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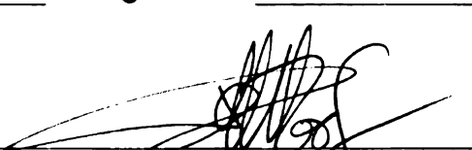

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BETWEEN WORD AND MEANING:
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By

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ABSTRACT

Between Word and Meaning: Wit, Modernism and Perverse Narrative

By

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Between Word and Meaning: Wit, Modernism, and Perverse Narrative focuses on wit in the works of forgotten or understudied comic authors of the modernist period. In these texts, wit occurs in the isolated witty moment or comment, but also provides a model for the entire narrative that undercuts oedipal, heteronormative expectations. The mechanics of wit delay, subvert, or queer knowledge and meaning. Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the *Jeeves* stories of PG Wodehouse, Dorothy Parker's witty short stories, and Anita Loos' satirical novel *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* each deploy comic wit in ways that either multiply or interrupt meaning, leaving the reader in the position of deciphering, not merely reading the text. Recognition of how language is deployed in masterful, yet non-concrete ways in these works reveals a previously neglected narrative aesthetic: one that is funny, popular, avant-garde, and perverse.

The 18th century concept of wit as a faculty or ability is rewritten by these authors as a means of countering expectations, creating an aesthetic based in incongruity, fracture, and unreproductive excess. The proliferating Ernests of Wilde and the multiple sterile, bitingly self-conscious relationships in Parker's stories all shape their narratives into forms that cannot fully resolve according to expected patterns, but work through wit to create a new range of narrative forms that are perversely modern. The homosocial bond between Bertie and Jeeves is both presented and concealed through wit, ultimately

queering the idea of narrative progress as the reader is distracted by frivolous plots that always return the reader to a queer domestic space. Anita Loos' narrator is a promiscuous wit, one whose inability to master her own narrative places the reader in the position of the wit, making us yet another of the people that Lorelei Lee uses in her attempts to become "an educated girl." Each of these authors uses wit to transform knowledge, but also to form a new kind of narrative wherein meaning is ultimately subjective or unknowable.

For Erik,
Who always knew I could

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Prologue: Notes on Wit

Susan Sontag's 1964 essay "Notes on 'Camp'" opened a new avenue for discussion of certain kinds of discourse in twentieth century culture. By exploring and celebrating the 'low' as a kind of success whose qualities lie outside the expected boundaries of taste, she created a means of discussing 'camp' that was parallel to mainstream criticism. This recuperative move was especially interesting in that she found a way to bring 'camp,' which had never been particularly appreciated, into the academy. By contrast, wit historically has been valued in the academy, but over time has lost its high status. Beginning in the nineteenth century, the value of wit in the academy has diminished, at times being ignored entirely. Oscar Wilde, who is widely recognized as a wit, is studied *in spite of*, not *because of*, his wit. Although his dazzling and surprising use of language - a hallmark of the modern wit – is often admired, it is rarely examined critically. Wit is usually dismissed on the way to discussing content. Academics recognize Wilde's wit, but do not know how to process it, and thus ignore it in their criticism. Later wits (Dorothy Parker, Anita Loos, P.G. Wodehouse) are usually labeled 'stylists' and receive little attention. The conclusion we can draw is that, finally, wit is beside the point. So what is the point?

It is particularly noteworthy that the removal of wit from academic study – and, in fact, the devaluation of wit even as a stylistic device in academic writing - occurs simultaneously with the rise of modernism, a movement noted for its especial attention to the use of language and the specificity of the word. And, one might add – seriousness. The very moment when wit's primary technique becomes the focus of literary production

is the same moment that wit is eliminated from academic study. This coincidence is even more curious because modernism and this new formulation of wit have a great deal in common, often embracing similar tactics and achieving similar ends. My effort here is therefore not to expand the definition of modernism to include wit, but instead to show how wit has always been modernist, to reveal the unexpected value of something that was there all along. Through this examination, I hope to begin to be able to find a new way to appreciate modernist wit along the lines of Sontag's recuperation of 'camp.'

The history of modernist studies is one of constantly expanding boundaries. New Critics and others contemporary to or shortly following modernism established a canon of works and a particular set of interests for works called 'modernist.' Since then, other scholars have argued that those formulations ignored certain texts, certain authors, certain thematics, or certain genres. Some of these efforts have tried to alter the overall conception of modernism, while others have tried to incorporate forgotten texts into the existing definition(s). Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz point out that "were one seeking a single word to sum up transformations in modernist literary scholarship over the past decade or two, one could do worse than light on *expansion*" (737, italics original). Further, they note that "quite sharp boundaries between high art and popular forms of culture have been reconsidered; [...] canons have been critiqued and reconfigured; [...] works by members of marginalized social groups have been encountered with fresh eyes and ears" (738). In recent years, Modernist Studies has become a vibrant area of study that is coming to recognize the limitations of its earliest premises, and which is at its best when it interrogates those premises themselves as artifacts of a kind of modernist thought, rather than simply overturning them. This

project is more in line with the latter impulse, in that I wish to show how modernist wit has always functioned within a modernist aesthetic. This realization also reveals certain anxieties within modernism over its obsession with 'seriousness' that have caused wit to be overlooked. I look to Susan Sontag's explication of the ever-presence and ever-denial of 'camp' within the framework of 'taste' as a model for my own project. In describing 'camp,' Sontag states:

> Many things in the world have not been named; and many things, even if they have been named, have not been described. One of these is the sensibility – unmistakably modern, a variant of sophistication but hardly identical with it – that goes by the cult name of "Camp." A sensibility (as distinct from an idea) is one of the hardest things to talk about [...] Camp is esoteric – something of a private code, a badge of identity even, among small urban cliques. [...] To talk about Camp [...] is to betray it. (275)

The power of Sontag's argument is based in her own rhetoric, her ability to assert the truth she speaks, even if she cannot quite point to it. Yet, she manages to maintain an air of authority, the sense that she has it just about right. It is a fragmentary essay: she rightly titles it "Notes on 'Camp'" because it is just that – notes – not a complete and coherent exposition on a topic. Her form is appropriate to her topic, for it is like an essay, but not quite. Her form is also appropriate to her topic, for it is like camp, but not quite – or even close. Camp, like wit, is something that ought to be respectable and isn't, something that is closely linked to taste but that misses the mark. Sontag isn't interested in trash sensibility after all: for all that John Waters films are labeled as camp, they are nothing of the sort in Sontag's estimation, because they aim for low taste and hit the mark

squarely. Camp is something born of misdirection: something that wound up being tasteless without meaning to. It is for this reason that attempts at camp usually fall short: one can't really *mean* to be campy. It just happens.

Wit, however, does not just happen. It is highly crafted, a product of great and intentional effort. It appears effortless, but only because of great skill. Wit is related to camp in the same way that camp is related to taste. They have a common ancestor, but something unexpected happened as they evolved. Like camp, wit is incredibly hard to talk about. Fragmentation seems an appropriate response to the seeming wholeness of wit; I'll turn to Sontag's model to discuss wit, therefore, lest it continue to be ignored. Sontag dedicated her "Notes on 'Camp'" to Oscar Wilde; these "Notes on Wit" look to both Wilde and Dorothy Parker for inspiration.

1. To start very generally: Wit is a kind of control that is based in language. It requires an absolute mastery of language, and the ability to turn subtle meanings in words against themselves to reveal more than that word is *supposed* to reveal. Simultaneously, it is coy about what, exactly, has been revealed – if anything.
2. Wit is not a style, but it is linked to style. Dorothy Parker and Oscar Wilde are both wits without peer, but one would never mistake one for the other. Wit is used to create a style, and authors are often said to have a 'witty style,' but that is not to suggest that wit has a single style. It is, after all, about interplay, substitution, and surprise...so why would it restrict itself and become predictable or proscriptive?

3. Modernist wit tends to talk about change and stasis. It requires mastery of language, and when used seriously, that mastery is deployed to discuss things that are beyond mastery. Wilde and Wodehouse use wit to perform a kind of frustration with class politics and sexuality: either that they were changing too quickly or that they were not changing quickly enough. Dorothy Parker did the same with the role of women, and in her most profound work, the way that the increased speed of life and social mobility had produced loneliness rather than connection.
4. Random examples of items which are part of the canon of wit:

    The Importance of Being Earnest

    Madeline Kahn

    The foxtrot

    Grant Wood's *American Gothic*

    Noël Coward

    Anything Goes

    Winston Churchill, at moments

    Hello Kitty

5. Wit and comedy are related, but are not the same. They are concerned with similar situations, but bring about different outcomes. Comedy (and its attendant concept, humor) are often understood as compensatory moves for the frustrations and inconsistencies of the world. Bakhtin introduced the idea of carnival: "temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and

prohibitions" (10). This brief release from order allows order to be maintained; carnival ultimately reinscribes the strictures against which it rebels. Comedy offers escape from wordly concerns, if only for a time. Wit offers no escape: it magnifies, not mitigates, the concerns it addresses.

6. Wit has an affinity for cruelty. When a wit makes a proclamation, their audience either understands it, or they don't. When they do not, wit has been used as a weapon – a sharp, pointy weapon that slips so effortlessly into the flesh that it goes unnoticed for a bit. Then one bleeds to death. George Meredith claimed that wit "is like the sword of the cavalier in the Mall, quick to flash out upon the slightest provocation, and for a similar office – to wound" (7). When the audience understands wit, they are complicit in the fact that others do not. While they may not have committed the act of cruelty, they did stand by and watch as it happened, and delighted in not being its victim.
7. Wit appeals to, in fact relies upon, a speaker (the wit) and an audience. Both must exist for wit to be witty. There is nothing so pathetic as wit for one.
8. Like comedy, when wit is analyzed, it dies. Sontag claimed that Camp "is one of the hardest things to talk about" and that "to talk about Camp [...] is to betray it." Her own essay, therefore, is an act of treachery, but one that fits in perfectly with the aesthetic she describes. Wit begs to be discussed, but fails to produce concrete meaning upon analysis. Wit depends entirely upon the specific arrangement of its elements (words, notes, steps, brushstrokes), and when they are prized apart, the parts mean less than the whole. Try to explain to someone why a

joke they didn't understand was funny, and you'll experience this. Additionally, you'll become the aforementioned bystander to cruelty.

9. Wit has been examined at great length by Sigmund Freud (in one of the least witty texts ever created, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, 1905). The amount of scrutiny paid to wit by such an important figure in the modernist moment would seem to make wit an important avenue for study by scholars of modernism. This has not been true, though. Freud's work on jokes, which he claimed throughout his life to be some of his most important, is rarely cited by critics, although everyone does seem to acknowledge its existence and that it is doing something. They are simply not quite sure what it is doing and how to deal with it. This is partly because Freud himself misunderstands his topic so much. He goes to great lengths to explain how jokes work; as we've established, this only makes them less interesting. Also, Freud tends to think of jokes as working within a framework of repression: what is not said is what makes them funny. Wit, by contrast, works more like sublimation: what *wants* to be said is funneled into what *can* be said. Wit can say a lot as long as it never says exactly what it means.

10. Wit is an economy, but it is not miserly. Dorothy Parker could say "men are sexist, chauvinist pigs," but instead she wrote the brilliantly witty poem "News Item." To quote it in its entirety:

> Men seldom make passes
>
> at girls who wear glasses (*Portable* 109)

She simultaneously says less *and* more, broaching issues of desire, beauty, self-image, and bitterness. The poem is a masterwork of understatement, yet it is a complete statement. It is an example of total mastery over language, and total mastery over sentiment. A gender's worth of anxiety hangs in the balance, but it does not despair. It is a simple statement. Its brief and controlled form demonstrates a lack of angst. The poem may express a truth, but it is not a truth that Parker feels the need to apprehend with disquiet. Her wit allows her to assess an unpleasant situation, then file it away. There is no space here to dwell upon it. Contrary to the famous aphorism, wit need not be brief - but it may not be any longer than absolutely necessary.

11. Modernist studies developed in response to the 'new' style of work that required 'new' kinds of reading. Its primary mode is formalist, its primary technique the close reading. Wit, as we have seen, refuses to be parsed. When it is examined closely, it dissolves into babble. This frustrates scholars who can take apart a Grecian urn word by word, but cannot get too close to wit. Modernist studies as a practice seems ill-equipped to deal with wit in any effective manner, and thus dismisses it. In wit, form never equals content. Content usually exceeds form.
12. Wit sublimates, modernism represses. Like camp and sophistication, sublimation is a variant of repression but hardly identical with it. Once again, modernist studies is equipped to deal with a certain kind of psychological apparatus, and wit challenges it with a different one.

Enough with the maxims and proclamations. Let us turn to an example. I have claimed that wit may not be fully explained by a traditional close reading, but as that is the tool of

the literary critic, it is what we must use. When reading wit, however, the ultimate goal may be to comprehend indeterminacy more than to explain meaning. With this shift of goal, examination of wit can become a productive, rather than frustrating, process. One of Dorothy Parker's more famous aphorisms should serve, and may survive its own examination. Like Wilde, Parker is outrageously misquoted, and is credited with having said a huge variety of things that she didn't. Other witticisms are correctly attributed to her, but their context is missing or incorrect. This aphorism was supposedly created on the spot during a game of Can-You-Make-A-Sentence, in which someone is given a word and asked to build a sentence using it. She was prompted with "horticulture," and responded with "You may lead a whore to culture, but you can't make her think" (Drennan 121).

How does this show us the mechanisms of wit? There are several important innovations taking place in this single comment. First, it is based in a familiar aphorism: "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink." The familiar becomes the unfamiliar, yet is immediately apprehended. The formulation is shocking both because it does not do what is expected, and also because its originality is somehow familiar. In short, it is Freud's concept of the uncanny, which is itself much wittier than his conception of joke-work. One is expected to both know the original saying as well as understand the new version's similarities to and differences from it, and to comprehend all of this in an instant. Or at least after a short pause. Wit is often followed by a short pause. Sometimes that is how you recognize it: because you're given time to reflect.

[Pause]

Other dynamics are at work in Parker's turn of phrase, of course. The word "horticulture" is pronounced as if it is the phrase "whore to culture." In fact, it only makes sense if that is the pronunciation. Without the original context, knowing that it was a response to a specific prompt, it sounds as if she is pontificating about ladies of the evening. This reading works perfectly well on its own, but reduces the layers of meaning. But then there are also the comparisons being drawn. Or are they being drawn? Is she saying that women are like horses, that prostitutes are like plants, or that women are whores? Or is she saying all three? Is she claiming that horses have minds of their own...just like women? And if so, who comes out better in that comparison? What about the issues of compulsion and ability: horses cannot be *forced* to drink, but whores may not be *capable* of thought. Or is it that they are capable, but unwilling? And how are we to tell the difference?

The answer, as these notes have demonstrated, is that we are not supposed to tell the difference. We are supposed to know that a difference exists, but we are not supposed to dwell *in* the difference. It is the both/and that separates wit from the either/or of the commonplace saying. As Parker said, "There's a hell of a difference between wisecracking and wit. Wit has truth in it; wisecracking is just calisthenics with words" (Drennan124). It is this refusal to *mean* that makes wit impenetrable as a mode of academic study. Except, of course, that wit *does* mean. It simply *means* in a way that has more to do with unpacking than it does with putting back together.

Modernist wit is almost a kind of over-mastery; that is, it is language deployed so precisely that it almost brings meaning to a halt at the same time that it multiplies meaning. It is in this way that modernist wit can be called perverse. Wit does not

misdirect so much as it differently directs; it depends upon a reader/audience understanding expectations and recognizing when they have been somehow disrupted. The term 'perverse' is appropriate both for its generic meaning as well as for its sexual overtones. Wit disrupts meaning at the level of the word as well as at the level of narrative, and narrative is often (and best) described in metaphors of sexuality. Narrative that progresses along established lines and in familiar ways can be called heteronormative, while wit and other tactics tend to pervert narrative and render it differently meaningful. In her discussion of the fetish, a concept closely linked to the perverse, Ellen McCallum describes how this mechanism "productively disrupts assumptions" about meaning (xix). The 'meaning' she refers to is sexual difference; wit produces narrative difference. The two mechanisms are remarkably similar and can be discussed using the same terminology. Ultimately, wit means-yet-doesn't-quite-mean: it projects an expectation for meaning, then progresses elsewhere. Wit is not opposite from, or contrary to, anything. It is, rather, *almost*. Wit very nearly operates as other, more normative modes of discourse, but ultimately carves its own discursive space whose ultimate function is to show the contingency of the discourse it nearly mimics. It is in this way a kind of parasitic discourse, for it relies upon an established pattern of meaning making (often narrative itself) in order to perversely refocus that pattern and reveal its own inconsistencies.

Academic writing, since the advent of the close reading, has been a remarkably witless endeavor. It is clever, it is insightful, it is occasionally elegant, but it is almost never witty.[1] Academia can neither talk about nor produce wit. When it tries, the result is tedious, like Freud's analysis of jokes, or just downright silly and unproductive. That

is why the format of Sontag's "Notes" is so useful, because it allows a non-traditional way of discussing a non-traditional subject that still, somehow, *means*. With any luck, wit can be treated like camp, as an anomalous category that defies expected nomenclatures and instead has to be treated on its own terms. They are not terms that may be universally appreciated, but they are the only terms that can work. In this, I echo Tyrus Miller, who has claimed "I am suggesting that we consider ridiculousness – its verbal and visual embodiment in comic types, styles, forms, and modes of address – as one of the specific ways in which modernity may be artistically expressed" ("Ridiculously Modern Marsden" 90). The ridiculous, the silly, the comic, the witty – these have a place in modernism, and deserve to be recognized. The problem is that a century of literary criticism has taught us that wit has nothing to say that matters much. So what is left for the academic to do? The answer, since Wilde, has been to ignore it. Modernist studies, as a practice, has certainly taken this tack. This precludes the possibility of wit as a meaningful and inherently critical mode, one that, in its best examples, can reveal modernism's own foundational principles and biases.

Introduction

"What an Elegant, Swellegant Party This Is"

If Cole Porter threw a party for TS Eliot, would anyone attend?

Maybe for the food. Maybe for the conversation. Certainly for the gossip. Not, however, for the privilege of being considered an intellectual elite. For that, TS Eliot has to throw the party. Then, his guests hope to hang out at the bar with Cole Porter.

Why is Cole Porter, like Oscar Wilde, Dorothy Parker, and other modernist wits, not recognized as an intellect, but only as a wit? Why is his brilliance confined to a specific realm of discourse and meaning, one which is then hardly ever studied in a twentieth century context? Why, when the names of these wits are mentioned, do people smile and nod knowingly, as if their genius, whatever it may be, is fully understood, appreciated, and consumed? Does wit in the modernist moment come pre-digested, devoid of any discoveries to be made? Is there nothing that wit can teach us in the twentieth century, or about the twentieth century? By the time of Oscar Wilde, the first really great modernist wit, wit itself had come to be thought of as a product, as a commodity, something whose purpose was to be consumed wholly and used entirely, not really an intellectual experiment so much as a party game. And of course, that party would be fun, but not an intellectual salon.

Just because wit had come to be consumed in this way does not mean that there was nothing else to be found in wit. Academic practice, while formulating the canon of

what would come to be called 'modernism,' ceased to consider wit as a valuable endeavor. This fact is not definitive of wit's own value, but reflects the values and prejudices of a new kind of academic inquiry which was devoted to the pursuit of 'seriousness' above all else. And while Cole Porter may throw an elegant party, nothing he called "swellegant" could be confused with being serious. The witticism, the quip, the *bon mot* was valued as a mark of cleverness. Wit as a faculty, as a sense of the world and one's command over it, was no longer seen as relevant, as it would have for Swift, Pope and Johnson. Wilde won academic praise for *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, but not for *The Importance of Being Earnest*. (Audiences, however, loved it.) Students studied Dorothy Parker's "Big Blonde," but rarely her funny character sketches. Authors whose work was entirely comic, like PG Wodehouse, found no place in the academy at all. Had he written a tragic story of Bertie and Jeeves, that may have made the cut, but his madcap, funny adventures never would. Not serious. Not worthy. Nothing to learn.

The goal of this project is to interrogate modernist wit, and to see what lessons it does have to teach. In particular, the relationship between the individual moment of wit and the structure of narrative must be examined. If a witty line can shade the way we understand that moment of a text, what does it have to teach us about the text as a whole? This project will look at four iconic, yet not necessarily canonical, modernist wits: Oscar Wilde, Dorothy Parker, PG Wodehouse, and Anita Loos, to see how their wit operates, both at individual moments and at the level of narrative. Wit and narrative are both ways of structuring meaning that is based in language. It seems unlikely that the two structures, using the same mechanisms, might not influence each other. Yet until now, that is exactly the assumption of literary critics: whatever value there may be in witty

texts is to be found around, beneath, or in between the wit. The wit itself was not to be valued, only to be laughed at.

In modernist wit, the moment of wit operates in the same way as the larger narrative that contains the wit. The quick one-liner, then, which is usually enjoyed, consumed, and discarded, becomes the means of entry into the larger work. By paying attention to the way(s) that the witticisms themselves operate, the stakes and the mechanisms of the narrative are revealed. The trick is paying attention to them critically, not merely as entertainment. It is also for this reason that the prevailing modernist models of comedy, Bergson and Freud, do not offer particular insight into wit, for they are more concerned with the individual moment of comedy as differentiated from the larger context in which it is found. Freud, especially, tends to look at jokes as discreet entities that occur in larger texts, but that do not particularly interact with those larger texts; while his technique for close reading jokes is valuable, he offers almost no way to use those jokes as critical tools. Modernist wit depends upon this second step, of using the wit as a means of reading the larger text in which it is found.

Each author and text manifests wit in different ways, which causes subsequent differences in what their wit reveals. Oscar Wilde uses linguistic indeterminacy, in the form of wit, to reveal the indeterminacy that surrounds and supports the major institutions of modern life, including marriage, family, and identity. Dorothy Parker's wit serves to undercut meaning, to create meaning without substance, as a means of reflecting the world in which she finds herself. The urban, twentieth century world, as she sees it, no longer contains meaningful structures upon which to build life and meaning, and therefore her works reflect that difficulty. PG Wodehouse's *Jeeves* stories contrast

contemporary wit and its expectations with the wit of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, represented by Bertie Wooster and his servant Jeeves. The stories develop a queer dynamic through the craft of the narrative voice: it is constructed in such a way that it is often inseparable from character voices in the narrative, thus calling into question the position of knowledge in the stories. Anita Loos' *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* is the work in this project closest to satire, although the subject of its satire is somewhat indistinct. Through the construction of a narrator who cannot understand the story she tells, Loos reformulates the concept of wit by locating its faculty in the reader, not in a character or the narrator. In this way, the actual utility of the main character and narrator of the novella is questioned. What each of these formulations reveals is that wit is already a modernist paradigm. In its various incarnations, wit always serves to reveal language as representation, and in doing so disrupts the possibility of creating meaning. It does not erase this possibility, but it does render meaning contingent and based upon representation. In this way, modernist wit is aligned with the overall modernist project, although it fails to be recognized as part of it.

The overall relationship of wit to modernism can be understood as perverse. This term has many resonances with regard to wit. First, of course, is sexual perversion, for modernist wit manifests a variety of non-normative positions with regard to sex and sexuality. The works of Oscar Wilde and PG Wodehouse both are shocking in their tameness, bordering upon asexuality, although each contains a kind of queerness, as well. Dorothy Parker's works are shocking in their blasé attitude toward sex, which is seen as an almost mechanical function which is performed without emotion or even evident physical satisfaction, but rather as an anachronistic holdover from some other, more

romantic era. Anita Loos' novella is alternately full of sex and devoid of sex, and is ultimately a text about prostitution that wishes to masquerade as social propriety. Its sexual content therefore is illicit to the point of criminality, yet never described, and seen as a stepping-stone to heteronormative, matrimonial monogamy. In none of the texts, then, is there any particularly normative sexual activity or attitudes, nor is there a rejection of such things.

In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality,* Freud defines "perversions" as "sexual activities which either (*a*) extend, in an anatomical sense, beyond the regions of the body that are designed for sexual union, or (*b*) linger over the intermediate relations to the sexual object which should normally be traversed rapidly on the path towards the final sexual aim" (16). This provides a model for modernist wit both in terms of sexuality and in terms of structure. Wit's relationship to modernism is perverse, particularly with regard to point (a): wit is outside of the realm that is typically considered to be the purview of modernism, and yet still engages with modernist ideals and concepts. The union of wit and modernism, therefore, is not located in regions that modernism is used to operating. Modernist wit not only contains perversions, but its own existence, the relationship between its two operative terms, is perverse. It must always be "beyond" whatever criteria have been developed for meaning. Per point (b), as narrative, modernist wit "linger[s] over the intermediate relations." It delays, it deflects, it defers: it exists in what Peter Brooks identifies as the interminable middle, rather than progressing toward completion. The specific ways that this is accomplished vary from text to text, but modernist wit, as a whole, tends to dwell in the muddle, in the middle, and completion comes as both a surprise and a violation of the established narrative structure.

Defining Wit

'Wit,' along with terms such as 'humor' and 'the comic' is a specific aspect of the larger category 'comedy.' The nomenclature of comedy is a dangerous morass of overlapping and changing meanings. Morton Gurewitch finds comedy schizophrenic, a "miscellaneous genre activated by a plurality of impulses: farce, humor, satire, and irony" (13). Edward Galligan embraces this scattered quality, since it allows his understanding of comedy as nonspecific: "comedy distrusts assertions and explanations and delights in gestures" (x). Others have developed similarly non-definitive definitions, explanations that mark out a territory more than explain what lies within its borders. Northrop Frye locates this territory in the "mythos of spring" (163), Lane Cooper finds it in a hypothetical reconstruction of Aristotle's lost discussion of comedy in the *Poetics* (4). Bergson claims that "the attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine" (79), and Freud thinks that jokes "make possible the satisfaction of an instinct (whether lustful of hostile) in the face of an obstacle that stands in its way [and] draw pleasure from a source which the obstacle made inaccessible" (*Jokes* 119-120). Differentiating among and between these conceptions of comedy, the umbrella term that usually contains wit, is not always possible, and is not always fruitful. One of the purposes of this project is to show how comedy in general, and wit in particular, has fallen out of favor in the academy, and to locate this change as synchronous with modernism. A further goal is to show that this change is a symptom of modernism itself, one centered upon modernism's self-perceived seriousness.

What, then, is wit? In common parlance, the term is often used interchangeably with 'funny.' More precise usage tends to lean toward 'a funny use of language.' This explains a bit more fully the elements of wit, but still lacks any explanation of its mechanics or sense of its purpose or intent. Wit is not simply an attempt to make people laugh (that would be Freud's definition of 'the comic'), although it frequently does produce laughter. That reaction, though, is just that: a reaction. It is not wit itself. Instead, wit is a complex facility with language that is designed to reveal inconsistencies in language itself, or in the way that language is used to construct meaning. Robert Scholes calls it "a certain tantalizing suspension of meaning" (144). This 'meaning' can be social, political, economic, or belonging to any other register of discourse. Wit is, fundamentally, the certain knowledge of mastery over a means of discourse and meaning, as well as the ability to use language in a creative (and often humorous) way to reveal that mastery.

Wit, as a category, has been recognized and admired in literature since at least the sixteenth century[2]. In its earliest conception, wit was understood as a sense, akin to the more commonly accepted five physical senses: "the seat of thinking and reasoning in general; mental capacity, understanding, intellect, reason" (*OED* def 2.a.) and "good or great mental capacity; intellectual ability; genius, talent, cleverness; mental quickness or sharpness, acumen" (def. 5.a.). These definitions show two different facets of wit, and how it has changed in meaning over time. The first definition has more to do with comprehension: a wit (the person possessing the quality of wit) is of the highest order of intelligence and reasoning. There is no doubt but that this is a positively-regarded quality; any educated person would hope to aspire to the quality of wit. The second, later

definition includes "talent" and "cleverness" among its meanings. This understanding of wit implies not merely comprehension, but also an ability to use that understanding. In this definition, the wit (the person speaking or creating witticisms) puts their skills to use. The word "cleverness" is particularly important, for it implies a kind of unpredicted quality. Wit contains an element of surprise, of the unexpected.

The most accepted understanding of the term 'wit' emerged in the second half of the seventeenth century, when it came to mean "that quality of speech or writing which consists in the apt association of thought and expression, calculated to surprise and delight by its unexpectedness" (def. 8.a.). While emphasizing the element of surprise in the earlier definition, this meaning firmly locates wit *in language*. In other words, the wit not only has certain intellectual capabilities, but is able to communicate those capabilities via language, either in speech or in writing. John Dryden, in 1677, claimed that "the definition of wit is only this, that it is a propriety of thoughts and words; or, in other terms, thoughts and words elegantly adapted to the subject" (*The State of Innocence*). This implies that language is often inexact, that meaning is usually imperfectly communicated. Wit is the ability to communicate (and the act of communication) in a form that most perfectly suits meaning. Because the use of wit is often surprising, however, it is also clear that this form of communication is not something most are capable of. Additionally, the element of surprise often renders wit comical. These factors imply that wit is not the perfect union of meaning and expression, where there is no distance between the two, but rather that it is as imprecise a fit as any other pairing of content and form. The difference is that the wit utilizes that imprecision, making it itself

meaningful, and produces a new and unexpected connection that is inherently self-conscious of its failure to solidly unify meaning and expression.

Frank Muir explains the gradual change in meaning of 'wit' through an examination of its relationship to 'the comic' over time:

> During the seventeenth century the word began to be used to describe not only a brilliant and concise thought as in Pope's definition of true wit as 'nature to advantage dressed, / What oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed', but a brilliant thought which was also amusing. From then on a shaft of wit was expected to be entertaining as well as intellectually adroit. [...] But wit was not there to be laughed at. It was to be admired with a lift of an eyebrow or a half-smile or a nod of appreciation but not much more than that. Because of this it was the only aspect of comedy which a gentleman in the eighteenth century could practice in public; polite society would not tolerate the sight of gentlemen roaring with laughter. (xxvii)

This definition firmly links wit with class, a category that in the nineteenth century would undergo radical change. It also categorizes an instance of wit as a "shaft," as a kind of weapon (similar to Meredith's claim that wit is like "the sword of the cavalier in the Mall"). This indicates that it had a kind of policing function, that it is a means of maintaining order. Rather than power used by the upper classes over the lower, however, it appears that it polices the upper classes themselves. It allows a kind of outlet for emotion, but one which was still constrained by the public expectations of class and culture. Wit served as a means of regulating the upper classes, then; it was a public performance of the absolute difference between aristocracy and commoner. As this

distinction crumbled in the nineteenth century, so did the notion of who a gentleman was and how he should act. Wit became a more commonly-traded commodity, no longer confined to the aristocracy.

Daniel Wickberg explains wit specifically as separate from humor: "the wit/humor distinction [...] emerged in the later seventeenth century, as did ridicule and its relatives, but it was not until much later in the eighteenth century that the distinction became the main one for categorizing modes of laughable representation" (57). In his formulation, wit makes sense as a category only if it is divorced from humor, which he conceives of as those things which produce laughter. "Wit was associated with aristocracy, with the values of a 'well-bred' elite; humor, on the other hand, was essentially a bourgeois concept, one in which naturalness, benevolence and universality were primary elements" (59). Leonard Russell echoes this formulation, although he recognizes it as problematic in the nineteenth century through his discussion of Charles Lamb: "the simple truth is that he is both wit and humorist. To confound the two is, of course, a vulgar error, but it is not easy to understand why wit and humour are always placed in opposition" (ix). Wickberg has no such problems separating the two terms, and finds their mutual exclusivity necessary. Like Muir, Wickberg cannot conceive of an eighteenth-century gentleman actually *laughing*; that is the behavior of the masses, not of the elite. The differences between their positions is that Muir finds the gradual change in wit to be an essentially beneficial one, while Wickberg mourns the firm class strata reinforced by wit and humor. Wickberg locates the change in wit in the nineteenth century, and specifically ties it to the fact that humor and wit merge, that wit becomes something to be openly laughed at, a very bourgeois reaction. Trying to preserve the

separation between the terms humor and wit, Wickberg ultimately concludes that "wit was now [in the late nineteenth century] associated less with an aristocratic elite than with a purely intellectual one, but it was still seen as the preserve of the few, while humor was the possession of the many" (62). While this transformation preserves the distinction between the masses and the few (which is important to his idea of the incongruous vs. sympathetic functions of laughter over time), the nature of 'the few' changes from the aristocracy to the intelligentsia. The wit of nobility was gone, and in its place we have wit of the merely smart, and they could come from any class. Wit would never be the same again.

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries may have been the zenith of wit's journey as a literary and intellectual device. Wit became a kind of coin of the realm, spent by those in positions of power. The practice of the literary salon emerged in eighteenth century British society as gatherings of the finest wits, artists, and social critics of the day. Elizabeth Eger describes the famous 'Bluestocking Circle' as "informal gatherings of upper-class and professional middle-class men and women in the London homes of well-to-do society women. Unlike many such gatherings, these replaced the normal cards and alcoholic drinks with tea and intellectual conversation" (ix). Hester Thrale and Lady Elizabeth Montagu, among others, assembled the greatest minds and wits of their time, including Samuel Johnson, Frances Burney, and Horace Walpole. These salons brought together the figures who were actively engaged in creating the literary and artistic culture of the day. These intellectual gatherings allowed the greatest minds of the era to meet, exchange ideas, and issue proclamations about politics, aesthetics, morality, religion, or any number of other topics. Their wit, both in

formulating ideas as well as framing them in language, soon percolated through the highest echelons of British culture, bringing about change in all areas of contemporary life. Jürgen Habermas describes the kind of influence wits of the day had in his discussion of Swift, Pope and Gay, whose discourse began "in clubs and coffee houses, at home and in the streets" (59). Their work, published by Bolingbroke, "established [the press] as a genuinely critical organ of a public engaged in critical political debate: as the fourth estate" (60). Private conversation, then, gathered momentum and eventually helped construct the English public sphere. Their work was often satirical, but was a product of wit, the mysterious faculty with words and ideas that could produce change.

From this height, wit degraded in meaning from capacity expressed *through* language into capacity *over* language. Rather than language being the tool of wit, it became the entire realm of wit – a significant reduction from the previous realm of the wit, which comprised the entire world. The shift is subtle but important: by the nineteenth century, wit had become a commodity, a consumable product, rather than a manifestation of intellect. The individual witticism overtakes the sense of wit as the meaningful unit of wit, and almost any inventive, catchy, or biting remark could be referred to as 'wit.' In this way, it became an intellectually diluted category, one of less academic interest. Some modern wits (the best of them, in fact) retained the earlier, expansive quality of wit, while also mastering the wordplay of the witty remark. These authors, and their texts, tend to thematize control in various ways. Wit is itself a careful control over language, and it is used in an extended format to discuss control (or lack of it) over the changing realities of modern life.

In *Literary Wit*, Bruce Michelson describes wit more than defines it, which is reflective of one way in which wit is perverse: one can point at it, but it is often difficult to find the sense in it. He says:

> As social discourse in Western English-speaking societies, modern *wit* is distinguished by brevity, eloquence, and surprise. It favors incongruous congruity: quick verbal performances of insight or insights as verbal performance. Either way, wit fosters pleasurable psychological effects, which we commonly refer to as "amusement." With regard to wit of the former sort – where insight, as an intention, seems to surpass verbal performance – the signification, inferences, and other effects can be stronger and more various. (4, italics original)

He locates wit in the realm of discourse, and addresses some of the long-standing conventions of wit: brevity, eloquence, and surprise. He does not address why modern wit is different from "wit of the former sort" in this respect. In that way, we can surmise that these qualities are timeless, are without period specificity. This seems perfectly adequate, for without these qualities, any concept of 'wit' seems empty. Michelson locates the difference between modern wit and earlier wit in the arena of "intention." His differentiation, however, seems to be a distinction without a difference: he begins to suggest that content (insight) overruled form (verbal performance) in earlier wit, but then refuses to resolve this difference by claiming that the reverse is true in the modern moment. In fact, he claims that content (signification, inferences. and other effects) are even more important. Form loses in both formulations, and the ways that content varies in importance is left unexplained (other than to claim that in modern wit it can be "stronger").

What really seems to be missing from Michelson's description of wit is any difference between wit as a mode (akin to 'comedy' or 'the comic') and individually amusing witticisms (the quip or the aphorism). His formulation works well for analysis of the wisecrack or the *bon mot*, but does not explain why (or how) it is applicable to longer-format works. In short, he follows in Freud's footsteps as to the scope of wit. In its best use, wit can function as a sustained critical mode. The best of modernist wit includes individual witticisms, but also *uses* wit as a critical tool. Wit extends beyond isolated moments and informs entire narratives, infusing them with the sense of eloquence and surprise both in language and in structure.

Robert Martin calls wit "the comedy of language and idea and intellect" (ix). Dominique Bouhours claims of *bel esprit* (the French equivalent of wit): "when one has such esprit, one thinks things well, and expresses things just as well as one thinks them. One puts much sense into few words, says all that needs to be said, and says precisely that which needs to be said" (quoted in Carl Hill, 13). J.A. Hammerton claims that "there is more 'heart' in humour and more 'head' in wit" (78). Several common ideas emerge from these definitions of wit. First, wit is language-based. Second, it is tied to intellect. Third, it requires a high degree of proficiency or agility with language. Fourth, it is highly economical, but it is not lacking: it makes a few words do a great deal of work. Wit involves knowing when one has said *exactly* enough, and then stopping. As wit evolved from the Enlightenment to the 19th century, its economy became sheer brevity. While wit was originally conceived of as a command of one's own faculties ('having one's wits about them') that found its expression in the *bon mot* or the perfectly-stated quip, by the end of the nineteenth century, wit had become more known *as* its product

than *by* its product: the command of faculty was no longer necessary, but the biting remark was even more highly praised.

Wit, Meet Modernism

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw a small explosion in academic interest in comedy. Several major works explored the discourse of comedy, the ways in which it creates meaning, and its social functions. Among the most prominent are George Meredith's "Essay on Comedy" (1877), Henri Begson's "Laughter" (1900), and Sigmund Freud's *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905). Meredith focuses on comic spirit, attempting to deal with the entirety of the comic realm in one stroke. Freud's work borders on a linguistic analysis, and is primarily concerned with how language-based comedy reflects the method of the 'talking cure.' Richard Keller Simon refers to it as "a careful synthesis of the disjecta membra of nineteenth-century comic theory" and "only an interesting failure" (213-214). Bergson is interested in physical comedy, and of the three works, becomes the most influential due to its applicability to the nascent motion picture medium. While each is interesting in its own right, these works deal with very different understandings of what comedy is, how it is manifested, and what its use(s) are. They therefore fracture the field more than unite it, and frustrate scholars who want a single, unified theory of comedy. As their work shows, such a thing neither exists nor ever really could exist; yet the idea that comedy has been fully 'theorized' persists. In spite of these major works on the topic, comedy ceased to be a topic of academic interest in the early twentieth century. The reasons for this are

multiple and sometimes contradictory. As a general statement, comedy was simply incompatible with the notion of 'serious' and 'innovative' work that was the realm of modernism. Because wit was, correctly or not, seen as linked specifically to comedy, it fell out of study as well, although authors continued to produce works that were both comic and witty.

Much as the language surrounding comedy and wit can be complicated and overlapping, the same is true when claims are made of modernism. As Peter Nicholls explains, "'modernism' came to be presented as sort of monolithic ideological formation," but that this formation "could be seen to constitute only one strand of a highly complex set of cultural developments at the beginning of the twentieth century" (vii). The only 'absolute' that he is willing to accept is temporal; otherwise, modernism is a set of characteristics, related or not, that appear monolithic and have, for a long time, been accepted as such. Astradur Eysteinsson has claimed that "the view that modernism wields a hegemonic power over our literary sensibilities is not uncommon" (179), and Gerald Graff has observed that "weary though we have become of modernist experimental modes [...] we do not know how to break out of them" (224). Even though modernism is not any one thing, and does not have a single way of working in literature, it has gained a kind of authority in the twentieth century that requires all literary inquiry to be made in relation to itself. Those modes of production, like wit, which seem to have no relation to modernism, therefore, are simply not literary, and not important.

To claim that modernism is incompatible with wit, it must be clear which aspects of modernism are implicated. First, there are the modernists themselves: those artists, authors, playwrights, and poets who practice modernism, who produced the texts that are

today studied under the rubric of 'modernism.' This conception of modernism clearly does not reject wit, or the larger category of comedy: the very fact that texts are available to study disproves this belief. Modernists were clearly aware of wit and of its uses; in addition to the authors covered in this project, one could add the names Max Beerbohm, Evelyn Waugh, Ring Lardner, James Thurber, Stella Gibbons, Damon Runyon, Ogden Nash, and the entire staff of *The New Yorker*. Authors who are not usually considered to work in a comic mode often have witty moments, such as this letter from Virginia Woolf to Vita-Sackville West, in which she glosses the commentary on her new short hair-bob (a "shingle"):

> 1. Virginia is completely spoilt by her shingle.
> 2. Virginia is completely made by her shingle.
> 3. Virginia's shingle is quite unnoticeable.
>
> These are the three schools of thought on this important subject. I have bought a coil of hair, which I attach by a hook. It falls into the soup, and is fished out on a fork. (Quoted in Paglia 104)

Camile Paglia praises this passage's "sophisticated comic style, with its subtlety of ironic inflection," and its brilliance for creating a structure in which "three diverse reactions are allowed to cancel each other out, cleverly effecting a return to stasis" (104-105). Critics by and large tend to ignore wit, or to accept it as self-evidently meaningful; here Paglia defies convention and interrogates not only what Woolf says, but how she says it, and finds that the two reinforce each other. This is not merely a funny moment, then, but one that rises to the level of comic wit in that it requires a reexamination of the premises of the statement itself in order to make sense of it. Understanding the mechanism of wit is

actually necessary to understand the passage as a whole: the wit is the structure of the meaning, not merely a funny way of stating a meaning that exists apart from its structure. Woolf, of course, is not the only such author who incorporates such moments. Faulkner and Joyce, among others, are noted for their use of comedy, although their work is not dominated by a generally comic style.[3] It is clearly not modernist authors who refuse to recognize wit, but some other position within the constellation that collectively came to be known as 'modernism.'

If modernist authors were not themselves anti-wit and anti-comedy, the tradition of exclusion of such texts from critical study began elsewhere. The history of modernist studies is unique among literary studies in that it is the first mode of study to arise directly in response to a body of literature. Prior to the advent of modernism, the practice of literary study was seen as somewhat universal: one could study Shakespeare, Swift, or the Brontës with similar techniques and with similar training. Modernist studies, though, rejected such traditional modes of criticism and demanded a new way of reading, a new way of understanding: if the literature had so fully rejected its past in order to lay claim to the new, so too must the criticism of the era. As Lawrence Gamache explains, modernism "gave rise to a search for a new context – cosmopolitan, not provincial, in scope – and for new techniques to evolve an acceptable perception of reality, often, paradoxically, in the form of an attempt to rediscover roots in the depth of the past" (33). The traditional, the status quo, the way things had been, were no longer seen as applicable to modernist "reality," and the past was only useful as a modernist construct, as a source to be mined to reiterate the legitimacy of the cult of the present, rather than to celebrate the past for its own sake. And, of course, the practice of criticism was defined

and shaped by those who first practiced it. In addition to introducing critical methodologies, they also had the opportunity (or the responsibility) to fashion a canon, to decide not only how to read, but what was worthy of being read. Comedy, and by extension comic wit, did not make the cut.

Definitions of modernism are numerous, each inflected slightly to fulfill its author's own specific goal. Contrary to Mao and Walkowitz's assertion about contemporary modernist studies, the operative mechanism for generations has been exclusion. Early critics of modernism worked to develop fairly narrow criteria which would delimit modernism, denying the imprimatur to all that fell outside of those boundaries. These criteria usually had to do with innovation and self-conscious seriousness. As Raymond Williams claims, "literary analysis [has] appropriated a selective version of Modernism, and within this an internal and self-proving definition of the avant-garde, as a way of ratifying their own much narrower positions and procedures" (65). Over time, this "selective version" has expanded, with authors and texts ignored by the earliest formulators of modernism coming into recognition as worthy of study. Many important studies, such as those by Bonnie Kime Scott and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, expanded the canon by showing how early critics' prejudice against certain categories of writers (women, minorities, non-Anglophones) caused them to overlook or fail to consider certain texts.

This project's effort to appreciate comic wit, while similar, has a slightly different focus. The kind of perverse mechanism embraced by wit is the 'almost-but-not-quite,' and that is exactly the way that canonical exclusion has worked with regard to wit. It is not so much that the authors of comic wit fall into marginalized categories (although

some do) that causes them to be overlooked, so much as it is that modernism's sense of itself as a critical and literary endeavor causes it to overlook wit. Comic wit may be produced by the right people, but it seems to do the wrong things, and thus has been excluded from study with very little protest. The goal of this project is to show how comic wit's mechanisms ultimately mask the fact that it operates in ways clearly respected and valued by modernism, and that once revealed, can be incorporated into an expanded notion of literary production in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The working definitions of modernism used by scholars show the way that modernism is constantly reacting against its initial limitations, how those early boundaries both give shape to modernism as well as provide ready-made lines of flight. While each is unique, they also show a common set of anxieties that are continually renegotiated. In *Late Modernism*, Tyrus Miller claims that modernism "is the liberation of formal innovation; the deconstruction of tradition; the renewal of decadent conventions or habit-encrusted perceptions; the depersonalization of art; the radical subjectivization of art" (4). His definition emphasizes form and innovation, and hints at modernism's obsessions with sexuality and subjectivity. Alice Jardine finds modernism to be concerned primarily with a "crisis-in-narrative," (69), which Elizabeth Hirsch more fully explicates as "a breakdown or deligitimation of the traditional patriarchal master-narratives of history, philosophy, and religion, and the eruption, in their stead, of new, extra- or anti-narrative fictional 'spaces' " (579). The emphasis here, clearly, is on rejection of tradition and recognition of innovation and revolution, both at the literary and ontological levels. Joesph Allen Boone explains that modernism reveals "the

destabilization inherent in all modes of representation," and produces "fictional texts that necessarily challenge unitary conceptions of narrative along with those of unitary identity or fixed sexuality" (6, 7). This move reveals modernism's contingent nature, that it undermines representation as much as it provides new modes of representation, and that this has particular applicability to the issues of identity and sexuality. Justus Nieland criticizes what he calls "the longstanding clichés about modernism's mandarin disdain for the commonplaces of public life [...] – its disgust for the public and, by extension, for the democratic, the masses, the feminine, the quotidian, the ordinary" (2). While rejecting these exclusions as a sufficient understanding of modernism, he also reveals that these clichés do have a tradition within modernist studies; that until recently, these prejudices against the feminine, the ordinary, the non-elite, would have been considered definitive characteristics of modernism.

These definitions, from sources with a variety of agendas, reveal several common goals or characteristics of modernism: its concern with innovation and the overturning of tradition; its distrust of established models of meaning and representation; its disdain for the munane; its obsession with sexuality. When one adds in the aforementioned penchant for seriousness and difficulty, it becomes difficult to see how comic wit might have any connection with modernism. Comic wit is part of a tradition dating back several hundred years, if not farther, it often embraces (or seems to embrace) a heteronormative narrative structure, it is beloved by the masses, and in most cases is sexually normative and discreet. It appears light and fluffy, with little substance, and in its best moments effortless, as if the author had little if any input into the final work. How, then, could such works ever be considered as part of the canon of modernism?

Wit Moderne

One of the continuing assertions of this project is that modernism rejected wit as a useful and meaningful rhetorical mode, thus excluding it from academic study, scholarly examination, and general recognition as 'important' literature. As described elsewhere, this stems in part from wit's connection to comedy: wit had become primarily comic rather than intellectual. It was expected to elicit laughter, not discussion, and thus had become seen as a kind of joke-work, analogous to comedy, and dismissed in the same ways as comedy. In short, wit is guilty by its association with comedy, particularly comedy's connection to tradition. The belief that comedy cannot be innovative is itself spurious, but is an argument that will be left to others to make. Several other factors, though, make wit incompatible with modernism as it came to be understood and studied. Primarily, these include modernism's self-awareness as serious and masculine, traits that comedy and wit were not seen to share.

Modernism heard Pound's cry of "make it new!" and responded with textual innovations of remarkable variety. The pressure to innovate is felt throughout modernism, including the use of language. Randy Malamud explains the pressure to innovate among modernists:

> Regardless of the specific novelty [of their writing], the mere affirmation of novelty – in literature as well as within language – unites writers who have made the quest for a new language a fundamental facet of their literature. They have in common a fixation on language and on the challenge of language. They announce the inadequacy of the old language, and the myriad possible alternatives for a

> replacement. Their linguistic experiments reflect a conviction that language, in the modern age, had to stretch – had to say more than it had been able to say before; had to reveal more, embody more. (4)

The very uses and boundaries of language were seen as restrictions which had to be transcended, reshaped, repurposed. An aesthetic so firmly based in innovation (modernism) had little use for a form of discourse linked to history (wit). Ironically, wit's use of language in unexpected and multiply-referential ways most aligns it with the larger modernist project. Northrop Frye, himself a product of modernism, cast comedy as feminine and traditional in his famous essays on the various seasonal "mythos" of literature, with comedy as "the Mythos of Spring." In doing so, he draws upon the fact that, as Andrew Stott explains, "most critics and historians agree that comedy appears to be the product of a rural environment rather than an urban one, and to have come into association with agrarian fertility rites" (4). As such, comedy is the discourse of marriage, reproduction, birth, and fertility, making spring the logical association for Frye to make. Frye's mythos links comedy with a sense of unbroken tradition. Tragedy (the binary partner of comedy), of course, has a tradition dating to Aristotle as well, but comedy is different in that it is understood as a largely unchanged and unbroken tradition: it is the opposite of innovation. Frye claims:

> Dramatic comedy, from which fictional comedy is mainly descended, has been remarkably tenacious of its structural principles and character types. [...] The earliest extant European comedy, Aristophanes' *The Archanians*, contains the *miles gloriosus* or military braggart who is still going strong in Chaplin's *The Great Dictator*; the Joxer Daly of O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* has the same

character and dramatic function as the parasites of twenty-five hundred years ago, and the audiences of vaudeville, comic strips, and television programs still laugh at the jokes that were declared to be outworn at the opening of *The Frogs*. (163)

Not only does comedy have a pedigree, then, but it is static over time. This kind of stability, of a link to tradition, can hardly be in line with modernism, which is interested in the new, the innovative, the rejection of models.

Sanford Pinsker has remarked, "modernist literature, of course, comes armed with heavy-water manifestoes – usually in the form of pronouncements about what makes this or that movement avant-garde, daring and, most of all, NEW – that would make respectable humorists blush" (191). The timeless, the unchanging, the universal that is claimed for comedy simply is incompatible with modernism's mania for innovation. Leon Surette has claimed that "modernism presented itself as the end, the conclusion – even the fulfillment – of history and therefore as the end of historical writing" (3). Perry Meisel believes that modernism "thematizes – the desire to seek a place outside of the tradition that enables it" (4). Both of these formulations show a fascination with history, yet great discomfort with the notion of being a part of it. Modernism must, logically, be part of the flow of time and trend, but it also had to be distinct from that flow, superior to it, rewriting it even as it happens. It is no coincidence that TS Eliot, a modernist whose own relationship to the timeless and eternal is continually questioned in works such as "The Wasteland" and *Murder in the Cathedral*, wrote about "Tradition and the Individual Talent." In this work, he both praises tradition and claims the necessity of tapping into it, but also understands tradition as mutable, as responsive to the new: "for to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered

[...] and this is conformity between the old and the new" (50, italics original). Even while upholding a kind of classicism; therefore, Eliot fundamentally embraces innovation, and even believes that newness can retroactively reorder the tradition from which innovation sprang. This, one of the more conservative gestures toward tradition in the canon of modernism, still values innovation and newness above its context; comedy, as understood and explained by Frye and dozens of similar critics, cannot possibly have a place in modernist thought.

Robert Corrigan rather unartfully describes "the central intuition of comedy" as "an innate and deeply felt trust in life" (8). This description, which is mostly in terms of affect, also paints comedy as just a bit naïve. It is far from the self-assured 'seriousness' of modernism. Modernism does have its share of respected comedic authors, or at least those who employ comedy at discrete moments. Joyce and Faulkner are among those usually cited as comedic modernists, yet rarely can either be seen as participating in what Corrigan outlines as an overall comedic aesthetic. Instead, when recognized in their work, comedy serves as a form of temporary counterpoint, as a means of emphasis, rather than as an end unto itself.

Comic wit is ignored by modernist studies because of its association with comedy, but also because of its witty nature. As Camile Paglia points out in her discussion of *The Importance of Being Earnest*: "critics seem to have accepted Wilde's own description of [the play] – 'exquisitely trivial, a delicate bubble of fancy.' Scholarship has never distinguished itself in studying this kind of high comedy, with its elusive 'sophistication'"(95). Here, Paglia points out that comedy is outside the realm of most scholarship, but the quality of "sophistication," the very nature of comic wit,

renders critics even less able to deal with a witty text. In *Strange Gourmets*, Joseph Litvak states sophistication has been critically unexamined because it is "apparently regarded either as too frivolously 'aesthetic' or as too unproblematically self-evident to merit sustained, sophisticated theoretical or historical attention" and that it has "remained radically undertheorized" (1). Comedy does not share the second problem, if viewed in large historical terms. In fact, comedy has been repeatedly theorized over the past several thousand years, and many of the great literary works of the western tradition are recognized as comedic.[4] What makes Litvak's assessment of sophistication an interesting commentary upon comedy is that, while comedy through history had been studied and theorized, the advent of modernism rendered it "unproblematically self-evident" in a way that it had not been before. While the twentieth century prejudice against comedy as a serious endeavor is usually attributed to comedy itself, it may just as well be attributed to Freud, Bergson and Meredith's inability to reveal why comedy is interesting in the new century and to the New Criticism. After Freud's major work on jokes in 1905, comedy was largely relegated to the realm of mass culture, the venue for works without real critical merit. How and why this decline in interest in comedy happened is of major concern in this project, for it provides a way for understanding modernism as a whole. As Andreas Huyssen has stated, "Modernism constituted itself through a conscious strategy of exclusion, an anxiety of contamination by its other: an increasingly consuming and engulfing mass culture" (vii). Comedy, which had previously been a rather sophisticated form of discourse, became associated with the popular, the hoi polloi, the vulgar. It was part of mass culture, and thus a part of the "other" that Huyssen envisions as constitutive of modernism itself.

While broad comedy and comic wit are excluded from study, modernism does allow for humor in some forms, particularly if they are seen as avant-garde, as a form of humor that rejects tradition rather than embraces it. Alfred Jarry's 'pataphysics is an example of a kind of humor that has found a place within modernist studies. 'Pataphysics does what I claimed earlier in this chapter is not done in academic writing: it uses humor as a mode of inquiry, establishing a parodic methodology parallel to scientific inquiry. It embraces what Calinescu calls the transformation of the term avant-garde to refer to "the small group of advanced writers and artists who transferred the spirit of radical critique of social forms to the domain of *artistic forms*" (112, italics original). In doing so, it establishes wit as a kind of avant-garde, although one that has heretofore gone unnoticed. 'Pataphysics' is at the fringes of the academy; it exists on the edges of what most scholars imagine modernism to be, but it does have a place. As Roger Shattuck says, "drowned rather than buried, Jarry has long remained just below the surface of the literary tradition in France and has bobbed up often enough to keep his reputation alive" (174). Jarry is definitely a minor figure in the canon, but he is in the canon nonetheless. Why might this be? It is acceptable specifically because it is not generally popular. Humor, in modernism, can have value (although only marginal value) on the condition that mass audiences do not enjoy it. Once the masses have found a comic text enjoyable, it becomes stained, lesser, unworthy.

The comic (that which is designed specifically to elicit laughter) is truly valued in modernism only when the laughter elicited is compromised in some fashion, when it is made suspect. Andre Breton's *Anthology of Black Humor*, for example, is a modernist production that addresses the value of works that elicit laughter when they should not, or

when it is inappropriate to do so. As Mark Polizzotti says in his introduction to the volume, "this laughter, however, is always a little green around the edges, for as Breton was quick to point out, black humor is the opposite of joviality, wit, or sarcasm. Rather, it is a partly macabre, partly ironic, often absurd turn of spirit" (vi). Like Corrigan's explanation of comedy, Breton envisions black humor as more of an attitude, a spirit, than a finite list of characteristics. The laughter that it brings forth is always a nervous laughter, although also possibly a hearty one. The value of black humor has been recognized in that it gives us something to do other than just to laugh; as we laugh we are forced to examine ourselves and ask why we laugh, how we *could* laugh.

Comic wit seems incompatible with conceptions of modernism, then, based on the fact that modernism, like the eighteenth century gentleman, is not supposed to *laugh*. It is important to note here a modernist innovation that embraces both modernism and laughter: the cinema. It is comedy that resides in the realm of the physical, in performance, that Bergson references when he claims that "where matter [...] succeeds in dulling the outward life of the soul, in petrifying its movements and thwarting its gracefulness, it achieves, at the expense of the body, an effect that is comic" (79). While Bergson presents a highly evocative mechanism for laughter in the twentieth century, his work has little applicability to literary texts, which are the primary location of wit (based, as it is, in language rather than physicality). Bergson's absolute applicability to cinematic texts underscores the fact that there is no really comprehensive theory of comedy in the twentieth century. Partly this is due to the proliferation of comic media, and the fact that comedy does not work the same way in each. Freud's work on jokes, while useful for parsing the individual joke and defining why it is funny, has limited

utility for understanding literary comedy and wit. His conception of joke-work is that of the set-up, the complication, and the punch line, a useful schema for stand-up comics (again, like Bergson, comedy that is embodied within a person), but does little to explain comic or witty texts. Freud's model allows a comic text to be dismembered and analyzed joke-by-joke, but reveals little at the level of a whole text. Bergson, likewise, explains the laughter reaction to robotic movements by human actors, but has little to say about language or the reaction to it.

The cult of modernism, as it may be called, grew up in response to the 'new' literature being produced. This cult worshipped several specific aspects of the new literature; the preference for these characteristics ultimately determined the first definitions of modernism, and began the process of exclusion of texts that did not meet these expectations. Leonard Diepeveen has claimed that "literary modernism's first readers often asserted that difficulty's prevalence was unique to modernism [...] difficulty, in fact, was the most noted characteristic of what became the canonical texts of high modernism" (xi). This is reinforced by comments such as this by TS Eliot: "it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*" (*Metaphysical Poets* 65). Comic wit, particularly in the hands of its best practitioners, gives the impression of simplicity, of complete ease and unconstructedness. The charm of lines uttered by Bertie Wooster or Lorelei Lee is that they seem so totally a part of their character, so unrehearsed, so instant. These are not texts that want to appear crafted and labored over, but to appear fluffy, inconsequential, and fun. These qualities may be appreciated by the masses, but not by the first wave of New Critics actively engaged in defining modernism's seriousness and difficulty.

Ending Beginnings

To a great extent, it does not matter whether comic wit is admitted to the canon. As mentioned earlier, Mao and Walkowitz point out that "were one seeking a single word to sum up transformations in modernist literary scholarship over the past decade or two, one could do worse than light on *expansion*" (737, italics original). The expansion of the canon they speak of is the inclusion of more works and more authors that were previously not considered modernists, or (as in the case of comic wit), not considered *by* modernists. The texts considered in this project may or may not find their way into the elite club of modernism; what is more important is that they are revealed to have always been engaged in the same pursuits as canonical modernism, even if their version of those pursuits has gone unrecognized. Of all characteristics of modernism, it is seriousness and difficulty that have kept comic wit out of consideration. As will be shown in the following chapters, comic wit is deeply concerned with the issue of representation. It depends upon the precise use of language, which gives the illusion of absolute meaning: words are used in highly specific and intricate combination to evoke a specific response, and that response (laughter) is one disdained by modernism as too pedestrian, too ordinary, too much 'of the masses.' Instead, comic wit uses precise language to create indeterminacy, to even more finely reveal the distance between language and object, to foreground language as representation. In doing so, it reveals the ineffectiveness of this representation, and ultimately undermines the possibility of meaning. As a formal device, then, wit is used to specifically oppose expectations: its very purpose is to make it new. It therefore is exactly suited as a rhetorical device to undermine hegemonic, heteronormative structures, whether at the level of language, representation, or society.

Wit is therefore the epitome of modernism, and always has been, although it has not been recognized as such. The problem, of course, is that modernist wit does all of this with a wink and a nod, with laughter and giggles. No matter how much it may undermine class distinctions or notions of narrativity, Ezra Pound would never have been able to write "Tinkerty-tonk."

Chapter One of this project, "Oscar Wilde and the Emergence of Modernist Wit," explores the way that the specificity of language required of wit can actually create a lack of knowledge. The precision of wordplay negates meaning more than creates it, and often replaces meaning (or the potential for meaning) with ciphers that indicate an absence of meaning. The witty remark becomes a kind of reverse *mise en abyme*, in which the function of language in individual moments provides a blueprint for reading the larger narrative. Chapter Two, "Modernist (Dim)Wit: PG Wodehouse and Indeterminate Narrative," uses the *Jeeves* stories of PG Wodehouse to demonstrate how wit can be created through dissonance between narrative voice and character voice, and how that wit can be used to *not* tell a story rather than to complete a narrative. The circular narratives create a perverse distaff domesticity which becomes the location for desire that is communicated through implication, inference and omission rather than direct narration.

Chapter Three, "Modernism on the Rocks, with a Dash of Bitters: Dorothy Parker, Desire, and Stagnation," focuses on the ways that rapid changes in sexual mores, social patterns, marriage traditions, and other foundational institutions of society are reflected in the bitter, ironic wit of Dorothy Parker. Her short stories show one way in which narrative, itself a kind of foundation of society, literally loses direction as the

stories it tells no longer progress along expected trajectories. At times they fail to progress at all, producing an aesthetic of stagnation. Parker's wit, often revealed through narrative inflection, both creates and comments upon this new understanding of society and narrative. The final chapter, "Fate Keeps on Happening: Anita Loos' Displaced Wit," offers a different formulation of wit, one that is formed *by* a narrative, but is located *outside* the narrative. The narrator and central character of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, Lorelei Lee, is fundamentally unable to understand the world around her or her own position within it, but is unaware of this fact. Thus, while she creates a narrative, she is unable to recognize or capitalize upon the comic wit that is created through her ignorance. Instead, the reader becomes the arbiter of wit, transforming the act of reading into one of deciphering and recognition of wit.

Chapter 1:

Oscar Wilde and the Emergence of Modernist Wit

This project has marked the late nineteenth century as the moment when scholarly attitudes towards comedy and wit changed, but also as the moment when wit transformed into what we can today call modernist wit. It is a moment when wit became less obviously 'serious' than it had been in earlier centuries, and was therefore ignored by critics as mere entertainment. 'Less obviously serious' does not mean 'not serious,' however: what Wilde achieved, and has been emulated by his witty modernist followers, is the fusion of wit with meaning. Earlier wit may have been overtly serious, but that was because the comical element was a means of making the serious palatable, a kind of sweetener to the tonic of critique. That is, essentially, the nature of satire, which was the operative mode of wit prior to Wilde. The seriousness was easy to see, because it was right there, beneath the humor. Wilde eliminated this distance and made wit not only the means of making critique digestible, but the means of critique itself.

Modernist wit is no more a unified style than modernism itself is: instead, it is a description of a kind of union of meaning and comedy that varies in form and function from author to author. Wilde does not link these structures together in the same way that Dorothy Parker does, and neither their product not their means of critique are identical. What unites them in a single project, however, is the fact that they do link structures together, instead of seeing them as separate. In *The Importance of Being Earnest: A Trivial Comedy for Serious People (1895)*, the product of wit is the destabilization of structures of knowledge. Knowledge, or the certainty of it, is not discarded in the play,

but is shown to be continually relative or contingent. Language is formed into a *mis en abyme* structure that threatens to negate meaning even as meanings proliferate. The possibilities of double meanings (or more) in wit are mined not only for comic effect, but also to call into question the basis of all knowledge, even in the most seemingly stable of structures, like family, Society, and self.

The Importance of Being Earnest is a hilariously ridiculous play built upon mistaken identities, young lovers forced apart by society, and ultimately the amelioration of societal expectations versus individual prerogative. With its focus on heteronormative romance and the preservation of family fortunes, it is difficult to make a claim for innovation in content in *Earnest*. Neither does Wilde seem to be formally experimental in *Earnest*. Josephine Guy observes that "it is confoundingly 'difficult to find evidence of formal innovation in Wilde's work.' 'His writing,' adds Guy, 'is too derivative, too free in the formal conventions it borrows' for any reasonable claim to be made for its originality" (qtd. in Bristow 24-25). If both form and content are traditional, then whatever innovation Wilde effects lies in the elusive arena of style: not what he says or even exactly how he says it, but in the way that his arrangement of language produces (or fails to produce) meaning.

The major innovation in the play is that wit becomes a *mise en abyme*. Craig Owens explains, "the phrase 'en abyme' describes any fragment of a text that reproduces in miniature the structure of the text in its entirety" (75). The use of the mirror in the painting *Las Meninas* is such an example, as has been shown by Gide and Foucault.[5] It is generally envisioned as a situation in which a fragment within the whole reflects the larger structure. The play reverses the position of reflection, however. Instead of

assuming a cohesive whole that contains itself in miniature, wit becomes a template, a brief moment of intersection between language and knowledge. This moment is then reproduced on a larger scale, at the level of narrative. Rather than the larger narrative providing a context for the miniature, it is the miniature which is the context for its expanded version. This is not quite the Derridean notion of *mise en abyme*, in which a text contains itself, and thus both the text's means of representing and the undoing of representation. This ultimately leads to questions of subjectivity, which Wilde's use of the trope does not necessarily do. In *Earnest*, the subject is not in question, but the context within which a subject is located is. By reproducing the moment of wit on a larger scale, the ground upon which knowledge is based is rendered suspect. It is not wholly undone or negated (which might be more in line with Derrida), but merely brought into question.

What the wit in *Earnest* accomplishes is to force his audience to realize that the only thing they can know is the limits of their knowledge. As David Carroll explains, "the mirroring of representation in a particular representation serves both to reflect representation back on itself and to open it up to what it is not – to make it conscious of itself and, in doing so, to indicate the limitations of this consciousness, the gaps or empty spaces within it" (55). *The Importance of Being Earnest* engages in just this kind of mirroring: the individual witticism, if engaged, reveals multiple possibilities but also limitations. Plural meanings are hinted at, but the solid ground upon which knowledge can be made is eroded, leaving the audience adrift upon a raft of language that might mean many things, but none of them clearly. Regenia Gagnier echoes this possibility when she claims that "like Bakhtin's double-voiced words, Wilde's epigrams and

paradoxes exploit the self-critical possibilities of Victorian language and thought patterns" (32). Again, we are confronted with "possibilities," not certainties, and also with the fact that Wilde's language contains its own critique. *Earnest* shows language poised on the edge of an abyss of meaning, but without danger of falling in. To do so would reduce the play to mere nonsense, rather than maintaining a critical edge through its relationship to the abyss.

Ultimately, wit in *Earnest* works at three textual levels: the witticisms themselves, wit used as a means of interrogating social institutions, and ultimately wit as a kind of narrative structure in the play as a whole. These three levels interpenetrate each other: all of them depend upon witty sayings, so it is impossible to have either of the other levels without the first, etc. What the recognition of these multiple registers does, though, is to reveal that wit is neither an embellishment nor an afterthought. Neither, oddly, is it specifically a *style*, although that perhaps comes closer to revealing how wit works. Instead, wit *is* the play: there is no non-witty version of this play; the wit cannot be separated from the text. Wilde may be the master of the *bon mot* and the one-liner, but these elements add up to a much greater whole that finally challenges the relationship of meaning and form.

Moments of Wit

The abyss of *Earnest* is a threat of meaninglessness, but never more than that. There is no danger that the play will lead us into a nonsense world where meaning is irrelevant. Instead, it serves as a reminder of how close we are to nonsense without actually achieving it, while still remaining rooted in the rational world. This is done by

using small, individual moments of wit as a template for the larger structure of the narrative. This task begins as early as the opening lines of the play, as Algernon plays the piano while Lane, the butler, prepares for guests:

Algernon: Did you hear what I was playing, Lane?

Lane: I didn't think it polite to listen, sir. (295)

Lane has provided a definition of what he feels impoliteness comprises, which is listening to music without prior permission. The definition is ridiculous, if not impossible, in nature, but it is nonetheless a definition. This process of definition continues throughout the play, and most of the definitions are equally ridiculous, or else logical but contrary to expectations. It is not nonsense, but it is not quite normative, either. The first exchange of the play has already placed us in a world of contingent or possible meanings, rather than a world of rigid Victorian expectations.

Wilde's play is full of his trademark wit, often delivered in small, discreet packages. He is a master of one-liners, but is always after more than merely a laugh. That doesn't mean that he doesn't get the laughs, however. The wit of *Earnest* always serves to undermine knowledge, to negate certainty, to move us one step closer to the abyss. For example, as the various marriages are (finally) being sorted out in Act III, Jack objects to Cecily's pairing with Algernon. Lady Bracknell, as she is wont to do, ups the ante with her own objection to the objection:

Jack: I beg your pardon for interrupting you, Lady Bracknell, but this engagement is quite out of the question. I am Miss Cardew's guardian, and she cannot marry without my consent until she comes of age. That consent I absolutely decline to give.

Lady Bracknell: Upon what grounds, may I ask? Algernon is an extremely, I may almost say an ostentatiously, eligible young man. He has nothing, but he looks everything. What more can one desire? (350)

Lady Bracknell's definition of eligibility here is based upon two aspects: first, he is "ostentatiously" eligible; that is, he flaunts his bachelorhood in an unseemly manner, and needs to be married to bring a stop to this behavior. Second, he "looks everything," which places him in the Wildean world of forms (which we shall investigate later), in which things are what they seem: form is not merely superior to content, but it is the entirety of existence. Jack's objections to the marriage have to do with whether he thinks Algernon will be a good husband to Cecily (he does not), and Lady Bracknell's arguments in Algernon's favor actually exacerbate Jack's fears. Algernon needs to be married as a way of controlling him, which implies that he is incapable of controlling himself; additionally, Algernon can bring the appearance of being a good husband to a marriage, but he has no real potential to actually *be* a good husband. The destabilizing wit arises from the fact that Lady Bracknell throws Jack's worst fears at him as a way of resolving the issue. Rather than consoling him, or showing Jack how his impressions of Algernon are incorrect, he is shown that things are even worse than he imagined, and yet is expected even more willingly to accept the marriage. A rational objection has been countered with a wittily irrational response, which casts doubt upon the original objection and its relationship to rationality. Lady Bracknell has wittily and retroactively restructured Jack's objections into Algernon's most desirable qualities.

These moments of wit move beyond meaning into a realm of pure form; they are constructions that resemble meaning without being tied to it. Language becomes a game

with indefinite rules, or at least rules that change with each volley. This is exemplified in the final scene, as Jack frantically searches for the handbag in which he was found as an infant. As the characters listen to the sound of Jack destroying an upstairs closet in his frantic search, we hear the following exchange:

> Chasuble: [*looking up*] It has stopped now. [*The noise is redoubled*]
>
> Lady Bracknell: I wish he would arrive at some conclusion.
>
> Gwendolen: This suspense is terrible. I hope it will last. (355)

Lady Bracknell's comment is doubly meaningful; she both hopes that he will stop making noise, and thus come to a conclusion of his activities. Simultaneously, she hopes that his search will bring about a meaningful end to the situation, that the conclusion of his search will be actual knowledge. As if to undercut this desire for concrete knowledge, Gwendolen chimes in with her own commentary: "This suspense is terrible. I hope it will last." Again, two meanings are in play with each other. The first is that this moment of suspense is liminal: nothing about Jack's identity has been concretely established, but none of the possibilities are yet evacuated, either. They are in a zone of possibility that is also at the edge of an abyss; as soon as Jack concludes his search, some possibilities will disappear, while others emerge. In a moment of ultimate wit, however, she also has offered a destabilizing definition, one in which terrible things are wished to continue. It is also (as we shall see a bit later), a commentary upon the play itself, which is soon to come to an end. Jack's search for the handbag will bring the events to a close (or so we think; a second search for the name of the father will interfere with conclusions), and all of the delicious fun of the play itself will be over. One might

choose to read this as a character's own expression of desire for autonomy outside the confines of her play.

Each of these moments of wit functions as a joke, as a laugh line for the audience. Each also destabilizes a sense of meaning, however, and in doing so dances closer to the edge of meaninglessness. Wilde is an expert in this dance, however, and usually changes the terms right before meaninglessness is achieved, thus stepping back from the edge and keeping the possibility of meaning in play. It is always *possibility*, however, rather than actual meaning: things rarely get tied down to concrete understanding in *Earnest*, but merely function as structures that are recognized as meaningful.

Wit and Society

Much of *The Importance of Being Earnest* deals with social status: having attained it, being able to verify it, and in what ways it can be rallied to one's assistance. To a largely middle-class audience, the play seems socially homogenous: all of the main characters are rich, socially established, and able to do as they please without concern for financial backing and social opprobrium. The play reveals, however, a highly structured social system that has barely perceptible rules. However obscure the rules, they do exist, and are deployed ruthlessly to maintain the social structures that define the characters' lives. For instance, Jack feels that he is a socially acceptable suitor for Gwendolen, and Gwendolen either finds him to be her social equal, or else is unconcerned about his status. Lady Bracknell, however, is very concerned with the marital disposition of her only child, and finds Jack generally unacceptable. Although she never clearly states her objection, it is important to remember that she is Lady Bracknell, a member of the

nobility (however low upon that scale she may be, she is nonetheless on it), and Jack is simply Mr. Worthing. No matter how much money he has inherited from his father, this cannot ennoble Jack. He will always be a member of the bourgeoisie rather than the nobility, and thus socially a step down for Gwendolen. Lady Bracknell puts a fine point on this when she tells Jack:

> Lady Bracknell [*pencil and notebook in hand*]: I feel bound to tell you that you are not down on my list of eligible young men, although I have the same list as the dear Duchess of Bolton has. We work together, in fact. However, I am quite ready to enter your name, should your answers be what a really affectionate mother requires. Do you smoke? (308)

This passage shows both Lady Bracknell's devotion to the concept of Society, which is supposed to dictate one's actions, as well as her willingness to adapt Society to her desires should she feel strongly enough about an issue. Society, therefore, is both concrete and mutable, depending upon the needs of the moment. It dictates whom Gwendolen may marry, but also may be ignored "should your answers be what a really affectionate mother requires." The fact that her first question is "do you smoke?" renders this affection suspect: as smoking is a common enough habit, it seems a peculiar thing upon which to fixate. Certainly it might not be the first question asked, if Mr. Worthing's social status is to be confirmed. It is unclear, therefore, how Society is to look upon Jack, and how Lady Bracknell will, either, as the question does not seem to implicate status.

The interview between Lady Augusta Bracknell and Jack makes explicit what has been implicit throughout the play, that the characters are engaged in an extended series of definitions, all of which are products of wit, and all of which serve to undermine

knowledge rather than to reinforce it. In this sequence, the commentary alternates between global commentary and the highly specific, which, generally speaking, makes it a good deal more interesting. Second, the interview format predetermines that the conversation will be definitional in nature. While other definitional moments seem to arise out of conversation, in this sequence the definitions *are* the conversation.

The conversation moves in several directions at once; each direction is in its own way linear, although the expected connections between these vectors do not emerge, thus rendering them both ridiculous and humorous. The first trajectory is the merely factual: Lady Bracknell asks questions, and Jack responds. Lady Bracknell begins with fundamental questions of character: whether Jack smokes, what his age is, and if he considers himself a person who 'knows things.' The questioning then moves into the realm of finances, where Jack is asked about how much income he has, what the source of this income is, and how fluid his investments and land holdings are. The final set of questions concern his family background, and it is this set of questions that complicate the arrangements and bring the interview to a halt.

The second trajectory through the interview reflects the amount of pleasure Lady Bracknell takes in the answers provided. The first response she has is of great pleasure about his smoking, his age, his ideas, his income, and the fluidity of assets. She then begins to show displeasure when she learns of his specific address in town, for his house is on the unfashionable side of Belgrave Square. She then moves to shock and indignation at his lack of knowledge about his parentage, as well as his lack of concern about this matter. Her responses to his answers are humorous partly because she places great importance in those things that he cannot control (his parentage) and less in those

issues that reveal his own choices and character (his political beliefs, of which he claims to have none). She also registers the greatest pleasure with those answers that, in the audience, are likely to meet with the greatest disapproval. The earliest set of questions would register surprise in the audience, both in Jack's willingness to be honest about his character (he admits to being a smoker, and to not having any real ideas on any subject) as well as Lady Bracknell's approval of his answers, which do not, in fact, seem to be what "a really affectionate mother requires." The reader/audience would then be amused at the fact that Belgrave Square has a fashionable side and an unfashionable one (thus indicating a social hierarchy so rigidly structured that most could not begin to understand), as well as the fact that Lady Bracknell feels it equally simple to change the address by acquiring a new property as it would be to change the fashion which dictates where Jack should live.

The final set of questions elicit what are actually the most interesting answers, as we learn that Jack has no knowledge of his parents but was found in a hand-bag "in the cloak-room at Victoria Station...the Brighton line" (311). It is this answer which makes the reader/audience most intrigued to discover more about Jack's past, and which causes Lady Bracknell the most discomfort. In fact, rather than discovering more about his foundling status, she advises him to discover *less*: in short, to create a new past for himself to replace what he knows so far to be true. One assumes that this might best be accomplished through discovering his true past, but she seems only to care that a socially legitimate past be found, not that it actually be true. Furthermore, she seems to find Jack at fault for having misplaced his parents as an infant, rather than finding fault with Jack's parents for losing *him*. (The irony of this position is magnified when it is revealed that

Lady Bracknell's own sister has, in the past, misplaced a child. Although nobody yet realizes that Jack is that lost child, it shows that Lady Bracknell's odd opinions are actually well-established, not merely reactionary.) Lady Bracknell's frustration with Jack's parentage seems to be rooted in the same social hierarchy that dictates fashion in residence, a fashion that she had just implied that she could alter to suit her needs: "I would strongly advise you, Mr Worthing, to try and acquire some relations as soon as possible, and to make a definite effort to produce at any rate one parent, of either sex, before the season is quite over" (311). If she can change tastes to make his address fashionable, she sees no conceivable reason why he should not be able to change facts and locate some parents. Aunt Augusta has already bemoaned her party to be held the following Saturday because "at the end of the season...everyone has practically said whatever they had to say, which, in most cases, was probably not much" (305). Thus, a tight schedule is established: Jack must produce at least one parent, and he must do so by Saturday, which Lady Bracknell marks as the end of the social season. He thus has little time to act, forcing some of his more eccentric behavior to come.

Several reversals have taken place in this sequence: we are shown that it is better to be a man with few ideas and ambitions than one with them, which is a reversal (or rather, a dissonance between) what the audience may expect and what is presented to them. Also, Lady Bracknell has presented herself as someone capable of shaping social fashion to suit her needs (the ability to make 149 Belgrave Square a fashionable address should she choose), but then is unable to change fashion so much as to allow her daughter to marry a man of questionable (or in fact, entirely absent) parentage. This is further complicated in her final comment before leaving the room: "You can hardly imagine that

I and Lord Bracknell would dream of allowing our only daughter – a girl brought up with the utmost care – to marry into a cloak-room, and form an alliance with a parcel" (311). It thus seems that Lady Bracknell is not disturbed by the lack of facts surrounding Jack's background as she is by the presence of them. It seems offensive to her that her daughter, "brought up with the utmost care" should marry a man whose upbringing was so entirely happenstance, so lacking in care. Before Jack admits his provenance, Lady Bracknell tells him: "to lose one parent may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose *both* looks like carelessness" (310). She seems, by the end of the interview, to be willing to accept a suitor of completely unknown origin; Jack's origin is not unknown, however, it is merely improbable: and more than that, messy, which Lady Bracknell cannot approve. To have been really suitable, Jack should have taken greater care with his own parentage, assuring from an early age that he had some, and of a suitable sort. Lady Bracknell may be able to change this, but she does not wish to, as Jack's behavior as an infant is so repellant to her notion of how children should behave.

While it appears that Lady Bracknell feels at first capable of altering social rules and fashions and then is not so sure of her abilities to do so, the crisis is revealed to not be one of ability, but of willingness. If Jack can produce a parent ("of either sex"), she *can* make him socially acceptable; without his ability to do so, she is not sure whether she *cares* to do so. She therefore also seems much more interested in him finding an actual parent, not merely a person to fill the role, than she originally seemed, for she wishes to discern what sort of people they are, something that only meeting an actual parent could accomplish. In this way, her wishes for Jack *are*, in fact, in line with those of the audience, but for wildly different reasons. The audience then finds themselves in an odd

alliance with a character that they should not have anything in common with: on the issue of parentage, both wish the same thing for Jack (to find his true parents), but for reasons that have little in common. The audience wishes it in the spirit of comedy, the belief in happy endings and successful resolutions, while Lady Bracknell wishes it in order to satisfy her own curiosity about his parents and their acceptability as future parents-in-law for her own daughter. While this seems an odd compulsion at this point in the play, it becomes vastly important by the end, when Lady Bracknell confronts Miss Prism, demanding to know what she had done with her infant nephew some twenty-nine years earlier. Her motivation springs from experience, and it appears to color her judgment in all things related to the provenance and disposition of children.

All of the aforementioned reversals and redefinitions are products of wit. Like Lane's assertion that he could somehow not listen to music played in his vicinity (for reasons of propriety), both Lady Bracknell and Jack make some wild claims that, it appears, actually do structure their understanding of the world:

> Lady Bracknell: What are your politics?
>
> Jack: Well, I am afraid I really have none. I am a Liberal Unionist.
>
> Lady Bracknell: Oh, they count as Tories. They dine with us. Or come in the evening, at any rate. Now to minor matters. Are your parents living? (310)

In this exchange, several redefinitions occur, all of which are based in a turn of wit, and all of which appear to be, inexplicably, taken at face value by the characters. Jack seems to know that he ought to have political views, and is somewhat ashamed that he has none. He is, however, a member of a party, the Liberal Unionists. Is his claim, then, that he really does share their views? Or is his claim that the Liberal Unionists have no views?

(This would be akin to Will Rogers' famous aphorism: "I belong to no organized political party. I am a Democrat.") In either event, membership in a political party is apparently not based in shared beliefs, since Jack, and possibly the party, have none. Lady Bracknell redefines her question "what are your politics," to reveal that she is not actually interested in political views or beliefs, and has no desire to engage in a policy discussion with Jack. Instead, she is interested in politics as a measure of social acceptability, and the Liberal Unionists pass this test. She first claims that they are of a set to be invited to one's table, then refines her definition to say "or [they] come in the evening, at any rate," indicating that if not elite enough to make the table, they are welcome to join parties for after-dinner drinks and entertainment. It is an inferior social position, but a firmly established one that allows them access to the best houses. This witty banter has evacuated politics of any ideology and has used it only as a social barometer. As if important social institutions had not suffered enough damage at the hands of Lady Bracknell, she then moves on to discuss "minor matters" (presumably less important than politics): family.

Each individual moment of wit is a line to be enjoyed by an audience, a point in the play sure to elicit laughter. The wit is accomplished through reversals of meanings in individual words, reordering accepted hierarchies, or through expression of unexpected positions. In short, each of these moments undermines knowledge, by replacing expectations with eccentricities. These new positions are stated as facts, yet they do not seem possible as facts. But if they are not, then there really is nothing in the play upon which to hold, no footing to be found in its language. Accepting the eccentric, therefore, becomes the only viable option in the play. This paradigm, in which wit erodes meaning

without completely destroying it, functions both at the level of the smallest quip, and also in the larger structure of the play: the *mise en abyme*. It is precisely because the play reverses expectations and definitions from the very first moment, in thousands of small moments, that the larger reversals and redefinitions in the play become acceptable. In this way, Lane's insistence that he considers listening to music as a form of eavesdropping lays the groundwork for the play's later redefinitions of family, inheritance, and knowledge.

Another exchange, from the second act of the play, shows an individual moment of wit provide a pattern of meaning for the entire play. In this case, the ability of words to carry meaning at all is questioned. And of course, what better way to question meaning than through the romantic babble of a couple newly in love? Here, Cecily and Algernon begin their flirtation:

> Algernon: You are the prettiest girl I ever saw.
>
> Cecily: Miss Prism says that all good looks are a snare.
>
> Algernon: They are a snare that every sensible man would like to be caught in.
>
> Cecily: Oh, I don't think I would care to catch a sensible man. I shouldn't know what to talk to him about. (322)

As is true elsewhere in the play, Cecily and Algernon are engaged in a project of redefinition. In this case, the term in question is "sensible." For Algernon, it refers to any man who falls under the spell of a pretty girl's appearance. Cecily, on the other hand, is working with a different definition, although it is not as clear what hers is, exactly. She may be using a conventional meaning like "intelligent," in which case her argument is that she is not equal to discussion with an intelligent man. As she does not

elsewhere flatter Algernon's intelligence over her own, this seems unlikely. She might mean "sensible" in the same way that Algernon does, in which case her claim is that she cannot talk about herself, the way the ensnared young man would. This also rings false, as Cecily is one of Cecily's favorite topics of discussion. Might she mean that she is herself not pretty, and thus not able to catch a "sensible" man? Perhaps, but again unlikely. In fact, her response is wittily phrased, but is not specifically and decisively meaningful. In large part, it signifies the category of 'witty retort' more than it acts as a particular witty retort.

This pattern of knowledge undermined by wit is repeated throughout the play. As Lawrence Danson explains, "Wilde defamiliarizes words in order to defamiliarize the world they supposedly represent. He enacts the arbitrariness of language, as he does in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, to rediscover the arbitrariness of supposedly 'natural social arrangements" (151). The witty moment, the small moment of defamiliarization, therefore, opens up the possibility for a larger sense of displacement within the play. The pattern becomes evident at the level of narrative, in the very structure of the play itself. We repeatedly see the small detail magnified into a larger scheme of defamiliarization or ambiguity, a kind of micro and macro wit at play with each other. The play is built upon a series of unlikely and eccentric assumptions, including:

- Miss Prism might mistake a baby for a manuscript of a three-volume novel.
- Lady Bracknell might be unable, for twenty-seven years, to track down Miss Prism, even though she is living and working under the same name that she was when she worked for Lady Bracknell's family.

- Two brothers, separated as infants, might meet each other as adults and become good friends.
- Each brother might engage in a scheme of deception to allow him to live a double life.
- Each brother might fall in love with a young woman who mistakenly believes his name to be Ernest.
- Each young woman might insist upon marrying someone with the name Ernest, and none other.
- Nobody in Algernon's family might be able to remember what Algernon's father's name was.

Within the play, each of these assumptions is naturalized; that is, each is accounted for and accepted as meaningful and possible within the text. The culmination of the action of the play is the revelation of the 'truth' of Jack's parentage, that he is, in fact, Algernon's older brother. This satisfies Lady Bracknell's requirement that Jack "acquire some relations as soon as possible" (311). The final stumbling-block to the lovers' happiness is Gwendolen's refusal to marry anyone other than a man named Ernest. Cecily has a similar requirement, but is satisfied by the fact that Algernon is to be re-christened with a new name. For reasons unexplained within the play, this remedy is not sufficient for Gwendolen, and proof that Jack's name has always been Ernest must be found. Lady Bracknell remembers that he was named after his father, General Moncrieff, although she cannot remember what that name is. A quick look through the Army Lists (conveniently owned by Jack and kept in his morning-room), reveals that General Moncrieff's Christian name was Ernest John: thus, Jack's name is actually Ernest, but it is also John

(nicknamed Jack), the name he has been using for years. He is at once who he has always been, his father, and nobody at all. Any claims to 'truth' from this name are at best contingent.

Like Cecily's response about sensible men, this resolution does not actually resolve. It is meaningful only if one accepts all of the (mostly ridiculous) conditions established within the play, and if one accepts Jack's discovery in the Army Lists as accurate. He does not, after all, show his findings to anyone else, but merely announces that he has found the answer he was looking for within the book he happened to have handy. Lady Bracknell does 'confirm' his findings after the fact: "Yes, I remember now that the General was called Ernest. I knew I had some particular reason for disliking the name" (357), but no evidence is provided to show that she is correct. In fact, having met her one requirement (knowing who Jack's family is), Lady Bracknell is now very much in favor of the marriage, as Jack will then give his consent for Algernon to marry the (very wealthy) Cecily. She has every reason, then, to agree with Jack's newfound name, genuine or not.[6] The play is brought to a conclusion based upon a series of highly idiosyncratic circumstances and suspicious findings, none of which can be verified in any fashion. It is accepted *as* a resolution, much like Cecily's comment is accepted *as* a witty retort, even though any sense of actual knowledge or meaning underlying either is absent. It is not that there is *no* meaning or knowledge, but that they are always contingent; one cannot be sure of them. Things may be exactly what they appears to be, but they might not, and both possibilities have equal claim to being correct. The individual witticism has been reproduced in the form of the entire play, generating an abyssal structure that calls into question the possibility of knowledge and absolute status of meaning.

The Eccentric Moves to the Center

As has already been seen, *Earnest* engages in a continuing project of redefinition. The witty repartee between the characters, arranged in a variety of groupings, allows for the critique to be multivalent and multidirectional; even within a single character, it is sometimes difficult to find a consistent viewpoint. For example, in his relationship with Algernon's cousin Gwendolen, Jack is in favor of dispensing with traditional courtship and parental approval for marriage, preferring a new standard of love as the deciding criterion. Except, that is, when Algernon takes the same attitude toward Jack's ward, Cecily, putting Jack in the parental role. Suddenly, and unexpectedly, Jack becomes an impediment to love and marriage rather than its facilitator. The witty expressions, the *mots juste*, the well-phrased reversals of meaning all contribute to the generalized critique of the play. In the opening sequence, Jack and Algernon discuss Jack's anticipated proposal to Gwendolen:

> Jack: I am in love with Gwendolen. I have come up to town expressly to propose to her.
>
> Algernon: I thought you had come up for pleasure? ... I call that business.
>
> Jack: How utterly unromantic you are!
>
> Algernon: I really don't see anything romantic in proposing. It is very romantic to be in love. But there is nothing romantic about a definite proposal. Why, one may be accepted. One usually is, I believe. Then the excitement is all over. The very essence of romance is uncertainty. If I ever get married, I'll certainly try to forget the fact. (297)

Here, Jack and Algernon define the terms "proposal" and "romantic." Jack finds proposals to be a romantic endeavor, while Algernon considers them a kind of commerce. This also has implications for their notions of marriage, and what its uses are. Lady Bracknell shares her nephew Algernon's attitude that marriage is a transaction, one based in finances and social connections, and having nothing to do with love. She later tells Gwendolen "an engagement should come on a girl as a surprise, pleasant or unpleasant, as the case may be. It is hardly a matter that she could be allowed to arrange for herself" (308). Jack, our lovelorn hero, takes a decidedly different approach, accusing Algernon of being "utterly unromantic," initiating the second set of redefinitions. We can accept that Jack finds romance in the idea of love, but also in its consummation. Algernon, on the other hand, identifies romance as "uncertainty." Thus, a marriage proposal is the end of romance, not the beginning of it, for after the proposal has been made, one receives an answer. Like Lady Bracknell's advice to Gwendolen, it is "pleasant or unpleasant, as the case may be," but it is definite, and therefore, to Algernon, unromantic.

What, then, is to be made of this witty exchange? Is there a call to arms by Jack to overthrow the system of marriage matches and initiate a new era of self-determination based in love? Of course not. This is not that kind of play. Jack's position does win out in the end, but so does Lady Bracknell's. Gwendolen is allowed to marry Jack, but only after he has resolved the matter of his parentage, and thus of his social position. Cecily and Algernon are also allowed to wed, but only after Lady Bracknell realizes that Cecily is heiress to a substantial fortune: "a hundred and thirty thousand pounds! And in the Funds! Miss Cardew seems to me a most attractive lady, now that I look at her" (348-349). True love wins, but so does the established social order. There is not a call to

redefine society here, but a reflection of the fact that society is already redefining itself. *The Importance of Being Earnest* is not a radical play, but an analytical one. An anonymous reviewer of the Norton Critical Edition of the text, published in 2006, explains that "beneath the wit lie serious comments on life and mankind" (538). It is this sort of understanding of the play that misses the mark entirely: whatever commentary there is does not lie "below" the wit. Wit is not window-dressing, intended to make the unpalatable criticism digestible. Instead, the wit *is* the critique, which is eminently digestible: so much so that it is often swallowed whole and ignored *as* critique. This is one of the traps of wit: if done well, it is thoroughly enjoyable. It is fused with critique, but it can also mask the critique, leading to a popular, but critically underappreciated text.

Critics who have praised *Earnest* tend to focus upon the tone of mockery it maintains, and therefore assume that all social institutions depicted within the play are the subject of this mockery. Alan Bird, for instance, claims that "the play makes fun of everything the English held – and hold – sacred, not least money, baptism, birth, religion, food, and property" (182). While correct, he does not explain how (or whether) making fun of something is the same as critiquing it. He has recognized the humor, and clearly thinks the play has critical substance, but has failed to see the connection between the two. To Wilde's credit, this shows how the two are so closely intertwined that there practically is no connection: they are the same. To Bird's detriment, he dwells too much in the humor and neglects to explain how the humor accomplishes anything (other than producing laughter). In a similar move, Sos Eltis defends the play against those who find it mere fluff, stating that "most critics, however, allow *Earnest* a wider scope, noting how Wilde's comedy reduced the central tenets of Victorian society to farce" (175). His

praise contains the interesting word "allow," as if appreciating the play were a choice completely removed from the text itself. Critics "allow" *Earnest* to mean more than it appears to mean; one can only assume that without critics, the play would simply wither and die of meaninglessness. This is another example of the misunderstanding of the co-relation of meaning and humor; Eltis clearly wants *Earnest* to be a play with critical value, but cannot quite determine the source of that impulse. Instead of locating it in the text itself, he substitutes himself, in the role of critic, as arbiter of value.

Perhaps Eltis' move to extend the mantle of 'seriousness' to *Earnest* derives from the critical reputation of Wilde's other works. *Earnest*, after all, is hardly revolutionary or innovative in content; at the end of the play, heteronormative marriage and the status of the aristocracy are preserved. Wilde's other plays (all of which are *much* more studied than *Earnest*) deal with overtly 'serious' topics: illegitimacy (*A Woman of No Importance*), espionage and abuse of public office (*An Ideal Husband*), loss of social position (*Lady Windermere's Fan*). These plays are also not, strictly speaking, comedies, although each contains individual moments of humor and wit. In an astoundingly brief four-year career in the theater, Wilde had established himself as the preeminent playwright of his generation, and a master of the one-line quip. In his personal life, he had a reputation as a dandy and a wordsmith unsurpassed in London society. Then, as the final act to a short and brilliant career, Wilde wrote *The Importance of Being Earnest*, a full-on comedy of manners that appears to value convention and tradition. Rather than caving to convention, the play brilliantly rewrote convention as a series of negotiated constructs. They might win out in the end, but only because everyone involved agreed to allow them to do so. The overt, yet often overlooked, critique in the play is that there is

just as much potential for social negotiations to turn out differently, and for conventions and institutions to be overthrown. Critics label it 'mockery,' write glowing reviews, and largely miss the implied question "but what if...?" that fuels the play, causing constant juxtapositions of meaning that are recognized as wit.

The play's critical edge is easy to ignore, partly because the play itself encourages us to. In addition to its subtitle, which announces the play as 'trivial,' the language of the play consistently calls into question its ability to critique anything. It questions its ability to question: a triumphant turn of wit, and a reminder of our placement just on the edge of nonsense, peering into the abyss. In the process of its constant denials of criticizing, the play develops a sharp critical edge. In the midst of a deceptively amusing discussion about marriage, Jack and Algy directly confront the ability of language to mean anything:

> Jack: You don't think there is any chance of Gwendolen becoming like her mother in about a hundred and fifty years, do you, Algy?
>
> Algernon: All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. That's his.
>
> Jack: Is that clever?
>
> Algernon: It is perfectly phrased! (312)

This sequence examines the form of words versus their content, and finds form ultimately more powerful. In a turn of wit, which is all about the play between form and meaning(s), Algernon claims the superiority of the empty, but funny, turn of phrase. He is redefining wit, which had for centuries been thought of as an intellectual enterprise, into a more shallow form that is focused on producing the best quip. The overall arc of the conversation, though, shows that Algy has not been able to, nor even really wanted to

empty his comments of meaning. At most, he has deflected attention from his more radical statement, that men ought to become more like their mothers, the way women do, in order to avoid becoming tragic figures. This is a rather stunning formulation of gender, largely because it verges on the incomprehensible. How, exactly, are women like their mothers, and how are men to emulate that? And what about this in some way avoids tragedy? He doesn't tell us; we do not know. There isn't really enough information in this comment to figure it out without Algy's help. Like Cecily's witty retort that only really indicates that it was a witty retort, this is a manifesto that serves the function of 'manifesto' without actually stating anything coherent that can be absorbed, followed, or acted upon.

According to Robert Scholes, "part of Wilde's technique, [...] and part of his meaning, has to do with a kind of linguistic suspense, or suspension of closure, which prevents us from settling our interpretation, even of little matters" (147). This is exactly what happens at this moment, when meaning is evaded, but not erased; it is made uncertain, not absent. Algy's next comment, which could serve to resolve the issue, then completely undermines the possibility of language containing or communicating meaning at all, which in some fashion relieves the audience from having to resolve the cryptic, critical comment he has just made. It is much easier to accept his admonition that what he said was "perfectly phrased," because then one doesn't have to assume it meant anything. Our anonymous reviewer would explain that "beneath the wit lie serious comments on life and mankind," but this is not at all true. Beneath the wit lies confusion, misdirection, incomplete musings on complicated topics. The serious comments are the

wit themselves, and the way it calls into question marriage, parenting, and language: some of the foundational institutions of society.

The insistence upon the importance of the way information is phrased over the content it carries extends throughout the play, even in sequences where information, knowledge, is most in question. For instance, when Gwendolen and Cecily finally confront Jack and Algernon about their deception, the truth of their answers is no match for how they deliver them:

> Cecily: Mr Moncrieff, kindly answer me the following question. Why did you pretend to be my guardian's brother?
>
> Algernon: In order that I might have an opportunity of meeting you.
>
> Cecily [to Gwendolen]: That certainly seems a satisfactory explanation, does it not?
>
> Gwendolen: Yes, dear, if you can believe him.
>
> Cecily: I don't. But that does not affect the wonderful beauty of his answer.
>
> Gwendolen: True. In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing. (344-345)

This exchange echoes Algernon's earlier assertion that his comment was "perfectly phrased," if not clever. In this instance, Algernon is telling the absolute, unabashed truth. He has revealed the totality of his scheme, in hopes that the truth will inspire confidence in him and make him once again acceptable. Since Algernon cannot be counted on as being truthful, however, the women, who very much want to accept the explanations of their lovers, formulate a conception of discourse in which form prevails over content, thus allowing them to accept his answer based upon its beautiful phrasing (which is

actually quite mundane), and ignore its content altogether. As Scholes has explained, meaning lies *in* linguistic suspension. It is not, as others may have us believe, obscured *by* that suspension.

The Center of the Abyss

The structure of *Earnest* is itself witty, and, like the verbal wit of the play, uses small moments to reinforce larger issues. The play is overly concerned with origins and terminuses, and thus dispenses with them as a structural element. Instead of formally defined scenes, the play has sequences, which dissolve one into the next. The play's obsession with not knowing where something has begun (or if it has begun at all) becomes its own architecture. This is a move of wit, as one kind of meaning (thematic) is substituted for another (structural), leaving the audience to question both, and their relationship to each other. The same kind of wit shapes the epic tea-table battle between Gwendolen and Cecily that is, structurally and figuratively the center of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. All falsehoods perpetrated up until this point in the play are revealed, and for the second half of the play, truth rather than falsehood is the active pursuit. Before this devotion to truth can begin, however, the realization of past falsehood must occur, and since the men are too foolish to sort out such things, it must be left to the women. Their meeting and its aftermath have been accurately foretold in Act I in this exchange:

Jack: Cecily and Gwendolen are perfectly certain to be extremely great friends. I'll bet you anything you like that half an hour after they have met, they will be calling each other sister.

Algernon: Women only do that when they have called each other a lot of other things first. (313-314)

Jack and Algy accurately predict the exact pattern of friendship between the ladies: a half-hour of almost unbelievable cat-fighting, followed by a lifetime of close affiliation and devotion to each other even more than to their lovers. This is also the point at which we can establish the connection of wit to form, as the characters increasingly cease to act as actual people, but instead as ciphers for various positions. The scene plays out as a kind of chess game, and the characters become more and more like pieces in the game than as naturalistic human figures.

In "Oscar Wilde and the English Epicine," Camille Paglia reads the tea scene in the spirit of modernist wit, because she recognizes the all-important difference between what is *said* and what is *meant*. She does not focus on mere subtext, which is the slightest form of this difference, but instead on the ontological implications of what looks like merely a funny line or two. Her analysis resides in the realm of form, of the visible (hence her ongoing comparison to Renaissance artworks). Cecily and Gwendolen's meeting turns into a comical battle to see who can insult the other more:

Gwendolen: I require tea!

Cecily [*sweetly*]: Sugar?

Gwendolen [*superciliously*]: No, thank you. Sugar is not fashionable any more.

[Cecily *looks angrily at her, takes up the tongs and puts four lumps of sugar into the cup.*]

Cecily [*severely*]: Cake or bread and butter?

Gwendolen [*in a bored manner*]: Bread and butter, please. Cake is rarely seen at the best houses nowadays. (337)

Paglia comments: "For Gwendolen, tastiness is irrelevant, since the body has no needs in the world of form. Sugar and cake are items of décor, marks of caste by which one group separates itself from a lower group. Personal preference is renounced for hierarchical conformity. And note that cake is "rarely *seen*," not eaten – its status is visual and not gustatory" (92). These observations show how Gwendolen has positioned herself as an object of fashion, a place-holder for the category of 'woman' that Wilde both utilizes and fails to define in the play. What Paglia sees in this scene, then, is substitution: she has taken one meaning (the literal) and substituted in a different meaning ("the world of forms"), and reads the scene along those lines. This replacement reveals the tensions at work in the language of the play, how a word can mean more than one thing, and how meaningful this difference is.

What the comic wit of *Earnest* does, however, is to undermine meaning, not simply to replace it. Paglia ignores the notes indicating actions and attitudes within the scene: When told that Gwendolen does not take sugar, "[Cecily *looks angrily at her, takes up the tongs and puts four lumps of sugar into the cup.*]," and when bread and butter is requested, "[*cuts a very large slice of cake and puts it on the tray*]" (337). Are these the petulant reactions of a competitor, who wishes to cause some harm to her

opponent? If so, what harm can be caused by these childish acts? Is Gwendolen supposed to relinquish her claim to Mr Ernest Worthing's hand because of a tea incident? Or, are we to read this exchange more literally: since sugar and cake are not seen in the best houses, is Cecily laying stake to *not* being the best house? Might she, quite opposed to Paglia's concern, be relinquishing the world of forms, caring more for substance? Or is she perhaps making some kind of claim that Gwendolen herself is lower class, and therefore providing her with food more to her taste? All of these options are possible, but they do not point us in a single, unified direction. What they do reveal is that the play between word and meaning is inexact and multidirectional. Multiple, co-incidental meanings that overlap and contradict each other, yet have equal claim to truth: it is the very substance of wit, enacted in the way a slice of cake is served to an unwanted guest.

For the remainder of the play, the world of forms dominates the stage. Each character acts according to their assigned position, even though most occupy multiple positions. Gwendolen initiates this mode by announcing "I require tea!" announcing her role not as a person, or a jealous lover, but as a tea-drinking mechanism.

Witty Form, Witty Language

Wit is based in the interplay of language and its possibilities. *Earnest*, though, does not allow language to be meaningful. In the play, language can only suggest, but it cannot fully confirm. Language has no meaning on its own terms; it only has the potential to acquire meaning through reference to other sources of meaning. Those sources of meaning are themselves suspect in various ways, which destabilizes the entire

structure upon which meaning is made, and also allows for possible openings for critique of the play.

The status of the written word is particularly unusual in *Earnest*. Truth, meaning, and verifiability are all cast to the winds in *Earnest*, which presents a puzzle of parenthood and ancestry, none of which can be verified by traditional means. Birth records are replaced by three-volume sentimental novels, parents become train tickets, fraternal relationships become arguments over bills from the Savoy. Each of these things show connection and relation, but only in unexpected ways, and more conventional means are accorded no particular weight. The relation between language and meaning, between text and truth, is not broken in *Earnest*, but the expected relationships between these concepts are called into question, and non-normative patterns of meaning are suggested as potentially meaningful. Each of these replacements or substitutions is a turn of wit; language is used to describe a relationship, yet the relationship exceeds or problematizes its description. Language itself becomes one of the subjects of the play, then, especially when it is deployed to (fail to) describe the more overt conversations in the play, about parenthood, family relations, and inheritance. If language cannot firmly describe a relationship between object and meaning, then how can relationships between people be transformed successfully into language? Wit capitalizes upon this conundrum.

Joel Fineman has suggested that language itself becomes subjectivity in *Earnest*. Among many examples, he analyzes the way that young Jack is literally exchanged/substituted/mistaken for language during Miss Prism's inadvertent replacement of her young charge with a three-volume novel of "more than usually revolting sentimentality" (354). As a result, Fineman claims, "Jack-Ernest is in this way

so uniquely and definitively committed to literature, with literature thus registered as his alter-ego" and "he is one of those very few selfs or subjects whose very existence, as it is given to us, is specifically literary" (32). Wit, here, is the distance between what is named and what is real, between what is known and what can be. Jack's very origin as language reinforces wit's role in connecting language and substance in unexpected and often inappropriate ways. Oddly, since Fineman locates Jack-Ernest's origin in language, as a substitute for a text, he does not find much to say about his eventual textual 'resolution' in the Army Lists which finally reveal his father's name, and thus his own, as Ernest. Like Jack's actual father, the three-volume novel never appears within the play; it was discovered in the perambulator that Prism used for baby Jack, and presumably was not preserved. While Jack was mistaken for the manuscript once, it did not happen a second time, as Lady Bracknell (in lieu of Jack's apparently absent mother) quite clearly realized the difference between an infant and a novel.

While the difference between baby and novel is an absurdity that all but defies belief, there are other moments in *Earnest* when the written word is wittily transformed, often through the degree of authenticity granted to a given text. One of the first conversations in the play is between Jack and Algernon, who quarrel over ownership of an engraved cigarette case. Algernon claims that it cannot belong to Jack, because the inscription upon it does not match what he knows about Jack. Jack (currently incognito as Ernest Worthing) claims "of course it is mine. You have seen me with it a hundred times, and you have no right whatsoever to read what is written inside. It is a very ungentlemanly thing to read a private cigarette case" (299). The relationship between cigarette case and its owner, therefore, is established through repetition of the appearance

of ownership, not through any kind of concrete information contained within the case itself. If Jack has been seen with the case often enough, it becomes his, regardless of its inscription. Algernon, however, operates outside the spirit of wit and insists that the text conveys some sort of concrete meaning, and presses the point further:

> Algernon: But why does your aunt call you her uncle? 'From little Cecily, with her fondest love to her dear Uncle Jack.' There is no objection, I admit, to an aunt being a small aunt, but why an aunt, no matter what her size may be, should call her own nephew her uncle, I can't quite make out. Besides, your name isn't Jack at all; it is Ernest.
>
> Jack: It isn't Ernest; it's Jack.
>
> Algernon: You have always told me it was Ernest. I have introduced you to everyone as Ernest. You answer to the name of Ernest. You look as if your name was Ernest. You are the most earnest-looking person I ever saw in my life. It is perfectly absurd your saying that your name isn't Ernest. (299-300)

Again, the written word is credited with little truth, but the fact that Jack has previously answered to the name of Ernest is taken as proof that his name is, and always has been, Ernest. Jack, however, has reversed his position: he now claims that the facts on the cigarette case (or at least his name) is true, and that his name is Jack, not Ernest. While earlier claiming that he was not Ernest, yet still owned the case due to having been seen with it, he now disowns the name Ernest, which he has used all over London, and claims the name Jack, largely based upon the fact that it is the name engraved on his cigarette case. Algernon, meanwhile, declares the truth of Ernest's name because he looks like an Ernest, and because he also looks earnest. The fact that Jack/Ernest must be lying about

at least one thing in this scenario does not, apparently, affect his earnestness, at least in appearance.

This exchange calls into question the notion of evidence, the verifiability of the written (or engraved) word, and the relationship between the meaning(s) of homonyms: it is a discussion rooted in wit, playing meanings and expectations against each other. Neither Jack nor Algernon have a concrete, definable basis for their proclamations; both what they say and what they read obtains meaning based on its context, as opposed to having any kind of claim to static and unchanging fact. These meanings are multiple and mobile, and are exchanged in their witty banter. While there is no requirement that the inscription on a cigarette case be at all truthful, what is established here is that it is contingently truthful, depending upon what other information will be admitted to, and what sources of knowledge are brought into the equation.

Lady Bracknell, the figure who eventually resolves the issue of Jack's parentage by 'approving' the facts written in the Army Lists she is presented with, has her own history of mistrust of the written word:

> Jack [*in a cold, clear voice*]: Miss Cardew is the granddaughter of the late Mr Thomas Cardew of 149 Belgrave Square, SW; Gervase Park, Dorking, Surrey; and the Sporran, Fifeshire, NB.
>
> Lady Bracknell: That sounds not unsatisfactory. Three addresses always inspire confidence, even in tradesmen. But what proof have I of their authenticity?
>
> Jack: I have carefully preserved the Court Guides of the period. They are open to your inspection, Lady Bracknell.
>
> Lady Bracknell [*grimly*]: I have known strange errors in that publication.

Jack: Miss Cardew's solicitors are Messrs Markby, Markby, and Markby.

Lady Bracknell: Markby, Markby, and Markby? A firm of the very highest position in their profession. Indeed I am told that one of the Mr Markbys is occasionally to be seen at dinner parties. So far I am satisfied. (348)

In this exchange, Lady Bracknell refuses to accept evidence of Cecily's background that comes from Jack directly, or from a particular print publication. Her stated objection is that "strange errors" have occurred in the publication, although evidence or examples are not forthcoming. She finally admits the likelihood of the facts when told that they can be verified by a firm of solicitors whom she recognizes as respectable, particularly because they maintain a presence on the fringes of Society. The imprimatur of 'truth' comes only when information is presented within a certain framework; the same information, with other means of verification, does not rise to the same level. Information, therefore, is not meaningful, but only potentially meaningful. Truth is true only in certain circumstances. The written word, usually the highest form of proof, counts for nothing, if the person being confronted with it does not wish to accept it. In all of these ways, Lady Bracknell's witty deflections not only further her cause of keeping Cecily and Algernon apart, but also undermine the concepts of truth and meaning. All types of evidence are dismissed, with the exception of Society, which is larger than even Lady Bracknell, and which she must accept as meaningful.

The moment when the most trivial of written texts acquires the greatest significance in the play is during Cecily and Gwendolen's tea-table battle. As we have already seen, the action of the play rises to this scene, and falls from it, as does the pursuit of 'truth' as a goal of the characters. At this moment, the least verifiable and

trustworthy form of the written word, the personal diary, is wittily treated as iron-clad proof of historical events. Cecily has earlier presented her diary as a record of fantasy rather than of fact, an alternately supremely private as well as a public document:

> Algernon: Do you really keep a diary? I'd give anything to look at it. May I?
>
> Cecily: Oh no. [*Puts her hand over it*] You see, it is simply a very young girl's record of her own thoughts and impressions, and consequently meant for publication. When it appears in volume form I hope you will order a copy. (329)

The language, like the characters, is flirtatious: Algernon wishes to see what Cecily keeps private, and Cecily teases him with the possibility. By declaring her wish to make her diary wholly public, however, the terms of flirtation change, making Cecily seem less a naïf and more of a concerted exhibitionist. She them surprises Algernon/Ernest when he proposes to her by producing her diary as evidence that they have been engaged for a full three months, and that their relationship has survived several setbacks:

> Algernon: But was our engagement ever broken off?
>
> Cecily: Of course it was. On the 22nd of last March. You can see the entry if you like. [*Shows diary.*] 'Today I broke off my engagement with Ernest. I feel it is better to do so. The weather still continues charming.'
>
> Algernon: But why on earth did you break it off? What had I done? I had done nothing at all. Cecily, I am very much hurt indeed to hear you broke it off. Particularly when the weather was so charming.
>
> Cecily: it would hardly have been a really serious engagement if it hadn't been broken off at least once. But I forgave you before the week was out. (331)

Cecily shows that she uses her diary to record her romantic notions of how a romance and engagement are supposed to progress, rather than any facts about an actual engagement. Once an engagement emerges, however, she conflates the two and does not differentiate between them. Algernon/Ernest follows suit, and becomes both worried and offended that Cecily has broken off their fantasy engagement, even knowing that they were not actually engaged at the time of the separation. The diary is at once a complete fabrication of a fantasized event, a record of a real romance, and pattern for how romance might proceed from this point forward, depending upon what kind of authenticity that the characters wish to afford the text. Love, the diary, and language itself are interchanged in a turn of wit, when meaning is mutable, yet assumed to have some solid base.

Cecily's diary entries show the way that language is multiple and nonspecific in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Were her writings dismissed as trivial nonsense, they would have a specific meaning (or lack of meaning), and could be dealt with accordingly within the play. Her own conflation of her fantasy engagement with her real one, and Algernon/Ernest's similar tack, lends her text a questionable status. Is this an accurate record of their relationship? If so, how can it predate the relationship itself? Does Algernon merely entertain Cecily's insistence upon the truth of her text, or does he actually believe her? The acceptance of text as truth indicates that all possibilities are true at the same time, that Cecily's language provides an opportunity for creating meaning more than it creates any specific meaning(s).

Later in the same act, Gwendolen and Cecily compare their diaries as means of proof that they are each engaged to Ernest Worthing. They believe that they are competing over the same man, while their respective suitors (Algernon and Jack) have

both taken the name of Ernest Worthing during their wooing. The confusion is revealed in a surprisingly quick exchange:

> Cecily [rather shy and confidingly]: Dearest Gwendolen, there is no reason why I should make a secret of it to you. Our little country newspaper is sure to chronicle the fact next week. Mr Ernest Worthing and I are engaged to be married.
>
> Gwendolen [quite politely, rising]: My darling Cecily, I think there must be some slight error. Mr Ernest Worthing is engaged to me. The announcement will appear in the Morning Post on Saturday at the latest.
>
> Cecily [very politely, rising]: I am afraid you must be under some misconception. Ernest proposed to me exactly ten minutes ago. [Shows diary.]
>
> Gwendolen [examines diary through her lorgnette carefully]: it is curious, for he asked me to be his wife yesterday afternoon at 5:30. If you would care to verify the incident, pray do so. [Produces diary of her own.] I never travel without my diary. One should always have something sensational to read in the train. I am so sorry, dear Cecily, if it is any disappointment to you, but I am afraid I have the prior claim. (335-336)

Their disagreement does not focus on the apparent betrayal they have both suffered, nor upon the ways they might work to sort out the problem. Instead, the diaries are accepted as accurate records of their engagements, and their task is merely to use the evidence at hand to discern whose engagement trumps the other. It does not occur to them that the diaries may be fabricated (indeed, Cecily's diary is fabricated on just this point, as we have already seen), or that they might wish to consult Ernest about the situation. They set

out to resolve the situation themselves, in a mock-legal fashion. Neither woman seems concerned with the possibility of betrayal by Ernest, only with proving the other woman incorrect. Gwendolen labels the issue "some slight error," and after she feels she has trumped Cecily, hopes her friend has not suffered "disappointment." This far surpasses understatement as a rhetorical mode, and is simply a wittily inappropriate reaction to the situation at hand. This, of course, makes one question the nature of the situation at hand. The scene may be about a competition over a man, but it might also be a pointless competition between two women, in which the object is winning for its own sake, not for the prize won.

There is a further competition in this scene over the newspapers that will carry the various marriage announcements. Not only does the timing of the announcement matter (Gwendolen's trumps Cecily's by coming earlier), but there is also a distinction between "the Morning Post" and "our little country newspaper." Gwendolen assumes her cosmopolitan paper to overrule Cecily's country news outlet; her engagement, therefore, must be real, because she can get a more authoritative paper to publish the fact. Cecily, of course, does not share in this belief. The situation is resolved as each man enters the scene and is identified, thus showing that the women do not share a fiancé, but also casting the 'facts' of the diaries, and of the gentlemen's names, further into question. Through permutations of language, both men are Ernest, and both are engaged, then neither is named Ernest, and is not, and ultimately both men 'become' Ernests, thus retroactively legitimating the diary entries that have thus far been alternately truthful and fanciful. By the end of Act III, the lovers are in the same situation that they were in at the end of Act II, save that in the meantime their names and designations have changed

multiple times. Nothing has changed except language, but that language affects everything.

Queer Wilde, or, There's Nothing Witty About Being Gay

The wit of *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a product of indeterminacy in the face of seeming mastery. There is no doubt that the characters in the play know the meaning of what they say; the indeterminacy arises from the realization that what they say cannot (or should not) possibly be what they mean. Yet, if the characters are fully in control of their own language, should their meaning and their turn of phrase not match? The play prevents certainty in meaning, and ultimately undermines the status of knowledge and the institutions in which we commonly invest meaning. In reference to Wilde's works, Michael Gillespie refers to this quality as "the poetics of ambiguity," and claims that Wilde "resist[s] the prescriptive forces in traditional, linear, interpretive approaches. To this end, works by [...] Wilde incessantly emphasize the diversity of imaginative expression that can still occur within broadly structured societal limits" (2-3). This shows the same kind of recognition I have argued for in Wilde's rejection of teleological pressures: the linear narrative, the heteronormative pattern, the ending that functions according to expectations of narrative endings. This resistance to "prescriptive forces" is most certainly a perverse narrative aesthetic, and one that is often categorized as queer.

The bulk of recent criticism of *The Importance of Being Earnest* (and on much of Wilde's other work) has cast the play as a queer text. In most of these cases, 'queer' is

used in its most obvious and reductive way: to signify people or relationships that are or can be seen as homosexual in nature. While this body of criticism has some merit, it works counter to any notion of wit, for it tends to simplify, to name, to reduce complexity. *Earnest* is witty in that it is sprawling and contradictory, all while being incredibly proper and dignified. Queer readings of the play tend to turn its proper dignity into a camp configuration and to ignore its complexities and contradictions. It is largely an exercise in identity politics, in which Wilde's biography is inserted into his literary works, thereby rendering them queer. As Alan Sinfield claims: "it is hard to regard Wilde as other than the apogee of gay experience and expression, because that is the position we have accorded him in our cultures. For us, he is always-already queer" (2). The general impulse is to claim (or reclaim) the play as a gay text, to reveal its characters as homosexuals, or its structure and/or mechanisms as somehow indicative of homosexuality. To do so, of course, ignores the obviousness of what happens onstage, and dwells in some fantasy of 'what Oscar would have written if he could have gotten away with it.' This may be true, but it is, fundamentally, unknown and unknowable. Its unknowability, however, also hints at possibility, so neither insisting upon nor denying the queerness of the play encompasses its aesthetic. Alan Sinfield bluntly points out:

> Many commentators assume that queerness, like murder, *will out*, so there must be a gay scenario lurking somewhere in the depths of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. But it doesn't really work. It might be nice to think of Algernon and Jack as a gay couple, but most of their dialogue is bickering about property and women; or of Bunburying as cruising for rough trade, but it is an upper-class

young heiress that we see Algernon visiting, and they want to marry. (vi, italics original)

Sinfield focuses on the stated and performed objectives of Jack and Algernon, as opposed to their assumed 'desired' objectives claimed by other critics. He is correct that, on the surface, Jack and Algernon are not gay, and no amount of desire to render them homosexual will ever accomplish that end. By wholeheartedly rejecting the possibility, though, he ignores subtext, inference, and multiplicity, insisting instead that *Earnest* means something, and means one thing only. There are queernesses in the play, but they have to do with uncertainty of knowledge, not certainty of homosexuality (or even, as Sinfield would have it, of its absence). It is the constant negotiation of the possibilities of the play that make it witty. If we determine that it is fundamentally gay, it is no longer witty. The same is true if the play is straight. But queer? There is potential for wit there.

There is tension enacted in Wilde criticism between what is queer and what is gay, and how the two are different. Straight and gay, homosexual and heterosexual: these terms diminish wit by forcing it into absolute terms. Queerness, if it is allowed to have a kind of indeterminacy, can be very witty. Unfortunately, in most cases 'queer' simply means 'gay,' which puts us back in the realm of absolute knowledge. There are many queer aspects to *Earnest*, some of which are only tangentially linked to sexuality, if at all. Among the many foundational institutions of culture that are undermined in the play (inheritance, marriage, etc.), the most peculiar is the way that parents are distinctly absent. Only one character, Gwendolen, has a parent who appears onstage (or who even exists), but her mother, Lady Bracknell, is most often referenced as Algernon's Aunt Augusta rather than as Gwendolen's mother, thus minimizing her maternal role and

accentuating her more tangential role as a sister to a parent. This unusual de-centering of motherhood in favor of 'auntness' shows the overall destabilizing power of the play's witty language; its ability to depict scenarios in which recognizable structures of power fail to bring about meaningful resolutions that are recognizable *as* resolutions. Instead, perverse, queer, and eccentric endings supersede heteronormative ones, and power structures are realigned without being destroyed.

Earnest's Aunt Augusta (Lady Bracknell) became the basis for Eve Sedgwick's formulation of the concept of the avuncular, a non-parental relative who functions as a model for behavior, often including their sexual behavior. Aunt Augusta is just such a figure, as are Bertie Wooster's Aunts Agatha and Dahlia, as will be seen in Chapter 2. The avuncular is queer and witty, but not at all (or at least not decisively) gay. This is not to say that *Earnest* cannot be read as a gay text, only that to do so eliminates its wit and replaces it with camp and other forms of broad humor. Subtlety is elided in favor of knowledge, and we are pulled back, far from the edge of the destabilizing abyss. The play does, certainly, contain a number of homoerotic references, and is largely concerned with the improbable romances between a pair of effeminate men and their domineering female partners, all presided over by Lady Bracknell, an aunt who rules with an iron fist. Thus, normative gender roles are nominally inverted or at least compromised. There are also a number of ambiguities in the play that seem to suggest homosexuality, or at least cause one to pause and reflect on its possibility. The most obvious (and often cited by critics) is the playfulness surrounding the term 'bunburying,' a practice in which both men engage:

Algernon: Nothing will induce me to part with Bunbury, and if you ever get married, which seems to me extremely problematic, you will be very glad to know Bunbury. A man who marries without knowing Bunbury has a very tedious time of it.

Jack: That is nonsense. If I marry a charming girl like Gwendolen, and she is the only girl I ever saw in my life that I would marry, I certainly won't want to known Bunbury.

Algernon: Then your wife will. You don't seem to realize, that in married life three is company and two is none. (302)

It does not take a great deal of imagination to substitute some kind of illicit, and probably homosexual, practice for the term 'bunbury.' Use of the Biblical 'to know' furthers this reading, which is both complicated and magnified by the fact that if a husband is happy without bunbury, his wife will then want it/him. It can provide a wonderful laugh to audience members who pick up on the possible meaning, and functions as a plot point for those who do not. It does not, however, transform the play into a camp homosexual melodrama about closeted society gentlemen and their secret same-sex desires. It produces ambiguity, and therefore wit, but it does not require any particular understanding of the term to be meaningful. In fact, it works best as a constellation of interrelated meanings.

Queer theorists have overliteralized the possibilities encapsulated by the term 'bunburying' to the point when one expects to see Algernon enter in sequins and a boa, accompanied on the ukulele by Lane the butler. The criticism surrounding the term is almost staggering in both its volume and its general uselessness. Christopher Craft

rhapsodizes on the multi-leveled implications of the term, claiming to have found at least seven concrete sources for the term, including that it "represents or disseminates the following: 1) an actual person of no importance, Henry Shirley Bunbury, a hypochondriachal acquaintance of Wilde's Dublin youth; 2) a village in Cheshire [...]" (28) etc., all of which are called into meaning by the term 'Bunbury." Joel Fineman comments on the fact that Bunbury "was not only British slang for a male brothel, but is also a collection of signifiers that straightforwardly express their desire to bury in the bun," or in other words, multiply refers to homosexual practices (89). How "straightforwardly" this is accomplished is open to debate, especially as corrected by Jeremy Lalonde, who points out that "'Bun' does not signify 'buttock' in any of the dictionary records that Sinfield reviews – that is, until it assumes that meaning in United States sometime in the 1960s" (660). It therefore could not have "straightforwardly" meant what Fineman wants it to mean until well after Wilde's use of the term.

What these texts show is the perverse desire to make 'Bunbury' mean something, and to mean something stable and clear. This impulse, of course, violates the entire aesthetic of *Earnest*, part of which is built upon the multivalent incongruities of Bunbury and Bunburying. Bunbury is, after all, multiple persons living in multiple places, and within the play is alive, dead, and resurrected, all as needed by Algernon and Jack. The idea that it could be any one thing with any one meaning (other than subterfuge) defies the logic of the play itself. *Earnest* is not a puzzle to be 'solved,' but a turn of wit to become lost in. Attempts to pin down specific meanings, particularly ones that require knowledge outside of the text itself, only serve to ignore what Wilde does in the play, and to try and rewrite the play as less ambiguous, less witty.

Regardless of the juvenile enjoyment to be found in the term 'bunbury,' it is queer only in the most limited sense. Does it refer to an illicit homosexual act, or does it not? As Algernon points out about marriage proposals: one either knows, or one does not. One can have it either way (pun intended), and then it is resolved. Laurence Senelick, among many others, has pointed out the various homosexual 'cues' or 'clues' in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, including the status of the Albany Apartments (Algernon's address) and the Victoria Station cloakroom as known locations for same-sex assignations, and even to the "not-very-covert significance of 'cucumber sandwiches'" that Algernon consumes voraciously, denying them to Jack and to Aunt Augusta, who specifically requested them (176). Yes, all of these cues are provided by the text, but they are remarkably uninteresting, for they either indicate something, or they do not. There is no ambiguity. One either assumes the cucumber to be a phallic reference, or one doesn't. It may be a veiled reference to homosexuality, but it doesn't question the status of sexuality in the play; at most, it questions Algernon's sexuality. To focus upon such instances is to ignore Wilde's wit, his ability to reshape the world in which his language operates, in favor of recognizing the mere humor of the lines.

Carla Freccero's gloss of the word 'queer' is most instructive with respect to *Earnest*. Rather than an identity group or a theoretical practice based upon that grouping, Freccero suggests that "*queer* might [...] be thought of as naming a non-identity-based critical cultural and political practice that seeks to resist the humanist rights-bearing claims of collective identities understood to be based in a certain affective and sexual practice and a relation to same-sex object choice: *gay* and *lesbian*" (15, italics original). The value of this strategy is that it moves 'queer' away from mere identity politics and

into a realm of pure critique; in order to operate it need not call into being the actual queer body implicated by the term. The tension between the materiality and immateriality of queerness is then evoked, as it struggles between representing actual bodies and representing a matrix of meaning that presupposes, but does not dwell upon, those very bodies. 'Queer' can designate bodies and practices, but it can "also be a grammatical perversion, a misplaced pronoun, the wrong proper name; it is what is strange, odd, funny, not quite right, improper. [...] Like the trace, it is empirically irreducible but not phenomenal. The queer can thus be thought of as the trace in the field of sexuality" (18). Queer, therefore, is always present in sexuality, even in heteronormative phallogocentric sexuality; it identifies a disruption that exists fundamentally in language. Understood this way, the queerness in *Earnest* is the ever-presentness of oddity in the play, the way(s) in which normativity is a field against which the specificity of the play is enacted, the difference between the two evident as instances of language which evoke the spectrum of possibility. The queer is not the gay, therefore, but the way in which language has designated something as contingent, peripheral, or potential rather than absolute.

The Language of Wit

Ultimately, *The Importance of Being Earnest* creates a series of opportunities for language to mean, without ever forcing that language to mean any one thing. Wilde's characters operate in a world where language is always conditional and changeable,

where context can shade meaning or deny it altogether, and yet in which language is used as a precision tool by characters who understand its function completely. This is not to say that Wilde has created a postmodern totalizing 'both/and' situation in *Earnest*. Far from it. His characters display an absolute mastery of language; they know exactly what they are saying and what the implications are of what they say. They do not exactly manipulate their language into double (or even triple) entendres, in which more than one thing is intentionally meant all at once, but instead use their precision to undercut the absolute status of meaning at all. Far from 'both/and' or even 'either/or,' *Earnest* presents a 'neither/nor' aesthetic in which only one thing is meant, if anything is meant at all. Wilde's characters, some of the most articulate figures to tread the stages of England, may, ultimately, be babbling idiots, constantly unmaking their world the more they speak. In this world, the form for the play, which mirrors the familiar drawing room comedy of manners, ultimately serves to destabilize and critique dramatic form itself. Characters are artificial devices that parade upon a stage in which meaning is constantly deflected, multiplied, and pointed at, but never solidified and unified. Or they may be engaged in a project of building a world in which they can understand each other. Even in this world, Meaning is made between characters, but is denied to the audience, creating meaning as a spectator event, but not a participatory one. Either construction or destruction, however, they stand on the edge of an abyss of meaning and we cannot be quite certain they have not already entered it.

Chapter 2:

Modernist (Dim)Wit: PG Wodehouse and Indeterminate Narrative

P.G. Wodehouse (1881-1975) produced an enormous body of work, consisting of over ninety book-length works, lyrics and dialogue for dozens of Broadway musicals (including Cole Porter's *Anything Goes!* and Jerome Kern's *Show Boat*), and a frankly shocking number of short stories and essays. His stories of Bertie Wooster and his valet Jeeves (collectively referred to as the *Jeeves* stories) are among his most popular. Many that initially appeared in magazines and were later collected into volumes by Wodehouse, often with extensive editing and rewriting; others have been collected and published posthumously. The earliest published story of Bertie and Jeeves ("Extricating Young Gussie") dates to 1915, and Wodehouse continued to write about these characters throughout his life (his final Bertie and Jeeves novel, *Aunts Aren't Gentlemen*, was published in 1974, one year before his death). The pre-World War II stories are widely considered his best; these include several novel-length *Jeeves* works: *The Inimitable Jeeves* (1923); *Thank You, Jeeves* and *Right Ho, Jeeves* (1934); and *The Code of the Woosters* (1938). This discussion will be confined to the stories or novels written prior to 1941 for several reasons. First, it is a commonly-used (although not universally accepted) ending point for the modernist period; second, it is convenient for discussion of the *Jeeves* stories, as Wodehouse took his longest break from them in the 1940s, not returning to the characters until 1953. Finally, it represents a significant transitional

moment in Wodehouse's own life, as he gave up all writing for several years while in Nazi captivity during WWII.[7]

British literature in the post-WWI era saw the emergence of a 'type' of nobleman who was wealthy but useless, and whose function in society was increasingly unclear. P.G. Wodehouse's character Bertie Wooster is a prime example of such a 'type.'[8] Bertie is unusual among his literary peers, however, in that his particular brand of wit not only calls attention to his growing irrelevance in society, but also indicts the society that maintains him and his ilk. Bertie becomes a symptom of a society that is past, but still longed-for, even as efforts grow to marginalize that society even more. It is, in short, a kind of modernist nostalgia: not an actual desire to return, but a wistful memory of what was, which of course has been transformed in its telling into something that never really was, to begin with. This longing-for-an-imaginary-past is a kind of perverse formation, and is part of the way that wit is generated in the *Jeeves* stories. The reader is positioned in a fundamentally unstable position (through the narrator's evocation of the stories) from which to evaluate and enjoy the narrated tales. This lack of stability, created through language and based in temporality, manifests as comic wit.

This narrator of the *Jeeves* stories is the function through which nostalgia generates wit. Bertie Wooster is both the main character of the stories as well as their narrator. According to Robert Hall, the first person narration of the *Jeeves* stories is unusual for Wodehouse, who in his other works more typically uses a third person narrator (58-59). This fact marks the narration of the *Jeeves* stories as unique and worthy of study. Attention paid to the narrative structure of the stories reveals that it is the very site of wit, as well as the sign of competing sources of knowledge in the stories. Their

wit is generated in the space that Wayne Booth identifies as the "variations of distance" that can manifest between narrator and character (156). As a first-person narrator, there is an assumption of identity between character and narrator, that they share "personal beliefs and qualities" as well as voice, vocabulary, etc. (Booth 156). The *Jeeves* stories are remarkably uniform in these regards, but gaps exist that remind us that the narration is not simultaneous with the action of the story, but instead has been constructed afterward; what we read is a *version* of the events, including the thoughts and motivations of Bertie himself. In this way, what appears to be immediate (through its madcap plot, ridiculous twists, and improbable resolutions) in fact becomes a memory of some past time. How far past is not certain, but the fact of temporal displacement is. Realization that the narrator has time to 'tidy up' the story, and that this is, inexplicably, the version we are nonetheless presented with, opens a space of both memory and comic wit. The narrator of the stories revels in the memory of the stories as much as the reader revels in the nostalgia for the moment when these stories could have happened. Past and present, moment of action and moment of narration, are combined in a witty tableau. A second kind of distance, one related to affect, is realized by the reader's own instability: they are constantly positioned to enjoy Bertie's antics while decrying his social position. In this way, the reader is a perversely split subject, and not the stable 'universal reader' envisioned by Booth. The stories are at their most witty and revealing when what they show is lack of cohesion.

This space of witty narrative is most obvious at moments when the narrator recounts past events as if they were being recounted by the character of Bertie within the story that is being told. Although it is possible that the character shares these thoughts,

they are nonetheless products of the narrator, inserted into the ongoing present of the character. For instance, in *The Code of the Woosters*:

> "I trust Mr. Fink-Nottle was in good spirits?"
>
> "Extraordinarily good, considering the sands are running out and that he will shortly have Sir Watkyn Bassett for a father-in-law. Sooner him than me, Jeeves, sooner him than me.
>
> I spoke with strong feeling, and I'll tell you why. A few months before, while celebrating Boat Race night, I had fallen into the clutches of the Law for trying to separate a policeman from his helmet, and after sleeping fitfully on a plank bed had been hauled up at Bosher Street next morning and fined five of the best. The magistrate who had inflicted this monstrous sentence – to the accompaniment, I might add, of some very offensive remarks from the bench – was none other than old Pop Bassett, father of Gussie's bride-to-be. (9)

This passage reveals a degree of similarity between Bertie's voice as character and his as narrator: both use childish, inexact metaphor and abbreviation to both make their point and assure that their reader is of the 'sort' who will understand. Both emphasize minutiae and deemphasize important facts (for example, the fact that he spent the night in jail is converted to "having slept fitfully on a plank bed"). The temporal distance between character and narrator is clear, though, when the passage is introduced as a moment of conversation between narrator and reader: "I spoke with strong feeling, and I'll tell you why." Thus, no matter how similar narrator and character may seem, they are firmly established as *not* being identical. Additionally, the narrator appears to be intentionally adding information into the character's own story, ostensibly to clarify things for the

reader ("I'll tell you why"). The information added, though, is no more sensible than that which the narrator attempts to clarify. Bertie as narrator seems to be unable to make Bertie as character make sense, even if he tries after the fact to make it so. Part of the comic wit of the stories is created in this space, where an attempt to clarify, to re-tell, to recharacterize the tales takes place, only to more firmly reinforce their ridiculousness. Because of the stories' generation of an unstable reader, this attempt to clarify must always fail, as there is no possibility of any iteration of Bertie bridging all of the gaps that exist in the stories. The narrator's capitalization upon these gaps generates wit.

The passage above further reveals the class-based nostalgia that the stories engage in; the kind of attitudes that show the stories to be both part of their time as well as hopelessly retrograde. In this brief passage, Bertie flouts the law (or, "the Law," as he points out). His capitalization shows a mock-pedantic appreciation of legality, a disdain for a system that he clearly sees as below himself. After all, he engages in 'pranks,' not lawlessness. The purpose of Constables is to keep the peace (among the working and lower classes) and to provide entertainment to the upper classes. Bertie's milieu sees police as servants, not as civic officers, and thus has little use for them. Similarly, he characterizes his fine as "five of the best," a reference to a sum that, to a working class man, would be significant, but is likely pocket change to Bertie. The fact that his fine is so minute shows that even the legal system can no longer account for the aristocracy: it either must raise fines to the point where the lower classes are bankrupted for misdemeanors, or admit that the rich are simply beyond its reach. The fact that Bertie characterizes it as a "monstrous sum" is both a mockery of his own privilege (at the expense of the lower classes), as well as sheer fury (which is comic to his reader) that he

should be subject to any authority at all. This passage shows a number of gaps or distances: between characters, between classes, between narrators, between readers, all of which contribute to the nostalgia for a time when Bertie was relevant combined with a witty awareness of his actual irrelevance. It is this second awareness from which wit is generated: without it, the stories are comic, but merely comic. The distance between the character voice and the narrator voice, as well as the knowledge of this distance and all that it represents (socially, economically, and narratively) is the space of wit.

The *Jeeves* stories have many common characteristics. The plots are improbable, situational, and repetitive, and the characters stunningly two-dimensional. The use of language within the stories, particularly by Bertie (both as character and narrator) marks them distinctively Wodehouse and wildly comic. Bertie's turn of phrase is unique and evocative, and more often suggests or gestures toward meaning rather than stating anything outright. Once again we have a space that generates comic wit: that space between language and meaning, between sign and signified. These patchwork expressions, often called 'Woosterisms,' are part of the aesthetic for the oeuvre. Bertie's language is well-educated but poorly deployed (he attended Eton and Oxford,[9] but seems to have absorbed only a nonsensical mishmash of the classical education they provided), and is peppered with inappropriate or inexact references. Bertie is not guilty of malapropisms, exactly, because he is engaged in creating new expressions, original turns of phrase, rather than the clichéd (and incorrect) expressions of the malapropism. The way he speaks is distinctly class-bound, in that Bertie's milieu is the monied aristocracy, but it is also expansive, as Bertie is fascinated by popular culture, popular slang, and other 'low' forms of entertainment. It is also primarily juvenile: Bertie's glory days seem

to have been those spent at his boys' school, and he enacts his love for that period of his life through his continued use of schoolboy slang and his penchant for adolescent pranks. The realization that Bertie has been exposed to a magnificent education, yet has gotten so little gain from it, is part of the way that Bertie serves as an example of how the past class structures are ineffective for contemporary life. In an era of growing Progressivism, Bertie does not even have the good sense to be ashamed of his privilege. His friends (school and university chums, for the most part), share his attitudes and preferences. None of them possess Bertie's particularly sparkling turn of phrase, however, nor do they have his guaranteed income and the services of Bertie's valet Jeeves, whose unique talents give Bertie a favored status among his friends. In this way, he serves as a sort of leader to his peers, a kind of 'king of the idiots.'

Watching Bertie Wanting to Be Watched

The mode of narration in the stories shows Bertie to be two separate, but linked consciousnesses: one is out of control of his life and its events, while the other is completely in control of his skills as a narrator of those events. He is a master storyteller of his adventures, which are themselves about his lack of mastery over his own life. The space between these positions is a witty one, a space that creates oscillating degrees of knowledge and control. In this light, Wodehouse's *Jeeves* stories become a lengthy exploration of narrative that works counter to heteronormative modernist expectations. The instability of the stories produce comic wit, and also prolong a state of unresolved desire. They ultimately reveal a narrator whose desire is for stasis, rather than progress or completion, either sexual or narrative. Bertie's narration is a mechanism that

legitimates his desire to be watched while desiring – which he accomplishes by telling stories in which he is the object of someone else's desire.

Bertie Wooster serves as both character in and narrator of the *Jeeves* stories.[10] The first person narration often causes his two roles to seem intertwined; his speech and behavior in the stories seem completely consistent with the voice he uses to tell the stories. This consistency, however, is a product of the careful manipulation of the reader by the narrator. As a character, Bertie Wooster is delightfully dim and almost incapable of guile...or in fact, of wit. The narrator's organization and retelling of Bertie's inanity produces the wit. The two functions, character and narrator, appear seamlessly joined, but it is their fundamental separation that makes the appearance of seamlessness witty. Bertie, as a character, is certainly silly and funny, but not particularly witty. He produces none of the gaps, lacunae, fractures, or reversals that are needed to differentiate between wit and the mere comic. Bertie's function as narrator, however, capitalizes on the way in which Bertie's actions and words are retold in a manipulative way that produces wit. The fact that narrator and character often seem identical masks the source of wit, making it appear that Bertie as a character is its source, when in fact the wit is created through the narration. Here, Bertie and his friend Biffy have been dragged to an exhibition against their will:

> By the time we had tottered out of the Gold Coast Village and were working towards the Palace of Machinery, everything pointed to my shortly executing a quiet sneak in the direction of that rather jolly Planters' bar in the West Indian section. [...] I had been able to observe that there was a sprightly sportsman behind the counter mixing things out of bottles and stirring them up

with a stick in long glasses that seemed to have ice in them, and the urge came upon me to see more of this man. I was about to drop away from the main body and become a straggler, when something pawed at my coat sleeve. It was Biffy, and he had the air of one who has had about sufficient.

There are certain moments in life when words are not needed. I looked at Biffy, Biffy looked at me. A perfect understanding linked our two souls.

"?"

"!"

Three minutes later we had joined the Planters. (*The Rummy Affair of Old Biffy* 140-141)

In this exchange, the only spoken dialogue is an exchange of punctuation marks. This notation is itself a product of the narrator's voice shaping the exchange: words may have been spoken or not, but communication has been rendered purely punctuational by the narrator. Additionally, the narrator's voice transforms a rather mundane moment when Bertie would rather be in a bar than seeing an exhibition into an experiment in cultural anthropology. Bertie has suddenly found something he can value in the exhibition: a chance to see how alcohol is consumed in other parts of the globe. The narrator's voice and vocabulary are typical of Bertie's own (as a character): he deploys half-statements as if they were complete thoughts ("one who has had about sufficient"); seemingly inappropriate characterizations (Biffy as a dog: "something pawed at my coat sleeve"); a rather pedestrian desire to drink alcohol as a cross-cultural experience ("there was a sprightly sportsman behind the counter mixing things out of bottles and stirring them up with a stick in long glasses that seemed to have ice in them"). It is the similarity that

makes the voices seem identical, and the narration appears almost immediate and unfiltered, but there remains a distance between Bertie and the narrator who tells Bertie's story, no matter how Bertie-like that narrator may be. The fact that, as an entity other than Bertie, the narrator still chooses to mimic Bertie's patois is both funny and disruptive: it forced us to recognize the space between, the space of wit.

It is important to note the multiple and contradictory manifestations of seeing and watching in the passage. Bertie and Biffy are at an exhibition, a spectacle designed to be seen, and Bertie has been distracted by the sight of obviously alcoholic drinks. He then engages in a fantasy of himself being seen amidst the drinking crowd. After a wordless exchange with Biffy, they together join the Planters (drinking rum, one assumes), effectively becoming part of the exhibition. This exemplifies Bertie's ongoing desire to be watched. As readers, we already 'watch' Bertie, for we consume his stories, desiring more of Bertie and Jeeves. And, as in this case, we wait for Jeeves to come to Bertie's assistance: we wait for Jeeves to locate Biffy's true love and reunite them, thus separating him from both Angela Bassett and Bertie. Jeeves then takes Bertie home, to their shared domestic space, where they can await an invitation to yet another adventure.

After Biffy has been successfully dis-engaged from Angela Bassett and reunited with his actual love, Bertie's work is done and he can return, as he always does, to Jeeves. It turns out, of course, that Jeeves has masterminded the events of the day, and is now satisfied to return to the rooms he shares with "the young master" and await the next adventure. Jeeves is always happy to allow Bertie his adventures in the world, and even to assist in their completion, as long as he ultimately returns to the domestic space they share. Jeeves guards this private relationship jealously, including interfering in possible

matrimonial matches and other situations which would add to the number of people in their life. In "Bertie Changes His Mind," the only *Jeeves* story narrated by Jeeves instead of Bertie, Jeeves bristles at the suggestion of adopting children: "the course of action outlined by Mr Wooster meant the finish of our cosy bachelor establishment if it came into being as a practical proposition; and no doubt some men in my place would at this juncture have voiced their disapproval. I avoided this blunder" (230). This is not merely an example of Jeeves as a stock character type, like Plautus' *servus calladus* (wise or cunning servant), but an extension of that type to the point where the servant rules the master according to his own preferences. The fact that the reader sees this, while Bertie imagines himself to be in charge, is part of the wit created from distance in the stories. Bertie, as narrator, tells us stories in which he is controlled by Jeeves, yet does not realize it. Like the perversity of nostalgia, this is a perverse position of power and knowledge that is fundamentally witty.

As a narrator who tells us of this connection between himself and his servant, Bertie is also something of an exhibitionist: his desire is to submit to Jeeves' desire, to always return to the domestic space they share, without intrusion by any potential rivals. It is not merely a desire to be the center of readers' attention, however, that activates the stories, but a desire to be seen in a continuing relationship with Jeeves. There is a perverse sensibility at work here, partly in terms of the homosocial relationship of Bertie and Jeeves, but also, and more significantly, in the way that readers are deceived into playing the role of voyeur. Bertie's desire, as apparent in the stories, is not for an actual physical relationship with Jeeves, but is rather to be seen, repeatedly, as part of a unit with Jeeves – to forever be linked as Jeeves *and Bertie*. The way this desire functions in

the stories is masked: Bertie (as narrator) positions himself as the object of Jeeves' desire. The faithfulness of servant to master is easily coded as homosocial, but is also easily acceptable and even desirable. A space is created between Bertie's desire and the desire that the narrator depicts, a space for interpretation that is fundamentally witty.

Beginning at the End

Wodehouse's 1934 novel *Right Ho, Jeeves* opens with a discussion of the act of narration itself. The passage exemplifies the witty tension between showing and telling, the distance between knowing and revealing, and even signals Bertie's duplicity as narrator to his reader, while also revealing Bertie's concern over losing his audience:

> 'Jeeves,' I said, 'may I speak frankly?'
>
> 'Certainly, sir.'
>
> 'What I have to say may wound you.'
>
> 'Not at all, sir.'
>
> 'Well, then – '
>
> No – wait. Hold the line a minute. I've gone off the rails.
>
> I don't know if you have had the same experience, but the snag I always come up against when I'm telling a story is this dashed difficult problem of where to begin it. It's a thing you don't want to go wrong over, because one false step and you're sunk. I mean, if you fool about too long at the start, trying to establish atmosphere, as they call it, and all that sort of rot, you fail to grip and the customers walk out on you.

> Get off the mark, on the other hand, like a scalded cat, and your public is at a loss. It simply raises its eyebrows, and can't make out what you're talking about.
>
> [...] with the above spot of dialogue, I see that I have made the second of these two floaters. (369)

Bertie, as narrator, interrupts his story after it has barely begun in order to explain how he intends to continue from this point, and how he feels he has already gone wrong in the telling. He establishes the problem as one common to narrating as a whole, and that it is essentially audience-based: his mistake will result in leaving his "public [...] at a loss." The concern, then, is over audience appeal, not over anything so esoteric as 'truth.' Beginning as he has, with a conversation between himself and Jeeves, may be the most appropriate place to begin (although, not yet knowing what the story is, we can't really know), but it is not the way in which to "grip" the "customers." A tension is set up immediately, therefore, located in the space between the story that Bertie *wants* to tell and that which he thinks his "customers" will want to buy. As always in the *Jeeves* stories, when a distance between meaning and expression is created, and that distance is revealed through the narrator, the result is wit. Competing systems of knowledge, competing modes of representation, all of which point toward a witty space between what we are told and what we know.

The distance between these positions is largely illusory, of course, or at least one that exists only because of the language Bertie chooses to describe it. Bertie has begun his story with a moment of conflict, a conversation between two people in which something potentially hurtful (and thus potentially interesting) is about to be said. He

then aborts this trajectory to engage in a discussion of storytelling itself, which is interesting in its own way, but decidedly less gripping than the confrontation that preceded it. He then moves back in time to give us the history leading up to this moment in time (which comprises the bulk of the novel), none of which is as interesting as the moment itself promises to be. Bertie has changed direction from something interesting to something less interesting, all in the name of making the story more gripping to his reader. Something is deeply amiss. He has delayed narrative completion (a heteronormative structure) by actually moving away from completion towards a past moment from which he can begin (again) to narrate – and have far more ground to cover before he once again nears completion. Here, as with the repetitive nature of the story cycle as a whole, Bertie works to avoid an ending. His desire, as narrator, is to remain suspended, with Jeeves, and with an audience to see it all.

By referring to his readers as "customers," Bertie also acknowledges that the story he is to tell is one designed for audience consumption, that his goal is to give his readers what they want. This, of course, is a far cry from giving them what Bertie might choose without this audience restraint, or from giving them the truth of the matter (if an objective truth were even possible). For the truth is often messy and uncomfortable, and Bertie claims to want, above all else, to give his reader pleasure. With his false start, Bertie plays extensively upon the readers' expectations of a narrator. His reassessment of his beginning point implies that the story is being crafted as it is revealed upon the page. The story does not appear as a polished piece of writing that has been written, redrafted, and edited, but instead it reads like a bit of oral storytelling, where each hearing is a unique text. It lends a strange kind of verisimilitude to Bertie as a narrator, for it shows

that he is connecting directly with his reader, that he is telling his story with a minimum of filtration. This may be the biggest lure of the entire novel: as readers, we are charmed into believing what Bertie says, and also into thinking that he is really just a bit too dim to actually be deceptive. He *must* be telling us what he really thinks and feels, because he is not thinking far enough ahead in the story to misdirect us, and he's just not really clever enough to craft a plausible fabrication (this is underscored by his utter inability to tell a believable lie within the stories themselves). His success in creating this belief in his reader, and in doing it so quickly, is evidence of just how crafty and manipulative a narrator Bertie actually is.

Why is Bertie avoiding completion (of the narrative, but with obvious sexual connotations)? The answer may lie in the "spot of dialogue" itself: "'Jeeves,' I said, 'may I speak frankly?'" Jeeves answers in the affirmative, and then Bertie proceeds to *not* tell us what he wants to speak frankly about. That is not to say that Bertie (the character) does not speak frankly *to Jeeves* at the moment he tells us of, but that, as narrator, he chooses to edit himself and not reveal the substance of their conversation to his reader. His stated reason is that to do so would leave his public unable to "make out what you're talking about," when in fact his self-interruption prevents the reader from finding out what he *is* talking about – and simultaneously, it allows Bertie to continue (not) talking about it. This passage announces from the first that this is a narrative of misdirection, that the narrative is concerned with its own narrativity and is not yet decided as to whether it will knowingly reveal any truths about itself. A witty space is created between what we have been told and what we know the implications of that statement are. In the process of being told more, we have been told less, and even

knowing this find it delightfully funny. Instead of finding out what Bertie may have to say to Jeeves frankly, we have a discussion about the possible ways in which one *might* go about telling a story badly. The stage is set for a lengthy discussion by Bertie of how to avoid saying to Jeeves what he wishes to say to Jeeves, and how narrative is his tool for accomplishing just that.

What Bertie does *not* say, therefore, becomes subservient to how he does not say it. In other words, Bertie (as narrator) is privileging the form of narrative over the content; he understands narrative as a structure and plays upon this knowledge to obscure the reason the narrative exists at all. He deliberates quite openly about how to say what he wants to say without ever getting around to doing the saying: if Bertie were to have simply finished his "spot of dialogue," the reader might understand the issue under scrutiny. But to do so would be to violate the rules of Bertie's narration, which dictate that one is never to say quite what one means, but to stall, avoid, and rely upon euphemism to create meaning. This, of course, eliminates the possibility of 'accidental completion.' When Bertie does get around to telling us the rest of his conversation with Jeeves, it seems decidedly tame. It is difficult to understand why (or even how) he has spent more than two hundred pages explaining the backstory of the exchange. And that is because it is a lure: the complicated explanation of the meaning behind what Bertie says to Jeeves *is* the true story, and the structure of the novel simply leads us to believe that what Bertie says is itself meaningful.

What if the structure/content divide has led us astray? What if Bertie is trying *not* to tell his reader something, rather than trying to be perfectly honest? This is where criticism of Wodehouse (what little there is of it) goes terribly wrong: in assuming that

Bertie means what he says. Just because Bertie seems like a dim bulb does not mean that he is not actively engaged in a complicated narrative project. His internal debate takes a narrative form, and performs the very struggle in which he is engaged: if Bertie could actually say to Jeeves what he wishes to say, then the narrative would end, and with it, his pairing with Jeeves (which exists entirely *as* narrative). Instead, he prolongs the narrative as much as possible, and in doing so not only manages to avoid being frank with Jeeves, but also manages to make his reader forget that Bertie's discussion with Jeeves *is* the story, and that Bertie's desire involves having this displayed for his exhibitionist pleasure.

Jeeves, of course, repeatedly manages to avoid being frank with Bertie as well. He is omnipresent but, as we shall see later, all but disembodied. He is fiercely devoted to Bertie, and will do anything within his power to help 'the young master.' His own desires, though, are less completely stated. As narrated by Bertie, Jeeves appears to have two obsessions: Bertie's physical appearance and Bertie's permanent bachelor status. Of course, with Bertie as narrator, it is never clear if Jeeves really is obsessed with these things, or if Bertie is obsessed with Jeeves being (potentially) obsessed. Since Jeeves' desire (if it exists) is filtered through Bertie's narration, it may likewise be a product of Bertie's narration. Once again, we see the productive 'space between' of wit: the motivations of our protagonists are never completely clear, but they are highly suggestive. There is no absolute resolution to be found, but careful attention paid to the locations and types of 'spaces between' can offer potential answers.

The *Jeeves* stories are riddled with not-so-subtle hints about Jeeves' desire for Bertie, mediated through Bertie's own first-person narration. As narrator, Bertie not only

provides his readers with the clues that lead us to assume that he is the object of Jeeves' desire, but also leads us to believe that he himself is unaware of this desire. In short, he tells a story in which he is unaware of the story he tells. We have to either fundamentally de-link character-Bertie and narrator-Bertie in order to accept this (which their similarity of language use, interests, and obsessions makes difficult), or we must recognize the witty structure at play here: literally, 'at play,' as we are being toyed with by our narrator. Bertie must either be aware of Jeeves' desire, or he must actually be creating this desire on behalf of Jeeves. One example (of many) occurs in *Jeeves and the Impending Doom*: "I lay beneath the surface [of the bath] for another few minutes; then, having dried the frame, went along the corridor to my room. Jeeves was there, fiddling about with underclothing" (22). Underclothing, indeed. Why, exactly, must it be fiddled about with, and why at exactly the moment when its owner will enter (in a towel) and find it being fiddled about with? And why does Bertie not find this odd? All very delightful, and slightly naughty, but in a rather tame fashion. After all, we can be fairly sure that due to their different stations, Bertie is certain to remain unmolested by his perhaps too-devoted manservant, and all can rest easily. Jeeves' desire (as explained by Bertie) seems satisfied through being allowed to dry Bertie after his bath, to dress him, and to fiddle about with his underclothing.

And then Bertie tells us of this desire again. And again. And again. And again. Even though the compulsion to repeat is a hallmark of repression, this repetition is more like sublimation. It is a fine distinction, but an important one. Bertie is not using repetition to avoid anxiety, but is instead repeating for the enjoyment of what is being repeated. He is not seeking to alleviate anxiety, but to continually experience pleasure.

By repeating, he defers the end of his pleasure. Northrop Frye claims that "the obstacles to the hero's desire, then, form the action of the comedy, and the overcoming of them the comic resolution" (164). In Bertie's case, the obstacles to desire are the rules of normative society, represented by his meddling aunts and the constant string of would-be fiancées, all thwarted by Jeeves. Overcoming these obstacles takes the form of repetition, of delaying completion, which is Bertie's form of pleasure.

Queer Narration/Queer Narrator

In *Reading for the Plot*, Peter Brooks claims that "plots are not simply organizing structures, they are also intentional structures, goal-oriented and forward-moving" (12). Bertie, as narrator, is clearly the master of the plot of the *Jeeves* stories. As a character, the plot is often beyond his control, but as narrator he relates the plot to us in an "intentional" and "goal-oriented" fashion. It is not, however, "forward-moving." The cyclical nature of the plots means that each episode is brought to a conclusion only to have another begin immediately, nearly identical to its predecessor. Each is a different story, but nothing has changed, nothing has moved. The plots are so trivial that they serve only to return us to a point where we can see Bertie and Jeeves together again. Each story begins with Jeeves and Bertie alone in Bertie's apartment, just before a person, telegram or phone call arrives with information that forces them out of their isolated reverie. Each also ends with the pair having returned to their domestic setting, glad for adventure to be over so that they can return to...what? The stories act almost as an interruption in Jeeves' and Bertie's life together. Readers see the narrated events *as*

the substance of their lives, while the stories themselves position those events as unwanted intrusions in the state of happiness that is shared between stories. Brooks also claims that "the middle of the tale offers a kind of minimum satisfactory process that works through the problem of desire gone wrong and brings it to its cure" (9). With the *Jeeves* cycle, we have a kind of perpetual middle. It is intentional, it is constructed, it is tactical, but it is also without end. We continuously achieve a "minimum satisfactory process" and are continually working through "the problem of desire gone wrong."

Desire, for Brooks, is a complicated and contradictory process. He claims that "desire is always there at the start of a narrative, often in a state of initial arousal, often having reached a state of intensity such that movement must be created, action undertake, change begun" (38). Desire is what initiates narrative, what draws it out of a state of quiescence into a state of activity. Desire may not exclusively give life to narrative, but it does give it motion, creating a kind of propulsion through the plot, toward the ending. The *Jeeves* stories complicate this, for they enact a desire that produces no movement toward the end. Their desire lies in the middle, in the difference, in the interplay between meanings and explanations. With respect to modernist wit, as we have seen elsewhere, the term 'queer' refers to narrative indeterminacy that rises to the level of undermining the status of knowledge itself. Defined, comprehensible endings are heteronormative, and are the antithesis of queer wit, for they provide a stable location for meaning-making. The *Jeeves* cycle cannot come to an end in any traditional narrative sense, because its desire is to continue desiring, and endings bring about "satisfactory process" towards satisfying desire.

The kind of trajectory toward completion envisioned by Brooks is an example of heteronormative expectations of narrative. It models what narratives are expected to do, and how they are expected to do it. The failure to recognize a difference between the Bertie *in* the stories and the Bertie who *tells* the stories causes readers to believe that the stories operate according to conventional and expected trajectories and patterns. The cyclical and repetitive nature of the stories establishes a kind of perverse normativity in the texts; the reader is quickly taught to read past the queering of narrative and to accept it as convention. As an example, the contrived endings of *Jeeves* stories are received *as* endings, as if they arise from the narratives and complete them. Their ridiculous predictability is part of their queerness. Each story begins with some sort of assertion of impossibility: Bertie is placed (or places himself) in an undesirable position from which there is no possible desirable exit. By the end of the story, Jeeves has fashioned a desirable way out of the situation through some delightfully improbable machinations that rely upon facts not presented within the story or skills not evident prior to their use. The structure of the stories, therefore, works against heteronormative expectations, for they work against a concept of conventional, cohesive wholeness. Either the initial declaration of impossibility is incorrect (thus undermining truth as a functional concept), or the ending must be accepted at face value, regardless of how improbable. Both the belief in the initiating circumstance *and* the belief in the veracity of its solution are not simultaneously possible; one or the other must be accepted as fancy. Yet the contrived nature of the ending is seen as contiguous with the comic nature of the stories. The fact that it *cannot* work is disregarded and the ending is accepted as reasonable, thus queering any sense of narrative cohesion or satisfaction.

This queering opens a possibility for interpretation, for an awareness of the complexities at work. The reader's enjoyment of Bertie's comic wit, though, deflects the desire to embrace this possibility. The stories both describe and disguise a complex psychonarrative process. As narrator, Bertie convinces his reader to not be overly concerned with progress through the text; that is, Bertie can avoid a conventional ending while still pleasing his reader. This prolonged state of non-completion is achieved through a repetitive narrative structure that continuously places the reader in the middle of Bertie and Jeeves' relationship, returning them to the same point of non-completion over and over again. The *Jeeves* stories work against heteronormative narrative expectations, both in their subject matter, which focuses on the potential desire between two men, but also at the level of narrative. They do not follow an expected path to completion, they do not partake in patterns that are assumed of what narrative *does*. Instead, they are a serial of queer narrative desire that work as a distaff model of modernist narrative, one that ultimately calls into question narrative expectations.

Reading Bertie / Telling Bertie

The *Jeeves* stories tend to have wildly complicated plots involving Bertie becoming entangled in some situation (usually because of his own incompetence or because of pressure from his Aunts Dahlia and Augusta), with Jeeves coming to the rescue of "the young master" with a resolution that saves Bertie from doom (usually financial ruin, unwanted social entanglements, or marriage). A small cast of characters

appears again and again, variously occupying the roles of friend or foe, ex-fiancée or future love interest, as required by the stories. These characters are particularly notable for their comic schoolboyish names: Bingo Little, Tuppy Glossop, Pongo Twisteleton, Angela Bassett, Stephanie (Stiffy) Byng, Gussie Fink-Nottle, etc. Bertie is a character who finds himself quite privileged in a society where privilege has become suspicious. After finishing school, Bertie landed in London as a man about town and a member of the Drones Club, a gentlemen's establishment whose members are all rich, idle young men who are grossly immature, bordering on imbecility. It is not unusual at the Drones for a variety of inventively adolescent pranks to be carried out, and most meals degenerate into food-fights. In "Jeeves and the Song of Songs," Bertie tells of one particularly egregious prank played upon him at the Drones by his friend Gussie Fink-Nottle:

> First having got me in the sporting mood with a bottle of the ripest, he betted I wouldn't swing myself across the swimming-bath by the ropes and rings. I knew I could do it on my head, so I took him on, exulting in the fun, so to speak. And when I'd done half the trip and was going as strong as dammit, I found he had looped the last rope back against the rail, leaving me no alternative but to drop into the depths and swim ashore in correct evening costume. (78)

This is a moment when Bertie finds himself someone else's fool: Gussie has set a trap for him so that he will embarrass himself in front of his friends. The language used to describe it, though, shows Bertie to be in complete control: not of the event itself, but of its telling. Bertie, as narrator, is the master of this event, if only after the fact. Through his distinctive turn of phrase ("a bottle of the ripest" and "as strong as dammit"), he characterizes this juvenile dare as if it were a recognized sporting event; his idiosyncratic

sense of appropriate description ("correct evening costume") provides him with the (apparently) expected uniform for such a competition. As Bertie drops "into the depths," his wit transforms what has been a triumph of athletic prowess into an ultimate act of betrayal. With a few sentences, Bertie changes from champion to victim, both positions with a certain kind of power. It is a specifically language-based kind of mastery; the facts of the event make it clear that Bertie does, if nothing else, fall victim to Gussie's superior guile. As a character, Bertie cannot change what has happened. As a narrator, he can deploy his comic wit to any end he sees fit: in this case, it is to linger over his athletic prowess, forcing his reader to watch him at his finest, and then to become a victim on a grand scale. Of course, he also makes us laugh while he is doing this.

Bertie, as a literary construction, is created in the act of telling about Bertie, something that the mode of telling seems to place in the hands of the character himself. This reflexive structure is an illusion, of course, as both 'Berties' are evoked textually in the same moment. It appears, though, that we have competing Berties: one who 'lives' the stories and one who 'tells' the stories. This illusory splitting of Bertie recalls the destabilization of the assumed reader, once again creating a space between sources of knowledge: a space that may not exist, but whose evocation is a source of wit. As narrator, Bertie appears to decide what gets told (and what doesn't), but also how the telling will take place. He also holds great power over the readers' interpretive decisions, guiding them to notice certain things, ignore others, and to form an overall understanding according to his design. As a character, Bertie enjoys being the center of attention, as evidenced by his willingness to take Gussie's dare and perform in front of his friends. As narrator, he craves attention, which is why he casts the story of his night at the Drones as

a mock-epic challenge and feat, one which leads to a comic vendetta against Gussie stretching over many stories. The childish prank is given far more importance than it warrants, because it is a way for Bertie to remind us of his constant presence and his constant centrality to the stories. That is the one thing Bertie never allows us to forget: the stories may be named for Jeeves, but they are all about Bertie.

The ridiculous plots are part of the stories' overall aesthetic: they are, as Bertie himself sometimes complains, a bit too elaborate. Even the slightest of tales involves numerous complications, reversals, and misdirections that refuse to let the story move forward; we are constantly trapped in the middle of the story, in the telling. We can never quite finish watching Bertie. While Bertie has our attention, he tells us over and over about Jeeves' desire for Bertie, although never in concrete terms. Instead, Bertie tells us of Jeeves bathing Bertie, dressing Bertie, obsessing over Bertie: all things that, as valet, Jeeves has been hired to do. Bertie's narration, however, makes us wonder if professional responsibility is the reason behind Jeeves' attentions.

One of the ways that Bertie traps his readers in the now, in the ongoing middle, is to force them to translate the story as they read it. His witty turn of phrase is delightful, but is also puzzling, and provides a reason for readers to halt in their reading and focus on that particular moment, rather than moving along to the next. Critics and scholars tend to dismiss the way Bertie uses language as merely entertaining fluff, but it is also constitutive of his character: Bertie is, largely, a product of who he says he is and how he says it. As stated before, Bertie is created through the telling of Bertie, and the telling of Bertie is a damnably complicated thing. The fact that his unique slang seems effortless to him causes many to accept it *as* effortless, and not to investigate what this narrator is

actually saying, or what it reveals about his agenda as a narrator. If nothing else, Bertie's idiosyncratic language stops the trajectory toward the ending, toward completion. As one tries to 'interpret' Bertie, one is doing two things: focusing on Bertie, paying particularly close attention to every minor detail, and simultaneously *not* moving forward with the plot and not minding that there is no forward momentum. Bertie, as narrator, uses the inanity of Bertie the character to get what he wants: stasis and focus.

"The Great Sermon Handicap" is an early *Jeeves* story, first appearing in a 1922 issue of *Strand Magazine*, and later revised and incorporated as a chapter of *The Inimitable Jeeves* (1923). Like all *Jeeves* stories, it describes Bertie Wooster becoming unnecessarily entangled in a complicated scheme that Jeeves resolves on behalf of "the young master." In this case, Bertie wagers on the longest sermon to be delivered by a group of rural preachers in the vicinity of Twing Hall, the country home of his father's friend Lord Wickerhammersly. His old school chum Bingo Little is in exile at Twing Hall working as a tutor, and plans to win enough from the scheme to resign his post and return to the gay social life of London. His plan depends upon a loan from Bertie so that he can make his initial wager (against Bertie), as well as intelligence gained from several sources to help him pick his favorite. While helping his friend is in direct opposition to his own financial interests, his personal moral code ("the Code of the Woosters") obligates him to help those in need, friend or foe, if he attended school with them. While his loyalty may often be misplaced, it is an essentially altruistic code and one which endears Bertie to his readers. If Bingo wins, Bertie will lose, yet Bertie helps him anyway. Jeeves, of course, runs his own intelligence operations and chooses a different

set of favorites, much to his own benefit. His wagers also impossibly ensure that both Bingo and Bertie will come out winners.

The humor of the story is formed through the dynamic interaction of several different things: a frivolous premise, an idiosyncratic turn of phrase, a propensity for metaphor that is simultaneously imprecise and evocative, and a series of reversals, misunderstandings and omissions. By themselves, each of these features would be ridiculous; used in concert, they produce a sustained comic wit. The humor, rather than helping the story progress, prolongs the narrative moment, which focuses upon a moment where Bertie and Jeeves are together. The following passage is the opening of the story, which begins (as almost all of the *Jeeves* stories do), with Jeeves discovering Bertie alone, and bringing him news that will begin an adventure:

> You can always rely on Jeeves. Just as I was wiping the brow and gasping like a stranded goldfish, in he drifted, merry and bright, with the good old tissue-restorers on a tray.
>
> 'Jeeves,' I said, 'it's beastly hot.'
>
> 'The weather is oppressive, sir.'
>
> 'Not all the soda, Jeeves.'
>
> 'No, sir.'
>
> 'London in August', I said, quaffing deeply of the flowing b., 'rather tends to give me the pip. All my pals are away, most of the theatres are shut, and they're taking up Piccadilly in large spadefuls. The world is empty and smells of burning asphalt. Shift-ho, I think, Jeeves, what?'
>
> 'Just as you say, sir. There is a letter on the tray, sir.'

'By Jove, Jeeves, that was practically poetry. Rhymed, did you notice?' I opened the letter. 'I say, this is rather extraordinary.'

'Sir?'

'You know Twing Hall?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Well, Mr Little is there.'

'Indeed, sir?'

'Absolutely in the flesh. He's had to take another of those tutoring jobs.'

I don't know if you remember, but immediately after that fearful mix-up at Goodwood, young Bingo Little, a broken man, had touched me for a tenner and whizzed silently off into the unknown. I had been all over the place since, asking mutual friends if they had heard anything of him, but nobody had. And all the time he had been at Twing Hall. Rummy. (13)

Rummy, indeed. In this passage, we can see both individual comic moments as well as the beginning of a larger aesthetic emerging from their combination, all of which is based in language and perception. First, there is Bertie's idiosyncratic use of image and metaphor. "Gasping like a stranded goldfish" is a turn of phrase that is both completely unexpected and yet entirely possible to visualize. Rather than using the more pedestrian expression "fish out of water" (to describe someone in surroundings with which they are unfamiliar or for which they are somehow unsuited), Bertie creates an expression both new and uncannily familiar. A clichéd expression actually shuts down interpretation (we have heard it so often that it is accepted at face value), and also hurries the story along, since there is nothing there of value to ponder. This new twist on an old expression

literally gives the reader pause. One could (as many do) simply giggle and move on, but the narrator creates a possibility for us to stop for a while and think about what we have been told. What, exactly, does Bertie mean by this? Is he simply misstating a cliché, or does he mean exactly what he says? And what might that be? This image is also tied directly to narrative: if nothing else, this image demands a story. How did this goldfish come to be stranded, anyway? And what, exactly, does it mean to "strand" a goldfish? The expression is evocative more than directly communicative: there are definite possibilities for meaning, but none seem clearly obvious. There is no reason it should resonate, but it does. Clichés are dead metaphors, while Bertie's sparklingly inventive use of language is alive. It is about sustaining, it is something with narrative potential to be explored.

There is also the fact that the image is (at least potentially) misleading. Bertie begins with a discussion of the "beastly" heat, and there is the possibility that he is gasping for breath because of the weather. Just then, Jeeves enters (good man) with a "tissue-restorer," an unnamed drink of some sort. Goldfish might well "gasp" when "stranded" out of water; that is, when the fluid necessary to their life is absent; Jeeves' "tissue-restorer" is just this liquid of life that Bertie requires. The exact nature of this beverage is unknown, but one might hope that it is a bracing dose of fruit juice, or perhaps some organic concoction that will revitalize the body. Bertie, then, interrupts the (unnarrated) mixing of the drink to instruct "not all the soda, Jeeves." Far from a healthy celery tonic, Bertie appears to be having a morning whiskey and soda...light on the soda.

All of this, as with most of what happens in Bertie and Jeeves' interactions, takes place by implication, by inference, rather than by direct description. Bertie, as narrator,

could well have said "Jeeves brought in a drink to help me overcome a hangover, and when he mixed it, I asked him to use more whiskey than soda." The content, the factual information conveyed, is roughly identical, but it does not sparkle with Wodehouse's typical style, and is significantly less humorous (if at all). More importantly, it actually communicates directly. There is no confusion, no wondering what, exactly, Bertie is talking about. In "The Great Sermon Handicap," The narrator has chosen to have the character speak directly to the reader, apparently unfiltered, by including little narrative commentary, only dialogue. But of course this 'unfilteredness' is a lure: Bertie the narrator appears to have chosen this structure, and to have chosen it because the way the character speaks is itself delightfully indirect. It is this lack of directness that is vital to Wodehouse, that makes the stories work. The comic mode is his means of representing the various incongruities and silences in the story, but is not, as most assume, the entirety of what is going on.

Bertie continues with his unusual (indirect, metaphorical, slangy, cosmopolitan) means of referring to things: "quaffing deeply of the flowing b." It is not exactly clear what the abbreviated "b." stands in for. Is it 'beverage?' 'Bourbon?' '*La boisson*?' (Bertie does love his random French vocabulary.) Or is it some completely other word? One isn't sure. One is fogged, as Bertie would say. The point of abbreviation is to save printed space by removing extraneous matter that is not necessary for clarity; this seems to achieve the reverse. Whatever has been abbreviated did not really need it, and clarity is exactly what has been lost. Another feature of this abbreviation is that it is distinctly page-bound. It isn't clear how that abbreviation would be said aloud: its existence is only legitimate (to the extent it is at all) in print. Much of the charm of the *Jeeves* stories lies

in their oral quality; there are moments ("I don't know if you remember...") where Bertie addresses the reader directly, as if he is in the room with them, telling a story. It often feels as if Bertie is making these tales up as he tells them, that they are wholly unedited and unrehearsed, thus lending them their madcap quality. They aren't *supposed* to make absolute sense, because Bertie hasn't had time to go back and 'tidy up' all of the loose ends. Abbreviations like "b." directly contradict this. They remind us that these are not spontaneous bits of oral storytelling, but written tales. The division between Bertie as character and Bertie as narrator emerges, specifically at a moment when the telling of the story has slowed the story itself. Not surprisingly, it happens at a moment when Bertie and Jeeves are alone, prolonging the time they have before outside events will draw them into a less private space. Rummy.

One of the funniest portions of the passage is Bertie's comment on Jeeves' inadvertent rhyme. "Just as you say, sir. There is a letter on the tray, sir." Not exactly Shakespeare, but a rhyme nonetheless, and it seems to give great delight to Bertie. So much delight, in fact, the he inadvertently waxes poetic himself: "By Jove, Jeeves, that was practically poetry." Again, hardly Shakespeare, but clearly alliteration. This is cleverness, not wit. Cleverness is a deft use of language, but one that does not call any kind of knowledge into question. It is wordplay, and no more. It is appropriate in this situation: Bertie uses wit to deflect attention, so he would not want to call attention to something actually witty. Cleverness, though, is perfectly safe. He remarks on Jeeves' spontaneous poetry, but fails to recognize it in his own speech. Not that it is all that remarkably noticeable, except that Bertie seemed so delighted by just such an instance moments earlier. And, of course, he forgets it just as quickly, as his attention moves to

the mail: "I opened the letter." With this, Bertie has a new source of amusement, and he pounces upon it. This quick distraction, in fact, is part of Bertie's *modus operandi*. One of the reasons why the reader can find amusement in Bertie's opening complaint about the heat is that we know that it will not last long. A new topic will present itself, and we will quickly move along. Bertie begins the story as a martyr to Nature's fury (aided by Jeeves' comment that the weather is "oppressive," as if it has been created specifically to torture Bertie). The world has conspired to create every sort of discomfort ("my pals are away, most of the theatres are shut, and they're taking up Piccadilly in large spadefuls. The world is empty and smells of burning asphalt."). This imagery is Eliot's *Wasteland* combined with a healthy dose of existential angst, and Bertie feels himself the fulcrum of it all. Until Jeeves makes a small and pointless rhyme, that is, at which point Bertie perks up (the "b." must have kicked in a bit by then), and we are off to the usual antics involving school chums, mismatched romances, and general hijinx. Apparently not even the repavement of Piccadilly is enough to keep Bertie's spirits down.

Bertie's comic mastery is evident in several other instances, as well. There is an ongoing linkage of elevated and base language, such as the juxtaposition of "quaffing deeply of the flowing b." and "rather tends to give me the pip." The first sounds grandiose, the second like juvenile vernacular. There is the further juxtaposition of discretion through understatement (the unexplained "fearful mix-up at Goodwood") with unreserved detail ("touched me for a tenner and whizzed silently off into the unknown"). "Shift-ho" is a typical Woosterism, a vaguely nautical rendering of his desire to move to a new location. Finally, there is the way in which what is unknown is naturalized without explanation: "And all the time he had been at Twing Hall." The only person, other than

Bertie, who appears to know what Twing Hall is or why it is significant is Jeeves. The reader certainly doesn't, and we aren't really told, we just know that Bertie and Jeeves both know. Bertie, as narrator, has crafted a moment in which he reveals that Bertie and Jeeves share unstated knowledge; that they know something the reader doesn't, and that we are unlikely to be told what that thing is in any direct fashion.

What do we learn from these individual moments? That unusual and unexpected things will be conjoined. That we will be told what we shouldn't, and what we need to know will be concealed, yet that we might not realize we have been misled. That the way we will be told anything needs a bit of deciphering. And finally, that what we don't know, but Bertie and Jeeves do, is at the center of everything. Each of these situations creates a joke, an individual moment of humor, but also reveals to us the wit that operates throughout the story, creating the story.

Peter Brooks assumes that the purpose of narrative is to bring us to an ending point, a satisfaction of knowledge, but this is contradicted by the queering mechanisms of Bertie's narrative aesthetic and his Woosterisms. Rather than revealing, they delay and defer, but do so in a symptomatic way that allows us the opportunity to trace an alternate, parallel set of knowledge at work within the stories. Most important of all the things we learn from this explication is that while there is a great deal to be gleaned from the story, the language itself both creates opportunities for gathering knowledge and invites us to overlook almost all of them. This is the trap that the stories lay for us, and the one that almost everyone falls into. We must "shift-ho," indeed, in order to discern what Bertie wants to tell us, but also wants us to not realize we are being told, and how this paradigm is reinforced at every level of storytelling.

Sublimation: a Model for Narrative Wit

Wit does not merely operate by creating indeterminacy, by creating a space between possible meanings. It operates by creating such a space, then using it to undermine the status of knowledge writ large, by creating doubt that either possible meaning may apply, exclusive of the other. And, of course, making us laugh while doing all of this. It is not a nihilistic practice, for meaning is not simply obliterated by wit. Instead, it is redirected, questioned, and sometimes magnified. It is a way of calling our attention to exactly those things that we would ordinarily not notice, those details which reside outside of the range of heteronormative meaning-making. It thus replaces meaning with other meaning, and in doing so asks us to recognize the relationship between the two. It operates as a form of sublimation: as a process of transforming meaning through the signs by which we recognize meaning, and in doing so both obscures and magnifies the original meaning.

Sublimation, like wit, is based in misdirection of signals. It is the constant displacement of anxiety by funneling it into other projects; it is fundamentally productive. Sublimation triggers unhealthy production, or at least unnecessary production, but it does result in a great deal of *something*. With wit, the 'something' is verbal precision. Sublimation can result in uncontrolled production, a kind of logorrhea or other expression of excess. It can also result in highly controlled production, however: excess production is held in check by excess control. Excess is thus doubled, but the result appears insubstantial or even normative. This second form is the mode of wit: a great deal is meant, but very little is said, and the critical value lies in recognizing the

difference. It is also why wit is often misrecognized as repression, for the excesses of sublimation often appear minimal.

In *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood*, Freud develops his basic theory of sublimation. He states:

> Observation of men's daily lives shows us that most people succeed in directing very considerable portions of their sexual instinctual forces to their professional activity. The sexual instinct is particularly well fitted to make contributions of this kind since it is endowed with a capacity for sublimation: that is, it has the power to replace its immediate aim by other aims which may be valued more highly and which are not sexual. (26)

Sublimation, therefore, is usually based in sexual energies, but is expressed in "other aims." These expressions are symptomatic, and even if they are not themselves sexual in nature, they point toward the sexual as an underlying factor. This allows us to read the effects of sublimation, usually in the form of an unexplained yet overriding compulsion, as symptoms of sexual anxieties, even if there is no overt sexual connection arising in the "other aims."

In the *Jeeves* stories, Bertie's symptom is narrative itself. Bertie seems unable to stop telling his story, which is ultimately the story of his life with Jeeves. The overwhelming number of *Jeeves* stories is evidence of this; as a narrator, he is responsible for the number and scope of stories. As a character, he is under the control of his narrator's choices. Those choices require Bertie and Jeeves to exist as a unit, subject to whatever whims occur to Bertie (as a character). Bertie, as narrator, wants to tell the story of being the object of Jeeves' desire over and over, even though, as a character, he

seems oblivious to this desire. This distance between narrator and narrated is the space of wit in the stories. One cannot help but wonder where the desire is located in this relationship, towards whom it is being directed, and what form it takes. Does Jeeves desire Bertie? Does Bertie know it if he does? Or does Bertie tell a story (a continuing, repetitive story) in which he positions himself as Jeeves' object of desire as a result of his own desire? What we do know is that Bertie's symptom is narrative: what is not happening, but is clearly desired, becomes that catalyst for a very lengthy series of stories about what is not happening. That unfulfilled status is what provides stability to the stories. There is no effort to change the nature of the relationship; Bertie's pleasure stems from describing this desire repeatedly, not from acting upon it.

Bertie's narratives have a sexual subtext, but are not themselves overtly sexual. He sublimates his sexual desire into narration about sex, or rather, about the absence of sex. Bertie does not engage in sexual activity, but he does repeatedly tell stories of his sexual and romantic opportunities and how he refuses to follow through on them. Bertie's source of pleasure, the one thing he cannot do without, is to continually narrate unfulfilled desire. To arrive at fulfillment, to have some sort of completed sexual act, or even the realization of sexual desire, would bring the act of desiring to an end, and with it the need for further stories. Bertie's narrative pleasure is essentially exhibitionist, for it is based in showing and telling: he places himself and his avoidance of sexual fulfillment on display repeatedly, and takes great delight in constantly reminding his reader of what they are *not* seeing: any overt sexual life. The constant repetition of this display is symptomatic: our attention is repeatedly called to *something*, but that something seems to

be nothing. Either Bertie is an inept narrator, or his pattern of non-description is itself telling.

Wit operates by obfuscation, insinuation, misdirection. It never says what it means, but says what it can, and in doing so both obscures and magnifies. Joseph Litvak writes that "wit *tout court* – is, well, *tout court*, which we might simply (mis)translate as "too short": the shortness of its cuts cuts against any critical edge that it might presume to enjoy" (106). In other words, wit has to say *just enough* in order to be wit. It is a commonplace that wit is known by its succinctness ("brevity is the soul of wit," etc.), but Litvak warns that it can be *too* succinct: in its endeavor to not say too much it can actually say too little, and thus lose its "critical edge." This dynamic is essentially queer: it cannot be said too fully, lest it become vulgar, but it cannot be said too briefly, for then it fails to signify. Queerness maintains a constant tension between fully revealing itself (which may produce danger), and utterly concealing itself. It wants to signify to those 'in the know,' but to conceal from others. An alternate system of signifiers is created that closely tracks those of heteronormativity, but does not intersect with them. A slight distance is maintained between the two, and in this distance lies the difference, the "otherwise."

Is it Love, or a Keen Sense of Fashion?

Bertie and Jeeves are examples of a queer relationship, but one not based in sexuality. The *Jeeves* stories might well be one of the twentieth century's greatest love stories...except that they aren't. They do look like it, though. The pair are incredibly

intimate and steadfastly devoted to each other. Their bond was immediate and apparently eternal, and no other individual ever comes between the two. They are treated as a pair by friends and family alike, and people are often shocked when one appears without the other. The bond between them is inexplicable and unnamed. It is not homosexual, but it is queer. Their connection exceeds 'friendship' or any other label. It is transgressive in some ways, but it has its own rules and internal logic, both of which Bertie and Jeeves appear to know and respect without explanation. Their verbal interaction is limited (Jeeves is typically a man of few words), but Bertie's narration fills in the gaps, leading us to understand their unique queerness, at least to the extent that Bertie does.

Jeeves, as soon as he enters service to Bertie, takes control of Bertie's romantic life and never lets go of it. The same holds true in reverse, though. As the valet of an extremely demanding (and needy) master, Jeeves has little possibility of ever establishing relationships outside of his workplace; his time is spent almost entirely in the company of Bertie.[11] Their symbiotic relationship is even further revealed in the way that Jeeves takes control over Bertie's appearance. Bertie usually relies upon Jeeves' impeccable sense of fashion when it comes to his clothing choices, but also in the more intimate realm of hair and personal grooming. While ostensibly trying to keep his master fashionable, there is a kind of desire at work here, revealed mostly through Bertie's narration. The stakes of these choices are quite high: in *Jeeves and the Hard-boiled Egg*, in fact, Bertie's insistence upon establishing his own personal style results in something akin to a lovers' quarrel between himself and Jeeves. Bertie has decided to grow a moustache without Jeeves' approval; this passage shows the bond that has formed over

their mutual concern for Bertie's body (and how that bond is strained) as well as through their teamwork when acting on behalf of Bertie's friends:

> I was sorry if Bicky was in trouble, but, as a matter of fact, I was rather glad to have something I could discuss freely with Jeeves just then, because things had been a bit strained between us for some time, and it had been rather difficult to hit on anything to talk about that wasn't apt to take a personal turn. You see, I had decided – rightly or wrongly – to grow a moustache, and this had cut Jeeves to the quick. He couldn't stick the thing at any price, and I had been living ever since in an atmosphere of bally disapproval till I was getting jolly well fed up with it. (93-94)

As reward for solving his friend Bicky's problem, Bertie resolves to allow Jeeves to shave off the offending hair:

> It was a wrench, but I felt it was the only possible thing to be done.
>
> "Bring my shaving things."
>
> A gleam of hope shone in the chappie's eye, mixed with doubt.
>
> "You mean, sir?"
>
> "And shave off my moustache."
>
> There was a moment's silence. I could see the fellow was deeply moved.
>
> "Thank you very much indeed, sir," he said, in a low voice, and popped off. (109-110)

The relationship between Bertie and Jeeves is such that Jeeves is rewarded with a degree of control over Bertie's body and appearance. In other stories Jeeves is allowed to dispose of a particularly offensive tie, or a suit with an unsightly pinstripe. There is,

however, no doubt that Jeeves' desire is focused upon Bertie, or at least upon his appearance, and that Bertie feels it quite acceptable to allow this desire to be exercised. Bertie's characterization of Jeeves' departure (he "popped off") when told he could shave his master is wit *par excellence*. It is an appropriate description of Jeeves leaving quickly to gather the shaving implements as per his master's request. It is also a distinctly sexualized turn of phrase, coming (as it were) right at the moment of Jeeves' own gratification. It is not possible to parse the turn of phrase and determine its absolute meaning; its importance lies between the possible meanings, in the negotiation among them on the page.

Bruce Robbins calls attention to these moments of giving Bertie's clothes away as a kind of Marxist trickery. In a reading of the servant character Mr. Gumbo in Thackeray's *The Virginians*, Robbins claims:

> "[H]e scattered about his gold pieces to right and left, as if he had been as rich as Gumbo announced him to be." The suggestion is that through his master's liberality, Gumbo manages to reward his fellow servants. This logic is also illustrated in Jeeves; think of all those stories which end with Bertie sacrificing his loud clothing to "the under-gardener" or "the deserving poor." (185)

While Gumbo may see his master's largesse as a means to redistribute wealth, Jeeves has no such concerns. Jeeves is a man of impeccable taste; he does not wish to give Bertie's ties to the other servants out of generosity to the servant, but only as a means of disposing of the ties. His objective is not to help anyone, but to *not* see Bertie in the unapproved garments. Also, tasteless clothing is not quite as fungible as gold, so the actual benefit to the recipient is altogether different than is true with Gumbo. What is not clear, however,

is why Jeeves cares so much about Bertie's appearance. Is it because he is a devoted valet who considers his master's appearance a reflection upon himself, or is it because he has romantic and/or sexual feelings toward Bertie that remain unexpressed, but which include preferences in Bertie's attire? Our only clue is from Bertie, as narrator: "A gleam of hope shone in the chappie's eye" and "I could see the fellow was deeply moved." Neither of these statements is based in any objective facts; we only know that Jeeves feels as he does (which appears to be affectionate) because Bertie reads the gleam in the eye and the moment's silence *as* affection. Bertie the character, of course, reads these moments differently: in fact, he doesn't read them at all. He merely notes a gleam and a silence, and moves on.

One of Bertie's characteristics is his complete trust in Jeeves, which he states frequently, as in this moment from *Jeeves and the Hard-boiled Egg*: "The thing, you see, is that Jeeves is so dashed competent. You can spot it even in the way he shoves studs into a shirt. I rely on him in absolutely every crisis, and he never lets me down" (93). In this moment the description of Jeeves' brilliance is conflated with his agility with shirt studs. Jeeves seems most capable when dressing Bertie, an act of great intimacy.[12] What Jeeves seems to want, more than anything, is to dress and shave Bertie; by narrating these stories, Bertie allows and even encourages this desire. The relationship between Bertie and Jeeves is one whose power seems to oscillate: neither can ever be said to be firmly in control of the various situations, and each makes efforts to both assert control as well as to defer, depending upon the specific situation. This is an unexpected power structure between master and servant; one would expect the master to be in firm control, or for a comic reversal in which the servant is in charge (akin to the Rabellasian *carnivalesque*

described by Bakhtin). They are an odd couple, indeed: they lack a fixed hierarchy in their relationship, but occupy oscillating positions. This structure is established early in their relationship. In the early story *Jeeves Takes Charge*, Wodehouse reveals the almost serendipitous beginning of the Bertie/Jeeves relationship, as Jeeves is randomly assigned to Bertie by an employment agency. The two quickly become close, with Jeeves going so far as to bring an end to Bertie's engagement to Lady Florence. Bertie fires Jeeves, who responds: "As I am no longer in your employment, sir, I can speak freely without appearing to take a liberty. In my opinion you and Lady Florence were quite unsuitably matched..." (74). He then goes on to explain that Florence had intended to begin Bertie on a program of reading Nietzsche, whom Bertie would not have enjoyed as "he is fundamentally unsound" (74). Jeeves lays the fault for his decision upon his own opinion of Nietzsche, which is apparently quite negative. Jeeves' actions, then, are in Bertie's own interest. But which action is more important? Preventing Bertie from reading Nietzsche, or preventing him from marrying? Both happen simultaneously, and both Jeeves and Bertie are pleased with the result. Bertie rehires Jeeves after realizing that he does, in fact, understand Bertie better than any woman could, and the two settle into a happy life together. Bertie keeps Jeeves around, and Jeeves consents to stay. Their relationship is complex, and each seems to gain something from it beyond what is stated.

(Not Quite) Physical Comedy

The *Jeeves* stories place a great deal of emphasis on Bertie's fashion and attire, as well as on the mechanics of his dressing and disrobing. Bertie does seem to spend an

unusually large amount of time in the bathtub or getting into or out of pajamas...always in Jeeves' presence. It thus seems reasonable to wonder what Bertie himself looks like. This, in fact, is a question most interesting for its lack of answer. Bertie's clothing is often referred to, and in the one instance quoted above the presence of a moustache becomes an issue, but there is actually no physical description of Bertie's body in any of the texts. There is no indication of his height or weight, whether or not he is attractive (although enough women pursue him that we can assume he is at least moderately pleasing), nor of his age. His attitude and manner are such that he seems quite young, but it is also clear that he is older than his behavior would indicate. Certainly his age and his behavior do not match; he acts like something that he is not, or which the larger society has deemed he should not be. However young he may be, he is an adult, and is expected to act in a more mature manner than he does. In appearance, then, Bertie is an unknown quantity; in behavior, he is non-normative.

This leads, then, to the question of Jeeves' appearance. As Bertie describes, Jeeves' desire for Bertie seems to reside at the level of his appearance; in other words, at the surface of Bertie. Jeeves seems willing to condone any amount of outrageous behavior by his master (the one prohibited activity being a serious relationship with a woman), but refuses to accept Bertie's choices of wardrobe and fashion. Jeeves' own fashion choices, though, are absent from the text. In fact, Jeeves' entire physical presence is...well, not present. Like Bertie, no description of his body exists in the stories, but unlike Bertie, even the physical functioning of his body is removed from the text. Bertie is forever scrambling into a tree, scaling a wall, recovering from a hangover, or "drop[ing] into the depths and swim[ming] ashore in correct evening costume," but

Jeeves manages to exist and move about without any true physicality. In *The Code of the Woosters*, Bertie claims: "Presently I was aware that Jeeves was with me. I hadn't heard him come in, but you often don't with Jeeves. He just streams silently from Spot A to Spot B like some gas" (106). This is but one of the dozens of references to Jeeves' movements that seem to take place without an embodied form. A selection of Jeeves' movement includes:

> "He shimmered out" (*Jeeves and the Impending Doom* 2)
>
> "I turned to Jeeves, who had shimmered in with the morning meal" (*Jeeves and the Song of Songs* 72).
>
> "'Sir?' said Jeeves, manifesting himself" (*Song of Songs* 91).
>
> "I pressed the bell, and presently in shimmered Jeeves" (*Episode of the Dog McIntosh* 93).
>
> "He oozed off, to return a moment later bearing a telegram" (*The Love That Purifies* 294).
>
> "It was Jeeves. He had slid from the shadows and was gazing gravely at the picture" (*Leave It To Jeeves* 32)

Jeeves slides, he shimmers, he appears like light, gas, or...ooze, rather than actually having a body with definite boundaries. These references actually imply Jeeves' ever-presentness; like light or gas, he can occupy many spaces simultaneously. Jeeves' entrances are noted, but almost never his exits. In fact, he seems never to exit; even in the quotation from *The Love That Purifies* above, Jeeves exits only to return within the same sentence. When he "pops off" in the earlier reference, it seems more like an act of satisfaction that an exit, but in any case, an immediate return to shave the moustache is

implied. Most of the stories conclude with a conversation between Bertie and Jeeves, but without either character leaving the scene. The space between stories seems to be reserved for Bertie and Jeeves, together and unobserved. As the next story begins (and it always does, for there are so many of them), Bertie is usually alone, calling for Jeeves to come assist him (perhaps by bringing him a "flowing b." to help his hangover). Thus, at some point in the interval Jeeves must have left the scene. His actual departure is not depicted, however, and his reentry is characterized as an almost ethereal experience. The stories posit Bertie and Jeeves' 'natural' condition as being together, and position Jeeves outside the realm of the physical when they are apart.

One of the few times that a concrete physical movement is ascribed to Jeeves (thus indicating the presence of his body) is in *The Code of the Woosters*, when, after breaking into a supposedly empty bedroom in order to search for and steal a piece of incriminating evidence, Bertie and Jeeves find themselves face-to-snout with Bartholomew, a ferocious Aberdeen terrier:

> He was standing on the bed, stropping his front paws on the coverlet, and so easy was it to read the message in his eyes that we acted like two minds with but a single thought. At the exact moment when I soared like and eagle onto the chest of drawers, Jeeves was skimming like a swallow onto the top of the cupboard. The animal hopped from the bed and, advancing into the middle of the room, took a seat, breathing through the nose with a curious whistling sound and looking at us from under his eyebrows like a Scottish elder rebuking sin from the pulpit. (124)

This passage gives Jeeves a kind of physicality, but it is a highly contingent one. Its existence depends upon being connected to Bertie, both in spirit and in body. Jeeves seems able to leap to safety only because he is so perfectly in tune with Bertie. Additionally, his physicality exists only at the level of metaphor; he does not climb onto the cupboard, but instead "skim[s] like a swallow." This, likewise, is associated with Bertie, who "soared like an eagle." The pair are linked through singularity of mind as well as communal avian imagery. The difference in the bird references is also striking: although both men are in the act of fleeing from a small dog, Bertie posits himself as a masculine, even aggressive bird of prey. Jeeves, on the other hand, is a small, delicate, feminized swallow. It is thus even more surprising when Bertie expects Jeeves to be the one to confront the dog and allow their escape:

> "Are you afraid of a tiny little dog, Jeeves?"
>
> He corrected me respectfully, giving it as his opinion that the undersigned was not a tiny little dog, but well above the average in muscular development. In particular, he drew my attention to the animal's teeth.
>
> I reassured him:
>
> "I think you would find that if you were to make a sudden spring, his teeth would not enter into the matter. You could leap onto the bed, snatch up a sheet, roll him up in it before he knew what was happening, and there you would be."
>
> "Yes, sir."
>
> "Well, are you going to make a sudden spring?"
>
> "No, sir." (128)

Humor is derived from several sources: the reversal of the master/servant relationship, the elaboration on the minutiae of the plan, the repetition of the phrase "sudden spring." Partly, as well, it is from the lack of vocalization by Jeeves. We are allowed to hear him say "yes, sir" and "no, sir," both expressions appropriate to his station as Bertie's employee, but in the more detailed speech about the danger the dog presents, Bertie takes over the narration and removes Jeeves' voice from the discussion, choosing instead to relate Jeeves' argument himself. And, of course, what he tells us appears to be word-for-word what Jeeves told Bertie, with the substitution of third person pronouns for the first person ones that Jeeves would have used. In effect, we are told exactly what Jeeves said, but we are not allowed to hear it from Jeeves' own lips. Bertie is going very far out of his way to marginalize Jeeves, even though Jeeves' argument seems to be by far the more rational. Bertie, essentially, is being a petulant (but witty) narrator, and while trying to faithfully relate what happened, he chooses to take as much control of the situation as he can. This intrusion of Bertie as narrator once again hinders our progress through the narrative. Not only do we pause over the hilarity of what is being said, but also the strangeness of how it is narrated: why can Jeeves not speak for himself? What, if anything, has been left out of Bertie's transcription of Jeeves' words? If Bertie is so faithful a scribe, then why not record Jeeves' own voice? This, once again, is the space between, that is both comic and queer, and it serves the ultimately queer purpose of prolonging the middle and stranding Bertie and Jeeves together, in a bedroom, with their bodies connected, at least at the level of language and metaphor.

Wit versus Wit

Bertie has a charming use of wit, one that delights his audience so that they sometimes ignore his narrative project. Jeeves, however, is also a kind of wit, one much more in line with an eighteenth century model. The recognition of both Jeeves and Bertie as wits, but as different types of wits, opens yet another critical space in the texts. The *Jeeves* stories actually take on wit as subject matter as well as rhetorical mode. The stories embody both an eighteenth century notion of wit (facility, genius and imagination in concert) in the character of Jeeves, while at the same time embody a nineteenth century notion of wit (sparkling repartee, surprising use of language) in Bertie Wooster. The two are played against each other, and while Bertie is certainly the more enjoyable character, it is Jeeves who consistently trumps. Bertie's own unacknowledged (or at least unstated) desire *for* Jeeves may also be tied up in a desire to *be* Jeeves (or to have his capacity for wit), which also has interesting implications for class relations and the decline of the aristocracy. As mentioned previously, Jeeves always solves whatever problem may be at hand, and he does so by rallying a surprising amount of knowledge about a variety of topics as well as unexpected insight into individuals. He rarely generalizes, but formulates a unique plan for each situation, dependent upon the specific characteristics of the people (or swans, as is sometimes the case) in play.

One commonplace about Jeeves' method for resolving problems is that he uses a psychological model: he observes the behavior of people, and from this discerns their motivations and how these may be used to Bertie's advantage. His method is left largely unspecified; part of Jeeves' wit seems to be a complete ability to absorb information and make use of it without explaining how he does so. One can assume that Jeeves has read

widely in the discipline of psychology. In fact, he seems to be widely read in all disciplines, as he is always able to fill in Bertie's incomplete references to various works of art, literature and philosophy. Bertie is well-educated and is unable to recall basic facts, while Jeeves is seemingly self-taught (along the lines of Wordsworth's model of a genius taught by experience) and has great command of a wide range of knowledge. Further, unlike Bertie, Jeeves has not only read widely, but appears to have actually understood what he has read and is able to utilize that information. Bertie, by contrast, can only half-recall some of the major concepts, but is unable to correctly quote or attribute them, nor to actually incorporate them into his conversation. For example, during an argument with Aunt Dahlia, after she has refused to listen to a scheme which Bertie has developed without Jeeves, Bertie pontificates:

> 'Very well, Aunt Dahlia,' I said, with dignity, 'if you don't want to be in on the ground floor, that is your affair. But you are missing an intellectual treat. And, anyway, no matter how much you may behave like the deaf adder of Scripture which, as you are doubtless aware, the more one piped, the less it danced, or words to that effect, I shall carry on as planned. (*Right Ho, Jeeves* 412)

Bertie labels the scriptural reference as something of which "you are doubtless aware," thus something that he thinks should be common knowledge, while he has wildly misquoted the text: "The deaf adder *that* stoppeth her ear; Which will not hearken to the voice of charmers, charming never so wisely" (*The Holy Bible*, Ps. 58. 4-5, italics original). He then proceeds to mix his metaphors and descriptions, creating a lively image of a serpent dancing to unheard music, or perhaps not dancing...it isn't quite clear. In any event, it is an image unique to Bertie and his idiosyncratic mixture of half-

remembered and misunderstood references mixed with a large dose of intellectual bravado. The *Jeeves* stories often refer to a prize in Scripture Knowledge that Bertie won as a schoolboy, and of which he remains quite proud. He should, therefore, be expected to have fairly accurate knowledge of this reference, but does not. His wit is not like Jeeves', which would recall the entire verse from memory (and likely be able to give a Talmudic gloss of several leading scholars' interpretations), but instead resides at the level of language. Jeeves *knows*, and Bertie *says*. Both are wits, but of completely different sorts. Unsurprisingly, Bertie's plan is a complete disaster, while the one developed by Jeeves and favored by Aunt Dahlia saves the day.

The fact that Bertie cannot accurately recall information that he has read, while Jeeves does have this ability, is not merely comedic. It also brings up the question of Bertie and Jeeves as readers, both of texts and of people. Jeeves relies upon observation of the human condition for his problem-solving, and always succeeds. Bertie, however, frequently gets jealous of the praise lavished upon Jeeves for his schemes and tries to assert himself as Jeeves' equal, and copies what he thinks is Jeeves' method. In this passage, Bertie tries to outdo Jeeves at his own game, and has thought of every possible problem with his own plan. Jeeves disagrees:

> 'Well, sir, if I may take the liberty of reminding you of it, your plans in the past have not always been uniformly successful.'
>
> [...] 'It is true, Jeeves,' I said formally, 'that once or twice in the past I may have missed the bus. This, however, I attribute purely to bad luck.'
>
> 'Indeed, sir?'
>
> 'On the present occasion I shall not fail, and I'll tell you why I shall not

fail. Because my scheme is rooted in human nature.'

'Indeed, sir?'

'It is simple. Not elaborate. And furthermore, based on the psychology of the individual.'

'Indeed, sir?'

Bertie reveals his overly-simplistic plan to Jeeves. It consists entirely of telling Tuppy to not eat dinner. He is certain that this act will be interpreted by Angela as a symptom of unstated passion. Jeeves counters:

'Well, sir – '

I frowned. [...] 'Why don't you think this scheme will work?'

'I fear Miss Angela will merely attribute Mr. Glossop's abstinence to indigestion, sir.'

I hadn't thought of that, and I must confess it shook me for a moment. Then I recovered myself. I saw what was at the bottom of all this. Mortified by the consciousness of his own ineptness – or ineptitude – the fellow was simply trying to hamper and obstruct. I decided to knock the stuffing out of him without further preamble. (*Right Ho, Jeeves* 423 - 424)

While Bertie tries to compete with Jeeves (and fails miserably at it), he is actually engaged in what Freud termed 'wild psychoanalysis:' he has "misjudged or misunderstood a whole series of *scientific* principles of psychoanalysis, and thereby [has] demonstrated very little prowess in understanding its essence and intentions" ("On 'Wild' Psychoanalysis" 4, italics original). In effect, he is looking at symptoms and applying 'solutions' to them without going through any of the process in between that will help the

individuals involved realize why the solution is beneficial. He ignores the benefit of 'the talking cure' and, like the misguided doctor in Freud's essay, thinks that if he recognizes the workings of a subject's unconscious and reveals it to them, they will instantly be cured. In "On 'Wild' Psychoanalysis," however, the doctor did correctly diagnose his patient, he simply had no working knowledge of the clinical methodologies to help him apply his diagnosis and help his patient. He is far ahead of Bertie, who doesn't know how psychoanalysis works, and also misdiagnoses his 'patients.' Psychoanalysis, in Bertie's case, is a bit like aspirin...one does not need to know how it works, merely that it does. Apply it when needed, then sit back and wait for the effects to kick in. Jeeves, of course, attempts to point out to him the folly of this understanding of psychoanalysis, but Bertie's insecurity vis-à-vis Jeeves does not allow him to accept this criticism. Instead, he deflects it, assuming that the criticism is instead a symptom of Jeeves' own insecurity. Which, of course, is totally incorrect.

This model, then, reveals a good deal about Jeeves' and Bertie's interactions. Bertie reads Jeeves, and tells his reader the story that he sees. This is problematic in the first instance because we have seen that Bertie is a poor reader (whether his text be print or human), and he is not always able or willing to tell his reader what is obviously the truth behind his interactions with Jeeves. In the above case, that 'truth' would be his own jealousy of Jeeves, but the story he chooses to tell is of Jeeves' jealousy of Bertie. The other story that Bertie repeatedly tells his reader is one with himself as the object of Jeeves' desire. It is clear that Bertie takes pleasure in telling his readers about Jeeves, and about how he and Jeeves interact. It is also clear that Bertie's recounting of their

interactions are not accurate. The truth, as we have seen with his entire witty aesthetic, is a combination of both versions and lies somewhere between them.

The Middle Comes to an End

Bertie Wooster occupies a highly contingent, liminal space in the *Jeeves* stories. This liminality is doubled with respect to wit: as a narrator, Bertie is deeply witty, but as a character he is witless. Wit itself occupies a space between, not settling for any one meaning. It is indicative rather than definitive. Do Bertie and Jeeves have a physical relationship? We cannot know. What we do know is that their relationship is one filled with desire, and that the desire often centers on the physical. The form it takes is narrative: a logorrhoeic explosion of stories that repeat and cycle, with the master and servant always fixed at their center. Desire erupts as a kind of exhibitionism: Bertie, as narrator, wants nothing so much as to tell us about himself and Jeeves, over and over again. But of course he can never really tell us about them, because it is the act of being watched while telling that fuels Bertie, and if he ever told us anything definitive, there would be no reason for his reader to keep looking back. In this way, wit, a sophisticated yet traditional mode, is being deployed in a deceptively modern way. It does not tell us about desire, but it enacts desire on the page, over and over, in a charmingly perverse cycle.

Chapter 3:

Modernism on the Rocks, with a Dash of Bitters: Dorothy Parker, Desire, and Stagnation

"Informed that the world-famous [transsexual] Christine Jorgensen was planning a trip to the States in order to visit her mother, Mrs. Parker inquired: 'And what sex, may I ask, is the mother?'" (Drennan 121). Dorothy Parker's quip demonstrates wit at its best: brief, situational, funny, sassy, and thought-inducing. Her comment, obviously meant to be taken at face value, *cannot* be taken at face value. While Jorgensen's transition may have begged questions about the relationship between biological sex and gender, Parker's question refocuses the inquiry and instead undermines the nature of the relationship between gender and parenthood. Is she suggesting that transsexualism 'runs in the family,' and that Jorgensen's parent(s) transitioned, as well? If so, which one? Or is she suggesting a new definition for the word "mother," one which is not based in having given birth to a child? While many people saw Jorgensen's transition as fundamentally dangerous to the 'obviously' stable categories of gender and sex, Parker embraces whatever ambiguity may have been created, adds in some of her own, and in a few words announces an entirely new way of looking at family. Oh, and she also makes us laugh while she's doing it.

Is Parker engaged in a concerted attempt to redefine the terms of sex, gender, and family? Or did she see an opening for a quick one-liner and take advantage of it? Or both? Wit, her trademark style, allows for a multiplicity of meanings. In fact, wit not only allows multiple meanings, but requires them, and requires that they all are evoked simultaneously. Oscar Wilde used multiplicity to create uncertainty as to whether

meaning exists; Parker instead uses multiplicity to create a kind of play between and among meanings simultaneously. It is the fact that her comment does not mean this *or* that, but *all* at the same time, that is her brand of wit; it is the conjunction of unlike terms and meanings that makes it funny. Additionally, a kind of perversity is at work in Parker's texts that both is formed by and contributes to the overall sense of indeterminacy. Like Wilde's 'almost but not quite' brand of queerness, Parker uses adjacency of meaning to undermine power structures such as gender and narrative.

Dorothy Parker (1893 – 1967) has been called both "self-loathing and [a] lethal wit" (Gaines 29). Her humor is biting and sarcastic, but can also be light. It is almost never hopeful. Yet it is not entirely despairing, either. Parker's literary voice is that of a woman who has seen the world, has been seen by the world, and has decided to go on living in spite of it all. She turns bitterness and irony into an aesthetic, one which, as Nina Miller claims "significantly transformed the roles and relations presented to her" (763). Parker's work is exemplary of a particular type of wit, that, when joined with a modernist aesthetic, tends to be misunderstood by critics. What criticism there is of Parker ignores her style in order to comment upon her content: academia recognizes Parker as an important writer, but only if it does not recognize her as an important *comic* writer.[13] While scholarship of this kind has its uses, it erases Parker's value as an artist, valuing her as a kind of sociologist. By examining her wit along with her content, a much more complex aesthetic emerges, one in which storytelling itself mirrors the new and confusing terrain of early twentieth century life. Her characters are lost in a confusing world of relaxing sexual attitudes but with nonetheless traditional moral positions, creating tensions that pull her characters in multiple ways, and which shape the

stories themselves into a new form of prose. Parker, as a comic writer, produces a model of perverse narrative that both allows and explores the conditions her characters find themselves in.

Dorothy Parker is truly the consummate wit of the modernist moment. Oscar Wilde initiated a brand of modernist wit, transforming both language and audience in an effort to make the eighteenth century concept of wit relevant in the dawning modernist era, but it is Parker who most fully embodied the mastery and contradictions that lie at the heart of modernist wit. Her work is enigmatic: while the most self-evidently witty, it is also the hardest to dissect as wit. Her narrators, usually women, are emotionally malleable, which makes it difficult for them to serve as any kind of stable critical position. They are also highly mobile, both in physicality and subjectivity, rendering them both deeply cynical about the world in which they operate as well as unfixed enough to seemingly lack the kind of mastery required of wit. Parker's mastery of turn of phrase is something that is evident to reader, but not necessarily to character: while her audience is often brought to awareness of complicated connections through Parker's use of language, the figures in her stories usually carry on without such insight, essentially misunderstanding the ways that they are connected to the world in which they live. Parker creates an aesthetic of loneliness and motion, therefore, as her characters keep moving, from place to place, relationship to relationship, while failing to realize the connections they create in each circumstance. Parker's wit creates connections, and through which her reader can see these connections; it is the failure to recognize wit within her stories that sets her characters adrift with no apparent connection or obligation to others.

Parker's subjects are the people of the world she lives in, both the city dwellers (mostly New Yorkers) and the small-town folk of the United States in the early twentieth century. Nina Miller explains the new terrain that Parker found herself in, the world of "Modern Love":

> Foundational to the ideology of Modern Love was the assumption that gender relations were permanently and intrinsically flawed. Situated in a mundane world structured by class and class pretensions, the fictional players of Modern Love were identifiably upper-, middle-, or (occasionally) working-class people to whom the world of modern gender relations had happened. (764)

This phrasing, "to whom the world of modern gender relations *had happened*" is exactly the world of Parker's work. Her characters are in a new world, and react to it with varying degrees of skepticism, fear, and amazement. Mary Loeffelholz explains Parker's subject matter as "general anxieties about the meaning and consequences of the sexual revolution, such as it was, of the 1920s. Desperately liberated and desperately dependent at the same time, her female speakers would be difficult to hear out if not for their wit, which protects both them and Parker's readers from the consequences of their feelings" (138). In this way, Loeffelholz imagines Parker giving voice to both fictional characters as well as the actual women of a generation, all of whom are dealing with (or denying) the changing world around them to some degree. Parker both reveals these pressures as well as deflects them; she literalizes the multiple referentiality of modernist wit.

Some of Parker's younger characters embrace the new-found world, others are overrun by it. Some, such as Hazel in "Big Blonde," find its limits and crash against the freedoms it offers after finding that it also offers little security: "Then Sydney married a

rich and watchful bride, and then there was Billy. No – after Sydney came Fred, then Billy. In her haze, she never recalled how men entered her life and left it. There were no surprises. She had no thrill at their advent, nor woe at their departure" (*Portable* 200). Hazel manages to make a life in the world around her, but it is a life of emptiness, loneliness, and stagnation, even as it is filled with men and parties. Older characters, like Mrs. Matson in "Little Curtis," have no intention of taking part in Modern Love or the freedoms offered to women in the new century, but find their world changing around them whether they like it or not. She refers to herself and her husband as "the Albert Matsons," and of her house: "she liked to think of its cool, high-ceilinged rooms, of its busy maids, of little Curtis waiting to deliver her his respectful kiss. She had adopted him almost a year ago, when he was four. She had, she told her friends, never once regretted it" (63). Mrs. Matson looks for respectful kisses, not loving ones, and tells her friends that she holds no regrets over adopting Curtis, which is not quite the same thing as actually having no regrets about it. Also, by bringing the subject up, she clearly feels that one ought to have such second thoughts. Parker partakes in Nina Miller's world of Modern Love, but she also writes of the world to whom this new sensibility is an affront: a world of maids, respectability, and social status. Her wit, her ability to say what she means without quite revealing if she means it, allows her to inhabit both worlds at once.

Parker is a master of the witty moment, the witticism or one-liner that makes one question one's relation to meaning or fact, but also extends this practice to the level of narrative. Her narratives are themselves perverse little structures; they never seem to be quite completed, never resolved. Her short stories are perhaps more appropriately called 'sketches,' for they do not follow conventions of form by introducing characters and

situations, presenting a complication, then resolving that complication in some fashion. Often, her characters go nameless, the specific situation and complication are not fully fleshed out, and the resolution is absent: instead, she writes about subjectivity in the moment of dealing with a complication. The form of her narratives is part of their refusal to conform to expectations. Rhonda Pettit points out that:

> Reviewers praise Parker's satire, wit, economy, ear for dialogue, and sharp observation. They debate the relative value of her longer and shorter stories, described as short, slight, vignettes, sketches, minor tales, talk sketches, and monologues – problematic labels in a culture that measures success in terms of accumulation and size. (Pettit 50)

Parker's work occupies a liminal space because she writes against patriarchy: she is unconcerned with size and length, but is concerned with skill and control. Wit, of all forms of comedy, is the one that requires the greatest mastery over language, the ability to sharpen a comment until it shines like steel and pierces effortlessly. Parker emphasizes the "satire, wit, economy, ear for dialogue, and sharp observation," but in doing so must be attentive to her subject, which is *not* the values, expectations or concerns of men. Pettit's assessment of Parker's form, or more properly, forms, shows a kind of playfulness and experimentation in her work, but more importantly, an aesthetic that refuses to be pinned down into any one thing.

Her stories are funny, they are eloquent, they are witty, and they are perverse, for they refuse to partake in heteronormative models of narrative meaning. Anne Herrmann defines heteronormativity simply as "compulsory heterosexuality as normative" (2). This is applicable to characters within texts (or, in Herrmann's work, real people), but it can

also be extended to notions of narrative. In the simplest terms, heteronormativity represents the range of expected possible patterns a person (or a narrative) may follow. It is restrictive, but it is also what allows for meaning *as* meaning: it provides a context within which patterns can be evaluated and measured. It will always produce itself, and it will always look to find itself. It is what is expected, but it is also the means through which those expectations can be evaluated. As a framework, it also presents the possibility of operation outside the frame.

Modernist wit, like that of Dorothy Parker, operates outside of this heteronormative model. It is for this reason that it is overlooked within modernist critical studies, as it cannot be seen as meaningful within a heteronormative framework.[14] Parker recognizes the milieu in which she operates, but does not conform to its strictures. This move instantly makes her work outcast, or at best fringe, but mirrors her characters and their situations, rendering them doubly meaningful. She often does this by constructing characters who operate at the edges and fringes of contemporary sexual morality, a new social framework which is accepted, but which lacks any clear model for behavior. For example, in "The Last Tea," a couple meet to compare notes after having each been to various parties the night before. The characters are identified as "the young man in the chocolate-brown suit" and "she" (49). Over the course of the story, it becomes clear that "she" is in love with the young man, that he is ignoring this fact, and that she is hurt by his obvious affection for another young woman (who is given a name, Carol McCall). The young woman in return pretends to be pursued by a different young man (also named, Wally Dillon), although it isn't clear if it is an attempt to make "the young man in the chocolate-brown suit" jealous, or merely to salvage her pride. "She" is one of what

Loeffelholz refers to as Parker's "witty but needy woman who wonders at her own willingness to play the games she plays with men" (138). What is missing from the story are almost all of the details that are typically considered important. How long have these people known each other? Is her affection new, or ongoing? Is he aware of her affection and therefore treating her cruelly, or is he completely oblivious to it?

The title of the story is ambiguously referential. It conveys seemingly concrete information, but does not reveal exactly what that knowledge is. This is akin to Wilde's wit that indicates more than signifies; in Parker's case we are presented with two concrete meanings, rather than Wilde's play between meaning and non-meaning. In reading this story, one has to ask: is this "The Last Tea" that these characters will share, meaning that their relationship, whatever its nature, is now at an end? Or does it mean 'last' as in 'most recent,' rendering this merely the latest in a string of failed attempts for these characters to interact in a meaningful way? Will they meet again after next weekend's round of parties for another similar conversation, or is this the end? Since the narrator remains firmly exterior to both characters, it isn't entirely clear what either of them thinks of the future of their relationship; as readers, we are perhaps more likely to listen to both sides of the conversation, while the characters listen only to their own comments, but we still know no *more* information than they do. The ambiguity is carried through to the end, when no concrete sense of finality is given to the young woman's exit. The final sequence of the story is:

> "Goodness, I've got to fly! I'm having dinner with Wally, and he's so crazy, he's probably there now. He's called me up about a hundred times today."
>
> "Wait till I pay the check," he said, "and I'll put you on a bus."

"Oh, don't bother," she said. "It's right at the corner. I've got to fly. I suppose you want to stay and call up your friend from here?"

"It's an idea," he said. "Sure you'll be all right?" (51-52)

The passage clearly shows the woman's wounded pride, and her attempts to disguise it. By suggesting that the young man not accompany her, but call Carol instead, she is both allowing herself a graceful, unaccompanied exit, but is also increasing her own pain over the situation. Again, the ambiguity of the title forces us to evaluate our relationship to language and to meaning. It is a witty move that mirrors the perversely witty trajectory of the story. While the young woman's love may never be returned (or acknowledged), she cannot claim that she is being mistreated in this sequence. Even though she had ordered tea for herself (and not for him) before the young man arrived, he plans to pay her bill, and wants to pay her bus fare so that she can get to her date on time, or at least to escort her out of the restaurant. These are acts of heteronormative, masculinist expectation, however, and do not comport to the mood of the young woman, who only desires escape. According to the social norms of the day, he acts appropriately (if a bit densely), and she refuses to respond accordingly. Instead, she says what she needs to in order to make her exit, and then does so. We are left unsure as to how permanent this exit is.

The story does not resolve, although it hints at an unstated resolution, one known only to the young woman.[15] A heteronormative structure would dictate a complete sharing of knowledge. Some kind of confrontation would be required, however small, in which both parties would be made aware of the stakes of this conversation. If the man chose to ignore the knowledge, then he might remain in the dark, but the opportunity for

knowledge would have been presented. Parker, though, is not interested in such conventions. She is interested in the ways that people come to awareness, and the ways that they act upon it, and is aware that such things do not always happen according to expected narrative patterns. A woman who has kept her love hidden, as this young woman has, and who is now presented with an actual rival (Carol McCall), is unlikely to choose this moment to reveal her affections. She knows that she has already lost. Flight is the most likely response to injury, not a declaration of love. The relationship in the story has does not follow a heteronormative narrative model, and thus Parker creates a perverse tale by avoiding resolution rather than achieving it. In this way, the young woman may not have the love she wants, but she is not forced to confront its absolute loss, either. The indefinite, then, becomes a realm of possibility, however foolish and unlikely. This lack of normativity, coupled with possibility, creates a model of perverse narrative wit.

Parker in the Academy

Of all the modernist wits, Dorothy Parker is possibly the most well-studied. Her work has large popular appeal and has always been in print. A Publishers' Note to the 1976 reprint of *The Portable Dorothy Parker* claims: "The original *Portable Dorothy Parker* appeared in 1944 [...] Of the first ten Portables (they now number more than seventy-five), seven have been dropped or replaced by new editions; only *Shakespeare*, *The World Bible*, and *Dorothy Parker* have remained continuously in print and selling steadily through time and change" (v). The fact that Parker finds herself in the company

of Shakespeare and God has more to do, probably, with the peculiarities of Viking Penguin publishing than with any kind of parity in their work. Yet this fact does show ongoing public interest in Parker. This popularity, and the fact that she tended to publish short fiction and poems in mass-market magazines (non-'serious' forms in non-'serious' journals), has cost her a place in the canon of modernist luminaries. Most, like Rhonda Petit, claim that she doesn't really deserve to be there anyway:

> Conventional wisdom holds that Dorothy Parker is a modern writer who is not quite modernist. While the content of her work typically includes a Roaring Twenties howl at modern life, her poems adhere to formal standards, and her fiction is linear. In other words, Parker's work as we know it lacks radical experimentation with form. (21)

Several things are problematic with this statement. First, there is the fairly narrow understanding of modernism that encompasses only "radical experimentation with form." While this is certainly an aspect of modernist literature, it is far from a definitive and exclusive criterion. There is also the fact that 'modernism,' in this formulation, is a privileged position: as if attaining the imprimatur of modernism is akin to winning a prize. Modernism becomes a category that is not only discernible, but desirable. Lastly, Petit seems to make a claim *for* Parker's modernism without knowing it: she uses "formal standards" in her poetry and "linear" structures in her prose, but manages to use those standard forms to a new and modern purpose, including "a Roaring Twenties howl at modern life." She transforms conventions without denying their existence. It is a subtle form of innovation, but one valued in other, non-comic modernists.

The fact that causes Petit, as well as most of the critics of Parker, to ignore the particular kind of break with tradition practiced by Parker is that it is funny. She uses the lyric poem to describe bitterness and anger, not love; she uses the linear short story to describe lives in pieces. The juxtaposition of traditional form with modern content often produces laughter, even if it is uncomfortable laughter. These are not qualities that literary criticism in the modernist moment is equipped to appreciate, and thus they have been ignored.[16] If the union of form and content in Parker is divorced, her work does, in fact, seem quite traditional. This, though, ignores the essence of her work, and instead rewrites Parker without humor, then uses the rewritten text for study. This pattern of ignoring the comic elements of wit and comedy is repeated throughout criticism of modernism. Although modernist authors themselves often appreciate their funny brethren, critics refused to recognize the potential of comic modernism, and thus it largely fell out of the academy.

Of recent Parker criticism, Julia Hans' reading most seeks to maintain the connection between the facets of Parker's work and to appreciate it holistically:

> As a modernist, Parker had something different to say from her *fin de siècle* counterparts, and in an entirely different language, reflective of women's new freedoms. Significantly, feminine identity in Parker's fiction is largely constructed in relation to the world around her – urban and hostile – and *not* to her husband and children, and Parker's language reflects that autonomy and untidy identity. (100)

This highlights Parker's subject matter, and links this to the change in social values of the modernist moment that allows (or even creates) the kind of woman that Parker tends to

write about. Her conception of modernism differs from Pettit's, as Hans has no problem labeling Parker a member of that august group, seemingly based upon Parker's progressive notion of the role(s) of women, if not based upon her innovation in form. She later states that "[Parker's] manipulation of language in her monologues unearths the important and often volatile relationship between humor and gender construction" (101). This takes her initial claim a step further, by not simply making an historical argument, but tying the early century changes into the notion of gender itself. Hans' critique does not interrogate the idea of gender, although it claims that Parker does, which creates for a somewhat limited utility. By 'gender,' Hans means 'women,' and she is mostly interested in showing the differences in the ways that Parker depicts male and female voices. This difference is significant, and Hans does an excellent job of showing the overall privileging of the female voice to the male voice, as well as the polyphonic quality of the female voice: "In 'A Telephone Call,' two voices exist: one polite, emotional, apologetic; the other direct, strong, and violent" (104). What she doesn't really consider, though, is the nonormative way that polyphony is used. By combining both 'types' of voices within one character, Parker displays the very essence of the split subject. The two voices argue with each other about the way 'they' have been treated by a man, but, for Hans, it remains primarily an argument about the categories of 'men' and 'women.' In fact, Parker's monologue does much more: she perverts the very notion of 'men' and 'women,' and in doing so creates a new gender category: that of a woman progressive enough to engage in illicit sexual relations with a man, but traditional enough to not feel confident in taking charge of the relationship. Mary Loeffelholz claims that "the story's fascination lies in the mental ingenuity the speaker invests in the process of

disguising her situation from herself" (138). In this way, the speaker must know and not know at the same time, and must use language to convince herself of her own lack of knowledge: a supreme moment of modernist wit.

Early in "A Telephone Call," the unnamed speaker recalls the words of her lover. This actually contradicts Hans' assertion about the lack of a male voice, but it does transform the male voice into one reproduced by a woman:

> "I'll call you at five, darling." "Good-by, darling." He was busy, and he was in a hurry, and there were people around him, but he called me "darling" twice. That's mine, that's mine. I have that, even if I never see him again. Oh, but that's so little. It isn't enough. (81)

Parker's narrator remembers language, and transforms it first into something precious, something personal, something *owned.* "That's mine, that's mine." Once it has become transformed, however, it is immediately insufficient. "Oh, but that's so little." Ambiguity surrounds this statement, though, for it is unclear what makes this insufficient: is it the fact that what she has is language, or is it the fact that she has so little of it: only two 'darlings' hurriedly said on the way to something else? The obvious answer seems to be that language is not enough: she'd rather have some material token of love, or better still, her lover himself. The monologue format and the mixture of original and appropriated language calls attention to the fact that this voice exists *as* language. This use of language to despair over *only* having language is an odd move, a witty move. This is paired with another moment later in the story:

> Something might have happened to him. No, nothing could ever happen to him. I can't picture anything happening to him. I never picture him run over. I never

see him lying still and long and dead. I wish he were dead. That's a terrible wish. That's a lovely wish. If he were dead, he would be mine. (83)

Once again, the narrator focuses on ownership. Originally, she "had" his sweet words, however few they were. Now, she has his death. It is again an ambiguous sense of ownership, although not ambiguous in the same way as the earlier passage. What, exactly, is "mine" in this passage? Does she literally want his body, "still and long and dead?" If so, what is she going to do with it? Is she reconceiving the idea of ownership into a more abstract idea of power, which she still has, but he has lost along with his life? Is the lover "mine" to the extent that she has the power to imagine him dead? Or does she have some kind of ownership over him based on his lifeless state? All of these are possible, and their collective possibility creates their meaning. The humor (admittedly, dark humor) in this violent passage is formed by the total contradictions, some acknowledged, some not. The speaker claims not to be able to imagine several things, all ghastly, which she then proceeds to name: evidence that she can imagine them, and is in fact in the act of imagining them as she denies her ability to do so. There is also the use of the word "never," which implies that not only is she capable of this kind of imagining, but that she does it repeatedly. This, in fact, seems to be her sole source of pleasure within the story, imagining her lover's mutilation over and over and over. Dorothy Parker has perverted the notion of the kinds of pleasure able to be taken from love; she does not claim that love is without joy, but that its joy derives from the ongoing suffering of one's partner. Parker makes love modern, indeed. She equips it with a full heart, a cruel laugh, and a knife.

The overall trajectory of the narrative is itself perverse. It does not allow for any kind of resolution except for the knowledge of lack of resolution. The story ends with the speaker counting by fives as she tries to distract herself from either waiting for a call or making a call herself: rather than an impetus to action (a heteronormative notion of plot), the story is instead about repeated attempts to delay action, to keep anything from happening. And that is exactly what happens in the story: nothing. The speaker is in the same place, physically and emotionally, that she was when the story began, and the story itself consists of the reader watching her own efforts to remain in that place, to resist motion or emotion. She does, of course, fail in this effort: there are periods of emotional outburst, such as those already quoted, but each is quickly reincorporated into the aesthetic of stasis. What the story presents is what Peter Brooks might call "the interminable middle," the very spot of narrative that he cannot imagine being prolonged, for to do so undermines the 'will' of narrative to move forward. Parker's wit and humor enables her to do exactly that work, to undermine narrative, and to produce a perverse variant that is distinctly modern, distinctly witty, and distinctly Parker.

Ten Degrees to the Left

In both Parker and Wilde, characters, relationships between characters, and overall narrative trajectories can be seen as perverted. With respect to modernist wit, 'perverse' indicates a kind of adjacency of knowledge or power. It is a state of 'almost but not quite' that does not seek to undermine heteronormativity, but which ultimately reveals the constructedness and instability of that structure. It is often linked to non-heteronormative sexuality, but there is no necessary link, and thus it is incorrect to

confuse the 'perverseness' of wit with homosexuality or same-sex desire in any absolute way. Not all wit is queer, but all wit is certainly perverse in some fashion. As practiced by Wilde, Parker, and others, perverse wit describes those things that signify slightly off-center, ten degrees to the left, if you will. Wit is when the target is shifted slightly, when meaning is focused on something close to, but not the same as what was expected. This may manifest in the realms of sex and gender, but, as in Wilde, it also applies to any monolithic social construct, such as marriage, paternity, or social status. All of these constructs, which form the 'expected' patterns of social interactions, come under the rubric of heteronormativity; modernist wit does not seek to oppose such structures, but to show alternatives that exist slightly out of their expected range.

The kind of perversity at play in modernist wit is modeled in Freud's reading, re-reading, and misreading of homosexuality, and particularly of the category of the lesbian. In addition to the sexual overtones of the perverse, this model makes the same sort of meaning out of adjacency that wit does, and also incorporates a means of understanding that is slightly removed from normative expectations. Teresa DeLauretis explains her project in exploring Freud's various extrapolations of 'perversion' as "finding in the perversions – rather than in normative, reproductive, teleological, "normal" sex – a model of sexuality as it is subjectively lived through fantasy and desire" (27). In other words, the normative (specifically the heteronormative) is not *usual*; typicality is to be found in the perverse sexualities, with heteronormativity achieving its status as "normal" only by consensus, not by lived experience. "Such theory," she continues, "might not, perhaps, account for the majority of people, but then the positive theory of sexuality does not either; and then again, the notion of 'the majority of people' is as troubled as the notion

of 'the normal' – it, too, is at best an approximation and at worst a projection" (28). Wit's relation to both discourse in general and modernism in particular falls along these lines, and is relevant to Dorothy Parker's particular brand of non-heteronormative narrative.

This argument is furthered by Judith Roof's reading of Freud's understanding of lesbians, an act of willful misunderstanding in order to satisfy heteronormative expectations. She claims: "[Freud's] consideration of lesbian sexuality also reveal the narcissism of his own reading. [...] Freud reads lesbians in ways that promise their conversion to heterosexual objects or make them the pretext for a more compelling consideration of male homosexuality – positions that can include and reflect Freud's own desire" (*A Lure of Knowledge* 213). Not only is the lesbian forced into other models (heterosexuality, male homosexuality) to be understood, but the purpose behind this move is the heteronormative desire to see oneself, to find one's own reflection wherever one looks. While procreative, there is nothing 'normal' about such a position, and yet it is exactly in this state that the lesbian (or more broadly, the perverse), is required to operate. The lesbian is 'explained' through modes that have little relevance to lesbianism but do come equipped with a substantial amount of capital. The power and ubiquity of those models, therefore, overrides their fundamental uselessness in relation to the issue of the lesbian. The best model for understanding the lesbian is actually the persistent lack of a model. This is a perversion akin to modernist wit, in that it recognizes the existence and prevalence of a model, yet finds that model ultimately unsatisfying as an explanation for actual experience. The category of 'lesbian' is closely enough related to normativity that normative models are assumed to 'explain' it, yet those models do not really

encompass, understand, or predict the lesbian. The best that can be done is to shove the lesbian into a heteronormative model and ignore the bits that don't fit. It is exactly those bits and the way(s) that they do not fit that are at question in this project. Modernist wit perverts expectations, or more properly, shows the limits of what can be explained or understood by heteronormative models, including mainstream modernist studies. It is for this reason, as well as modernism's own aversion to the comic and the popular, that wit is misunderstood (and therefore ignored) by modernist studies and has fallen out of academic favor in the last century.

Wit's Narrative Perversity

Dorothy Parker's stories provide many instances of narrative perversity generated through wit. For example, "Dust Before Fireworks" opens with the following description:

> He was a very good-looking young man indeed, shaped to be annoyed. His voice was intimate as the rustle of sheets, and he was kissed easily. There was no tallying the gifts of Charvet handkerchiefs, *art moderne* ash-trays, monogrammed dressing-gowns, gold key-chains, and cigarette-cases of thin wood, inlaid with views of Parisian comfort stations, that were sent him by ladies too quickly confident, and were paid for with the money of unwitting husbands, which is acceptable any place in the world. Every woman who visited his small, square apartment promptly flamed with the desire to assume charge of its redecoration. During his tenancy, three separate ladies had achieved this ambition. Each had

left behind her, for her brief monument, much too much glazed chintz. (*Portable*, 135)

This passage has all the hallmarks of modern literary wit: an elegant turn of phrase, the aptly-used double entendre, and most of all, a kind of ambiguity that arises from their combination. Parker has a particularly masterful use of the dependent clause, which both grammatically and narratively claims its place in her prose. The sentence ending with "and were paid for with the money of unwitting husbands, which is acceptable anywhere in the world" exemplifies this. The clause is perfectly placed grammatically, yet still contains a note of ambiguity in its referent: what is acceptable worldwide? The money of the unwitting husbands (turning cuckold dollars into a kind of universal currency), or the practice of using one's husband's money to pay for one's liaisons? Similarly, the final sentence: "each had left behind her, for her brief monument, much too much glazed chintz." The word "for" becomes pivotal here. It could mean "as," rendering the ill-decorated apartment a legacy of her tenure, but it could also mean "in exchange for," meaning that the "brief monument" is the payment received by the woman. Because, at this point in the story, the point of view is unclear, this kind of swipe at the unnamed man's sexual prowess might be unintentional, highly meaningful, or not actually there at all. In both cases, meaning is made contingently and multiply: there is no 'correct' answer to be determined, but it is the interplay between the possibilities, all formed of language, that queers meaning and renders the passage witty.

Other moments in the passage mean (or fail to concretely mean) in a similar way. It is unclear exactly what is meant by the fact that "he" is "shaped to be annoyed." It is an evocative phrase, but an ambiguously evocative one. The narrator refuses to allow the

reader access to the thoughts and motivations of "he," although we get glimpses into his paramours, all of whom operate identically. We know that they are all "too quickly confident." Why the confidence is overly hasty is unclear: is there a hint of danger in the future of their relationship, or is this an indication of his overpowering effect on women? Either way, we know that they "flame with desire" in return. The final line describes the way that three different women decorated his apartment, each identical to the others, after "assum[ing] charge of its redecoration." Why would each want to redecorate if they are going to create the same environment? Is it because they do not know their taste and abilities as a decorator, or is the implication that they simply want to leave their mark, regardless of how much theirs is like everyone else's? A kind of ubiquitous "Kilroy was here" on this young man's apartment, if not his heart? Finally, is glazed chintz a fabric that "he" finds distasteful, or is it simply an overly feminine, overly domesticated style that does not suit the playboy ways of the male character? Again, it is both, while not being quite clearly and solely either. All of this adds up to the knowledge that there is a disconnect between the affection shown to the young man and the affection he returns, that the young man both profits from this disconnect and yet seems ambivalent about it, and that it is all part of a pattern that both mimics and directly challenges heterosexual monogamous marriage. Even at this stage of meaning-making, there are possibilities, choices, and contradictions. Meaning is operating along too many vectors to pin it down, to definitely state a thesis. Instead, there is a constellation of possibilities, each of which is related, yet distinct.

DeLauretis and Roof have revealed that heteronormative models are not all there *are* for women, but only all that are *allowed*; wit reveals that the same is true of narrative.

Wit as a perverse construct calls into question such issues as whether the meaning of language is ultimately knowable, and whether it is singular. Must language mean what it says it means (a heteronormative and masculine formulation), or even the opposite of what it says (a heteronormative and feminine formulation)? Instead of confining meaning to a choice between yes and no, might it not be an idiosyncratic move between those poles? This type of perverse narrative is the mechanism of wit.

In *Literary Wit*, Bruce Michelson notes that "literary wit can destabilize our relationship to language, to culturally based patterns of response, to thinking itself – whether or not that thinking is construed as inherently cultural, political, hormonal, gender inflected, or anything else" (4). He also claims that wit produces a kind of *jouissance*, and is thus a crisis of meaning and interpretation (4). Something which *should* mean does not, or not in its expected way. This is a fundamentally perverse formulation, in line with the kind of crisis DeLauretis sees in the role of the lesbian. Michelson's crisis, though, is firmly rooted in narrative, in representation, rather than in *being*. Although Michelson does not use the framework of perversion, his understanding of wit fits neatly into this discussion. He is clearly interested in master narratives, and his selection of hormonal and gender inflected thought is particularly telling.

Michelson further claims that:

> Literary wit [...] celebrates and complicates our understanding of the act of reading and the motions of the mind. Modern literary wit can liberate experience and consciousness from false absolutes and suffocating patterns. It can offer "agency" of a special kind, for it can make possible expansion in literary discourse, in aesthetics, in poetics, even in the possibility of identity. (2)

In Michelson's formulation, "false absolutes and suffocating patterns" would be the idea of direct, unambiguous communication. Wit (here he refers specifically to "modern" wit, although his pattern has application to wit in other historical moments, as well) does not *create* ambiguity, but *celebrates* it. It reveals a fundamental truth: that communication, particularly through language, is inherently ambiguous, and delights in the multiple possibilities this knowledge allows. Recognition of this fact can, in his words, create a kind of "agency." The specifics of this agency are unclear, although its effects (the various kinds of expansion that he envisions) are indicated. His association of wit with the word "identity" is important, for this connection is perhaps more explanatory of the agency he refers to than was intended (here he falls into his own trap, for the more he indicates meaning, the less he is able to pin it down). Wit and identity are fundamentally linked, and the link between them is one of co-adjacency, of almost meaning.

Modernist wit performs a linkage of unlike things, or unexpected qualities, in order to produce a new and unique truth that is recognizable both for its newness and for its dependence on the mundane or familiar. It is exactly Parker's "horticulture"/"whore to culture" paradigm. Wit is not, after all, the creation of new language, but instead is the use of the familiar in an unfamiliar way. A defining characteristic of wit is its sparkling freshness, but also the way in which it can almost pass by unnoticed; it is almost familiar, yet somehow not quite. Wit, by definition, cannot say what it means, but instead reveals a framework within which meaning can be made. It creates a shift in paradigm such that new meanings can be made, meanings which refuse to mean one thing and one thing only. An individual witticism may be more or less able to be pinned down to a limited range of meanings (the aphorism and the quip would fall into this category), but the

larger category of wit perverts the very notion of comprehensible meaning. Rather than suggesting a single, alternate meaning, wit reveals the inherent problems of meaning. Wit makes meaning relative, relational, and suggestive rather than concrete, absolute and definitional.

Wit is not the discovery of something new, but the discovery of the unexpected connections between what is already known. It is a way of overturning expected relations and associations and the forging of new paths of meaning. It has resonances, in fact, with Ross Chambers' notion of Oppositionality. His project is concerned with recognizing and countering power in narrative, and in revealing how narrative contains the means of its own undermining, even while appearing monolithic:

> Oppositional discourse [is the product of a (mis-) reading of the discourse of power, as that which mediates the deflections of desire that can change the real. "Reading," then, as the practice that activates the mediated quality of all discourse, is the "moyen de moyenner" that produces oppositionality and realizes it as change. (xvi)

In addition to connecting wit and power, this also creates a bridge to the issue of desire, which is related to, although not fundamental to, the perverse. Wit is an enactment of a kind of narrative desire, one which seeks unconventional trajectories. Peter Brooks claims that "desire as a narrative thematic, desire as a narrative motor, and desire as the very intention of narrative language and the act of telling all seem to stand in close interrelation" (54). Brooks is able to see such overarching patterns in narrative and narrative desire because he sees narrative in heteronormative terms, that narrative is a Freudian desire for an ending, and for the correct ending, at that. The notion of

'correctness' implies existing models (heteronormative, monogamous, reproductive, capitalist, oedipal) that dictate and predict meaning. While incredibly revealing, this model of narrative desire is proscriptive rather than descriptive, which is the mode Chambers finds himself in. Chambers' entire notion of oppositionality is itself perverse:

> Oppositional behavior consists of individual or group survival tactics that do not challenge the power in place, but make use of circumstances set up by that power for purposes the power may ignore or deny. It contrasts, then, with revolution, which is a mode of resistance to forms of power it regards as illegitimate, that is, as a force that needs to be opposed by a counterforce. (1)

Resistance, revolution, overturn: all of these are heteronormative reactions to heteronormative structures. They are also specifically gendered reactions: they are masculine responses that imply penetration, hardness, or firmness. A feminine, yet still heteronormative maneuver, might be to undermine, to corrupt: to counter by using something against itself, rather than relying upon strength or violence. The perverse, by contrast, simply changes the terms of the conflict: it does not need to oppose power, but to look through and beyond power for a different set of circumstances. In this way, the power is not challenged, per se, but becomes a solid containing negative spaces that can be exploited for other purposes. If this exploitation ultimately cripples the power, so be it. If not, power will always contain its own undoing, waiting for the moment to reveal itself. This, then, is the perverse queerness of wit as it functions in narrative.

Perverse Parker

The works of Dorothy Parker are well-read and well-known. In fact, Jessica Burstein attributes Parker's lack of critical attention to the fact that her popularity verges on ubiquity:

> Perhaps Parker has been overlooked in scholarly circles not because she is understood as neither hard nor grim, but because she is already familiar. That familiarity is reflected in the probability of our having ready access to some shard of Parkeriana --- "Men seldom make passes / At girls who wear glasses" or "Wasn't the Yale Prom wonderful? If all the girls in attendance were laid end to end, I wouldn't be a bit surprised." (233)

While Burstein does have a point, she actually *almost* makes another, more insightful one. She begins by asking if critics have ignored her "because she is understood [...]." The implication in this parsing of Burstein is that Parker is ignored because she is obvious, because her work requires no critical attention to understand. Alas, she finishes the sentence by making a much less interesting point, that she is ignored because she is known. This knowledge, I assert, comes from the belief that Parker is simple. Popularity breeds contempt among critics, but for Parker, it is derived from a general belief that her work is comprehended by the masses...and thus instantly suspect. Parker's work, instead, wears a veneer of seamlessness that renders it accessible; it seems to come complete in a package that requires no unpacking, but can be swallowed whole, as is. This is the trap of wit, that it makes the complex appear simple. It is both the source of its popularity with the masses as well as its disregard from the critics.

As mentioned earlier, criticism of Oscar Wilde is plentiful, but ignores his wit almost entirely. Criticism of Parker is much the same, except that there is a much smaller body of criticism to explore. What there is tends to focus on Parker as a woman writer, to fit her into the trajectory of female writers of her time, ignoring the mainstream of modernism that is seen as primarily the realm of the male, or of formally experimental women like Stein and Woolf. Rhonda Petit, for instance, devotes several pages of her book-length study of Parker to the short story and sketch format, which Petit finds to be a confusing choice. She claims:

> It has been said that much of Parker's fiction is autobiographical in nature, an account of her own experiences or the experiences of those she knew. [...] Yet the sketch form does not allow Parker much room for narrative maneuvering; neither does Parker allow her characters much movement or space. More than thirty of Parker's stories have static settings and limited or no action. (126)

She goes on to explain that nineteenth century women writers often utilized the sketch form because their domestic duties prevented them from having long, uninterrupted periods for writing, something Petit finds necessary for longer-format, and hence structurally complex work. But, as Petit points out, Parker was not such a woman, but had time to write and few (if any) domestic duties. Petit's confusion over the form Parker chooses misses the point entirely. Parker does not rely upon the brief sketch out of creative necessity, but out of creative choice. Her stories are claustrophobic, much like the personalities she depicts. They end almost as quickly as they begin, often without having left us with details such as character names or the location of the story. The form is indicative of the kind of perverse ambiguity I have argued for: her stories are

fragments, glimpses, not complete portraits. They are themselves 'notes' on wit. Yet they provide insight into character with surgical precision, revealing a huge amount about a specific emotional situation in a brief moment. The stories are 'incomplete,' if one wishes to use that term, because the characters themselves are. Parker writes about longing, lust, and despair, about people settling for their circumstances or succumbing to them, but rarely rising above them. Her form may be part of a feminine tradition, but it is also an aesthetic statement in its own right.

Petit critiques Parker for not allowing herself "much room for narrative maneuvering." Her reference to Ross Chambers is clear, yet distinctly odd. She characterizes Parker's form as a kind of mistake, as if she really *meant* her stories to be longer, but just didn't achieve it. She falls into heteronormative, masculine expectations, such as that length equals quality. This connection underscores the relationship between Chambers and perverse narrative: Parker's stories are not 'incomplete,' but *differently* complete. They perform a specific function, then come to a kind of an ending. The emotions created within the stories are endlessly repeating: Hazel's ruminations upon her own lack of worth are too numerous to count in "Big Blonde," for instance, and the introductory paragraph of "Dust Before Fireworks" establishes a pattern that has been repeated and which is likely to continue to repeat. These patterns are not heteronormative, however: they do not procreate, they clone. We do not simply get more of the same, we get *exactly* the same. Parker's stories do not come to traditional, heteronormative conclusions because the stories themselves are queer: they produce an excess, but never move on. Another generation is not produced, but the current one

simply expands. In this way, her stories are exactly appropriate to their subject matter, which is usually of an accumulating stasis that often becomes overwhelming.

Parker's stories are typified by their inconclusiveness, the lack of absolute knowledge that they convey, linked with wit. She is certainly not the only author to write in an inconclusive manner, or to leave facts suspended within narrative; it is her coupling of these devices with her witty turn of phrase and sense of structure that makes her stories remarkable. Many of her works follow a kind of expected pattern, but vary that pattern in interesting ways. In "Advice to the Little Peyton Girl," for instance, the first three-quarters of the story are an exchange between Miss Peyton and Miss Marion, in which Miss Marion diagnoses Miss Peyton's mistakes in conducting her love life, and offers her advice for repairing the damage she has done. This is followed by a brief sequence in which Miss Marion herself makes the mistakes attributed to Miss Peyton; in an ironic twist, we learn that her prescience with Miss Peyton comes from personal experience with the same problems, not from some position of detached wisdom. Ironic twists, however, are not modernist wit. They are the domain of O. Henry and Guy de Maupassant. Parker does more than simply reverse the plot; she shifts the position of knowledge in the story, creating a distaff, rather than parallel structure.

The majority of "Advice to the Little Peyton Girl" consists of transcribed dialogue. The narrator's only real presence is seen through the attribution of speech to each character with the tags "Miss Marion said" and "Sylvie said," but without description of motion in the story and with no explication of motivation or emotional content of the spoken words. Curiosity about Miss Marion builds when Sylvie Peyton says "It would be so wonderful to be like you: to be wise and lovely and gentle. Men

must all adore you. You're – oh, you're just perfect. How do you always know the right thing to do?" (*Complete Stories* 188). As Miss Marion is definitely "Miss," and thus unmarried, this comment is enigmatic: does Miss Marion know what she is talking about? How? If she is as wonderful as Sylvie says, then why is she herself single? The narrator provides no reason for us to mistrust Miss Marion's advice, but also no particular reason to accept it, other than that Sylvie Peyton does, and with great enthusiasm.

The final segment of the story not only reveals that Miss Marion makes the same mistakes in dealing with men that her young pupil does, but this information is also revealed through an entirely new narrative voice. While the narrator in the early part of the story gave only the briefest of information about who was speaking, we suddenly have a narrator who comments upon the actions Miss Marion makes, as well as attributing motivation or emotional quality to them: "Suddenly she rose again, put down the magazine, and with quick, firm steps that were not her habit swept across the room to the tall desk where the telephone rested. She dialed a number, with little sharp rips of sound" (*Complete Stories* 189). The narrator is now revealing much more information, as well as characterizing that information ("sharp little rips of sound") to convey some sense of the emotional state of Miss Marion. Between the motion used to dial the number and the sense of context we are given ("firm steps that were not her habit"), this figure is seemingly much less in control of herself and her actions than is the Miss Marion of earlier in the story. The only time this pattern is broken is when Miss Marion speaks to the secretary of her own young man:

> May I speak to Mr. Lawrence, please?" she said. "Oh, hasn't he? Well, couldn't you please tell me where I could reach him? Oh, you don't know. I see. Have

you any idea if he will be in later? I see. Thank you. Well, if he comes in, would you be good enough to ask him to telephone Miss Marion? Yes, Marion – Cynthia Marion. Thank you. Yes, I telephoned before. Please be sure to tell him to call me, will you? Thank you very much. (189)

In this sequence, the narrative voice again almost entirely disappears, except to indicate "she said." We also find out Miss Marion's first name, much as we found out Miss Peyton's first name earlier in the story. The old narrative pattern has returned, but now makes Miss Marion its victim rather than its master. She has ceased to be "Miss Marion," something more like a title, or an indication of type, and is now "Cynthia Marion," very much an individual. She has lost her own critical distance that she held in her advice to Miss Peyton, and is reduced to emotion and desire, the attributes of the individual. In this way, Parker has not merely reversed the positions in the story, a fairly conventional structure, but has played a single character's varying positions against each other. Miss Marion has been rendered a subject that contains two modes, both closely related: ten degrees to the left, if you will, rather than polar opposites. As is often the case with Parker's characters, the movement between these positions creates stasis rather than progress. Miss Marion is not schizophrenic, but perverse: she operates in two closely-related fashions, alternating between them as the situation, and Parker's wit, dictates.

Coming to the End

I have repeatedly asserted that Parker's narratives do not fully resolve, or come to conclusive endings. This is not a casual observation, but one that is exemplary of her overall strategy as a writer. Rhonda Pettit has commented upon the tradition of women as short story writers, focusing on the form as a matter of necessity, while I have argued that in Parker's case, it is an aesthetic choice appropriate to her prose. Similarly, the lack of an ending, as traditionally understood, is a further way that Parker deploys her wit to the advancement of her ideas. What does it mean for a narrative to come to an ending, or to have a traditional ending? According to Peter Brooks, "meaning in plot is the structure of action in closed and legible wholes" (91). The very possibility of meaning, therefore, is caught up with the notion of being "closed" or completed, and that this is a function of legibility. In other words, closure is a convention, one that can be read easily and that thereby allows meaning to be made. Conventions, however, are not part of Parker's aesthetic interest. At least, she is interested in them only to the extent that her deviations from them become significant.

One convention of narrative endings is the emergence of knowledge. The action of the story is organized by a revelation; meaning is retroactively assigned to the events we have seen and future events are projected. Jessica Burstein (one of the few critics to address Parker's wit) shows that, at the end of the story "Sentiment," the main character "ends up in a cognitive blur that overrides specificity: her tree in fact looks like any number of other trees, and she maps her world incorrectly. The joke arrives when she comes to and sees where she really is" (246-247). This is a story, Burstein point out, that ends with error rather than knowledge. The oedipal, or heteronormative model of an

ending, involves an arrival at awareness; the only awareness here is of the mistake the character has made throughout the story. The emotions felt are real, but the way that they have been tied to a location are revealed as false. This is a play upon a convention: while Oedipus comes to the knowledge that he has brought plague upon Thebes, the narrator of "Sentiment" only comes to know that she is on Sixty-Fifth Street instead of Sixty-Third. Even this kind of awareness does not make the story a "closed and legible whole" as described by Brooks, for the reader still does not know what, if anything is going to happen. We have seen a woman in an emotional crisis, but that crisis is not resolved, and no future actions are based, as far as we know, in her current state. We have no ability to see or imagine a future, but are stuck in *now*.

Rachel Blau DuPlessis criticizes the kind of heteronormative, reproductive ending that I have claimed is part of the narrative tradition. Her work, however, places women in a position of narrative triumph superior to that of the heterosexual couple, which she claims is "the point at which [...] basic formations cross" (1). DuPlessis formulates alternate models of female power, of a kind of feminine ending that displaces and disrupts the heteronormative tradition. (This is the kind of "feminine" strategy explained earlier, as opposed to a "perverse" strategy.) This is important to Parker studies, as she is equally critical of 'meaning' based in heteronormative convention. Unlike DuPlessis, though, Parker imagines no particular victory for women. Her suspension of resolution undermines any sense of coherent meaning as applicable. Instead, characters are left in limbo: we do not know what will become of Hazel in "Big Blonde" now that she is finally unappealing enough that another man is unlikely to enter her life and perpetuate the cycle of sterile (yet queerly proliferating) relationships she has had. The narrator of

"Sentiment" has rehearsed a long list of grievances against her lover, but it is unclear what she will do from this point forward, or even if she will have any choice in the matter. The final line ("*Driver, what street is this? Sixty-Fifth? Oh. No, nothing, thank you. I – I thought it was Sixty-Third... ")* (199, italics original) is a witty, perverse, and inconclusive ending. The single word "Oh" undermines the entire preceding text, wiping it away into a blur of mismeaning. It cannot wipe away the realization the character has come to, but it can undermine its effectiveness as an ending. With one word, Parker calls into question all that we have learned thus far, but cannot erase the feeling that we, and the character, thought we felt when we thought we knew the facts. Instead, we have something that should be an ending, but refuses to resolve into meaning. Even the final ellipsis denies its status as an ending. Much as Moon and Birdboot question the nature of dramatic beginnings in *The Real Inspector Hound* ("You can't begin with a *pause*!") (10, italics original), Parker asks if you can end with one. Have we finished, or are we simply taking a breath? We don't know, and Parker has positioned us at an ending that refuses to end, a location of meaning that refuses to mean.

The notion of an ending as both conclusive and meaningful is itself a masculine and heteronormative concept. For instance, Frank Kermode's example *par excellence* of an ending is Apocalypse, the ultimate ending that "ends, transforms, and is concordant" (5). It is through the ending that all that precedes becomes ordered and meaningful. It is the final swipe of patriarchy that threatens all meaning and reshapes it according to its own functioning. This is mirrored by Brooks' notion that "narrative must tend towards its end, seek illumination in its own death. Yet this must be the right death, the correct end" (103), or that endings reorder narratives and give meaning to beginnings. In

Parker's work, like "Sentiment," the ending calls into question all that has come before, but it does not substitute *new* meaning in place of the old. Neither does it destroy the meaning thus-far-assumed. It merely questions it, causes it to become less sure. It might be an ending, and it might be meaningful. It might mean what we assume, or it might not. We might be at a pause rather than a full stop. Or we might not. The stories end the way their characters do: indeterminately, perversely, wittily.

Thomas Leitch has described "stories without endings" as "stories which project no authoritative teleology because they never end" (64). His argument is almost tautological; he changes terms to essentially say that stories with no endings never come to an end. "Teleology" implies more than the mere mechanism of an ending, however, and connotes a sense of narrative purpose, as communicated through endings. Therefore, stories without end have a different purpose, a different intent, than stories with endings. He refers to soap operas and situation comedies as the prime examples of such stories, which are designed to carry on indefinitely, and therefore have a different sense of narrative than stories which are designed to end.[17] This is not quite the situation of Parker's narratives, though, for her stories each do come to individual endings; they are not cyclical or serialized in any fashion. Rather, the kind of ending they lack is a kind of final determination that stamps the narrative with meaning, or with a predetermined moment or framework for meaning.

Leitch provides a much more workable model for narratives without endings in his examination of Freud's *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria.* Leitch refers to it as "a fragment of an analysis, a story without an ending" (65). As Freud himself points out, is incomplete in multiple ways. First, there is a procedural issue, which Freud calls "the

incompleteness of my analytic results," and which he has attempted to remedy by "restor[ing] what is missing, taking the best models known to me from other analyses." Further, there is a descriptive incompleteness, in that "I have not as a rule reproduced the process of interpretation [...] but only the results of that process." Additionally, he is aware that "a single case history, even if it were complete and open to doubt, cannot provide an answer to all the questions arising out of the problem of hysteria" (7). In almost all aspects, then, Freud is aware that his case study is itself incomplete, and that its utility in modeling hysteria and/or its cure is incomplete. Further, of course, is that the case history is incomplete because it was brought to an end (in Freud's estimation, a premature end) by Dora herself. It is this factor that is of most use in relation to Parker's works, for they are 'incomplete' only in the sense that they do not buy into what Leitch calls an Aristotelian ending "whose teleology transcends the requirements of formal or aesthetic closure to offer a privileged perspective, a mode of wisdom, concerning the audience's own experience" (68).

Parker's stories do, of course, end. There comes a point when they are over, when there is no more to read. The story is, at this point, over. There is not necessarily a privileged sense of knowledge communicated at this moment of ending, however. Rather than a lack of ending, therefore, they more properly lack an *expected* sense of conclusion or resolution. Often the disposition of the characters is unknown: in "The Last Tea," as explored earlier, it is not clear what is in the future for the two characters. Will they meet again, will they not? What kind of understanding has been achieved by either character? We do not know the answers to these questions, and yet this is exactly the kind of "privileged perspective" that endings are expected to provide. Expectations, though, are

what Parker defies without remorse. Like Dora, Parker ends her narratives when she has deemed them over, not when a paternal expectation of completeness has been reached. Parker's stories, in effect, "said good-bye to me very warmly, with the heartiest wishes for the new year, and – came no more" (*Dora* 100). Both Freud and Dora's father, after this farewell, felt that she needed to return for further treatment, for she was not yet cured, not yet returned to normative expectations of conformity. In other words, Dora was not yet restored to a masculine, heteronormative vision of feminine stability, and ended her treatment, her story, her narrative, at a time and place of her choosing: a place that could only be seen as perverse. Like Dora's story, Parker's stories certainly come to endings, they simply do not end when they are told they should. In doing so, they create a modernist aesthetic of perverse narrative wit.

Chapter 4

Fate Keeps on Happening: Anita Loos' Displaced Wit

Anita Loos' *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1925) is a novel in diary format, narrated by Lorelei Lee. She is a film actress turned 'professional lady friend' of rich gentlemen, and a blonde. At the suggestion of one of her gentlemen friends, she keeps a diary from March through July of 1925, during which she travels the globe, undermines the British aristocracy, engages in espionage, confounds a nice Jewish doctor she meets in Austria named "Mister Froyd," has a debutante party for herself in New York, and marries a wealthy man. She claims that recording her adventures is a way of 'educating' herself. The central question in reading *Gentlemen* has to do with Lorelei's actual intelligence versus her appearance of stupidity: is Lorelei really being taken advantage of by the men she 'dates,' or is she in charge of her own life, and those of her gentlemen friends? The novel records manipulation, and performs it as well: ultimately, the reader is manipulated as much as any of the characters in the novel. The novel positions the reader in a perverse position of knowing only what it has told them, but of believing they know more. In *All About Thelma and Eve*, Judith Roof points out that this position "remind[s] us of the different kind of sense that lurks throughout the story" and is perverse because of its failure to tell us all that we need or want to know (2). While doing so, it refuses to let us forget that more information exists, thus causing us to second-guess all that we think we know. Either Lorelei must be accepted at face value, or the reader must be more prurient than the text itself is. Lorelei survives on what she provides to her admirers and what they are willing to be satisfied with it; if the reader assumes more than what Lorelei

tells them, then they take on the position of the men who take advantage of Lorelei by taking more than she is willing to reveal.

The humor of the novel is often broad, and turns on Lorelei's (seemingly) inadvertent admissions of her own ignorance. She is a simpleton, a "little girl from Little Rock" (92), who makes her way in an urban setting full of predatory men. Her small-town, uneducated and unsophisticated nature is constantly revealed, such as her reaction when she first sees the Tower of London: "In London they make a very, very great fuss over nothing at all. I mean London is really nothing at all. For instants, they make a great fuss over a tower that really is not even as tall as the Hickox building in Little Rock Arkansas and it would only make a chimney on one of our towers in New York" (40). Several things contribute to the sense of Lorelei as an unrefined hayseed: her imprecise grammar and spelling ("For instants"), her affectation of British English ("a very great fuss"), and her complete inability to recognize importance versus size (comparison of the Tower of London with the Hickox building in Little Rock). This passage, and many similar ones, reveals Lorelei to be a young woman who recognizes value only in terms of amusement and monetary worth. Great works of art have no value to her, except insofar as they can be sold for cash. Historic buildings are worthless, although they are sometimes located near expensive parfumiers or other purveyors of luxury goods. Clearly, Lorelei is nothing but an ignorant gold-digger with a constant supply of wealthy boyfriends and a deficit of taste.

Or is she? One of the key problems in the text lies in Lorelei's constant performance of the role of Lorelei, which she then details for us in her diary. It is not actually as clear as we might like that Lorelei *is* an ignorant gold-digger. It is clear that at

given moments in the novel she performs that role, usually because her performance results in some form of monetary gain. At other times, though, she seems to be a very sincere young woman in love, a person who honestly wishes to learn more about the world, and a naïf being used by lascivious men. In each case, she walks away with a diamond bracelet or a pair of earrings that her gentleman's wife should not find out about. As Lorelei so famously says, "kissing your hand may make you feel very very good but a diamond and safire bracelet lasts forever" (55). No matter what role Lorelei performs, it is the one most likely to secure a 'gift' from a gentleman. It is hard to say, then, who the 'real' Lorelei is among her performances. Likewise, her diary is a kind of performance, although its function and audience are less clear. It is no more or less authoritative a record of Lorelei than any of her performed roles, but it is the facet of Lorelei that reveals the rest of her roles to us. Lorelei's diary, then, is nothing other than a record of what some version of Lorelei wishes us to know.

Gentlemen Prefer Blondes is a novel that makes people laugh out loud; the humor of the text is immediately evident to readers, yet also very difficult to describe. H.L. Mencken, the man for whom the novel ostensibly was written, wrote in his review:

> This gay book has filled me with uproarious and salubrious mirth. The story of a young woman who is being "educated" by Mr. Gus Eisman, the Button King, told by herself. It is farce – but farce full of shrewd observation and devastating irony. I commend it to rural Christians who would get an accurate view of life in New York in these gaudy days of moral endeavor. And to all others who enjoy fresh humor, not too formal and refined. There are pages that made me stop to bawl. (Mencken 127)

One of the most educated men in the United States claims that the novel made him repeatedly stop "to bawl." He characterizes it as "an accurate view of life in New York," hardly a subject to make Mencken lose himself to laughter. He recognizes how others will find it funny ("rural Christians" and those who enjoy "fresh humor, not too formal and refined"). None of this describes his own reaction, however. He recognizes it as "farce full of shrewd observation and devastating irony." The elements here are awareness and representation: the very aspects I have defined as constituting modernist wit. Mencken neatly skirts around the most complicated issue in the novel in his review through a bit of grammatical legerdemain: he does not explain *whose* observation(s) in the text produce its humor. For Mencken, observation is shrewd, but also without agent. This, in short, summarizes both the nature of the humor in the novel as well as the problem(s) inherent in discussing it: where, exactly, does the wit reside?

Modernist wit, as we have seen, is a specific positioning of language against meaning that creates an interpretive space between. This space is usually created by a person or character who occupies the function of wit, and whose command of language and narrative drives the possibilities for understanding in the text. In Oscar Wilde, we saw a kind of unattributed, universal wit that all characters deployed, creating a kind of ambiguity in representation that itself became meaningful. In Wodehouse, the difference between Bertie as narrator and Bertie as character formed the space of wit, allowing us to glimpse the queer domestic space of Bertie and Jeeves, but not to enter it ourselves. Narrative became a witty device in Dorothy Parker, as her stories each violated expectations to produce an aesthetic of perverse sterility rather than of heteronormative production. In Anita Loos' novel, everything we know as readers is focused through

Lorelei Lee's consciousness: her diary is our text, and thus the site of wit. Lorelei, though, does not seem capable of being a wit. She is too ignorant, and possibly too innocent, to have the kind of control over language and representation she would need in order to function as a wit. Yet, if she is not the wit, who else could be? No other voice asserts itself enough to shape the narrative as much as hers; the novel contains her record of other people's speech, particularly that of her friend Dorothy, but none so aesthetically or structurally important as her own.

The innovation in wit as deployed by Loos is that it is displaced from the text itself. It obviously arises from the text, but it is realized only by the reader. This is not merely the need for the presence of a reader to complete a text or to create meaning from a text (which could be true of any text), but that the wit in this case actually incorporates the reader into the narrative understanding at work. If the reader wants to know the 'truth' about Lorelei and her 'profession,' then they already have ideas about what those things might be. Lorelei, we can only assume, knows what she is doing and therefore does not need to detail it in her diary; what we read is the location of things she writes down in her attempt to become educated. Therefore, the diary details the parts of her life that she herself does not understand, and it is from these fragments that the reader must construct the totality of her life and experiences. In other words, the reader is the site at which meaning, implication, knowledge and its suppression intersect. Lorelei already 'gets it' (whether literally or metaphorically), and the text is just that: a text. Any sense of purpose, anticipation, or concealment within the text is only realized in the reader, who therefore is the only entity in possession of enough points of disparity to create the distances needed for wit to occur.[18]

This odd configuration creates the possibility for multiple simultaneous readings of the wit, as well as misunderstandings. The potential for multiplicity and misunderstanding arises from diverse opinions of what the novel is about. Relying upon H. L. Mencken yet again, Loos tells of his private reaction to her novel: " 'Little girl,' he now warned Anita, 'you're making fun of sex and that's never been done before in the U.S.A. I suggest you send it to *Harper's Bazaar*, where it'll be lost among the ads and won't offend anybody' " (Loos, "Biography of a Book" 56). Mencken clearly felt that the topic of the book was sex, and that it was not handled with sufficient decorum and propriety. Again, though, this statement is evocative without being specific. What is it about sex that he feels is being made fun of? Is it that middle-aged men are slaves to pretty young women? Is it that women actually have control over their own bodies and actions, something not previously discussed in a lighthearted way? Is it that sex is primarily a transaction, not between bodies, but between positions of power? All of these things are suggested by the novel, but they are not all equally clear to all readers. Rather than insisting upon one single reading, the novel creates a space for readers to insert their own prejudices and develop different, yet perfectly sufficient readings. The wit is created by the novel, but it is not completely located within it.

The novel presents itself, like Lorelei, as a surface upon which viewers/readers/ consumers can project their own assumptions and desires. Do you wish to believe that Lorelei is a calculating whore? The novel supports that. Is she an innocent victim of the cruel world of sex and Capitalism? Certainly possible. A good girl who has great luck finding men who wish to support her? It would be hard to argue with that reading. Lorelei's livelihood depends upon being what her suitors wish her to be, and she spends a

great deal of time in the novel performing those expectations. The novel itself presents those same options to its reader, as it flirts with them as much as with the 'gentlemen' of the title. That does not mean, however, that there is no depth below the surface, only that Lorelei intentionally makes it difficult to locate.

Blondes resists the very idea of interpretation. Lorelei exists as surface: she is blonde. Her world consists of surfaces, often of jewels. The notion of anything internal confounds her (the concept of real jewels versus paste ones is deeply troubling), and she rejects the complications of interiority. Even her narrative itself, which is a diary, ostensibly designed to reveal interiority, serves to reify her exterior *as* interior, linking the two solidly, allowing for no difference or interpretive space. Lorelei's language is repetitive and childish; she uses simple words poorly and complex words disastrously. In doing so she undermines the idea that language represents anything, for it barely seems to have its own substance, much less the power to project beyond itself. Euphemism, which conventionally is used to suggest without stating, is instead used to state without suggesting:

> When a gentleman who is as important as Mr. Eisman, spends quite a lot of money educating a girl, it really does not show reverance to call a gentleman by his first name. I mean I never even think of calling Mr. Eisman by his first name, but if I want to call him anything at all, I call him "Daddy" and I do not even call him "Daddy" if a place seems to be public. (5)

Several things are unclear in this passage: what is meant by "reverance," why is her pet name for Mr. Eisman "Daddy," and why does she not use this name in public? Each of these moments are stated as fact; Lorelei does not seem to indicate that these are, in fact,

euphemisms, or that they mean anything other than the simple statement of their existence that she has provided. There is no invitation from the narrator to engage with these questions and explore them, and there is no additional information provided that might suggest answers to any questions readers may have. Lorelei has revealed some of the inner workings of her relationship with "Daddy," but refuses to recognize that these are private matters, or terms that have negotiated meanings. To accept Lorelei at her word is to find her a person with no shame, but also no secrets: there is nothing to reveal beyond what we know. It is difficult to really penetrate Lorelei (euphemism intended) and see if there is anything there.

One way that Lorelei, as narrator, resists *being* the wit in the text is through her refusal to use language in any way that indicates a belief in multiple meanings. Her prose is a veneer, a surface, overlying...something. It is not clear what lies in Lorelei's interior, for she never allows access to it. Language, rather than revealing the complexity of her character, actually interferes with this knowledge. Wyndham Lewis, in *Time and Western Man*, examined what he called the naïf-motif, or childlike quality of Loos' writing, specifically to show the "tricks" (as he calls them) of her technique. In what today seems an unusual move, he compares her work to that of Gertrude Stein. He writes:

> If you put [a] passage from *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* into the free-verse form you will see the relationship [to Stein] still more closely:
>
> Paris is devine.
>
> I mean Dorothy and I got to Paris yesterday and it really is devine.
>
> Because the French are devine.

> Because when we were coming off the boat, and we were coming
>
> through the customs it was quite hot.
>
> And it seemed to smell quite a lot.
>
> And all the french gentlemen in the customs were squealing quite
>
> a lot.
>
> [...] The identity in all these tricks of manner is deeper than a simple technical imitation would explain. In the case of [the quotations from Stein and Loos] there are these two fundamental similarities. The passages are alike because (1) the person who is supposed to be writing is illiterate; and because (2) she or he is a naïf, and engagingly childish. In the case of Miss Loos she has employed this method because she wished to obtain the breathless babble of the wide-eyed child, telling Mummie all about what has happened to her. (54-55)

I take this comparison to be remarkably telling and helpful; unfortunately for his subjects, Lewis meant this as a condemnation of Stein for writing too much like Loos, an author he hated. Other than Lewis, critics have ignored the relationship between their styles, and particularly that he privileges Loos as its originator. Stein has her place in the academy, and that place is *not* as a derivative of Anita Loos.

What Lewis' analysis of Stein and Loos does show, however, is the density, if not the complexity of Loos' prose. She repeats words ("devine"), often placing it in the same grammatical position, correctly or not. She repeats "a lot" only once, but also pairs it with the rhyming phrase "quite hot." There is also a nonsense quality to what she says; she explains over and over how Paris is "devine," then moves on to explain that it is hot, smelly, crowded, and the French "squeal." No sense is given that she understands these

as contradictory positions. What we have, then, is information, but not clear *meaning*. Information is carried in the words themselves, but also in their arrangement and the kind of effect they create. None of this, though, clearly tells either how to understand the information, nor whether it is crafted as an interpretable moment. Lorelei remains the "wide-eyed child" Lewis mentions, and we do not know whether to take her at face value, interpret her words, or ignore her entirely. Of course, simply because a text does not invite interpretation does not mean that it will not be interpreted. In doing so, the reader must treat Lorelei as a naïf, must put themselves in a position of understanding more than the narrator telling them her story. It is a perverse relationship, one in which the reader sees the kind of advantage, particularly sexual, that men take of Lorelei, while she does not acknowledge it or understand it herself.

The same kind of perverse ambiguity exists in the title of the novel itself. The full title is *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes: The Illuminating Diary of a Professional Lady.* Several things are worth note here. First of all, the relationship between the words "professional" and "lady" is unclear. Is "Lady" capitalized because it is part of a title of a book, or because it is, itself, a title? Does it denote rank, or merely sex? Is she claiming that being a "Lady" is her profession (and thus something she 'does' as employment, not something she 'is' by right of birth or breeding), or is she claiming to be a woman who is a "professional," or a prostitute? Much like the wit of Dorothy Parker, the relationship between the words can be parsed, but cannot be reassembled: there is no answer to be found, other than the play between meanings itself. Second, there is the word "Illuminating." This word suggests an audience, one who will achieve some sort of illumination through the reading of this diary. It seems an odd construction if it refers to

Lorelei, the author of the diary. It is certainly possible that she might achieve knowledge through reading her own diary, but within the text she seems to conceive of the act of writing as being the moment of illumination. There is no indication, in fact, that she ever goes back and reads her own entries. Who, then, is the recipient of this illumination? If it is not Lorelei, are we to assume that the entire diary has been written for someone else's consumption? Grammatically, this makes the most sense, but that means, then, that the text has some purpose outside of its existence *as* a text, a purpose located in a reader. It isn't clear exactly what the reader is supposed to do with this information, but it seems clear that the reader is not only able, but expected to function as the site of meaning. This is symptomatic of the novel's endeavor to force the reader to both (and simultaneously) construct and interpret the wit of the text.

Knowing and Telling

Lorelei's diary is an oddly suspect narrative site. It is unclear what audience the diary is intended for, and even what its ultimate purpose is. Lorelei tells us the origin of the gift: "So this gentleman said a girl with brains ought to do something else with them besides think" (3). The next day, he sends a diary as a gift. It is immediately set up as a contradiction: is the diary a place *not* to think? Or is the diary a place of *action* instead of thought? Or, is the diary merely a way to flatter a rather stupid girl by telling her that she is intelligent enough and interesting enough to have thoughts worth recording? It isn't entirely clear; what is known is that Lorelei goes on to tell some rather intimate details of her life in it, yet not the *most* intimate. Why does she censor herself? And what is

missing from the diary? The diary, like Lorelei herself, is flirtatious: it reveals enough to keep us interested, but conceals enough to maintain its good reputation. The fact that Lorelei herself might be more than a flirt is heavily indicated, but never fully revealed. She tells of another boyfriend:

> So then we took a hansom cab and drove for hours around the park because Gerry said the air would be good for me. It is really very sweet to have some one think of all those things that gentlemen hardly ever seem to think about. So then we talked quite a lot. I mean Gerry knows how to draw a girl out and I told him things that I really would not even put in my diary. So when he heard all about my life he became quite depressed and we both had tears in our eyes. Because he said he never dreamed a girl could go through so much as I, and come out so sweet and not be made bitter by it all. (11)

This passage shows that Lorelei is intentionally leaving facts about her life and activities out of her diary, which alerts the reader that we are not getting the full story. The nature of the censored bits is itself censored, other than they are things "a girl could go through" and ought to be bitter and hard after having done so. This entry is itself censored, and in a very telling way. We hear that Lorelei and Gerry rode in the hansom cab "for hours around the park," followed by "so then we talked quite a bit." Lorelei's writing may be imprecise; that is, the conversation may have occupied the hours driving around the park. It may also be exactly correct though, that they spent hours in the hansom cab, *followed* by conversation. If this is correct, then what filled the hours in the cab? Is this one of the very things that Lorelei then tells us she intentionally edits from her diary? This passage hinges upon a point of syntax: does she tell us of coincidental events as if they are

consecutive, or are they actually consecutive events stated correctly? Because Lorelei makes so many mistakes of grammar, syntax and spelling elsewhere, it is easy to assume that this is one as well. It is important to note, though, that this is a syntactically correct statement; it is only that the reader has been conditioned not to expect such correctness that causes doubt. If we accept Lorelei at face value, then she has had a meaningful conversation with a famous author. If we believe the pattern the novel has established of concealing and revealing information, then she has probably had sex with Gerry while driving around the park, and tells him (and us) that she won't talk about such things in her diary.

It is unclear why Lorelei feels that some material is unsuitable for her diary, or who the audience for the diary is. Shortly after the hansom cab incident, Lorelei claims that "I am taking special pains with my diary from now on as I am really writing it for Gerry. I mean he and I are going to read it together some evening in front of the fireplace" (12). He is a famous author, and she feels that "I really would not be surprised if all of my thoughts will give him a few ideas for his novels" (11-12). Shortly after this entry, though, she records her doubts about her relationship with Gerry, and even how she leaves for Europe (paid for by another boyfriend, Mr. Eisman) to get away from him. While on the ship to England, she engages in a bit of espionage when a gentleman reveals military secrets to her which she then passes on to another boyfriend, Major Falcon. She explains: "So then he told me all about it. So it seems that Uncle Sam wants some new aeroplanes that everybody else seems to want, especially England, and Uncle Sam has quite a clever way to get them which is to long to put in my diary" (31). Again, we are told that information exists, but that we are not going to find out what it is by reading

Lorelei's diary. In this case, she claims that she does not record information because it is "to long" (sic), although this claim comes in an eighteen-sentence paragraph; clearly Lorelei is not overly worried about how much information she records in her diary. In at least two places, then, Lorelei tells us that her diary is not a complete record of her life, thoughts, and activities, but that it is edited. Her reasons for this are either nonsensical or entirely missing, making the entire text suspicious as a record.

Euphemism, understatement, and silence also function as interpretable moments in the text, although, like other such moments, the narrator does not seem to realize the absence of concrete meaning in her words. One of the central questions in the novel is about Lorelei's sexual promiscuity: is she actually trading sex for money (or jewels), or is she so captivating that men give her gifts in exchange for merely spending time with her? Almost no critics even entertain the notion that Lorelei is a virginal tease: the nature of her relations with men seem obvious to anyone. Anyone, that is, except Lorelei herself, who has every opportunity to detail, or at least mention, this issue, and who instead completely omits it. While being courted by Henry Spoffard, Jr. in a Viennese park, for instance, Lorelei comments on the popularity of American music in Europe:

> So we rode around in the Prater until it was quite late and it really was devine because it was moonlight and we talked quite a lot about morals, and all the bands in the prater were all playing in the distant "Mama love Papa." Because "Mama love Papa" has just reached Vienna and they all seem to be crazy about "Mama love Papa" even if it is not so new in America. So then he took me home to the hotel.

So everything always works out for the best, because this morning Mr. Spoffard called up and told me he wanted me to meet his mother. (93)

There is an interesting lacuna in this narrative. In one paragraph, Lorelei is describing a fairly tame evening out with Henry, albeit one in which "Mama love Papa" seems to be the dominant theme, and is in competition with "morals." This is followed by a return to "the hotel," a location both specific and vague: whose room in the hotel was she taken to? Who was with her in the room? We do not know. What we do know is that the next morning, something has prompted Henry to advance his relationship with Lorelei by introducing her to his mother, and Lorelei feels that "everything always works out for the best." Has something happened in the break between paragraphs? What causes Henry to move one step closer to proposing marriage? What Lorelei tells her reader (or herself, depending on how her audience is understood), is that she has manipulated Henry into doing what she wants. What the reader can discern is that the couple has probably had sex for the first time. Lorelei does not hint that this has happened, she simply leaves it out in a conspicuous manner, inviting the reader to fill in the blanks that she has left. The audience is "illuminated" while Lorelei maintains her own self-ideal as "a little girl from Little Rock" (92). She does not engage in double entendre, nor witty wordplay; she is not manipulating the meaning of words her in a Wildean fashion. Instead, she manipulates the absence of language altogether, forcing the reader to recognize the silences and fill them in. This not only allows the possibility that the audience may not fulfill their role, and thus believe Lorelei at her word, it also is a perverse formation that causes the reader to both accept Lorelei as a good girl while imagining the ways that she is not.

Susan Hegeman has commented that "The narrative [...] prolongs the erasure of sex to such an extent that sex becomes its central preoccupation" (534). I agree with this assessment, with one amendment: Hegeman locates the preoccupation with sex in the text itself, the very text that refuses to discuss sex. Locating the agency in the very site of non-agency is an odd move, but one that functions for Hegeman's argument, as she is not particularly interested in the mechanics or structure of knowledge, but the content of knowledge. As long as someone knows that Lorelei is sexually active, her argument stands. I find it vital, however, to locate this knowledge in the reader. It is the reader who has both understood that something is missing in the narrative, and it is the reader who fills in that gap. This causes the reader to be much more prurient than Lorelei herself, and essentially puts the reader in the position of the older men who consume Lorelei for their own pleasure. In a single act, then (which is itself more the absence of a act), the reader is revealed to know *exactly* how Lorelei lives, and is put in the position of her victimizer, all as a function of knowledge.

Lorelei's silence at this critical moment (which is but one of several such moments) stands in contrast to her understanding of making things clear in writing. When Henry is finally on the verge of proposing, Lorelei goes to great lengths to not only get his proposal, but to secure it in writing. She leaves Vienna and travels to Budapest because "Dorothy was just on the verge of getting very unreformed," a kind of moral mission (96). This forces him to communicate with Lorelei by letter or telegram, either of which has the admirable quality of being admissible as evidence "if a girl should sue him for breach of promise" (98). When the proposal arrives:

> It says in black and white that he and his mother have never met such a girl as I and he wants me to marry him. So I took Henrys letter to the photographers and I had quite a lot of photographs taken of it because a girl might lose Henrys letter and she would not have anything left to remember him by. But Dorothy says to hang on to Henry's letter, because she really does not think the photographs do it justice. (97)

It is thus quite clear to Lorelei that to be understood, it is important to have ideas stated clearly, in writing, and to have copies available (for defense council's benefit, we assume). When Lorelei leaves vital information out of her diary, she is thus either unaware of the value of that information, or she is well aware of it and wishes to hide something. The novel, of course, points at both options as answers, leaving it to the reader to negotiate between them. The novel concludes with Lorelei's marriage to Henry, indicating that the text is a record of her journey to this moment. Written record of her sexual exploits could be used against her in court in the way that she plans to use Henry's letter, should the need arise. She therefore has reason to edit her activities selectively. This makes assumptions about the audience for her diary which are not in evidence elsewhere in the text, however, that it is a public document and available to others.

Lorelei's self-censoring is contradicted by other sequences in the text, of course. In one of the more uproariously funny sections of the novel, Henry suggests that she visit Sigmund Freud while she is in Vienna. Her candor with the doctor, and with her diary, indicates that she has little concern for what might be revealed about her. She does say "I told him things that I would not even put in my diary," (90) but her mention of this

excision is itself damning; if her concern is what an attorney will ask her about her diary, even this mention of an edited portion could ruin her. Of the rest of her consultation with "Dr. Froyd":

> So Dr. Froyd and I had quite a long talk in the English languadge. So it seems that everybody seems to have a thing called inhibitions, which is when you want to do a thing and you do not do it. [...] So then he seemed very intreeged at a girl who always seemed to do everything she wanted to do. So he asked me if I really never wanted to do a thing that I did not do. For instance did I ever want to do a thing that was really vialent, for instance, did I ever want to shoot someone for instance. So then I said I had, but the bullet only went in Mr. Jennings lung and came right out again. So then Dr. Froyd looked at me and looked at me and he said he did not think it was possible. [...] So then Dr. Froyd said that all I needed was to cultivate a few inhibitions and get some sleep. (89-91)

This passage has been commented on more than any other in the novel.[19] This is perhaps unsurprising, for it directly addresses an issue, and a theoretical model, both common to literary studies. More than any other part of the novel, this section engages with what literary critics *do*. Much of the criticism is very astute, such as Dale Bauer's observation that:

> Loos celebrates Lorelei's uninhibited sexual freedom as it subverts the repression of psychoanalytic coercion. Her lack of inhibition [...] seriously questions Freud's theory of repression. [...] Lorelei suggests what Loos [...] could not say outright: that "Dr Froyd" did not know what women want, that his psychology of

women left out the economics of women's oppression, relying as it did on seemingly universalist claims about complexes and instincts. (64-65)

Bauer astutely critiques the applicability of Freudian models to women, and uses the sequence to establish that in the face of obvious diagnostic failure, the Freudian model erases sexual difference as a meaningful category of understanding. I find this argument compelling, and I do not argue with it. I do find it lacking, however, as an explanation of Lorelei Lee or *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. There is an assumption here of "Lorelei's uninhibited sexual freedom" without any explanation of how this freedom is known to the reader. It is highly inhibited, in fact, for Lorelei refuses to ever describe her sexual behavior or admit that it exists. If it does, and if it is as uninhibited as Bauer suggests, knowledge has been created in the reader and *by* the reader, outside of the text. There is also an odd assertion here that Loos "could not say outright" something about Freud, and thus constructs a character who stands in for Loos' opinions. If this is true, the way in which Lorelei herself is critical of Freud is completely elided: the ridiculousness of Freud is evidence enough. Lorelei, though, does not see him as ridiculous, but instead "very sympathetic, and he seems to know how to draw a girl out quite a lot" (90). Again, I agree with every bit of this commentary about Freud's understanding of women and his ability to formulate a model that values sex as a category, but I find it oddly lacking in explication of how the critic knows what they know, and where this knowledge is expressed in the text itself.

What this rush to discuss the interiority of Lorelei (and many others similar to it) fails to take into account, though, is that she expresses a lack of interiority. Her interior and exterior appear to be seamless, and she sees this same seamlessness in others. When

she sees a woman in a hotel lobby in London, she nudges her friend Dorothy and says "That is quite a cute little girl so she must be an American girl" (33). In Lorelei's formulation: American girls are cute; that is a cute girl, so she must be American. And of course, she is correct. Form and content, for Lorelei, are not merely linked, they are identical. So we shall remain with Lorelei at the surface of things and alter our questions: we shall not ask "what does this tell us?" but instead "how do we know what we have been told, or even if we have been told anything?" What this reading strategy reveals is that the novel works quite hard to force the reader into a position of knowledge greater than that of the narrator of the text. It is a perverse position from which to read, for the reader has to read *past* the narrator to see if there is even a text there to be analyzed. In doing this, the reader is both totally beholden to Lorelei for information, but superior to her in awareness, causing a transportation of the site of humor, of wit, from the text itself to the reader.

Cracks in the Plaster

Gentlemen Prefer Blondes, like Lorelei herself, is a fabrication that has been painted over, prettied up, and put on display for consumption. The comic tone and the production of wit are ways of masking the rather glum reality of Lorelei's existence. The narrative provides numerous clues that the story we are being told is not the real story (or at least not the full story). Lorelei's fractured language, the various lacunae in the text, and the narrative technique itself all point towards cracks in the veneer that is Lorelei's tale. The largest crack is Dorothy, Lorelei's best friend (and apparently the only woman who actually likes Lorelei).[20] She is a brunette, and her potential for 'friendship' with

gentlemen is therefore more limited than Lorelei's; she has to supplement her income by working as a showgirl. Hers is the only substantive voice in the novel other than Lorelei's, but it is heard only as reported speech, recorded by the narrator in Lorelei's diary. The gaps in Dorothy's comments are telling, as is their content: it seems unlikely that a narrator wishing to paint Lorelei in a favorable light would include Dorothy's voice, for while she is a friend of Lorelei's, she is also a wisecracking truth-teller who has no use for making Lorelei's story 'nicer.' She likes Lorelei as she is, and sees no reason not to be proud of that fact. Dorothy is the ultimate sidekick, the brassy, uninhibited counter to Lorelei's seeming (or at least self-supposed) reserve and refinement. Although she is the character we know best in the novel other than Lorelei, she is still a mystery. What we know of her is what Lorelei reports of her: we hear wisecracking quips and little more, and often go for great stretches of the text without hearing from her at all. She is a sort of voice of reason in the text, yet one we are prevented from hearing most of the time.

In *All About Thelma and Eve*, Judith Roof describes the sidekick character Ida in the film *Mildred Pierce*:

> Although Ida is intriguing, it is nearly impossible to follow her in *Mildred Pierce*. Despite her compelling, decoratively indecorous presence, the camera persistently moves away from her. Like Mildred, we too are restrained from further contact with her; we are tantalized, seduced, and kept away not only in this scene but throughout the film to various degrees. Secondary, a supporting player, one whose idiosyncratic difference marks her as minor and funny, wise and irreverent,

Ida peoples the background fabric of the film, coming forward only occasionally to remind us of the different kind of sense that lurks throughout the story. (2)

Substituting a fictional format for *Mildred Pierce*'s filmic format, the description works perfectly for Dorothy. She is enigmatic and mostly absent, she is alluring and denied to Lorelei's reader. Most importantly, though, she is an indication of "the different kind of sense that lurks throughout the story." The inclusion of Dorothy's voice, even as third person direct speech, with no access to her thoughts or motivations, forces the reader to question her relationship to Lorelei, and what Lorelei understands about this relationship. Dorothy is, after all, highly critical of Lorelei, and, in addition to being her best girlfriend, thinks her to be little more than a successful whore. This is not a mean-spirited or derisive opinion: Dorothy is primarily jealous of her friend, who can seduce Dukes and millionaires while she is left with bellboys and backup dancers. Like Ida in *Mildred Pierce*, Dorothy is deeply involved in the plot of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, but is not its center. Lorelei does not follow Dorothy's actions fully in her diary (and thus denies her readers the possibility of knowing more) because what she does tell us of Dorothy is all we really need to know. She is not a leading character, and might be rather boring if she were. Her role is to support Lorelei and to reveal aspects of Lorelei's character, not to take center stage.

Dorothy's presence in the novel is suspicious, however. She is critical of Lorelei, and has overt opinions of her, making the reader wonder if her inclusion in the narrative is a choice Lorelei makes out of approval or out of ignorance. Her voice acts as the novel's own internal commentary on Lorelei's ability to create meaning. As a diarist, Lorelei is the filter for all information in the novel. Through her reportage of Dorothy's

comments and activities the reader comes to realize that the novel contains its own critique, and also that the narrator is either unaware of its existence, or has included it intentionally as a counterpoint to the image Lorelei presents of herself. After a gentleman friend (nicknamed "Piggie" by Lorelei) buys her an expensive diamond tiara, his wife confronts our heroines, hoping to get the tiara for herself:

> So Lady Francis Beekman came in and she is quite a large size lady who seems to resemble Bill Hart quite a lot. [...] So it seems that she said that if I did not give her back the diamond tiara right away, she would make quite a fuss and she would ruin my reputation. [...] So Dorothy spoke up and she said "Lady you could no more ruin my girl friends reputation than you could sink the Jewish fleet." I mean I was quite proud of Dorothy the way she stood up for my reputation. [...] Because no matter how vigorous Lady Beekman seems to be, she had to realize that she could not sink a whole fleet full of ships. So she had to stop talking against my reputation. (57-58)

The meaning of Dorothy's comment is obvious to readers: as there is no Jewish Fleet, there is also no possibility of Lorelei's reputation being any lower than it is. Lorelei, though, does not know this (or acts as if she does not), misunderstands the condition placed upon the comment, and assumes that Dorothy has come to her defense. This is the pattern for deferred wit in the text: Lorelei understands things in a unified way and reports them as such, but the reader realizes that there is much more at stake in her language. The possibilities that this opens up are interesting opposites: has Dorothy merely had a laugh at her friend's expense, or has Dorothy exposed the fact that she is not, in fact, a friend to Lorelei? The first option is clearly the more enjoyable one (and

the one assumed in the film version), but the second exposes the possibility that Dorothy is actually using Lorelei for her connection to rich men. She maintains the façade of friendship in order to be recognized as Lorelei's sensible friend, the one that gentlemen will want to send to Europe as a chaperone to Lorelei. She gets to stay in the Ritz, she gets luxurious gifts, and she doesn't have to sleep with old men: that is left to Lorelei. The reader, therefore, can sense the possibility that Dorothy is using Lorelei the way that Lorelei uses her gentlemen. She may well be the ultimate fake in the novel.

If Lorelei does recognize Dorothy's duplicity, she still keeps her around, so there is clearly some benefit Lorelei finds in their friendship. It certainly opens up the possibility of Lorelei as a trickster figure, one who is herself hiding her intellect and uses Dorothy to expose this fact. Dorothy's presence in the text is comic, but also reveals what Lorelei may elsewhere keep hidden: that a functioning intellect lurks below the peroxide.

William Faulkner recognized this 'problem' in the narrative, but interprets it differently: as a narrator who isn't unreliable, exactly, but who does not understand the story they are telling. The location of meaning, therefore, is transported to the reader, or is at least more equally shared by the reader and the narrator. After reading the novel, Faulkner wrote to Anita Loos:

> Dear Anita ---
>
> I have just read the Blonde book, Bill's copy. So I galloped out and got myself one. Please accept my envious congratulations on Dorothy – the way you did her through the intelligence of that elegant moron of a cornflower. Only you have played a rotten trick on your admiring public. How many of them, do you think,

> will ever know that Dorothy really has something, that the dancing man, le gigolo, was really somebody? My God, it's charming – the best hoax since Witter Bynner's Spectral School in verse – most of them will be completely unmoved – even your rather clumsy gags wont get them – and the others will only find it slight and humorous. The Andersons even mentioned Ring Lardner in talking to me about it. But perhaps that was what you were after, and you have builded better than you knew: I am still rather Victorian in my prejudices regarding the intelligence of women, despite Elinor Wylie and Will Cather and all the balance of them. But I wish I had thought of Dorothy first. (*Letters*, page 32.)

Faulkner's praise is odd; he congratulates her on the fact that she has written a novel that has little possibility of being appreciated. Late in the letter, he points out that even Loos may not have any idea what she has done, which nicely places Faulkner in the patriarchal position of 'one who understands,' ahead of the author herself. It is exactly this position, though, into which *every* reader of the novel is placed, not only Faulkner. Every reader has to determine whether there is anything here, after all, and if there is, how important it is. The text itself will not do any of the work, but will simply say what it has to say.

Faulkner's praise focuses on the character of Dorothy, who is a smart, wisecracking, unhypocritical truthteller in the novel. Her language, her very existence, though, are filtered through Lorelei, who does not understand Dorothy, and therefore can only reproduce her words and evaluate them as either useful or not. There is no question of interpreting their meaning, for Lorelei fundamentally exists as surface. She assumes she understands everything that everyone says (including Dorothy), and evaluates what

they say only in terms of their utility to Lorelei. For instance, after dancing with the Prince of Wales, Lorelei reports:

> So after our dance was all over he asked Dorothy for a dance but Dorothy will never learn how to act in front of a prince. Because she handed me her fan and she said "Hold this while I slip a new page into English histry," right in front of the Prince of Wales. So I was very worried while Dorothy was dancing with the Prince of Wales because she talked to the Prince of Wales all the time and when she got through the Prince of Wales wrote some of the slang words she is always saying on his cuff, so if he tells the Queen some day to be "a good Elk" or some other slang word Dorothy is always saying, the Queen will really blame me for bringing such a girl into English society. (43-44)

This passage shows Lorelei properly concerned over the way Dorothy acts in public, but totally unaware of the kind of impression she has made on the Prince (who does not choose to write down anything Lorelei says), and only able to imagine how Dorothy's behavior may one day reflect poorly on Lorelei herself. The passage is funny specifically because it shows the lack of interiority of its narrator. Lorelei remains at the surface, at the level of language, and does not penetrate to *meaning*. Her repetition of the title "Prince of Wales," used three times in a single sentence, shows her focus on the person as a title, not as a man, a future King, or a person with interests, tastes and desires. Dorothy recognizes all of these things. She knows, as she must, that she has no chance of seducing the Prince and marrying him, and if this is not an option, then what use is he to her? She instead decides to have fun and treat the Prince as she would any man, have a few laughs, and get a great story to tell later. A decision-making process is evident in

Dorothy's speech and actions, but Lorelei cannot see this process, only its effects and its value to herself. Dorothy evaluates her situation, but does not scheme based upon it, while Lorelei misses the meaning of the moment, as well as the possibility that the moment has meaning at all. Lorelei's 'business' is being what is wanted of her. At this moment, what she thinks is wanted is a proper lady, and thus she does her best to be one. This scene is actually most interesting for showing that Lorelei is wrong: the Prince does not want a proper lady. Still, her chances of leaving the party with a 'gift' from a gentleman are greater than Dorothy's, who may leave with a waiter, but no 'gift.'

Lorelei's existence *at* the surface and *as* surface makes her laughable: both in terms of humor as well as in a derogatory sense. She appears wholly unconstructed as a narrator, merely a narrating machine that spews out facts about the events around her. She neither invites interpretation, nor presents any sense that anything exists to interpret if one wanted to. As an historical note, it is interesting that Faulkner wrote to Anita Loos in 1926, three years before Faulkner would publish *The Sound and the Fury*, famous for its own narrator who resides at the surface, and who is constantly telling the tale of Caddy, a woman whose actions and motivations he does not understand, except insofar as they affect the narrator. Unlike *Gentlemen*, though, that novel announces itself as interpretable in a variety of ways. First, it is not entirely narrated by Benjy, but other points of view are incorporated. Second, the other points of view are themselves compromised in various ways (with the arguable exception of the final chapter), setting the entire novel up as a project of interpreting various narrators whose relationships to interpretation are suspect. Finally, it is a tragic novel, while *Gentlemen* is a comedy. This difference will always resolve on the side of tragedy as meaningful and comedy as

superficial. I do not suggest that *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* is as important a novel as *The Sound and the Fury* (in fact, I find such attempts to compare texts almost ridiculously meaningless), but I do mean to suggest that *Gentlemen* has substance. It is simply of a kind that refuses to announce itself *as* substantive, and thus is almost always overlooked.

Lorelei, Authoress

The site of reading and writing in the novel is constantly deflected. In her first diary entry, she claims "it would be strange if I turn out to be an authoress" (4), which is a contradictory statement since she is, at that moment, in the act of writing. Similarly, when presented with a book by one of her gentleman friends, she decides not to read it because the book is not as "riskay" as she had been led to believe:

> I decided not to read the book by Mr. Cellini. I mean it was quite amuseing in spots because it was really quite riskay but the spots were not so close together and I never seem to like always to be hunting clear through a book for the spots I am looking for, especially when there are really not so many spots that seem to be amuseing after all. So I did not waste my time on it but this morning I told Lulu to let all of the house work go and spend the day reading a book entitled "Lord Jim" and then tell me all about it, so that I would improve my mind. (13)

Here, Lorelei is a reader who does not read, but who is nonetheless interested in books. At least, she is interested in them if they have "riskay" parts, or, in the case of *Lord Jim*, if she feels a gentleman may want to discuss it with her. In this case, she relinquishes her duties as a reader, hoping that hearing about Conrad's novel from her maid will be

enough to "improve my mind." This passage, like many others, questions the location of knowledge within the novel. As a writer who denies writing, and a reader who does not read, what does Lorelei know, and what can she tell her reader? *Blondes* transfers the production of knowledge to the reader, who is positioned by the text to know more than the narrator does, and to realize the witty dissonances between what is said and what is meant.

Lorelei Lee is a charming narrator. It is in her best interest to be charming, for her 'business' is based in charming rich older gentlemen out of their money. Her writing, like her profession, is an interplay between revealing and concealing, between discretion and satisfaction:

> [Gus Eisman] is the gentleman who is interested in educating me, so of course he is always coming down to New York to see how my brains have improved since the last time. But when Mr. Eisman is in New York we always seem to do the same thing and if I wrote down one day in my diary, all I would have to do would be to put quotation marks for all other days. I mean we always have dinner at the Colony and see a show and go to the Trocadero and then Mr. Eisman shows me to my apartment. So of course when a gentleman is interested in educating a girl, he likes to stay and talk about the topics of the day until quite late, so I am fatigued the next day and I do not really get up until it is time to dress for dinner at the Colony. (4)

Mr. Eisman travels from Chicago to New York to see Lorelei, and according to the information she gives us, we are to believe that he does this only because he is interested in her intellectual development. There is the chance that she is telling the truth, and that

Mr. Eisman has no particular expectations of Lorelei than that she become better educated. She offers no reason why he is concerned about her intellect, but does reveal that her education consists mostly of going on dates with him. They are also dates that Lorelei does not care much for, but that she submits to, as part of her arrangement with Mr. Eisman. The least defined part of the dates is what happens after they return to her apartment at night, when Mr. Eisman "likes to stay and talk about the topics of the day." Is this a euphemism for sex, or do they really discuss current events? Lorelei's description of the event is flirtatious. It is an incomplete description of what occurs, but it presents a veneer of completeness. Even if their interaction is innocent, a great deal of information is missing. It is this lacuna that is Loos' deployment of wit: it is not precisely the space between what is said and what is meant, but the space between what Lorelei knows and what she doesn't know.

In this novel, wit becomes a function of knowledge, of the space between competing possibilities for knowledge and truth. Lorelei does not herself reveal truth, but only suggests possible locations of it, and thus she is not the site of wit. She is the source of wit, to be sure, but the actual formation of wit, the realization of disparate knowledge and the reassembly of those pieces into contrasting meanings, happens elsewhere. The site of wit in this novel is the reader: the reader understands that Lorelei's explanations do not make sense, and that she is actively concealing information. The reader is positioned as a voyeur, constantly watching Lorelei, and also as a subject who knows more than Lorelei herself does. Through her diary format, Lorelei focuses all attention upon herself, but also refuses to acknowledge what that attention reveals. She may be a subject in the midst of an educatory process, or she may know all that she needs to know

already. The text does not resolve those competing possibilities, but creates a space of meaning in the reader where the witty interplay between possibilities resides.

The fact that Lorelei refuses to confirm or deny the possibilities that exist between herself and her gentlemen friends is an assault on the patriarchal structure in which she is embedded. Lorelei may be a kind of prostitute, a position that is typically understood as being within and victimized by patriarchy, but if so, she does not acknowledge it. In fact, her promiscuity (both sexual and textual) undermines the control usually exerted by patriarchy. Lorelei selects her gentlemen, they do not solicit her. Likewise, she does not acknowledge dominance by her gentlemen nor reliance upon them. She is a working girl who seems unaware of her 'employment' and is thus neither victimized nor confined by it. The number of men who fall in love with her is matched only by the number of ways she can deny the nature of her relationships. Whether she is truly unaware of her own status, or whether she simply denies it in her diary is unknown. It is the realization of both possibilities by the reader, and the acceptance of their simultaneous truth that generates wit.

Lorelei's first diary entry undercuts the notion that she is a mind in the process of development, by claiming to be already fully developed:

> A gentleman friend and I were dining at the Ritz last evening and he said that if I took a pencil and a paper and put down all of my thoughts it would make a book. This almost made me smile as what it would really make would be a whole row of encyclopediacs. I mean I seem to be thinking practically all of the time. I mean it is my favorite recreation and sometimes I sit for hours and do not seem to do

anything else but think. So this gentleman said a girl with brains ought to do something else with them besides think. (3)

According to Lorelei, she is already a 'person who thinks,' and thus is not in need of 'education,' but her gentleman friend disagrees. It isn't clear what kind of authority to grant this observation, because Lorelei is perhaps the one figure least able to determine her own intelligence and need of education. She may be, as she claims, "a girl with brains," or she may not. Her days may be filled with thought, or she may only "seem to be thinking." Is her semblance of thought an issue of grammar, using the word "seem" unwisely and thus undercutting her statement, or is it a straightforward admission of performance? In other texts, I have argued that this very kind of ambiguity is a witty formation; here, it operates in a different manner. It creates confusion more than multiplicity, and transfers the task of realization that meaning exists to the reader. This is not Wildean wit. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Algernon negates the potential for meaning through careful word choice; here, Lorelei negates the potential for meaning through a seeming mistake. The most important difference between her construction and Algernon's is that she seems unaware that she has made this error, while Algernon maintains strict command of language. When Algernon claims that "a man who marries without knowing Bunbury has a very tedious time of it" (*Earnest* 302), he creates multiple possibilities for meaning, but he does so through use of language in an almost hyper-specific way. His precise and correct use of language opens opportunities for meaning, while Lorelei's casual and sloppy (yet completely confident) language skills serve to shut down possibility. It is only the reader who realizes that there is any meaning here, much less more than one possibility. Algernon is in control of language;

Lorelei does not have that level of competence, and thus her innuendo is tentative, uncertain. Algernon wittily manipulates his words, but Lorelei does not: it is up to her reader to discern the wit, the comic multiplicity of meaning in what she says, if it is to be realized at all.

Faking It

The 'real' versus the 'fake' holds a place of priority in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. After leaving London, which she felt not to be at all educational, Lorelei arrives in Paris, a city whose value she understands. She wishes to visit all of the historical sites: Cartier's shop and Coty's parfumerie (which is much easier to see from the Place de la Vendôme if you turn your back on the monument in the middle and look the other direction). She also learns something new, however, something that expands her understanding of the world, and of her place within it:

> So then we saw a jewelry store and we saw some jewelry in the window and it really seemed to be a very very great bargain but the price marks all had francs on them and Dorothy and I do not seem to be mathematical enough to tell how much francs is in money. So we went in and and it seems it was only 20 dollars and it seems it is not diamonds but it is a thing called "paste" which is the name of a word which means imitations. So Dorothy said "paste" is the name of the word a girl ought to do to a gentleman that handed her one. [...] So it really makes a girl feel depressed to think a girl could not tell that it was nothing but an

imitation. I mean a gentleman could deceeve a girl because he could give her a present and it would only be worth 20 dollars. (53-54)

Lorelei's entire notion of what the world is and how it works has been upended because of the existence of "paste" diamonds. Worse yet, Lorelei cannot tell the difference between the real and the fake, and thus is in a position to be taken advantage of by her gentlemen, who may not be giving her fair exchange value for her company. Although it is perilous to ever take Lorelei's grammar, syntax and spelling into account, it is quite telling in this moment, for she does something here that is atypical even of her tortured English: she doubles the levels of representation implied in her language. When she discovers the existence of paste jewels, she does not describe them as being fake themselves. Instead, she sees the fakes being represented by a word, "paste," which is itself "the name of a word which means imitations." It is not a *word* that means imitations, but *the name of a word.* Lorelei's own language mirrors the confusing distance between real and fake that the paste diamonds represent to her by having words, themselves representations, not refer to things, but refer to names of things (which, one assumes, then refer to the things). The semiotics of the relationship between word and item, between actual and copy, are interrupted by a third, unnecessary term. Lorelei is unable to reconcile the meaning between real and fake, and thus is unable to find proper terms with which to discuss this meaning.

Making Lorelei Make Sense

One of the more difficult tasks in reading and interpreting *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and the character of Lorelei Lee is that the text and the character are inconsistent. The Lorelei that ends the novel is not the same as the Lorelei that begins the novel, and it is thus difficult to ascribe common motivation to the character throughout the novel. As Anita Loos has famously explained, Lorelei Lee was created as a parody of everything that Loos hated about 1920s commodity culture: in particular the admiration of some women over others because of their hair color. After explaining the fawning attention a fellow passenger on a train received, while Loos herself received none, she wrote:

> Obviously there was some radical difference between that girl and me. But what was it? We were both in the pristine years of early youth; we were of about the same degree of comeliness; as to our mental acumen, there was nothing to discuss: I was the smarter. Then why did that girl so far outdistance me in feminine allure? Could her strength possibly be rooted (like that of Samson) in her hair? She was a natural blonde and I was a brunette. (Loos, "The Biography of a Book" 53-54)

After this observation, Loos wrote a brief sketch in which she parodied the ignorant blonde woman and the men who are attracted to her. This sketch was submitted to *Harper's Bazaar* where, according to H.L. Mencken, "it'll be lost among the ads and won't offend anybody" (56). Loos goes on to quote Carmel Snow, who writes: "Henry Sell was the editor in charge and fortunately saw the story first. 'Why do you stop?' he asked Anita. 'You've started this girl on a trip, go on.' So, as Lorelei appeared one month in *Harper's Bazaar*, Anita was frantically writing the next month's installment"

(56). Any claim that Lorelei or the text of *Gentlemen* is unified and consistent, then, must be automatically suspicious. Loos' intent, clearly, was to have Lorelei be a figure of derision, a cipher for all that was wrong with both commodity culture and personal relationships in the 1920s. As she continued to write, though, Loos' attitude toward Lorelei seems to have changed; like the men who swarm around her, Loos seems to have fallen a little bit in love with Lorelei, and by the end of the novel has transformed her from an anti-heroine into a heroine.

The only scholarship that takes serious note of the publication history of *Gentlemen*, and thus of the possible (and almost certain) inconsistencies it manifests, is Sarah Churchwell's "'Lost Among the Ads': *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and the Politics of Imitation." Churchwell details the very ads that H.L. Mencken felt the sketch belonged among, and how they changed over the publication period of Loos' serial. It is a fascinating piece of scholarship, but is not particularly revelatory about the novel itself, taking instead as its subject the consumer public of 1920s America. This is in fact typical of scholarship of the novel, which is a fairly slim body of work to begin with: most of it focuses on the economic relationships within the text and the circulation of capital, both monetary and sexual. While interesting, this work as a whole sidesteps the witty nature of the text, treating it as an intentionally serious condemnation of mass culture and consumerism. While Loos may actually have agreed with this position in the earliest days of her writing, as the character evolved, that line of critique evaporated, finally causing Loos to write:

> If one examines the plot of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, it is almost as gloomy as a novel by Dostoievski. When the book reached Russia, this was recognized, and it

was embraced by Soviet authorities as evidence of the exploitation of helpless female blondes by predatory magnates of the Capitalistic System. The Russians, with their native love of grief, stripped *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* of all its fun and the plot which they uncovered was dire. ("The Biography of a Book" 54)

This shows Loos' awareness of the dynamic I have tried to explore throughout this project: that in discussing wit (and comedy in general), the impulse is to ignore the text entirely, or to ignore the witty nature of it. *Blondes*, inasmuch as it has been discussed at all, has usually been discussed as Loos feared: stripped of its "fun" and rendered a "dire" novel of gloom and despair. Talking about *Blondes* while recognizing its wit actually allows the complicated evolution of character to be revealed. Since wit plays upon the difference between what is said and what is meant, analyzing wit creates an opportunity to account for, rather than to ignore, the change in the character over the course of the novel.

In possibly the most astute critical article to date written about *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, Susan Hegeman outlines the problems inherent in analysis of the text:

> The desire to see *Blondes* as a satire of '20s morality or as a tragedy of fallen virtue or both rests, I think, on the critical impulse to position the text against the values and mores of the milieu it represents. However, just as Loos rejected [such readings] of her text, so *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* seems to have resisted these "serious" attempts of its critics. What follows is an attempt to take *Blondes* seriously but without turning it into a tragedy. [...] *Blondes* less criticizes changes in the '20s regarding the relationship between women, work, and sex than revises it in a celebratory, comedic form. (526)

Hegeman's impulse here is exactly correct: to discuss the novel without transforming the novel. After all, Lorelei clearly triumphs in her narrative. She achieves all that she could want: fantastic riches, a husband she can control, and a life in which she can do as she pleases (which, at the end of the novel, is to return to film, starring in a movie about the love life of Dolly Madison). There is nothing tragic about her or her story. What might be worth questioning is whether Lorelei should *want* the things she gets, whether she *should* see it as a triumph, or should recognize the social decay that has led to her form of triumph. Even in this case, though, Lorelei is not a tragic character. She is shallow, she is vain, she is materialistic, but she is also triumphant and deliriously happy. Turning *Blondes* into a tragedy is to deny the trajectory of the text, which positions Lorelei as its heroine and leaves insight to the reader.

As much as Hegeman tries to not turn *Blondes* into a tragedy, she still focuses on content. She sees the novel as one primarily of financial transactions, and (quite nicely) analyzes the circulation of capital in the text. She manages to avoid tragedy, but she lands squarely in what Loos said the Russians had done to the novel. Others, such as Faye Hammill, see the text as an example of how "Loos works the border between high and popular culture, never identifying herself with either" (28). Laurie J. C. Cella claims that "Lorelei is aware of herself as an image, and she constantly adjusts this image to best "take advantage" of the situation around her," and in doing so "effectively become[s] mistress of her own grand confidence game" (47). Each of these articles makes an effective point, but each also works counter to the novel itself: they each force the novel to be about *something*. They insist upon substance in a novel that fastidiously resides at the surface. This is not to say that these readings are incorrect; in fact, they are all quite

enlightening. What they provide information about, however, is 1920s culture, or the figure of the blonde woman as spectacle, or the growing anxiety of class mobility in the twentieth century. They don't really provide much enlightenment about the novel itself, at least not on its own terms.

Dumb Blonde

So what are the terms of the novel, finally? Is Lorelei dumb, or is she not? It is hard to say, for even Lorelei does not know. Lori Landay reads Lorelei as the ultimate American trickster figure whose intelligence is confined to her ability to acquire. She claims that "despite her ignorance (she is, after all, the quintessential 'dumb blonde'), she is fully cognizant of the social capital of her appearance and of the tricks she can pull off because of the emphasis 'gentlemen' place on it" (53). There is no doubt that Lorelei is aware of her own comeliness, and of the reactions she gets from men. It is not clear, however, that she always intends to use her wiles to her advantage. When Loos makes fun of sex, as Mencken described, it may be more the male of the species that is in question: men seem universally unable to control themselves when in the presence of a beautiful girl. Lorelei does not cause this condition, but she does recognize it and take advantage of it when she can.

The novel, in fact, carefully documents Lorelei's development as a naïf. This is important because it shows that the naïf is a role performed by Lorelei, and is not necessarily reflective of Lorelei's own intelligence or understanding. At a crucial moment early in her life, it became convenient for her to become an innocent, dumb

blonde, and she did so. After seeing that it worked, she continued this masquerade in a variety of settings until she found the venue that best suited her: as a 'companion' to rich, elderly men. Her diary reveals both that this role is an assumed one, as well as that the mind behind the performance still operates, and uses careful omission and seeming 'mistakes' to make itself known.

Lorelei reveals facts about her early life in a diary entry composed en route to England. Onboard, she unexpectedly encounters Mr. Bartlett, who had formerly prosecuted her for attempted murder in his role as District Attorney of Little Rock, Arkansas. She explains that her Papa had sent her to Little Rock (implying that she was from a smaller, more rural community) to learn stenography because "Papa did not like a gentleman who used to pay calls on me in the park and Papa thought it would do me good to get away for awhile" (24). Lorelei's 'dalliances' with men obviously start at a young age, although there is no indication that she gets any kind of financial compensation for her visits to the park. She is not yet a "Professional Lady," but just a young country girl with a healthy sexual appetite. After a brief and unsuccessful run in "business colledge," she was hired by Mr. Jennings, a lawyer who assured her that her stenography skills were irrelevant to her employment. She claims that she worked for him for a year before she "found out that he was not the kind of gentleman that a young girl is safe with" (24). The implication, of course, is that she was sexually assaulted after a year of employment. Instead, she describes what she actually found out:

> One evening when I went to pay a call on him at his apartment, I found a girl there who really was famous all over Little Rock for not being nice. So when I found out that girls like that paid calls on Mr. Jennings I had quite a bad case of

> histerics and my mind was really a blank and when I came out of it, it seems that I had a revolver in my hand and it seems that the revolver had shot Mr. Jennings. (24-25)

Far from being assaulted, Lorelei appears to have been a willing sexual partner who is jealous of her lover's other girlfriends. "Safe" in this case does not mean 'free from sexual assault,' but instead means 'free from competition for the boss' affections.' Mr. Jennings, like all men that Lorelei uses in the novel, clearly felt that he was able to hide his multiple girlfriends from Lorelei; we can only assume that he felt that she was not smart enough to figure it out. When she did, she overreacted, and found herself on trial for attempted murder. This is the moment when her character as the naïf emerges, and she manages to charm the jury into acquitting her: "everyone at the trial except the District Attorney was really lovely to me and all the gentlemen in the jury all cried when my lawyer pointed at me and told them that they practically all had either a mother or a sister. [...] They were all so lovely that I really had to kiss all of them" (25). At this moment, Lorelei changes from a woman scorned to a naïve victim, and in doing so, is acquitted of attempted murder. Lorelei thus far has been a very experienced girl; becoming naïve not only allows her to escape responsibility, but becomes financially lucrative: "it was when Mr. Jennings got shot that I got the idea to go into the cinema, so Judge Hibbard got me a ticket to Hollywood" (25). In one paragraph, she explains her acquittal for attempted murder and her manipulation of the judge into paying her way to California. She has gotten far more by acting as a dumb blonde than she ever did as a good girl, a bad girl who gets nothing for her favors, or a stenographer. Thus begins

Lorelei's performance, both as a naïf and as a woman who wants to reveal that she is more than that while not endangering her naïve status.

After her trial, Lorelei had a brief film career, then moved to New York, where she began her life as a "Professional Lady." Unlike Little Rock, where District Attorneys can put her on trial, and Hollywood, where she is subject to the whims of the studio system, in New York Lorelei finds herself to be her own mistress. Nobody tells her what to do, and if they try, she corrects them. For instance, when presented with a very small diamond for her birthday, Lorelei tells Mr. Eisman: "I thought it was quite cute, but I had quite a headache and I had better stay in a dark room all day and I told him I would see him the next day, perhaps. [...] But he came in at dinner time with really a very very beautiful bracelet of square cut diamonds so I was quite cheered up" (7-8). She certainly gives up something in exchange for this kind of power she holds over men, but it is something that she is willing to part with and which she considers to be worth less than what she gets in return. In short, she is a cunning businesswoman who is willing to do what it takes to get what she wants, and will not let anyone tell her how to go about conducting her business.

The answer to the question of Lorelei's intelligence, therefore, seems to be that she is intelligent enough to use her ignorance to her advantage. It is a slippery issue, as Lori Landay further demonstrates when she reexamines Lorelei Lee later in her book:

> As I argued in Chapter 2, Loos's novel not only celebrates the blonde inasmuch as she is a female trickster who exploits what 'gentlemen' can be fooled by; her dumbness, unrelenting pursuit of material goods, and willingness to turn herself into a commodity are what Loos satirizes. None of the men in the novel will get

> what they want from Lorelei, including the man she marries at the end because she can manipulate him [...] (156)

Far from Lorelei being the object of satire, it sounds as if Landay is actually making the argument that I make, which is that the gentlemen are the subject of ridicule. Lorelei is the means of that ridicule, but not actually its focus. This slippage is symptomatic of the text as a whole, and of the change in Lorelei over the course of its writing. It is also symptomatic of criticism of the novel, most of which is written by women, and most of which wishes to condemn Lorelei in some fashion, even when, as Landay demonstrates, their own criticism demonstrates that the text seems to have other targets in mind.

She Works Hard for the Money

Lorelei Lee, for all her self-proclaimed refinement, is a woman who makes her living from the gifts men give her for spending time with them. She is in control of the time they spend together and what happens during it, but at base, she is a prostitute. In *Cruising Modernism*, Michael Trask takes on the figure of the female prostitute in the early twentieth century. For Trask, prostitutes are one of the "perverse" class of early twentieth century denizens, not only for their sexual promiscuity, but because they "embodied [the culture's] epistemological groundlessness in his or her ever-shifting, unsafe person" (14). This groundlessness is based in cross-class contact that "brought genteel and upper-class Americans into encounters, either forced or chosen, with their social 'inferiors' "(1). It is not the mere contact between classes that Trask finds problematic, but the specific way that class positions become mobile that destabilizes the entire social fabric, initiating a kind of modernist crisis not seen previously. The modern

world's "standardization and mechanization – whether of consumption or train schedules, of hotel rooms or even street layouts – scarcely conduce to the cultivation of routine or standardized *subjects*. The logic of equivalence that underwrites the world of hotels, trains, and department stores – where each consumer is substitutable for any other – has the effect not of generating social equilibrium but of voiding it" (19, italics original). Lorelei inhabits this exact world: she shops at department stores, takes trains to Pennsylvania and "the Central of Europe," prefers cities that make sense, like New York, and lives a highly structured life: "we always seem to have dinner at the Colony and see a show and go to the Trocadero and then Mr. Eisman shows me to my apartment. [...] So I am quite fatigued the next day and I do not really get up until it is time to dress for dinner at the Colony" (4). Lorelei and Dorothy also stay at the Ritz hotel no matter what city they are in. The London Ritz is "delightfully full of Americans. I mean you would really think it is New York" (33). To Lorelei, every day is the same, every hotel is the same, every city is the same, and every gentleman is the same. Although she is a member of the lower class by trade, her connections allow her access to the most elite of society and institutions, none of which she appreciates. For Trask, the crisis Lorelei embodies is not one of her own sense of self, but of the upper class' lack of recognition of itself. If a prostitute can dance with the Prince of Wales, then what is the point of society at all? Much like Lorelei is not the object of satire, but instead allows for satire of her gentlemen friends, in Trask's model, Lorelei is emblematic of the destabilization of social categories that ultimately lead to a destabilization in subjectivity.

What Trask's insight into the figure of the prostitute reveals is the same dynamic I have explored throughout this analysis of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*: that the thing that

draws your attention is not the actual subject, that the thing you are laughing at is not the source of wit. In short, it is a novel of displacement: Subjectivity, knowledge, and wit are all located somewhere other than where they appear to be. Most important to this project is wit, which is generated by the text, but is ultimately located within the reader, the only position from which the displacement can be assessed. *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, ultimately, is doubly perverse: Lorelei's sexual activity is perverse in content, that is, she has sex with men for money. It is also perverse in its representation, that is, we are not allowed to see it. In this way, it becomes akin to the perverse middle position or third wheel identified by Roof. We want to know more, but are prevented from it. It is a signifier of the "different kind of sense" at work in the novel. The space between Lorelei's perverse activity and her perverse representation of herself is the space of wit in the novel, ultimately displaced outside of the text and in its reader.

Conclusion

One question that looms over this project is the simple query: how is this modern? While the case for wit's modernity has been made throughout this project, it is never directly addressed in any one place, leaving the relationship open for debate. A preliminary question, of course, is 'what is modernism?' There are shelves of books devoted to this topic, and courses about 'modernism(s)' taught in every university. The term has its own gravitas, and is assumed to mean *something*. In fact, the meaning is a bit up for grabs, not satisfyingly fulfilled either by a period based or content based definition. Defined temporally, modernisms encompass the early twentieth century, with some inclusion of material from the late nineteenth century (Wilde is almost always included in this group). It then extends to some point in the mid twentieth century, often defined as World War II. By this definition, all the works in this project are modern. This reveals nothing about them, though, except for a commonality of moment of authorship.

A more informative, yet less definitive version of modernisms would comprise any texts that exhibit qualities associated with the finest texts produced during the modernist time period. In this way, not all works produced between, say, 1895 and 1941 are modern, but only those deemed to be doing something specific that can be called modern. Who determines what these qualities are and which texts display them has been the subject of most of the shelves of books devoted to the subject. Some common qualities emerge, however, which are almost universally accepted as traits of modernisms: radical experimentation with narrative form, including fragmentation; an interest in psychology or the psychic interiority of characters more than their actions in

the world; an interest in temporality and the possibilities for escaping its linear confines; redefinitions of traditional sexual behavior and sexual desire. Not every text exhibits all of these qualities, and there are certainly other qualities that are produced in modern texts. The earliest scholars of the period, the New Critics, established the first canon of texts which met the standards they established for 'modernism.' These critics included their own prejudices and interests in their formation of a canon, including prioritizing the serious over the trivial and the masculine over the feminine.

Virginia Woolf, one of the few women accepted by early critics as a modernist, famously declared that "on or about December, 1910, human character changed" (194). In addition to proposing a temporal frame for modernism, she clearly lands in the school of thought that modernism means change, a decisive break with what had come before. This aligns her with Ezra Pound's cry of "make it new!" which fueled much of early modernist criticism and canon formation. David Lodge claims that modernism is "experimental or innovatory in form, exhibiting marked deviations from existing forms of discourse, literary and non literary. Next, it is much concerned with consciousness, and also with the subconscious or unconscious workings of the human mind" (481). Also concerned with innovation, Lodge also links the nascent (and contemporaneous) science of psychology with modernism. Michael Levenson claims "vague terms still signify. Such is the case with 'modernism': it is at once vague and unavoidable. Anything more precise would exclude too much too soon; anything more general would be folly" (vii). This observation from 1984, after the influence of the early canonists had begun to wane, shows 'modernism' as a problematic, although not empty term. His concern is largely with temporal boundaries of such a term, but he still recognizes that any boundaries of

the term are going to be inexact and permeable. A decade later, Peter Nicholls champions the idea of 'modernisms,' tracing the emergence of various traditions within modernism and showing how they do (and do not) pursue the same ends, albeit with very different means. This ushered in the era of 'new modernist studies,' which takes 'modernisms' as a starting point, assuming the term refers to a body of work that has a degree of cohesion but is not governed by any particular set of rules or expectations.

As modernist studies has evolved, new scholars have proposed new canons or new texts to include in the existing canon. These maneuvers have opened 'modernism' to women authors, minority authors, and even non-western authors, overcoming some of the long-standing prejudices bred into modernism at its earliest moments. These expansions, though, have not changed the definition(s) of what modernisms are or how they work, but have only increased the number of texts that fit existing definitions. One thing that has been true of modernism from inception to the present moment is that it has always excluded certain types of comic texts. For most of its history, modernism excluded all comic texts, while the "new modernist studies," as proposed by Mao and Walkowitz has allowed "vernacular modernism," including some popular comic texts, to be included. Popular, vernacular comedy, however, does not encompass wit, leaving it outside the realm of modernisms, and thus requiring this project to argue for its inclusion.

What happens to modernisms if wit is included? In many ways, wit seems perfectly in line with many of the goals of modernisms: it is based in language, and uses precision of language to undermine meaning, thus creating a kind of indeterminacy. Wit forces a kind of self-awareness within a text; that is, a reader is continually reminded of the textuality of their experience as they read. Wit depends upon an interplay between

expectations and actuality, thus it is continually innovative. In all of these ways, as well as others, wit seems to fit perfectly well with the canonical modernist texts. What wit does not do, however, is facilitate modernism's self-proclaimed 'seriousness.' Modernisms rarely laugh. If they do, it is accompanied usually by some political or social critique, which is what allows some of the newer 'vernacular modernism' into the canon. Wit, by contrast, usually operates within a privileged milieu (in order to deploy the type of language it requires), and does not critique that milieu in any easily identifiable way. As this project has shown, there is the potential for critique within wit, but the unraveling of language needed to determine the critique is complicated and dangerous. While music hall comedies and Charlie Chaplin films are ripe for class-based criticism, the tea table chatter of Wilde's heroines seems retrograde and conservative. And worst of all, funny.

Wilde's tea chatter is the place to look, of course, as modernist wit begins with Wilde. He transforms the one-liner into an aesthetic form, one which establishes and undermines social reality in a single swipe. What makes Wilde different from the music hall, what makes wit different than the popular comic, is that Wilde's wit questions its own context and uses that questioning as a narrative model. Modernist wit operates both at the level of the sentence and at the level of narrative. Wit embraces the one-liner or the well-turned phrase that is itself funny, but it also reproduces those dynamics as a function of narrative. The mechanics of wit, particularly the way a witty line has of bringing a stop to conversation as it is parsed and replayed, are exactly the mechanics of witty narratives, which themselves halt and attempt to dwell in the middle, rather than progressing towards a recognizable and predictable ending. Endings, in witty narratives,

are often surprising or unsatisfying, for it defies the very logic of wit to wind up where expected. As Lady Bracknell explains in *The Importance of Being Earnest*: "an engagement should come on a girl as a surprise, pleasant or unpleasant, as the case may be" (Wilde 308). Engagement and marriage, the ultimate comic endings, should work *against* the idea of an ending, rather than helping it along. Wit does not wish for this kind of expected ending, or any at all.

The texts discussed here all use wit to create a kind of stasis, a way of staying put in the middle, rather than using wit as a means of propulsion through a text. This stymies the most common assumption of narrative, which is that it will move along a trajectory toward an ending. Wit interrupts this expectation and instead asks us to look *at* the middle, rather than hurrying through it. In each of the texts in this project, focusing on the middle reveals something unique, such that one cannot say that wit is being used for any singular purpose, but the focus does become the middle, the in between, the on-the-way-to. As such, wit engages in a kind of narrative fragmentation that does not replicate the kind of fragmentation seen in canonical modernists, but which still engages with the goals of those texts. The comic nature of wit, however, tends to mask the actual work of wit; at a casual glance, wit often appears as nothing more than clever wordplay, not as a means of structuring narrative itself.

Many of the discussions in this dissertation wind up in a cycle of "what if..?", "what if...?" that ultimately remains unresolved, for that is how wit itself operates. Unlike simple jokes, where the punchline has definite meaning (whether understood or not) and ultimately 'resolves' the joke, wit does not ultimately mean any one thing, and cannot necessarily be 'resolved.' Wit suggests a matrix of meanings which are

negotiated and explored more than resolved. Wit is based in language, but is ultimately a mechanism to reveal the artificiality of accepted constructs, whether linguistic, social, or ontological. Wit can appear as a series of jokes, but is actually an intellectual project that challenges the need to progress through a text in order to locate (or confirm) meaning in its end. In this way, it rejects heteronormative narrativity, which understands the ending as a site of particular meaning, as the position from which the text is reordered and retroactively made meaningful. Modernist wit rejects this requirement and dwells in the middle, finding the meaning in the moment, and asks the reader to constantly reshape their understanding of a text as they work through, and between, each word.

Ending in the Middle

Here at the end, I find myself, like wit, back in the middle. The arguments presented in this dissertation have pointed in certain directions, but they have gestured rather than decisively indicated. Part of this is the nature of the topic; wit will never be nailed down into a certainty, for to do so eventually kills it. Like modernism, wit is most easily identified in the middle; its boundaries are indistinct and debatable. Modernist wit, as modeled by Wilde and championed by Wodehouse, Parker and Loos, functions most visibly *in media res*; it ultimately becomes a new kind of modernist aesthetic that continually returns to the middle, to the process, and only most reluctantly and unbelievably progressing toward an ending. Witty stories must come to an end, but in doing so they betray their own logic, and the endings are often contrived and unsatisfying, the most egregious kinds of *deus ex machina*. These are the only kinds of

endings appropriate to modernist wit, for it ultimately reflects itself, returning to stasis, relishing the lack of progress towards an ending.

NOTES

[1] One possible exception to this would be the title of Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin's *The Empire Writes Back* (1989). Unfortunately, its wit only extends as far as the title.

[2] The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists the emergence of the word in 1470. About a century later, it had developed a connection to satire.

[3] For an extended discussion of the comic writings of Faulkner, Joyce, and other canonical modernists, see Fred Miller Robinson, *The Comedy of Language: Studies in Modern Comic Literature* (1980).

[4] A brief list of examples of the study of comedy would include: Aristotle's *Poetics*; Antonio Riccoboni's "The Comic Art" (1585); Ben Jonson's Introduction to *Every Man Out of His Humour* (1599); Molière's Preface to *Tartuffe* (1669); William Congreve's "Concerning Humour in Comedy" (1695); Henry Fielding's Preface to *Joseph Andrews* (1742); Charles Lamb's "On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century" (1822); G.W.F. Hegel's *The Philosophy of Fine Art* (1820); Ralph Waldo Emerson's "The Comic" (1843); George Meredith's Prelude to *The Egoist* (1879); Henri Bergson's "Laughter" (1900); Sigmund Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905). With the exception of the last few listed, most of these texts are of little value to my discussion, for the way that they envision comedy (mostly in a binary relationship with tragedy, and also almost completely within drama) is different than comedy in the modernist period. It is exactly this difference, however, that makes it worthwhile to list them, for they demonstrate that something about the way comedy is understood has changed, and that this change occurs toward the end of the nineteenth century. Attitudes toward comedy remain within the academy, although comedy itself has transformed.

[5] See Gide's *Journal, 1889-1939*, and Foucault's *Order of Things*.

[6] In the 2002 film version of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, directed by Oliver Parker, Aunt Augusta is shown picking up the discarded book, finding that Jack has lied (his father's name having been merely "John," not "Ernest John"), and nonetheless confirming his assertion that his father's name, and thus his own, is Ernest. While a very effective ending for the film (and one difficult to accomplish on stage), it is nonetheless unsatisfying in that it actually resolves the issue. It resolves in a lie, but we nonetheless know the factual answer, which is much less in keeping with the overall defamiliarizing aesthetic of the play, in which the answer is merely stated, but not confirmed.

[7] In the late 1930s and early 1940s, Wodehouse and his wife lived in Touquet, France. When the Nazis invaded France in 1940, all Englishmen in France under the age of sixty were interned (Wodehouse was fifty nine). His wife was not taken into custody but was also not able to leave occupied France. Wodehouse feared that her continued safety and freedom depended largely upon his actions in custody. Two American friends in Germany (later found to be Nazi sympathizers) convinced Wodehouse that he should put his writing skills to work while under arrest, and suggested that he write about his internment in his comic style. Later admitting it was "a loony thing to do," Wodehouse agreed, and even recorded the pieces in his own voice for broadcast on German radio. He was assured that they would be aired only in the United States, which was still neutral in the war. As Herbert Warren Wind claims, "only a person as politically naïve and as fundamentally unworldly as Wodehouse would have failed to realize that the Nazi propaganda organization would record these talks, beam them to Britain, and generally exploit them for all they were worth" (29). The English were understandably horrified that 'their' Wodehouse seemed to be making light of the war. In July of 1941 there was even debate in the House of Commons about whether to try Wodehouse on charges of treason, although nothing came of this effort. Wodehouse was allowed to join his wife in occupied Paris in 1943, and they remained there until 1947, when they moved to the United States. Wodehouse never again returned to England.

The broadcasts themselves (the transcripts have been released by the Wodehouse estate only in recent years) are fairly innocuous, and present a tongue-in-cheek attitude toward the war, very much in keeping with his overall style. He did not glorify the Nazis, but neither did he damn them; it is this failure that caused the public to turn against him. It became politically difficult to champion Wodehouse's literary achievements for many years, even though the crown forgave his actions and knighted him a few months before his death in 1975. By all accounts, Wodehouse was not a Nazi sympathizer, and was in fact so apolitical that he was unaware of the impact his assistance to the Nazis would have, either on the war effort, morale in England, or his future career. Wodehouse later claimed "My motive...in doing the talks was no more culpable than that of a hundred English prisoners of war who came to the German radio and sent messages home saying that they were in the pink" (McCrum 307). The radio broadcasts remain a blemish upon, but no longer a constitutive element of his reputation. While Wodehouse's reputation did suffer for some time following the war due to his radio broadcasts, I do not feel that this is itself the explanation for his rejection by critics. Instead, the perception of Wodehouse as a Nazi collaborator provided a convenient reason to dismiss him critically, but this, to a very great extent, justified their existing treatment of him, rather than giving them cause to change their opinions.

[8] Other examples would include E.W. Hornung's character Raffles, and Dorothy Sayers' Lord Peter Wimsey, who Sean Latham calls "an unabashed synthesis of Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes and P.G. Wodehouse's Bertie Wooster" (171).

[9] Bertie reveals this information in "Jeeves and the Impending Doom," although at other times he mentions having attended Cambridge. Frankly, both seem unlikely.

[10] The only exceptions are "Bertie Changes His Mind" (1925), narrated by Jeeves, and *Ring for Jeeves* (1953), a novel that features Jeeves temporarily working for someone other than Bertie, and which is narrated in the third person. *Ring for Jeeves* was a play that Wodehouse transformed into a novel. In its new form, he felt it needed a traditional marriage ending, but did not wish to have Bertie Wooster marry. His solution was to create a situation in which Jeeves would work for someone else for a short while, then return to Bertie after his new master married. It is essentially a clumsy structure designed to solve a narrative problem, but is interesting in that it shows that Jeeves is willing to allow one of his masters to marry, but *not* Bertie.

[11] We learn in *The Code of the Woosters* that Jeeves is a member of the Junior Ganymede Club, a club for gentlemen's valets. He does have enough time away from Bertie to allow for this social connection. In Greek mythology, Ganymede was a beautiful young man who was kidnapped by Zeus and made his cupbearer (the astrological sign Aquarius is based on Ganymede) and his lover. The Latin form of his name, Catamitus, is the root of the word catamite, meaning the younger member of a pederastic relationship. (Barkan 19-40) The name Ganymede is appropriate to a club for servants, particularly for servants who idolize their masters, since the mythological figure was a servant to Zeus; however, the same-sex associations also attached to the name cannot be overlooked. This reference, as with so many things surrounding the relationship of Bertie and Jeeves, is not necessarily definitive. It is suggestive, and adds yet another insinuation into the existing mix. Like the wit of the stories, though, it is meaningful for its suggestive quality more than because it signifies specifically. As Barkan claims, "as so often where Ganymede is concerned, there is more silence than explanation" (19).

[12] The homoerotic echoes of Aziz and Fielding in EM Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) cannot be denied. It is also important to note that the shirt stud scene from Forster has received substantial critical attention, while the analogous scene from Wodehouse has not.

[13] For instance, in "Female Trouble: Dorothy Parker, Katherine Anne Porter, and Alcoholism" (1998), Ellen Lansky reads Parker's "Big Blonde" as a purely content-based text, one that presents alcoholism as an escape route for women in Hazel's position. An example of the argument made: "Dorothy Parker's "Big Blonde" and Katherine Anne Porter's *Ship of Fools* [share] a common complex: alcoholism and the "female troubles" that they encounter as they try to negotiate a life for themselves in a culture that asks them, as heterosexual women, to subordinate their bodies, desires, and

aspirations to their male partners" (212). While a perfectly reasonable claim, it promises to ignore form and examine only content, a promise the rest of the article keeps. Most criticism of Parker works in the same way, focusing on an issue in the text(s) and writing about the text as an example of that issue, rather than about how the text presents the issue. A related theme in Parker scholarship focuses on her biography, using her own life as a primary text. Again, while interesting, it allows for critics to side-step the complicated issue of her texts and how they say what they say.

[14] An argument that Modernist Studies, as a practice, is based in heteronormative, masculine expectations is made throughout this project. This is not a unique claim, and for other examples, please see Bonnie Kime Scott, Shari Benstock, Elaine Showalter, et. al.

[15] The similarities to Ernest Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" (1927) cannot be ignored here. In both stories, the narrator is firmly exterior to both characters, allowing no insight into their motivation or emotion. By the end of both stories, the woman has made a decision about the future of the relationship she is in, but has not concretely revealed what that decision is, thus creating a rich indeterminacy. While Hemingway's story is a heavily-anthologized and well-recognized classic of modernism, Parker's story from one year earlier has received almost no critical attention.

[16] This fact, fortunately, is changing as Modernist Studies expands its purview. Recent works that examine affect in modernism and/or the quality of laughter in modernism would include: Michael North, *Machine-Age Comedy* (2009); Justus Nieland, *Feeling Modern: The Eccentricites of Public Life* (2008); Leonard Charles Altieri, *The Particulars of Rapture: An Aesthetics of the Affects* (2004); Diepeveen, *The Difficulties of Modernism* (2003); Joseph Litvak, *Strange Gourmets: Sophistication, Theory and the Novel* (1997); James F. English, *Comic Transactions: Literature, Humor, and the Politics of Community in Twentieth-Century Britain* (1994).

[17] These examples are imperfect models for Parker, in that they both are filmic texts, and have a different set of narrative concerns and conventions than is true of print fictions. The print example that Leitch turns to as analogous is *A Thousand and One Arabian Nights*, a text which does, admittedly, take an extended serialized format. It is a problematic example, though, for its serialization is based entirely in the constant threat of an ending that overshadows the text. The narrative serves as a way of delaying an always-anticipated ending, as opposed to soap operas and situation comedies whose endings are never imagined, or even assumed to exist, until they occur.

[18] This formulation owes a great deal to an unpublished paper by Dennis Allen, "No Big Thing: *The Wire*'s Supplementary Logic," which was presented at the Louisville Conference of Literature and Culture Since 1900 on February 20, 2010.

[19] While there is very little scholarship on the novel *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, there is a fair amount on the 1953 film version of the Broadway musical based on the novel. It is a site of a great deal of feminist film criticism, specifically. This is particularly interesting in light of the fact that the entire Vienna sequence, including Sigmund Freud, were excluded from the stage musical and the film version of it.

[20] In *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, Dorothy's last name is never identified. It is revealed as "Shaw" in the sequel, *But Gentlemen Marry Brunettes*, and her full name is also used in the stage and film musicals based on the novel. Critics tend to use her full name when referring to *Blondes*, although technically her name in that text is simply "Dorothy." The reason I mention this is because the two novels differ greatly in tone, style, and format, yet the characters are assumed by critics to remain stable between the texts, a claim I find troubling. Henceforth, I will refer to the character only as "Dorothy," the name she is given in the text under consideration here.

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