out intellectual territory. And the epigram always does *re*-create the world by taking as its subject already-marked areas of intellectual thought; in fact, an epigram writer *defines* the world as the sum total of all the competing discourses about it. Not just the epigram, but the world is defined by words and not by ‘actual things.’” (Coppa 12-13)

¹¹⁷ See also McCormack, who associates dandyism with audience insofar as Wilde’s dandies turn the “doublethink” language of English society upon itself (Sandalescu 271).

In ascribing the powers of creator and critic to epigram, Coppa aligns epigrammatic speech with the performative criticism at the heart of Wilde's authorial practice.¹¹⁸ The dandy's mastery over divergent discourses, in this formulation, enables a transformative process of world re-creation.

I essentially agree with Coppa's account of epigram, with the qualification that more than words defines Wilde's dramatic worlds. Wilde was attentive to settings, costumes, staging, and the characters' relationships to dramatic space. Russell Jackson writes of the St. James's Theatre, where *The Importance of Being Earnest* was staged, "This was a theatre as well ordered as a drawing-room, with acting and staging whose quality was achieved with the expenditure of immense craft and care but which never drew attention to the effort it required" (Raby, *Cambridge* 162). In the context of theatrical performances of Wilde's society comedies, the dandy's speech need not create the world of the drawing-room, as Paglia claims, since that world is already materially present for the audience. In fact, much of the time the dandy's epigrammatic speech exists in tension with the drawing-room space that is nonetheless its recognized home. Keeping the dandy on stage is actually quite difficult. Among Wilde's plays, only *The Importance of Being Earnest* (and, to a degree, *An Ideal Husband*) carries the epigrammatic process of world re-creation to a point where the world transformed through the dandy's speech is actually inhabitable or, rather, compatible with the stage space in its semantic relations to domesticity.

Wilde's drama up to *The Importance of Being Earnest* is not centrally engaged in the personality project as laid out in his critical writing and "W.H.,"; however, it does enact Wilde's formulation of the critical spirit by using old forms to new ends. The dandy tends to be at the center of these formal innovations. In much of Wilde's drama, dandies collide with incompatible

¹¹⁸ On epigram see also Rebecca Walkowitz's "Ethical Criticism: The Importance of Being Earnest," which notes, "Crucial to epigram's wisdom is the perception that sincerity need not function, perhaps should not function, as the representational logic of an ethical imagination" (187).

formal and moral systems. The collisions are most pronounced in *Vera*, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, and *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), which feature what we might call Wilde's "bad" dandies. In writing *Vera*, his first play, Wilde may well have taken to heart Baudelaire's assertion that "[d]andyism appears above all in periods of transition, when democracy is not yet all-powerful, and aristocracy is only just beginning to totter and fall" (28). The play is a melodramatic tragedy (complete with scene-ending tableaux) that pits Nihilist revolutionaries against a corrupt Russian Czar. The play's dandy character, Prince Paul, is also a turncoat; while he spends most of the play as a witty prime minister in the Czar's court, after the Czar is assassinated he flees to the Nihilists' secret headquarters, disguised as one of them.

In the context of the Czar's court, and in a play whose other characters largely speak in a sincere (or sincerely villainous) melodramatic register, Prince Paul's epigrammatic speech is not clearly distinguishable from villainy. For instance, when the Czar proposes martial law, Prince Paul comments, "It will carry off your surplus population in six months, and save you any expense in courts of justice" (Wilde, *Collins* 702). If Lord Henry Wotton of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) made this statement, we might not be surprised; however, in contrast to Lord Henry's life of idleness, Prince Paul manages the Czar's affairs, advises him on important matters of state, and is thus partially responsible for a great deal of suffering among the common people. But neither is Prince Paul merely complicit in the social hierarchy he comments upon. While the Nihilists are extremists who want to abolish all authority, Prince Paul also undermines the moral authority of the Nihilists.¹¹⁹ As part of his pitch to join the Nihilist cause, after the Czar is assassinated, Prince Paul asserts, "Let me assure you that if I had not always had an *entrée* to

¹¹⁹ In "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" (1891), Wilde writes, "A Nihilist who rejects all authority because he knows authority to be evil, and welcomes all pain, because through that he realizes his personality, is a real Christian" (Wilde, *Collins* 1197). Wilde's views on Nihilists in 1880 would have been influenced by the political situation in Russia, where Alexander II, a liberal monarch invested in social reform, was besieged by anarchist assassination attempts.

the very best society, and the very worst conspiracies, I could never have been Prime Minister in Russia” (Wilde, *Collins* 706-707). Prince Paul suggests that the role of a Nihilist conspirator is already part of his skill set as a courtier. At no point does Prince Paul assert a commitment to the plight of the common people (whom he openly despises), though he does offer the Nihilists money. This strategy proves effective, and the Nihilists accept Prince Paul as one of their own, undermining their moral authority in the process. To accept the dandy into the social (or anti-social) milieu in *Vera* is to reveal the moral bankruptcy of Czar and revolutionary alike.

But if Prince Paul is able to function as both a courtier and a Nihilist, he is not stylistically assimilated into either group. In “Dowdies and Dandies: Oscar Wilde’s Refashioning of Society Comedy,” Joseph Bristow sees the dandy as an equivocal figure who “reveal[s] how power is wielded through the use and abuse of appearances” and, at the same time, whose “verbal pyrotechnics are hardly likely to ignite the fires of any coming revolution” (68, 69). This description of the dandy is newly resonant in light of *Vera*, which, though it is not a society comedy, places the dandy in a revolutionary context but portrays him as void of revolutionary fire. After Prince Paul ingratiates himself with the Nihilists and undermines their moral authority, Wilde writes him out of the play. As the Nihilists plot to kill Alexis the Czarevitch—the successor to the Czar’s throne who is actually sympathetic to the common people, and to the Nihilists’ cause—Prince Paul’s voice drops out of the dialogue. His last two comments are both asides:

Ah, the Grand Duke will come to the throne sooner than he expected. He is sure to make a good king under my guidance. He is so cruel to animals, and never keeps his word.
(Wilde, *Collins* 712)

This is the ninth conspiracy I have been in in Russia. They always end in a *voyage en Sibirie* for my friends and a new decoration for myself. (Wilde, *Collins* 713)¹²⁰

¹²⁰ Oddly, though the stage directions call this line an aside, one of the revolutionaries responds to it with, “It is your last conspiracy, Prince” (Wilde, *Collins* 713). This comment is never followed up on, however.

With these addresses to the audience, Prince Paul distances himself from the Nihilists, incorporates their conspiracy into a volatile social status quo, and depicts himself as able to thrive on the perpetuation of that status quo. By turning Prince Paul's final utterances into asides, Wilde makes the audience-oriented qualities of his speech explicit. Prince Paul's function is not to ignite the fires of the coming revolution, but rather to deflate its radical potential for the audience. The dandy's epigrammatic speech in *Vera*, then, projects a discursive, audience-oriented world that nonetheless impacts the other characters, since it thrives on and perpetuates the corrupt social system whose workings it exposes.

The world generated by Prince Paul's speech is not inhabitable by the other characters; moreover, the last act of *Vera* shows that Wilde does not ultimately want the audience to inhabit it, either. Wilde distances the politics of his play from those of Prince Paul by cutting him out of the last act. The idea that political extremism perpetuates a morally bankrupt status quo suggests the middle-ground at which the play arrives. Wilde's stylistic response to the political situation in *Vera* is melodramatic tragedy. In the final act, the Nihilist Vera, having decided Russia is not yet ready to be a republic, kills herself to save Alexis, who she loves. In this romantic death scene (before which Vera and Alexis pronounce themselves married and debate whether the call of a bird is the nightingale or the lark in a clear adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*), Prince Paul is not present. He is not ejected from the play so much as left behind. The melodramatic tragedy reinstates the rightful (and moral) monarch, Alexis, through the death of the heroine, Vera. The play thus ends with the abrupt triumph of a political moderate—a liberal monarch who partially resembles Alexander II, who would be assassinated in 1881—if not with stylistic moderation. Prince Paul's absence from the final act suggests that Wilde did not wish to ironize or deflate his

ending, and that this particular dandy is a perceptive, parasitic part of the old regime rather than a generative force within the new one.

The epigrammatic dandy critic thus can be (and often is) parasitic rather than generative. Andrew Eastham writes, “The idea of the ‘aesthetic critic,’ as it was promoted by Wilde in ‘The Critic As Artist,’ might be seen as a parasitic figure who demanded the liberties of critical consumption at the expense of artistic production and embodiment” (93). Wilde depicts the dandy critic as generative in “The Critic As Artist” and other works but, as seen in *Vera* and “W.H.,” the type’s generative properties exist in tension with the deaths and depletions that tend to occur when Wilde develops the dandy critic as a fully fledged character in narrative and dramatic situations. Thus Powell might see *Vera* as an early instance of the ways in which Wilde’s “hopeful theoretical pronouncements” about art as a mode of acting are “compromised by the narrative structures in which Wilde seeks to embed them” (Powell, *Acting* 7). These narrative structures often suggest Wilde’s cognizance of and negotiation with formal, moral, and social conventions that are incompatible in their accepted forms with his developing theory of art.

In *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, and *An Ideal Husband*, Wilde develops the dandy’s relationship to domestic and theatrical space.¹²¹ I will focus on *Lady Windermere’s Fan* and *An Ideal Husband* since these plays feature a range of dandy behaviors and relations to artistic genres and types.¹²² *Lady Windermere’s Fan* features a morally complex

¹²¹ *The Duchess of Padua* (1883), Wilde’s take on revenge tragedy, is worth mentioning here. The play’s approximation of a dandy character, Ascanio (beloved best friend of the hero), is written out of the play (sent away by the hero) quite early on as a prerequisite for kicking off the revenge plot. Though a dandy of Prince Paul’s stripe would be quite at home in this play, Ascanio is a horse of a different color, and Wilde seems to want him in the play mostly in order to depict male friendship as incompatible with (or at least sacrificed to) revenge tragedy.

¹²² *A Woman of No Importance*, like *Vera*, portrays the dandy as perpetuating a corrupt social status quo. Like *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, the play expels the bad dandy and teaches its puritanical female character a more nuanced moral understanding of the world; unlike *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, the “good” protagonists all resolve to leave England in the end.

“good” dandy (Mrs. Erlynne) to balance the “bad” one (Lord Darlington). Mrs. Erlynne, having long ago abandoned her infant daughter and run away with a lover, seeks reentry into English high society. She solicits the assistance of Lord Windermere, her grown-up daughter’s husband, but does not reveal her identity to the idealistic, moralistic Lady Windermere. Over the course of the play, Lady Windermere finds herself in a compromising position in relation to the womanizing dandy Lord Darlington, is saved from scandal and ruin by Mrs. Erlynne, and learns an important lesson about the dangers of moral binaries. What Lady Windermere does *not* learn is that Mrs. Erlynne, who rejects English Society after all and departs for the Continent, is her real mother.

In execution, this plot exploits and redefines the meaning of domestic space and the realistic set.¹²³ The dandies of *Lady Windermere’s Fan* experience gendered relations to domestic space, which in English high society is also the bedrock of social relations. Though Lord Darlington is habitually admitted to all the best households despite his questionable morals, Mrs. Erlynne is an up-and-comer attempting to regain her place there. Mrs. Erlynne’s plan is to legitimize and naturalize her presence in English high society through admittance to the house of her morally unimpeachable daughter. As Lord Windermere tells his wife, “she knows that you are a good woman—and that if she comes here once she will have a chance of a happier, a surer life than she has had” (Wilde, *Collins* 430). Like Ibsen’s squatters and Strindberg’s vampires, Mrs. Erlynne talks her way into domestic and social space, which is also the stage space. Once Mrs. Erlynne arrives at Lady Windermere’s birthday party (much against Lady Windermere’s will), she conquers that space (displacing Lady Windermere, who goes out to the terrace) through her beauty, elegant dress, and charming mode of speech. Dumby, one of the party

¹²³ On Wilde’s use of theatrical and domestic space in his plays see Richard Allen Cave’s “Power Structuring: The Presentation of Outsider Figures in Wilde’s Plays” in Sandulescu’s *Rediscovering Oscar Wilde*.

guests, comments that Mrs. Erlynne “Looks like an *edition de luxe* of a wicked French novel, meant specially for the English market” (Wilde, *Collins* 437). Dumby depicts Mrs. Erlynne as a text, but if she is a French novel, she may as well be her own author and editor, since she has tailored her speech and self-presentation for English society. Her charming compliments secure her invitations to other households, and when Cecil Graham notes that Mrs Erlynne “can make one do anything she wants,” Dumby replies, “Hope to goodness she won’t speak to me!” (Wilde, *Collins* 437). Mrs. Erlynne, who notes after the party “that there are just as many fools in society as there used to be” and then asks Lord Windermere to fund her impending marriage to one of the fools, is an expert visual and verbal performer who understands the social stakes as well as the monetary value of her performance.

But if Mrs. Erlynne conquers the Windermere’s drawing-room, she also finds that reentering her old social milieu threatens to make her what she once was: a mother. Mrs. Erlynne’s speech registers this pressure when she goes to see the Windermere’s the morning after saving Lady Windermere from scandal (and exposing herself to it instead):

LORD WINDERMERE. What do you mean by coming here this morning? What is your object? (*Crossing L.C. and sitting.*)

MRS. ERLYNNE (*with a note of irony in her voice*): To bid good-bye to my dear daughter, of course. (LORD WINDERMERE *bites his under lip in anger*. MRS. ERLYNNE *looks at him, and her voice and manner become serious. In her accents as she talks there is a note of deep tragedy. For a moment she reveals herself.*) Oh, don’t imagine I am going to have a pathetic scene with her, weep on her neck and tell her who I am, and all that kind of thing. I have no ambition to play the part of a mother. Only once in my life have I known a mother’s feelings. That was last night. They were terrible—they made me suffer—they made me suffer too much. For twenty years, as you say, I have lived childless—I want to live childless still....No, as far as I am concerned, let your wife cherish the memory of this dead, stainless mother. Why should I interfere with her illusions? I find it hard enough to keep my own. I lost one illusion last night. I thought I had no heart. I find I have, and a heart doesn’t suit me, Windermere. Somehow it doesn’t go with modern dress. It makes one look old. (*Takes up hand-mirror from table and looks into it.*) And it spoils one’s career at critical moments. (Wilde, *Collins* 459-460)

At this moment when Mrs. Erlynne “reveals herself,” her language (and Wilde’s language in describing it) remains quite theatrical. She narrates a melodramatic ending in which she tearfully confesses her maternal sins to her daughter in a “pathetic scene” and the family is reunited, but then rejects this ending, opting instead for modern dress, the appearance of youth, the ability to examine herself from outside herself through the mirror, and a career. Mrs. Erlynne has felt the genuine feelings of a mother, but continues to understand motherhood as a role she does not wish to play. In order to sustain this separation between feeling and social role, Mrs. Erlynne resolves not only to continue to hide her status as Lady Windermere’s mother, but also to leave England. Thus while Richard Allen Cave is correct that Mrs. Erlynne is a “consummate actress” who can play a “range of types” and who, at the same time, is not “readily categorised,” her ability to sustain this position requires her to eschew English society, domestic space, and family ties (Raby, *Cambridge* 228).

This resolution brings the reality of the play into alignment with the good female dandy even as Mrs. Erlynne cordons that reality off from the Windermers. Neither Lady nor Lord Windermere is privy to whole story of the play, but they are left in undisputed possession of the domestic set after Mrs. Erlynne’s departure. Mrs. Erlynne’s departure thus divorces the reality of the play from the realism of the domestic set; that is, the Windermers’ household and marriage are built on a certain degree of illusion, without which neither institution can function. Wilde thus formulates a truth in alignment with theatricality yet incompatible with the theatrical set. In the society comedies the impact of Wilde’s narrator characters on the world around them is semantic, but not physical, because the gap between pictorial realism and reality is essential to the theatrical project of those comedies.

The bad dandy of *An Ideal Husband* is a woman not dissimilar to Mrs. Erlynne (without the inconvenient mother's heart); the good male dandy, on the other hand, is the first in Wilde's dramatic oeuvre to merit (or be saddled with) a marriage ending. To marry off the good male dandy to a compatible good female dandy is to incorporate the dandy's critical role as part of the social fabric, and thus to mainstream the dandy, at least to a point. At the same time, the play also follows the story of a "straight" (un-dandy-like, sincere) couple, who are arguably the protagonists, and the play ends with their renewed commitment to each other. In the end, the bad dandy is ejected, the good dandy is incorporated more firmly into the social fabric through marriage (his final line is "Yes, father, I prefer it domestic"), and the non-dandies (as in *Lady Windermere's Fan*) get a more solid marriage by rejecting moral dichotomies and accepting a degree of deception as necessary to life (Wilde, *Collins* 582). Seeing the dandy as compatible with domestic space is a new turn for Wilde, who develops it further and more radically in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

In *An Ideal Husband* Wilde's authorial narration in the stage directions stresses his characters' status as carriers of other artistic forms. Cave argues that in Wilde's drama, "stage directions, when interpreted *spatially*, show Wilde devising a number of subtle visual strategies to stimulate and control an audience member's imaginative engagement with particular roles" (Sandulescu 38-39, emphasis in original). This account of the stage space in relation to character is generally true of the society comedies; however, in *An Ideal Husband* the other main function of the stage directions is to align the characters with artistic genres. As the characters enter, the stage directions compare them to assorted artworks: a painting by Watteau, a portrait by Lawrence, and a painting by Vandyck [sic] (Wilde, *Collins* 515, 516, 518).¹²⁴ These stage

¹²⁴ Watteau is credited with inventing the early eighteenth-century *fête galante* genre of painting, which features aristocratic and theatrical figures in imaginary or mythological landscapes. See Perrin Stein's essay "Jean Antoine

directions are clearly written for readers of the published play text, and align each character with a painter and his associated genre of painting.¹²⁵ Moreover, by identifying his characters as non-dramatic types of art Wilde heightens and mocks the “rigid typing” of melodramatic and comedic characters prevalent on the Victorian stage (Cave in Raby, *Cambridge* 224).

Mabel Chiltern, love interest to the good male dandy, merits a different comparison; she is “a perfect example of the English type of prettiness, the apple-blossom type....To sane people she is not reminiscent of any work of art. But she is really like a Tanagra statuette, and would be rather annoyed if she were told so” (Wilde, *Collins* 516). Tanagra statuettes, Greek terracotta figurines produced starting in the late fourth century BCE, became popular with the middle classes in the 1870s, and were associated with realism.¹²⁶ Mabel is reminiscent of no work of art (to the sane), resembles the type of art valued by middle-class enthusiasts of realism (in reality, which is not sane), and would not appreciate the comparison (according to Wilde’s authorial narration, which is meant for the reader rather than the theater audience). The stage directions of *An Ideal Husband* situate the characters in a long and varied history of art, where character can be defined in relation (and in resistance) to genres of art and, in Mabel’s case, in hypothetically annoyed resistance to the authorial narrator and the bourgeois realism to which he likens her.

Wilde places the play’s dandies, as his description of partial dandy Mabel Chiltern suggests, in more complex relations to this process of characterization by art genre. Mabel is not

Watteau (1684–1721).” Watteau appears as a character in Pater’s *Imaginary Portraits*. Sir Thomas Lawrence was a celebrated early nineteenth-century portrait painter whose work included portraits of actress Elizabeth Farren in addition to state and military leaders and royalty. See the National Portrait Gallery’s exhibition page, “Thomas Lawrence: Regency Power & Brilliance.” Anthony van Dyck was a seventeenth-century Flemish draftsman and painter. See Michiel C. Plomp’s essay “Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) and Anthony van Dyck (1599–1641).”

¹²⁵ Manfred Pfister notes, “Underlying the implementation of such techniques is the assumption that the printed literary text can, in its own right, influence the reception of a drama in a way that goes beyond its usual function of merely providing a set of instructions for the director” (194).

¹²⁶ In her 1879 book *Tanagra Figurines*, Mary F. Curtis calls the statuettes “eminently realistic. They give us the actual costume of their period with fidelity” (7). Wilde would likely have associated such statuettes with the archeological approach to drama he discusses in “The Truth of Masks.”

a dandy in appearance, though she shares the dandy's witty mode of speech. She is a type, and a particularly English type, but resistant enough to her own typification to be an intellectual match for the good male dandy, Lord Goring. Wilde's stage directions characterize Lord Goring through his resistance to definitive labels and legibility: "Thirty-four, but always says he is younger. A well-bred, expressionless face. He is clever, but would not like to be thought so. A flawless dandy, he would be annoyed if he were considered romantic. He plays with life, and is on perfectly good terms with the world. He is fond of being misunderstood. It gives him a post of vantage" (Wilde, *Collins* 521). "Flawless dandy" is the only definite label Wilde applies to Lord Goring without also noting the character's resistance to it. On the other hand, Mrs. Cheveley, the bad dandy, is a "work of art, on the whole, but showing the influence of too many schools" (Wilde, *Collins* 517). If the flawless dandy plays with life but resists definition in any particular type (other than the dandy type), the flawed dandy in this instance is marked by too many artistic types or genres. The influence of many schools visible in her appearance shows a lack of mastery over aesthetics and character, since Mrs. Cheveley has neither resisted these influences nor synthesized or transformed them (and herself) into a new and independent work of art.

If Lord Goring is introduced through his resistance to categorization, rather than as a specific genre or art form, his butler Phipps is form itself. Wilde's stage directions call Phipps the "Ideal Butler. The Sphinx is not so incommunicable. He is a mask with a manner. Of his intellectual or emotional life, history knows nothing. He represents the dominance of form" (Wilde, *Collins* 553). Being a flawless dandy in *An Ideal Husband* involves coming into contact with, mediating between, and transforming other forms while resisting categorization by them. Being the flawless dandy's ideal butler involves a total acquiescence that is still less legible. Phipps's main line is "Yes, my lord." The most obvious respect in which Phipps represents the

dominance of form, then, is in his perfect adherence to social forms, which Wilde ironizes through repetition.¹²⁷ This adherence makes Phipps unreadable even to Lord Goring, in moments when his comments seem to depart from the butlerial script by expressing an opinion:

LORD GORING. Extraordinary thing about the lower classes in England—they are always losing their relations.

PHIPPS. Yes, my lord! They are extremely fortunate in that respect.

LORD GORING (*turns round and looks at him. Phipps remains impassive*). Hum! Any letters, Phipps? (Wilde, *Collins* 554)

Phipps's impassivity trumps Lord Goring's habitual expressionlessness, since in fact we know quite a bit about Lord Goring's intellectual and emotional life, such as it is, by this point in the play. In the farcical action that follows his conversation with Phipps, Lord Goring juggles a visit from his father, who wants him to marry, a visit from Mrs. Cheveley, who Lord Goring mistakenly believes is Lady Chiltern, a visit from Sir Robert Chiltern, who seeks counsel about his crumbling marriage, and an innocent yet potentially incriminating letter from Lady Chiltern. All comes right in the end; Mrs. Cheveley is exposed and expelled, the Chilterns' marriage is saved and made stronger by Lady Chiltern's realization that there is no such thing as an ideal husband, Sir Robert Chiltern's political career is saved by the idea that publicly exposing one's past sins is not a necessary precondition to working for the social good, and Lord Goring is saved from his father's wrath through an engagement to Mabel. This ending depicts Lord Goring as a successful mediator between and transformer of characters and, by the logic of the play, of forms.

But Lord Goring does not fully resist categorization, since he will soon be a husband and since, in a key moment, Wilde's stage directions note that Goring shows "the philosopher that underlies the dandy" (Wilde, *Collins* 578). In his philosopher persona, Lord Goring delivers a

¹²⁷ On Phipps and the dominance of form in relation to aestheticist depictions of servants and labor, see Andrew Goldstone's "Servants, Aestheticism, and the Dominance of Form."

serious lecture to Lady Chiltern on the necessity of saving Sir Robert's political career. It is this lecture, part of which Lady Chiltern parrots back to Sir Robert nearly word for word, that ensures the play's happy ending. The fact that a philosopher identity underlies the dandy, in conjunction with Lord Goring's impending absorption into domesticity, makes him a less flawless dandy, as the stage directions define the term. At the same time, "husband" becomes a less definite identity by the end of this play; Mabel explicitly rejects the phrase "ideal husband" and says of Lord Goring, "He can be what he chooses. All I want is to be...to be...oh! A real wife to him" (Wilde, *Collins* 582). This gendering of marriage roles, where "husband" need not be an identity whereas Mabel embraces wifedom (albeit the real rather than ideal kind), is consistent with the oddly conservative aspects of Lord Goring's philosophy, as when he convinces Lady Chiltern that "[a] man's life is of more value than a woman's" (Wilde, *Collins* 579). Nonetheless, having been amorphously redefined, marriage and domesticity become for the first time in Wilde's dramatic writing a social state and a theatrical space from which the dandy need not be expelled or removed.

Though this ending shows Wilde's continuing concern with characters as (and as resisting) types, the idea of characters as different forms of art rather falls by the wayside. And while Lord Goring's speech helps to create an inhabitable world, it is his philosopher speech rather than his epigrammatic dandy speech that is most instrumental in creating that world. Lord Goring's domestication also reveals a difference between the flawless dandy as Wilde formulates the type in this play and Wilde's own use of form. Form, for Wilde, is not about resisting types. Form is dominant but, like Phipps, it mostly says yes. The way Wilde uses existing forms is a kind of assent that ironizes and transforms through repetition although, as an author rather than a

butler, Wilde has far greater freedom in the forms available to him and the ways he deploys them.

Generative Narrators in *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Readers and viewers have sometimes felt that much of Wilde's drama, like Mrs. Cheveley's status as a work of art, shows the influence of too many schools. Better approaches to this internal generic diversity have examined its centrality to Wilde's dramaturgy. According to Cave, "plays that begin by securely observing the stylistic conventions of one dramatic genre, usually comedy of manners, are surprisingly invaded by features indicative of a radically different genre. *Meaning* in Wilde's plays begins to be determined by these fractures, stylistic shifts, challenging dislocations; they are the moments that lead an alert spectator to engage with subtextual implication" (Raby, *Cambridge* 225, emphasis his). I agree with this analysis; however, it is also true that *The Importance of Being Earnest*, often hailed as the play in which Wilde's use of other genres and conventions comes together to create an influential form of drama, is the most developed and theatrically viable iteration of Wilde's stylistic shifts and dislocations.¹²⁸ I have argued that in "The Portrait of Mr. W.H.," the narrator is the formal device that makes the piece performative criticism, since we see the critical process operate on, through, and about the fiction of a person. In drama the device of a first-person narrator is not necessary in order to activate this performative dimension, and yet in *The Importance of Being Earnest* Wilde assembles an ensemble of stage narrators who band together to make his critical project an inhabitable reality through their speech.

¹²⁸ Powell for instance asserts that *The Importance of Being Earnest* "is characterized, above all, by an intellectual coherence and thematic solidity which are notably absent in its precursors" (Gagnier 148).

Like “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.,” *The Importance of Being Earnest* is about an imaginary person. Unlike “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.,” *The Importance of Being Earnest* proves the imaginary person to be real. The play is Wilde’s critical project in a farcical idiom; it literalizes Wilde’s concept of performative criticism. When enacted within the stage space, this generative criticism merges with the structuring principles of reality. Nicholas Frankel argues that in “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.” Wilde suggests that “theory or criticism works much like forgery, momentarily detaching us from the empirically verifiable and alerting us, albeit briefly, to a world not yet called into being” (Frankel 25). The idea that criticism projects a world not yet called into being resonates well with the idea that the dandy creates or rather re-creates a world through epigrammatic speech. This language of world projection and creation is also present in existing criticism on *The Importance of Being Earnest*; Katherine Worth argues that the imaginary-turned-real character Ernest exists in an “other dimension” divorced from social realities (Worth 176). Eva Theinpont extends Ernest’s other-dimensional existence to the play as a whole through Wilde’s choice of genre: “Wilde resolutely chooses farce as a means of expression and creates a world separated from actual life by a magic veil of humorous detachment” (Wilde and Gillespie 109). If in *An Ideal Husband* Wilde identifies his characters with artistic genres, in *The Importance of Being Earnest* the discourses associated with one particular character (the one who, for most of the play, exists as a fiction) become an embodied person who inhabits theatrical and domestic space. The space of discourse, in other words, becomes compatible with the material space of the stage as the imaginary person becomes a real one.

A fictional person or voice that speaks worlds into being is also a description of a narrator. Ibsen and Strindberg’s plays, I have shown, feature a frequent lack or disruption of

consensus about the properties of reality, and when their characters posit versions of the world that do not agree, they draw attention to the fictionality of dramatic world-building. In so doing, narrator characters enact change in the formal and material realities of drama and dramatic space and reveal the stakes of narrating when the stories we tell structure our realities. In *The Importance of Being Earnest* Wilde takes these properties of stage narration and puts them back in the service of a consensus about the properties of reality. This consensus makes the world projected and agreed upon by the characters inhabitable; at the same time, the foundational beliefs of the play are about the total fictionality of the agreed-upon reality, and the arbitrariness of the “real” Ernest who makes it all possible.

Wilde’s choice of farce helps to galvanize the generative properties of the characters’ narration and direct it toward an inhabitable domesticity. Powell calls *The Importance of Being Earnest* “a shameless ingathering of devices which characterized Victorian farce” (Gagnier 138). Michael R. Booth notes that farce “was always domestic,” unlike melodrama which had Gothic and nautical incarnations, and ends in the restoration of domestic harmony (Powell, “Victorian and Edwardian Theatre” 139). Victorian farce (a less scandalous derivation of French farce, which is full of adultery) is characterized by male heroes or anti-heroes “under increasingly unbearable pressure to conceal the truth” about their “harmless but forbidden” excursions in “suspect surroundings”; this pressure, moreover, results in the hero’s doubting his own identity (Booth in Powell, “Victorian and Edwardian Theatre” 140-141). Thus, Victorian farce is a genre that tends to align the restoration of domestic harmony with the restoration of male identity. Wilde deploys this aspect of farce in *The Importance of Being Earnest* in the service of his personality project, and so the restoration of male identity in the play is also its construction. And

while the end of the play projects a future of domestic harmony, that harmony is possible only because domestic space is void of ideological authority.

The play's imaginary person is actually two imaginary persons, one of whom is killed off and one of whom is proven to be real. The imaginary person who is killed off is Bunbury, the permanent invalid friend the dandy Algernon Moncrieff has invented in order to get out of family obligations and run off to the country at his own convenience. The imaginary person who is proven to be real is Ernest, a troublesome younger brother who the slightly less dandified Jack Worthing has invented in order to get out of family obligations and come up to the city at his own convenience. In Ibsen's realist plays, stage narration channels the desiring energies of the characters into possible realities accompanied by debts and obligations. *The Importance of Being Earnest*, on the other hand, depicts a society where to do what one likes is to invent not only an obligation, but a person. Bunbury and Ernest both serve to depict domesticity as sustained by fictions; as Algernon notes, "A man who marries without knowing Bunbury has a very tedious time of it" (Wilde, *Earnest and Other Plays* 302).¹²⁹ Ernest is an iteration of Bunbury, who thus emerges as a character type: upon finding out about Jack's invention of Ernest, Algernon calls him "one of the most advanced Bunburyists I know" (Wilde, *Earnest and Other Plays* 301). If the Bunbury pun refers chiefly to homosexual subculture, the Ernest pun refers most obviously to the play's satire on Victorian notions of earnestness and sincerity, though Powell notes that "by the mid-1890s...there was already a precedent for doubling the terms 'Earnest' and 'Ernest'

¹²⁹The Wilde, *Collins Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* prints Wilde's original four-act version of the play on the grounds that the cut act was due to the requirements of actor-manager George Alexander, who wanted to make room for a "curtain raiser" (Wilde, *Collins* 11). But most modern editions of the play present the three-act performance version as the authoritative one, and I follow suit here. Peter Raby points out, "Following the first run of each play, Wilde would then make alterations and additions to the post-production printed text" (Raby, *Cambridge* 144). This post-production alteration of the printed play texts confirms that Wilde did not subordinate or reject changes to the play made during and for performance.

into a coded allusion to same-sex passion” (Powell, *Acting* 111).¹³⁰ The name Ernest also refers to “The Critic As Artist,” where Ernest is the relative “straight man” to Gilbert, Wilde’s chief interlocutor in the dialogue. Wilde thus already sees Ernest as a character construct that facilitates the articulation of his critical project. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the fictional Ernest is a role inhabited by both Jack and Algernon, for when Jack goes back to the country, Algernon shows up posing as Ernest in order to introduce himself to Cecily Cardew, Jack’s wealthy and marriageable ward. In what sense, then, might we see Jack and Algernon as articulating or performing Wilde’s critical project? By asserting that a man who marries without knowing a Bunbury or an Ernest has a tedious time of it, Algernon suggests a social function for creating an imaginary person. Cyril Graham and the narrator of “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.” successively inhabit the role of Willie Hughes, thereby forging historical connections that are both essential and constructed. Jack and Algernon forgo the historical dimension of their imaginary person, who emerges instead as a critical (and thus generative, where what is generated is the person) commentary on the social and domestic present.

If Algernon and Jack are characters who inhabit the role of the critic as well as that of the imaginary product of their criticism, Gwendolen Fairfax and especially Cecily Cardew inhabit author-narrator roles that place them in peculiar relations to the temporal experience of dramatic action. By narrating fictional accounts of their own lives, Gwendolen and Cecily anticipate and shape those lives and, in conjunction with the other characters, the reality of the play. The anticipatory aspect of Gwendolen and Cecily’s approach to reality is apparent in their relations to the imaginary Ernest. When Jack is about to propose to Gwendolen, she tells him, “For me you

¹³⁰ On Bunbury and homosexuality in *The Importance of Being Earnest* see for example Christopher Craft’s “Alias Bunbury: Desire and Temptation in *The Importance of Being Earnest*” (in the Norton *The Importance of Being Earnest* or Gagnier’s *Critical Essays on Oscar Wilde*; Powell’s *Acting Wilde* (112-113); Paglia’s “Oscar Wilde and the English Epicene” (also in the Norton or Gagnier); and Jeff Nunakawa’s *Tame Passions of Wilde*.

have always had an irresistible fascination. Even before I met you I was far from indifferent to you. (*Jack looks at her in amazement.*) We live, as I hope you know, Mr. Worthing, in an age of ideals...and my ideal has always been to love some one of the name of Ernest” (Wilde, *Earnest and Other Plays* 306). Ernest thus emerges as the locus of female as well as male desiring energies. This mutuality suggests a reason why Bunbury is killed off, whereas Ernest becomes real—Bunbury, as the queerer pun and as an ailing gentleman, is a less viable construct around which to shape the social fabric for both genders, and maximal endorsement of the fiction is necessary in order to render it inhabitable.

Gwendolen and Cecily emerge most clearly as narrator characters through their diaries. Cecily’s diary in particular posits an invented past as fact in a way that recalls and revises a pivotal scene from Ibsen’s *The Master Builder*. Wilde was a great admirer of Ibsen’s; he saw Elizabeth Robins as Hedda Gabler more than once, and wrote to her in 1893 to apologize for missing her premiere as Hilda Wangel in the first English performance of *The Master Builder* (Wilde, “Letters” 477, 551).¹³¹ In this play, the mysterious and vivacious young Hilda Wangel shows up in master builder Halvard Solness’s studio and demands a castle:

HILDA. And then you said that when I grew up, I could be *your* princess.

SOLNESS (*with a short laugh*). Really—I said that too?

HILDA. Yes, you did. And when I asked how long I should wait, then you said you’d come back in ten years, like a troll, and carry me off—to Spain or someplace. And there you promised to buy me a kingdom.

...

SOLNESS. What on earth did I do next?

...

HILDA. You caught me up and kissed me, Mr. Solness....You can’t deny it, can you?

SOLNESS. Yes, I most emphatically do deny it!

¹³¹ Wilde did eventually see the production; see Raby’s “Wilde and European Theatre,” which also traces performers who acted in both Ibsen and Wilde productions, in Sandulescu’s *Rediscovering Oscar Wilde*. Ibsen’s influence on Wilde is well noted, as is the shared device of “depicting a lost literary work as a vanished child” in *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *Hedda Gabler*. (Powell, *Theatre of the 1890s* 78). Wilde also asked Robert Ross to procure translations of Ibsen’s *Little Eyolf* and *John Gabriel Borkman* (as well as Strindberg and Maeterlinck’s plays) in anticipation of his release from prison (Wilde, “Letters” 792).

HILDA (*looking scornfully at him*). I see. (*She turns and walks slowly over close by the stove and remains standing motionless, face averted from him, hands behind her back. A short pause.*)

SOLNESS. (*going cautiously over behind her.*) Miss Wangel—? (*Hilda stays silent, not moving.*) Don't stand there like a statue. These things you've been saying—you must have dreamed them. (*Putting his hand on her arm.*) Now listen—(*Hilda moves her arm impatiently. Solness appears struck by a sudden thought.*) Or else—wait a minute! There's something strange in back of all this, you'll see! (*In a hushed but emphatic voice.*) This all must have been in my thoughts. I must have willed it. Wished it. Desired it. And so—Doesn't that make sense? (*Hilda remains still. Solness speaks impatiently.*) Oh, all right, for God's sake—so I *did* the thing, too!

HILDA (*turning her head a bit, but without looking at him*). Then you confess?

SOLNESS. Yes. Whatever you please.

...

HILDA. And the ten years are up. And you didn't come—as you promised me. (Ibsen, "Complete" 806-808)

Hilda narrates a shared past Solness does not remember, and demands that he endorse it as a reality that is also a binding contract. Because Solness endorses Hilda's version of past events, he owes her a kingdom. Solness attempts to frame Hilda's story as a product of his own desire, rather than a factual event—a reading the play endorses as a possibility, though not as a certainty—but she rejects this idea as non-binding.

In the above-quoted scene the "true" version of past events is never clearly established; it is the agreed-upon version of reality that is important and attended by binding obligations and, eventually, fatal consequences. Wilde takes this structure and runs with it, eschewing the fatal consequences and concretizing the encounter's origins in fiction through the devices of Cecily's diary and a series of props. Cecily first uses the diary to record Algernon's compliments in real time, taking dictation as Algernon, charmed but discomfited, struggles to rise to the occasion with suitably flattering remarks. Cecily asks Algernon to pause, repeat himself, and indicate the start of new paragraphs as needed, and thus prioritizes the textual rendering over the actual experience of receiving the compliments. When Algernon finally asks Cecily to marry him, she

responds, “You silly boy! Of course. Why, we have been engaged for the last three months” (Wilde, *Earnest and Other Plays* 330). Cecily then narrates the progress of their relationship, consulting her diary as an authority:

ALGERNON. But how did we become engaged?

CECILY. Well, ever since dear Uncle Jack first confessed to us that he had a younger brother who was very wicked and bad, you of course have formed the chief topic of conversation between myself and Miss Prism. And of course a man who is much talked about is always very attractive. One feels there must be something in him, after all. I dare say it was foolish of me, but I fell in love with you, Ernest.

ALGERNON. Darling. And when was the engagement actually settled?

CECILY. On the 14th of February last. Worn out by your entire ignorance of my existence, I determined to end the matter one way or the other, and after a long struggle with myself I accepted you under this dear old tree here. The next day I bought this little ring in your name....And this is the box in which I keep all your dear letters. (*Kneels at table, opens box and produces letters tied up with blue ribbon.*)

ALGERNON. My letters! But, my own sweet Cecily, I have never written you any letters.

CECILY. You need hardly remind me of that, Ernest. I remember only too well that I was forced to write your letters for you. I wrote always three times a week, and sometimes oftener. (Wilde, *Earnest and Other Plays* 330-331)

The exchange continues in this vein for some time, during which Cecily produces gifts she has bought herself in “Ernest”’s name, describes the time she broke off their engagement and how they were reconciled, and announces her ideal, like Gwendolen’s, of loving someone named Ernest. Throughout, Algernon gives only a token protest or two about not having done whatever Cecily ascribes to him, and in general agrees to the story of their engagement that Cecily narrates. As in *The Master Builder*, agreeing to the past Cecily narrates constitutes a binding promise or contract; in this case, a promise of marriage.¹³² Algernon understands from the first scene of the play that marriage is “business,” a contract at the center of the social fabric, and he

¹³² Powell notes additional sources for Cecily’s anticipatory proposal in W.S. Gilbert’s *Tom Cable* (1875) and Fred Horner’s *Two Johnnies* (1893) (Powell, *Theatre of the 1890s* 131). Booth links the male acquiescence to the engagement between strangers in *Tom Cable* to the male hero’s doubt in his identity (Powell, “Victorian and Edwardian Theatre” 141). It is intriguing to consider that Ibsen might have adopted a convention of farce as a structuring principle of *The Master Builder*, though I lack the scope to investigate further at this time.

is reconciled to (in fact, made enthusiastic about) the institution by a young woman who has transformed the contract into a fiction that is nonetheless binding (Wilde, *Earnest and Other Plays* 297). It is clear throughout that the entire courtship and engagement story is a fiction, and it becomes equally clear that the fiction will be an excellent foundation for Algernon and Cecily's marriage, once Algernon irons out the small problem of his name.

Cecily and Gwendolen both use their diaries as proofs of fictional events, and as a means of turning their desires into realities. Worth notes that Cecily uses "her diary as the young men use Ernest to act out her 'will'." Wilde strikes very modern notes in the discussion sparked off by the diary about the difficulty of distinguishing between memory and fiction, both seen here as part of the self-creating process" (Worth 168). I would argue that while Cecily certainly uses her diary to enact her will—a trait she shares with the way Hilda and Solness use narration, as well as with Jack and Algernon's use of the character construct Ernest—in fact there is not much difficulty distinguishing between memory and fiction in this play. Instead, fiction is willfully adopted *as* memory, or rather as an agreed-upon and authoritative substitute for it. Thus, Gwendolen can refer to her own diary as "something sensational to read on the train" at the same moment in which she produces it in order to verify her engagement to Mr. Ernest Worthing (Wilde, *Earnest and Other Plays* 336). The intermittent historicism of Wilde's critical writing becomes, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, parodic invocations of the historical record.

Wilde connects the position of the diarist to that of the novelist not only through Cecily's fictionalizations and Gwendolen's reading practices, but also through Miss Prism's writing practices. Miss Prism, upon revealing her culpability in losing baby Jack (in fact baby Ernest) when she mistakes him for the manuscript of her triple-decker novel, falls into the waiting arms of Reverend Chasuble. In the three-act performance version the play ends here, with the addition

of Jack's final invocation of the title. In the four-act version, Reverend Chasuble proposes to Miss Prism, who in turn volunteers to "forward you, this evening, the three last volumes of my diary. In these you will be able to peruse a full account of the sentiments that I have entertained towards you for the last eighteen months" (Wilde, *Collins* 416). Though Miss Prism lacks Cecily's ability to turn her desire into a retroactive truth through narration, she too has kept a written record of a romance that was until this point fictional. Lady Bracknell comments, "Prism, from your last observation to Dr. Chasuble, I learn with regret that you have not yet given up your passion for fiction in three volumes" (Wilde, *Collins* 416). The diarist is a novelist, and the outcome of her literary production is marriage, though Miss Prism is less sophisticated than Cecily and Gwendolen in her understanding of this process. Miss Prism sees her diary and her novel as separate texts, whereas Gwendolen purposely reads her diary as a novel; likewise, Miss Prism does not present her account of her romance with Reverend Chasuble as a binding marriage contract, though she does see it as proof of her emotions.

But Miss Prism's role as a stage narrator in both versions of the play lies primarily in her recitation of Jack's origin story: the accident whereby Miss Prism "deposited the manuscript in the bassinette and placed the baby in the hand-bag," thus causing the infant Ernest to be discovered in the cloak-room of Victoria Railway Station (Wilde, *Earnest and Other Plays* 354). The mixing up of manuscript and child is reminiscent of *Hedda Gabler* but also, as Powell discusses, *The Foundling* (1894), a farce by actor/author W. Lestocq in collaboration with actor E.M. Robson. Powell notes that the play makes use of the idea of a character with origins in a novel to the point where the main character in *The Foundling* "proceeds to narrate his story in novelistic style," including conventions of serial publication such as, "To be continued in our next" (Powell, "Theatre of 1890s" 114). Powell notes yet another antecedent to the handbag gag

in *Mr. Boodle's Predicament* (1890), in which “comic mixups ensue when a lady novelist *loses* a handbag with her initials on it in Queensborough Station”; the lady novelist uses the handbag, as in Wilde’s play, to carry her manuscript (Powell, *Theatre of the 1890s* 126, emphasis in original). Jack’s origin story casts him as a novel manuscript, a farcical plot device, and a character whose speech is laden with narrative conventions of serial fiction. The result of Miss Prism’s stage narration, in other words, is Jack’s identity, which is “not a soul, but rather the product of texts, rituals, and performance” (Powell, *Acting* 11).¹³³ Miss Prism’s story alone is not enough to construct this identity: she refers Jack to Lady Bracknell (“There is the lady who can tell you who you really are”), who reveals a bit more of the story but cannot remember Jack’s Christian name, which must then be hunted up in the Army Lists (Wilde, *Earnest and Other Plays* 356). The four-act version involves everyone present in finding Jack’s name in a frantic search through all the books in the room. Seen one way, the play resorts to the sort of proof Erskine seeks (and which Cyril Graham and ultimately Wilde depict as unnecessary or of secondary importance) in “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.”, though it is chiefly Lady Bracknell who makes this sort of proof of identity necessary. But the Ernest identity achieved by the end of the play can also be viewed in terms of Wilde’s formulation of personality in relation to performative criticism: it takes the communal desire for an Ernest, and the acts of stage narration spurred and communally endorsed by that desire, to launch him as an embodied character constructed not from nothing, but from what already existed in another form.

The characters’ communal desire for and endorsement of an Ernest—in fact, their desire for two Ernests, and thus for an Ernest type—distinguishes this play from Wilde’s other drama

¹³³ States notes that the “characters of comedy, particularly farce, are almost constant in their Identities”; once again, then, Wilde turns characterological conventions on their heads (States 97). On Jack/Ernest as text or literature see also Joel Fineman’s “The Significance of Literature: *The Importance of Being Earnest*” in Gagnier’s *Critical Essays on Oscar Wilde*.

and narrative fiction. As opposed to “W.H.,” where the characters struggle to sustain belief in Willie Hughes at the same time, the characters of *The Importance of Being Earnest* arrive at a consensus about their fictional person. Lady Bracknell is the exception to the desire for an Ernest, though she also ultimately assents: when Jack’s biological father’s name is discovered, she comments, “Yes, I remember now that the General was called Ernest. I knew I had some particular reason for disliking the name” (Wilde, *Collins* 418). Wilde neutralizes Lady Bracknell by making Ernest a member of her own family; thus, the type that embodies escape from confining social norms and the transformation of desire and will into reality is embedded in existing social structures. The social status quo is both sustained and transformed, and the dandy characters are compatible with the mimetic set because they collectively embrace illusion. In the process, the mimetic basis of character becomes diegetic and performative.

Stage narrators in *The Importance of Being Earnest* speak not only worlds, but also people into being. But lurking around the edges of the play, specifically in the person of Lady Bracknell, are the arbitrary yet powerful social realities that lead Erskine to “believe there is something fatal about the idea” of Wilde’s personality project (Wilde, *Collins* 312). We see this fatality in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as well in the string of deaths and murders committed for and by Dorian, who is both a work of art and a person, and whose status as “a new personality for art” Wilde stresses in the opening chapter (Wilde, “Dorian” 12). As in “W.H.,” Wilde is always careful to disclaim the idea that the personality project and the theories of art and criticism with which it is intertwined are the cause of the fatalities, and yet fatalities seem to accompany the theory in every work that directly engages with it. *The Importance of Being Earnest* is the major exception to this pattern, since only Bunbury is killed off, and he never had a body to begin with. But the play also invokes Lord Bracknell, a reverse Bunbury. Like

Bunbury, Lord Bracknell is discussed but never seen, but within the world of the play Lord Bracknell is a real (if solely referential) person. As opposed to Ernest's status as a fictional person made real, Lord Bracknell is a real person whom Lady Bracknell has all but made fictional: she invokes his disapproval whenever the other characters behave contrary to her desires. If Bunbury and Ernest began as devices for escaping the obligations of family and social life, Lord Bracknell was Lady Bracknell's ticket into the world her nephews wish to escape; when she married him she "had no fortune of any kind," but "never dreamed for a moment of allowing that to stand in [her] way" (Wilde, *Earnest and Other Plays* 349). Now that Lady Bracknell occupies her desired social position, Lord Bracknell is nowhere to be seen; his attendance at her social events is entirely dependent on whether there is an even or odd number of diners, and if his presence is not required Lady Bracknell sends him upstairs. Like Bunbury, Lord Bracknell suffers from ill health, though Lady Bracknell holds health to be "the primary duty of life" and is "always telling that to your poor uncle, but he never seems to take much notice...as far as any improvement in his ailment goes" (Wilde, *Earnest and Other Plays* 305). The joke is of course that Lady Bracknell expects Lord Bracknell's physical health to respond to her speech, though this feat does not seem so far-fetched by the end of the play. Worth attributes parasitic qualities to Lady Bracknell when she writes, "We can see why Lord Bracknell had to become an invalid: [Lady Bracknell] has taken all the health for herself" (161).¹³⁴ If Lady Bracknell's speech has an effect on Lord Bracknell's health it is enervating rather than restorative. As in *Vera*, speech that sustains the social status quo (since upholding arbitrary, mercenary social standards is Lady Bracknell's primary function) is parasitic, but in *The*

¹³⁴ On the parasitic qualities of theatrical speech in Wilde's writing in relation to JL Austin see Powell, *Acting Wilde* 114-117. Powell notes that Wilde's use of performative speech does not fit into Austin's theory insofar as Austin requires performative speech to occur in the context of everyday ritual. Austin excludes theatrical speech as well as "naming practices which run counter to accepted procedures" (Powell, *Acting* 114).

Importance of Being Earnest Wilde displaces the resulting decay from the state onto a character only marginally more real than Bunbury.

Nonetheless, it is in *The Importance of Being Earnest* that Wilde depicts onstage character narration at its most generative. A fictional persona or voice that speaks worlds—and, in Wilde's case, people—into being is also a description of a narrator. Ibsen and Strindberg's plays feature characters whose narration posits competing versions of past and present events. In *The Importance of Being Earnest* Wilde puts stage narration back in the service of a consensus about the properties of so-called reality. This consensus makes the world projected and agreed upon by the characters inhabitable; at the same time, the foundational beliefs of the play are about the total fictionality of the agreed-upon reality, and the arbitrariness of the ostensibly real Ernest who makes it all possible. By narrating a person into existence in plain sight, against the backdrop of a mimetic set emptied of ideological authority, Wilde both develops and parodies foundational formal structures of modern drama.

Beheading the Narrator in *Salome*

Salome is singular in Wilde's drama: it was originally written in French, it abandons a mimetic or archeological setting in favor of a symbolist style and biblical context, and it is largely free of epigram. Wilde wrote the part of Salome for Sarah Bernhardt and published an edition featuring illustrations by Aubrey Beardsley in 1893; however, the Lord Chamberlain's Examiner of Plays denied the production a license for performance in England on the grounds

that it depicted biblical characters. Wilde did not see the play performed in his lifetime, though it was staged in Paris in 1896 while he was imprisoned.¹³⁵

In *Salome* the physical impact of character speech on the stage space and on the other characters is realized through the commands of Salome and Herod: Salome orders Jokanaan raised into the stage space from his cistern, and he is raised; Herod orders the furnishings of his banqueting-hall to be brought to the terrace, and the terrace is transformed; Salome demands the head of Jokanaan on a silver charger, and he is beheaded. But the play's main narrator character, Jokanaan, only indirectly impacts these changes to the stage space; his willed actions are negative: his refusal to look at Salome, and his refusal to stay in the stage space when he returns to his cistern. Nor is Jokanaan in any way a dandy; in his wasted paleness and probable rags he is the opposite of a dandy. Jokanaan is an undesiring narrator who would be heard, but not seen, and whose refusal to participate in the visually sumptuous world of the characters collides spectacularly and horrifically with Salome, the play's primary nexus of desiring vision and speech.

Jokanaan's status as a narrator is in many ways intuitive: making prophetic pronouncements from the cistern beneath the stage where Herod has imprisoned him, Jokanaan is an offstage voice whose speech periodically interrupts the onstage characters' dialogue. Thus the "offstage space becomes immediately as important as what is to be seen" (Cave in Sandulescu 40-41). A prophet is a character type that speaks worlds into being (though generally the agency in that process lies outside the prophet), since if the prophecy comes true the speech becomes a real—and, quite often, lethal—world. Though Jokanaan's prophecies are applicable to the characters on the stage, and frequently condemn Herodias, wife to Herod and mother to

¹³⁵ For a useful survey of *Salome*'s publication and performance history, as well as the major trends in criticism on the play, see Joseph Donahue's "Distance, Death, and Desire in *Salome*" in Raby's *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*.

Salome, as an incestuous whore, the larger context and content of his prophecies is the coming of Christ. The first time Jokanaan speaks from his cistern, it is to announce, “After me shall come another mightier than I” (Wilde, *Collins* 584). Thus while the other characters respond to Jokanaan’s speech with varying degrees of fear, belief, doubt, and incomprehension, the audience knows the prophecies are true. After Jokanaan rejects Salome and returns to his cistern, his proclamations are to the effect that Christ has come: “The time is come! That which I foretold has come to pass, saith the Lord God” (Wilde, *Collins* 593). But if Jokanaan’s prophecy of the coming of Christ becomes real, it does not materialize on the stage. Thus Jokanaan, like George Eliot’s narrator (though in a totally different style), comments on the lives of the characters but also situates them in a larger world-historical narrative beyond their ken.

In the Christian story, the coming of Christ makes the world whole and rewrites history into coherence. The characters on the stage are characterized by disagreement about the world, its history, and its organizing principles—particularly the play’s Jews, who are constantly debating doctrine. To behead Jokanaan is to cut off the voice that heralds a coherent world. In a discussion of Huysmans, Arthur Symons writes, “What is Symbolism if not an establishing of the links which hold the world together, the affirmation of an eternal, minute, intricate, almost invisible life, which runs through the universe?” (Symons 272).¹³⁶ Jokanaan is the voice that holds the world together, but Wilde’s treatment of that voice (to say nothing of the head) can hardly be called coherent: Jokanaan’s speech is the disruption in a world where the characters already fail to communicate. But the threat of Jokanaan to Herod and his court remains the threat of possible coherence; if Jokanaan speaks the truth, if his references to Herod and Herodias and

¹³⁶ I am indebted here to Donohue, who also cites this passage from Symons in his analysis of *Salome*, though he does not discuss Jokanaan in terms of a coherent world (see Raby, *Cambridge* 135).

the coming of Christ are recognized as accurate, it means the impending destruction of the characters on the stage.

Jokanaan has knowledge beyond the human that Wilde's narrator characters generally lack, but he is not omniscient: his prophetic knowledge does not extend, for instance, to knowing where Herod and Herodias are, or to who Salome is when she raises him from the cistern. Before Salome orders him brought up from the cistern, Jokanaan constantly calls out for Herod and Herodias to come to him and hear his words. Most of his speech begins with "Where is he," or "Where is she," followed by "Bid him come forth, that he may hear the voice of him who had cried in the waste places and in the houses of kings," or "Bid her rise up from the bed of her abominations, from the bed of her incestuousness, that she may hear the words of him who prepareth the way of the Lord" (Wilde, *Collins* 588). Salome is the unwitting means through which Jokanaan's speech is realized, when that speech is applicable to the play's characters, since Herod comes out to the Terrace to seek her when she refuses to return to the banquet, and he brings Herodias and the court with him. It is Herod's desire for Salome, which throughout the play is filtered through characters' desires to look upon her, that drives him to the terrace. The primary narrator's speech in *Salome* has consequences, but those consequences are indirect and of uncertain or external agency.

The indirect physical consequences of Jokanaan's narration, triangulated through Salome's desire, repeatedly prove destructive. When the Young Syrian observes Salome's desire for Jokanaan, the Young Syrian kills himself in despair. Following the death of the Young Syrian, his friend and implied lover the Page of Herodias cries, "He has slain himself who was my friend! I gave him a little box of perfumes and ear-rings wrought in silver, and now he has killed himself! Ah, did he [Jokanaan] not foretell that some misfortune would happen? I, too,

foretold it, and it has happened” (Wilde, *Collins* 590-591). Jokanaan’s prophecies have bigger fish to fry than the Young Syrian, but through the speech of the Page of Herodias the death of the Young Syrian becomes the fulfillment of prophecy, or narration made real. Powell argues that “in this play *no one* listens and speech never breaks out of its self-enclosing circle—for if they listen they do not hear, and no one’s voice ever really penetrates the consciousness of another” (Powell, *Acting* 65). *Salome* is without a doubt a play that stages communicative failure but, I would argue, speech does break out of its self-enclosing circle insofar as communicative failure does not prevent character speech from affecting the world of the play and the people within it.

If Jokanaan is a narrator who refuses desire by refusing to look at Salome or remain on the stage, the other characters make no such attempt. Salome is at the center of the characters’ desiring looks, and the Page of Herodias and Herodias herself are always reminding their counterparts, the Young Syrian and Herod, not to look at the young princess. Salome herself seems to discover desire through Jokanaan; it is her desire to speak with and look at Jokanaan that drives her to raise him from the cistern. She repeats variations on, “I desire to speak with him” and “I wish to see him” and then shifts to cajoling the Young Syrian with promises of her favor in order to get the guards to open the cistern (Wilde, *Collins* 587). And it is Salome’s desire to kiss Jokanaan, coupled with his refusal to look at her, that gets him beheaded. Wilde is careful to give Salome a voice as well as to depict her as constantly looked at by others, in contrast (for instance) to Flaubert’s story “Herodias,” in which Jokanaan is solely a voice from below until his beheading, and the princess speaks only to demand his head.¹³⁷ Thus it is desire in conjunction with sight and character speech that has the power to physically affect the bodies of the characters as well as the organization of the material stage. Salome’s desire in particular is

¹³⁷ On Wilde’s many sources for *Salome* see Donahue as well as Patricia Kellogg-Dennis, “Oscar Wilde’s *Salome*: Symbolist Princess” in Sandulescu.

distinguished by the almost metaleptic quality of calling forth a body to accompany the voice that heralds and emanates from an unseen world.

Though the character speech in *Salome* is stylistically distinct from Wilde's other writing, the speech of his desiring characters is a recognizable cousin to Wilde's decadent descriptions in other works. For instance, Salome says to Jokanaan, "Thy mouth is like a band of scarlet on a tower of ivory. It is like a pomegranate cut with a knife of ivory. The pomegranate-flowers that blossom in the garden of Tyre, and are redder than roses, are not so red....It is like the bow of the King of the Persians, that is painted with vermilion, and is tipped with coral" (Wilde, *Collins* 590). Dowling aligns such speeches with Wilde's oral, authorial, and critical speech when she argues, "In Wilde's own talk, in the monologal dialogues of the great critical essays, in the passionate soliloquys of Salome and Herod, the artist pronounces the all-creating word to speak a new world into being" (Dowling, *Language and Decadence* 187-188). The world spoken into being here is not the epigrammatic world generated (or regenerated) by the dandy's wit; this world is the result of the times when Wilde and his characters hold forth at length, as in chapter 11 of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (when the narrator describes the influence of the yellow book on Dorian, and Dorian's hedonistic wallowing in arts and experiences), or in "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." when the narrator delves deeply into the history of boy actors on the Elizabethan stage, or in the numerous passages across multiple texts when Wilde strings together descriptions of historical figures and periods and art objects. Thus, while Jokanaan is the character who most resembles a narrator, the desiring characters are the ones who most resemble Wildean narrators. The authorial speech in this play is not the speech of prophecy.

The authorial speech in *Salome*, then, is the speech of the court more than it is the speech of the narrator, Jokanaan. Michael Y. Bennett argues that "in *Salome*, Wilde suggests that the

storyteller, in order to be loved by the audience, must die or be removed from the space of the story. But at the same time, Wilde is inextricably present in the text. For the language of the play, in its grandiloquence, cannot be the language of characters, but of a playwright/storyteller adapting the story of those characters” (Bennett 150). But the language of characters overlaps with or is an interlocutor for the language of the storyteller in much of Wilde’s work. Wilde’s desiring character narrators collide disastrously (but sumptuously) with the undesiring narrating voice that promises to make the world whole. *Salome* is a symbolist play but, as with Wilde’s use of other genres, styles, and movements, he adapts symbolism for his own ends by locating the links that hold the world together in the voice of a narrator who only reluctantly becomes a character, and who is beheaded and silenced by the end of the play.

Unlike *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the desiring characters in *Salome* reach no consensus about what or who they want. Salome, who most of the characters desire in some way, sets her own sights on the voice that heralds a new world as well as the destruction of the world she inhabits. Dowling posits a vital cost to the process of speaking worlds into being through performative authorial speech: “Wilde’s performative ideal of language requires both enormous, self-depleting skill and an entire assent to the evanescence and final extinction of the spoken word of art....If the artistic personality is conceived of as anything less than infinite, Wilde’s performative mode is thus quite literally self-exhausting” (187, 188). We see such self-depletions in “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.” when the narrator writes his faith in the Willie Hughes theory out of himself. But sometimes what is depleted is not the self, but another character, as in the case of Lord Bracknell. And in *Salome*, where the physical effect of language is present but indirect, we hear the voice of the primary, undesiring narrator calling the savior into being—somewhere offstage. The desiring characters and their soliloquies, meanwhile, talk past each other but still

find that their speech has consequences. In Herod's case, these consequences are binding and violent, since in keeping his promise to Salome he beheads the primary narrator.

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