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Modernism’s Suicidal Impulse: Psychic Contamination and the Crowd

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by

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In loving memory of Martin Ryan
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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Modernism’s Suicidal Impulse: Psychic Contamination and the Crowd

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This dissertation examines the early twentieth-century anxiety that disproportionately high rates of suicide indicated a suicide epidemic. A sense of the suicidal impulse as contagious and most likely to spread amidst the crowded urban environment is especially prominent in the period’s scientific discourses, and this anxiety over public hygiene and population control emerges in a strand of modernist fiction that repeatedly portrays the suicidal subject as suffering from an intersubjective contagion rather than intrasubjective anomie. Thus challenging accepted critical narratives of urban suicide as the result of psychic isolation, texts by John Dos Passos, Virginia Woolf, Elizabeth Bowen, and Djuna Barnes suggest the necessity for a more epidemiological reading of self-destruction in modernist literature, and particularly point to affect as the source of modernism’s psychic contamination. Departing from early psychoanalytic theories of suicide, and merging fin-de-siècle crowd theories, legal and clinical studies, and recent theories on the circulation of affect, this dissertation analyzes how physical crowding comes to precipitate a breakdown of psychic boundaries, threatening notions of identity and autonomy that the act of suicide sometimes paradoxically reaffirms. Moving from New York, to London, and finally to the culture capitals of continental Europe, an increasingly cosmopolitan engagement reveals affect’s capacities to infect and overwhelm the individual, resulting in suicides that instigate progressively more collateral damage and that articulate the self as highly permeable, likely to be endangered by the contagious psychic and bodily states of others.
“There should be no more poetry in suicide than there is in madness or in crime.”
- S.A.K. Strahan, *Suicide and Insanity*

“the moderns had never written anything one wanted to read about death”
- Virginia Woolf, “Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street”

**Introduction: The Pathway of an Epidemic**

In a story that forms one of the early drafts of *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa reflects on a history of thinking about death, one that is mediated primarily by literary representation. Contrasting the “great poetry” of Shelley’s “Adonais” and Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline* with the unpalatable work of the moderns, she dismisses more recent developments in that history of representation, presumably those surrounding the recent catastrophe of WWI. Her juxtaposition of these works is not surprising, especially given that the excerpts she remembers lament the deaths of men (or women *supposed* to be men) who, like the soldiers in the Great War, die far too young. What is far more striking, considering what modern readers know about the ending of *Mrs. Dalloway*, is that both Clarissa’s texts portray a safety in death, which protects rather than destroys the individual by isolating him or her from the sullying influences of the world. From Shelley’s poem, Clarissa recalls the one line that most directly ensures the loved one’s security from contamination, or “From the contagion of the world’s slow stain” (155). In her reference to Shakespeare’s funeral song immediately following, she takes refuge in the idea of death as a removal from the world’s harsh elements (“Fear no more the heat o’ the sun”), likewise invoking the song’s depiction of death as a territory beyond the affects that constitute human interaction (“Thou hast finished joy and moan” [4.2.273]) and their infectious, even lethal, influence (“Nothing ill come near thee” [4.2.279]). Depicted as a form of self-containment that reinforces the boundaries between self and other, death quarantines the individual from a toxic social
landscape, and particularly from human interaction that at its best will slightly tarnish and at its worst irrevocably contaminate.

Thus, in the legacy of the pre-moderns invoked by Clarissa, it is life rather than its eradication that forms the primary threat to bodily integrity. Her reflection on the moderns is excised in the final draft of the novel, as is the line from Shelley’s poem; yet, Shakespeare remains, and “Fear no more the heat o’ the sun” becomes a common refrain. Clarissa defends her choice of “great poetry” over the works of her contemporaries by thinking that “For all the great things one must go to the past” (155), but her nostalgia for bygone representations, and particularly the safe remove of death depicted therein, is not abandoned by Mrs. Dalloway in its own modernist experimentation. In fact, Woolf’s novel destroys Clarissa’s binary, conflating the troubling depictions of death she abhors (the senseless slaughter of the moderns) with those she appreciates. Exploring the absurdity of death through the eyes of shell-shocked Septimus Smith alongside Clarissa’s contemplations of mortality, the novel conflates her view of modern and pre-modern death. In doing so, it investigates the danger intimated by Shelley and Shakespeare, courting the possibility of contamination as Woolf’s characters traverse London and constantly immerse themselves in the insidious emotional influence of the crowd. As heroic withdrawal into the space of ordered, meaningful tragedy, Clarissa’s version of death allows her to put off the terror of mortality and the bodily corruption associated with death’s decline. Of course, Septimus Smith is the test case for her philosophy, and it is primarily through his death that Mrs. Dalloway explores the potentially preservative qualities of self-destruction. Like the other texts considered in this dissertation, the novel depicts the supposedly meaningless death of a modernist subject only to integrate that death into a more (or less) reassuring schema, recovering cause and effect so that death can once again be said to do something, to mean something.
**Historical Contexts: Suicide, the Crowd, and Contamination**

The pathway for this reclamation of meaning begins by addressing suicide – a form of death so much on the rise in the years preceding and directly following WWI that the modernists feared the emergence of a suicide epidemic. We tend to describe suicide as an isolated act, performed in the midst of a profoundly alienating cognitive and emotional disturbance, and, clinically, the causative relation between suicide and solitude has much basis in fact. Yet, if this factual account of origins emerges time and time again in treatments of suicide and literature, or in what we might think of as case studies of suicidal writers, it does not always take the dominant role in depictions of suicide in literature. In a specific strand of literary modernism, it seems to have had little impact at all.

Accordingly, this dissertation seeks to explain why, despite the twentieth century’s growing tendency to depict suicide as an act of severe isolation, an entire generation of modernist scholars and writers harbored the nagging suspicion that self-destruction was instead the result of a fatal possession by the crowd. It explores the ways in which the urban masses are perpetually described through the language of infection, and how the suicidal impulse itself was often represented as the result of this germ. Such a study is designed to illuminate new terrain in modernist studies, not just in critical considerations of suicide and the crowd, but specifically in the ways they become intimately connected through epidemiological discourses that are anchored in an intense anxiety over emotional control. For, studying how the language of infection aligns with the language of affection may provide new insights into current conceptions of our susceptibility to suicide and the emotional chaos that presumably underlies it. If literary and cultural representations cast suicide as an epidemic, how does it manifest as an illness? What is its mode of transmission? And who stands at its origin, as patient zero? Related to these three
primary questions, we might also ask why the crowd usually appears to incite or facilitate the suicidal act, and what role affect plays in predisposing one to the “disease.”

The shades of meaning evoked in Clarissa’s aforementioned quote begin to answer some of these questions, and the other novels, essays, and short stories chosen for this investigation help elucidate one possible conclusion. A selective analysis of suicide in modern literature rather than an exhaustive one, this study of texts by John Dos Passos, Virginia Woolf, Elizabeth Bowen, and Djuna Barnes focuses on one rather strange common bond – a depiction of suicide as the result of, and the answer to, a deadly outbreak. By departing from early psychoanalytic theories of suicide, and by merging fin-de-siècle crowd theories, clinical observations, and legal studies with contemporary accounts of affect, this dissertation analyzes how physical crowding in texts by these authors comes to precipitate a breakdown of psychic boundaries, threatening notions of individual identity and autonomy that the act of suicide sometimes paradoxically reaffirms. Moving from New York, to London, and finally to the culture capitals of continental Europe, an increasingly cosmopolitan engagement with affect in these literary works reveals that its capacity to infect and overwhelm the individual results in suicides that instigate progressively more collateral damage and that articulate a continuing cultural anxiety about the fundamental porosity and permeability of self. Likely to be influenced by the contagious psychic and bodily states of others, the suicide of modernity suffers less from intrasubjective anomie, or the paralyzing destabilization that comes from an isolating urban experience, than from an intersubjective contagion, which requires death as the ultimate form of seclusion, or quarantine.

The suicide as epidemic mentality of the modernists is perhaps most directly revealed by S.A.K. Strahan, one of the most prominent scholars of suicide in his day and one of the most oft-quoted in the many histories of suicide compiled and published during the twentieth century.
Importantly, his quote above, in contrast to Clarissa’s, places suicide beyond the realm of poetic recovery and the meaning-making that constitutes literary elegy. In his preface to *Suicide and Insanity: A Physiological and Sociological Study* (1894), he broaches this view, stating:

I consider the present an opportune moment for teaching the lesson contained in the following pages. The remarkable prevalence of suicide in England this summer brought the painful question of self-destruction prominently before the public. Several attempts to explain the outbreak were essayed, but no one ever mentioned the true cause – cultivation – and the great object lesson was lost. (v)

Here, Strahan begins his work by comparing the recent string of suicides taking place in England in the summer of that year to an “outbreak.” By doing so, he suggests that what had previously been considered a personal and isolated act is instead the result of a highly communicable disease, one that is embedded in the very sociality of the public. He positions his own work as a response within what appears to be an already popular conversation, addressing a general audience and offering a potential solution for an epidemiological scare.

For Strahan, and for many others working under the aegis of degeneration theory at the turn of the century, the propensity towards insanity, and consequently, suicide, was transmitted through heredity, and as a whole, threatened to “contaminate the race” (70). However, while succeeding generations may carry the germs of suicidal tendencies, suicide itself is not tied to genetic dissemination. Rather than an isolated, familial decline, it is often described as a social sickness, one that can be transmitted from culture to culture by gross feeling and excess, wiping out large swaths of people in the same way that smallpox conquered the Americas. Strahan claims it is the “vice” of the Romans that morally and corporeally corrupts the Greeks during the Classical Era and propels them to higher rates of self-destruction; such “Self-slaughter,” he
writes, “could only be looked upon as disease consequent upon their generally depraved condition” (15). Though Strahan begins his study of suicide in antiquity, it is his current era and its as yet unsequestered contaminants that are of primary concern, and in the many treatises on suicide leading up to and spanning the modernist period, this evocation of suicide as a troubling biological and social contagion incessantly returns. While madness is repeatedly seen as a hereditary transmission, spreading vertically from generation to generation, suicide is frequently depicted as moving horizontally despite potential genetic roots. The autonomy of one who is “under the dominion” of suicidal ideation, or “morbid feelings,” is “infected,” and according to Dr. Henry Maudsley, a contemporary of Strahan, the suicide therefore constitutes a “diseased element” that must be quarantined (172, 173).

It is not the aim of this study to pinpoint the dates of origin for this conceptualization of suicide, or to trace its trajectory to its terminus. Many capable scholars have traced these histories already.¹ Yet, it is crucial to note that within the modernist period, this idea of suicide as, quite literally, a “social ill” takes on powerful new resonances. Those who have parsed the history of these perceptions repeatedly show how the twentieth century came to depict suicide as an increasingly medical and sociological issue, and Holly Laird’s recent work on modernist suicidology has shown the surprising popularity of suicide as a topic of debate in the public forum.² A great deal of this publicity was due to the continuing cultural interest in sanitation, social hygiene, and public health, which all relied on the collection and analysis of population data. Thus, the historical anxiety surrounding the figure of the suicide was only exacerbated by modernity’s increasing recourse to statistical measures, epitomized by Henry Morselli’s Suicide:

¹ Shneidman’s Comprehending Suicide: Landmarks in 20th-Century Suicidology provides a succinct overview of
² Suicidology, or the scientific study of suicide, did not emerge as a field until the latter half of the twentieth century; however, as Laird and others note, the modernists and their immediate predecessors begin to conceptualize suicide as a nascent field of study in their own “proto-suicidological discourses” (Laird 526).
An Essay on Comparative Moral Statistics in 1882 and by Émile Durkheim’s On Suicide in 1897. While clinical analyses furthered the medicalization of suicide, Durkheim’s text is often credited with claiming suicide to be a social rather than individual issue, and though his perspective eventually lost ground to psychoanalytic views, it is this social origin that causes a far greater anxiety on the part of clinicians and which subtly infects a great deal of modernist writing. Strahan’s short preface reveals this anxiety and accompanying sense of urgency in no uncertain terms; however, the epidemiological resonances he invokes, and which proliferate through a wide range of discourses on modernity’s suicide epidemic, have yet to be explored.

It is precisely at this intersection of suicide and contagion, self-destruction and disease, that this study intervenes. And in order to answer the questions that form the foundation of my inquiry into the figure of the suicide in the first few decades of the twentieth century, we must step back from the psychology of the individual, and particularly from the psychoanalytical accounts of suicide contemporary with modernism itself. These Freudian perspectives do little to address the modernist anxiety over suicide in relation to contagion, or “the world’s slow stain” – an anxiety that is far more redolent of sociological and epidemiological concerns surrounding mental hygiene than the aggression and inner turmoil caused by personal psychic trauma, and which consistently resurfaces in commentaries on overcrowding during the population boom that took place at the turn of the century. For, as Ian Marsh notes, it was by emphasizing the contagiousness of insanity that the psy- discourses claimed to protect society from a “lethal peril”: “To this end, throughout the century, suicide was represented as a threat – not only to individuals but to the population at large. Suicide was discussed in terms of contagion and there were fears expressed of suicide epidemics” (139). A threat to individual, family, and nation, this elided epidemiological panic created an opening for the intervention of biopower, or psychiatry
as the purveyor of public health (140), and calls into question our general reliance on psychoanalysis to interpret nearly all the depictions of suicide and suicidal ideation in modernist literature. After all, it is the very non-psychoanalytic nature of these novels’ depictions of suicide that makes their deaths so difficult to parse. Marking a modernist moment before we all became psychoanalytic, they represent an important point in the genealogy of modernity and modernism.

*How does suicide manifest as an illness?*

Previous criticism on suicide and modern literature has focused on the gendering of suicide, explored its elision in canonical modernist texts, interrogated the stylistic compulsion towards self-destruction inherent in modernist literature’s desire to “make it new,” and used modernism’s complex body of “proto-suicidological discourses” to complicate the notion that suicide constitutes a simple device for ending plotlines. Yet, given the era’s concerns with overcrowding, it makes sense that suicide – a phenomenon observed to be higher in major metropolitan centers than in their outlying rural districts – might also be inflected with modernist attitudes about the city and the highly social environment fostered therein. The urban experience of modernity has often been characterized as fleeting and ephemeral, a fast-paced phantasmagoria of sights and sounds that bombard individuals and force them to develop psychic reinforcements. More often, it has been portrayed in the critical narratives of modernist scholars as a place of both physical and psychic isolation, or, in other words, as a place wholly constructed to further the alienation and withdrawal of the suicide. At variance with this predominant view – a view which is still admittedly quite apt for many texts within the modernist canon – some literary works exhibit a heightened concern over proximity and

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3 E.g., Margaret Higonnet’s “Suicide: Representations of the Feminine in the Nineteenth Century” (1985), and “Frames of Female Suicide” (2000).
4 Christopher Chung’s “Almost Unnamable”: Suicide in the Modernist Novel (2009).
overcrowding. Their characters feel a paralyzing claustrophobia in the vicinity of others and an intense anxiety over agency, identity, and bodily integrity. Rather than avoiding isolation, they seek it out, and they do so in order to re-establish a sense of control.

Perhaps Everett Dean Martin reveals this concern most colorfully from a scholarly angle when he writes in *The Behavior of Crowds* (1920), “As a practical problem, the habit of crowd-making is daily becoming a more serious menace to civilization” (ix). While crowd formation has occurred throughout history, Martin claims that recent years have exacerbated the number and intensity of crowds, and that “the forces which threaten society are really psychological,” or related to the “crowd mind” (ix). His emphasis on the precarious position of civil society often lends itself to exaggeration: “our society is becoming a veritable babel of gibbering crowds” (6). Nonetheless, the population boom and the rise of industrialization during this period cement an anxiety over population control which had already come into being during the previous century with the writings of Thomas Malthus, and as we shall see, this Malthusian specter reemerges in the psycho-sociological accounts of the crowd at the turn of the century.

The historical genesis of this project lies in the emergence of urban crowds and crowd theories alongside the rapid escalation in suicide rates and cultural depictions of suicide during the early twentieth century; however, this anxiety over self-violence as the result of a psychic contamination has its origin point in earlier discourses and gains momentum as the century hurdles towards a close. Charles Mackay, a contemporary of Malthus, forms one of these origins with his 1852 edition of *Memoirs of Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*, first published in 1841. Prefacing his work by referring to the unanimity that controls, and ultimately drives, the crowd, he states: “We find that whole communities suddenly fix their minds upon one object, and go mad in its pursuit; that millions of people become simultaneously
impressed with one delusion, and run after it, till their attention is caught by some new folly more captivating than the first” (1). Invoking a rather large crowd, the nation, Mackay explores such popular delusions as Witch Mania and the Crusades. Yet, even on this scale, Mackay invokes “contagion,” claiming that the crowd impulse is “caught” by its members, and that in its catching, constitutes a primitive regression: “Men, it has been well said, think in herds; it will be seen that they go mad in herds, while they only recover their senses slowly, and one by one” (1). Here, the individual is not only opposed to the crowd, but only capable of sensible action once outside it. Remission is dependent on removal, singularity, and most importantly, isolation.

Mackay’s work is populated by many actual, historical epidemics in the biological sense, but there are just as many that are purely affective. For, a brief search of the text reveals that a broad span of negative emotions, or varying levels of psychic distress, are repeatedly described in an epidemiological register. We see “epidemic terror” (140, 199, 253, 267), “epidemic frenzy” (144, 231), “epidemic fear” (269, 293), and even “epidemic dread” (293). In addition to these named emotions, “contagion” also appears frequently, spurring movements that spread across Europe like a plague. For example, Mackay notes that “Enthusiasm is contagious” (201), and once the Pope “caught it,” crusaders swarmed “like a pestilence” (205). In his discussion of witchcraft, we see the trope deployed yet again: “The contagion of this mental disease was as great as if it had been a pestilence” (300). And, ultimately, we can see that Mackay forms the basis for later crowd theories, aligning affect with infection, and leading his readers to conclude that the “fervor of the multitude” is in reality a fever (203).

This epidemiological language is repeated half a century later in the works of Gustav Le Bon, whose treatise The Crowd (1896) asserts the primacy of urban multitudes in modern urban life and becomes a hallmark study in the field once translated from its original French. Le Bon’s
focus on the concept of group mind, influenced by earlier work by Gabriel Tarde, joined a slew of studies published on crowd psychology, or herd behavior, and was followed shortly thereafter by Sir Martin Conway’s *The Crowd in Peace and War* (1915), Wilfred Trotter’s *Instincts of the Herd in Peace and War* (1916), William McDougall’s *The Group Mind* (1920), Everett Dean Martin’s *The Behavior of Crowds: A Psychological Study* (1920), and Sigmund Freud’s *Group Psychology* (1922), among others. Inherent in this collection of studies is a concern with population control and regulation, particularly through the discipline of wayward (i.e., female, non-white, non-normative) bodies. Yet, while these theories exhibit a strong tendency to define and dominate the threatening other, they are ultimately most concerned with the harrowing possibility that within a group one might lose the capability for self-control and self-regulation. Their anxiety centers on maintaining a sense of individual identity and agency within the group, and it is precisely the loss of these which becomes the first indication that one has been infiltrated by the crowd, infected with feelings and compulsions that are not one’s own.

Attacking the individual from the outside, crowd feeling, encountered as overwhelming affect, is thus depicted as a physical contaminant — dirt, grime, effluvia, and filth. This contamination leads to, and also indicates, an utter loss of self-containment, or a breakdown in the boundary that separates and immunizes one from others. No longer in command, the individual is frequently portrayed as “possessed” by a foreign body that takes over both physiological and psychic processes. Correlating legal and clinical accounts of suicide by Strahan, Maudsley, and others who portray self-destruction in similar terms — as the result of an involuntary impulse, or again, a “possession” — these crowd discourses illustrate one of the ways that suicide comes to manifest as an illness within scientific and popular literature, as a loss of agency due to psychic contamination.
What is the Mode of Transmission?

If suicide is a sickness, the primary symptoms of which are a loss of physical purity, and consequently, a loss of psychic integrity and control, its mode of transmission relates to these losses, and particularly to what makes the individual unable to remain self-contained. For, how does the occurrence of dirt combined with propinquity translate into a type of psychic control? Modernist crowd theories posit that individuals are made susceptible to influence not only because they stand in the crowd where heightened proximity brings them within the sphere of contaminants, but because the crowd itself, once amassed, generates intense affective resonances. Capable of “heightened affectivity” and “contagious emotion” by virtue of its collective body, the crowd becomes an entity of its own, transmitting affective cues from person to person and unifying its boundaries. In the crowd theories noted above, affect, or this external manifestation of subjective emotion onto the body’s surfaces (as a squint, a grimace, a laugh, etc.) is repeatedly figured as a “germ,” “microbe,” “infection,” and even, in one extreme instance, as “cholera.” More importantly, this contamination is intricately linked with crowd behavior. Thus, not a true germ in the biological sense, but the germ of an emotion that can infect those who come in contact with the physical manifestations of that feeling, affect both infects the individual and transmits the infection. It is the contaminant and its own process of contamination, spreading when one person interprets, or reads, the body language of another, most often through visual cues but also through smell, taste, touch, and sound. In the crowd discourses of modernity, the method of transmission is often perceived as subconscious, and in Conway’s The Crowd in Peace and War varies from being an “electric current,” a “wireless message,” and then later, something just “absorbed” (26, 37, 187).
The path of affect may be complicated, but repeatedly, we see that in discourses of suicide, self-destruction constitutes an attempt at escape from overwhelming emotion. This view is still prevalent in suicidology, as evident in discourses of psychache and current psychological perspectives of suicide. Yet, in the years leading up to cultural modernism, suicide as an "affective insanity" becomes something that is externalized and highly visible despite its corrupting, internal influence (Maudsley 121). Just as affects written on the surface of other bodies transmit and incite the self-destructive impulse, these affects in turn manifest on the surface of the suicide, "outing" them and the underlying morbidity of thought and feeling. These physiological signals are located primarily in the face and are copied in the many drawings of mental patients commissioned by physicians in asylums throughout the nineteenth century; Jean-Étienne Esquirol, whose definition of suicide for a medical dictionary in 1821 became quite famous in clinical communities, commissioned an astounding two hundred of these plaster casts of the faces of the insane (Marsh 123). In this way, affect becomes a primary symptom for diagnosing suicide. The act itself is perceived as nothing more than the mind discharging the "terrible emotion with which {the suicide} is possessed" (Maudsley 194), and as we will see, in the literature of modernism, these terrible emotions are caused by none other than the crowd.

Yet, while the era’s sciences have no difficulty in asserting that affect spreads like an infection, they have trouble pinning down the mechanism by which it infects. This uncertainty reappears in modernist literature where affect and the suicidal impulse itself are also aligned with physical contaminants, described as corrupting influences which spread rapidly but never take the form of an exact "outbreak," per se. Rather, affect is often displaced onto natural metaphors for transmission, which mimic the floods and flames of feeling that incessantly reappear in

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7 Coined by Edwin S. Shneidman, Professor of Thanatology Emeritus at UCLA and founder of the American Association of Suicidology, this term refers to “psychological pain, the pain of the negative emotions” (200).
considerations of group mind. In *Manhattan Transfer*, we see contaminants give way to a firestorm that bursts across the novel’s isolated vignettes, spreading throughout the city and its psyches at an alarming rate. In *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Waves*, the affects of the masses create eddies and whirlpools, which threaten to suck Septimus Smith to their very bottom, and which ultimately do drown Rhoda in their tidal surge. *To the North* repeats these metaphors in an even more insubstantial and ethereal guise, aligning affects with mists, clouds, and air currents that infect the angelic Emmeline. Finally, in the works of Djuna Barnes, affects come a bit closer to a true infection, aligned with tuberculosis in “Spillway” and with various diseases by Dr. O’Connor in *Nightwood*. Yet, even here, the transmission of affect comes to define an almost mystical connection, which is epitomized in the figure of the titular spillway – a drainage channel that, unseen, connects and inundates those involved in, or acting as an intimate spectator to, romantic dyads. Repeatedly figured as a physical contaminant that circulates by means of a conflagration, a flood, and even a pernicious fog, affect infects and overwhelms the individual, proliferating the suicidal impulse from body to body through the crowded city streets.

*Who is patient zero?*

While the individual is most susceptible to this infection within the crowd, a smaller group, or even the presence of one other person, may constitute a threat to psychic integrity. While theories of the crowd often claim that the presence of a mass of people incites a group mentality and subsequent crowd behavior, they consistently position the non-normative other as the origin point for affective transmission and the solidification of these mental and emotional states. Feminized or foreign bodies are considered most susceptible to affect, and as such, not only generate affects through the crowd more quickly and completely, but also form what in modern epidemiological studies is called patient zero – the locus of the outbreak. In the texts
considered here we will see that this general affectivity translates into suicidality, and that non-normative bodies are more likely to be infected by, and to act upon, the suicidal impulse. In John Dos Passos’ novel, the Ellis Island immigrants become the locus of infection, and stand as a constant source of anxiety for characters who encounter them in the claustrophobic New York crowds, or who espy them from afar, on the harbor’s quarantine ships. The characters most compromised by infection are (in order) a murderer, an alcoholic, and a lower class, Jewish woman, while the text’s embodiment of the white, male intellectual remains aloof. In Woolf’s work, it is often the lower-class masses that incite this type of overwhelming anxiety, and those compromised (and feminized) by extreme sensitivity and empathy that become her suicides. For Elizabeth Bowen, contaminating affects often emerge from “beyond the pale,” and are metaphorically, if not actually, mapped onto the uncivilized horde, or in the context of the Anglo-Irish ascendancy, onto the native Irish themselves. In Barnes, sexual deviancy becomes the harbinger of both animalistic regression and infection, and as in Bowen, those who engage in sadomasochistic love relations that dilute the boundary between self and other are the first to fall.

Because the crowd theories of the era, and even to some extent the psychiatric discourses, are embroiled in the evolutionary discourses of their age, they frequently slip into language that aligns non-normative figures (i.e., female, foreign, poor, queer) with the animalistic, or otherwise primitive, herd. Yet, no one is considered immune from the masses, and it is crucial to note that in the texts considered here, there is a deeply political anxiety underlying the path of suicidal outbreak. The discourses of Le Bon, Conway, McDougall, and others are themselves deeply politically inflected with a fear of the other, and particularly a group of others capable of enacting political dissidence. Crowds constitute a human flow and a one-ness of mind that is typically aligned with violence and the rising tides of communism and fascism during the first
half of the twentieth century. These historical movements inevitably crop up in possessions by the crowd that end in suicide – in the socialist presence depicted throughout Dos Passos’ *Manhattan Transfer* and the fascism stalking the periphery of Barnes’ *Nightwood*.

Consequently, it is perhaps unsurprising that in all the texts considered here, the nightmare usurpation of the individual by the crowd spurs isolationist fantasies of self-containment for characters who feel threatened by the affective disturbances that accompany popular social movements. Though fantasies and dreams seem to come unbidden, sneaking up on characters in the days or even minutes preceding the suicidal act, they are similar in their investment of power. Creating a sense of psychic control not available in reality, they endow the characters with agency over themselves, and in some cases, over others. Yet, despite inverting power relations in the protagonist’s favor, these fantasies are often permeated with a suicidal ideation which hints that this dream of isolation is, in fact, just a dream, and that more drastic isolating measures are required to tame an overwhelming affective excess. Recalling Lauren Berlant’s claim that fantasy “donates a sense of affective coherence to what is incoherent and contradictory in the subject” (75), we can see how psychic burrowing in the form of daydreams and delusions may form a highly protective, if not problematically disengaged, positioning towards the outside world.

Still, I particularly want to emphasize that by reading novels which seem to share the concerns of dehumanizing fin-de-siècle crowd theories, this project is not engaging with the truth claims of these source texts, but their influence on literary thought. For, while the psychiatric and social accounts invoked here present a racist and essentializing conceptualization of the public, which finds the root of crowd hysteria in those who are lower class, women, non-white, or in any other way non-normative, these discourses nonetheless resurface in literary accounts of urban
life by authors whose politics generally fall under the category of liberal humanism. This fear of
boundary dissolution, which is really a fear of uncontrollable feelings (a fear of others and the
feelings they always, inevitably incite within us), follows a complex trajectory that traverses
multiple disciplinary clusters and that, at its most extreme, may be said to incite violent anti-
populist tendencies. Nonetheless, aspects of this thought process manifest in depictions of the
suicide throughout modernism and are subtly related to the political realities surrounding the
production of its texts. So while we may (justly) seek to discredit Wilfred Trotter’s depiction of
the proletariat crowd as an animalistic herd, and while we may abhor claims by Le Bon that
women, like the highly emotive and feminized crowd members, are incapable of logical
reasoning, we must acknowledge that modernist literature shows us that their influence on the
body of knowledge surrounding the suicide is profound, even if profoundly disconcerting.

**Contemporary Contexts: Epidemiology and Affect**

This study seeks to contribute to ongoing work on the crowd and its forced negotiation of
public and private space,\(^8\) yet by analyzing literature at the interstices of sociology, psychiatry,
epidemiology, and affect, its disciplinary framework necessarily moves beyond the purely
historical. I begin by examining crowd theory alongside modernist suicidology before and after
the intervention of psychoanalysis (a history taken up in more detail in Chapter 1) because both
bodies of knowledge were deeply concerned with the loss of intentionality and the possibilities
for individual agency given the psychosocial pressures of the city. Thus, picking up on the
Malthusian specter mentioned earlier, and tracing along with it anachronistic interpretations of
biopower and population discipline, I approach the works of Dos Passos, Woolf, Bowen, and
Barnes through a psycho-sociological (as opposed to a psychosocial) lens. On the one hand, this
project addresses population control (i.e., the exponential growth and crowding of the planet) and

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\(^8\) E.g., John Plotz’s *The Crowd* (2000) and Deborah Parsons’ *Streetwalking the Metropolis* (2000)
regulation (slums, contagious diseases, and political protest) as sociological concerns within a specific strand of modernist literature. On the other, it focuses on the psychological impact of the crowd or collective on the individual psyche, tracking these repercussions through the narrative innovations and consciousness-centered narratives of the texts in question. In the space of this conjunction, I interrogate a psycho-sociological genealogy of affective states that goes hand-in-glove with discourses of epidemiology, and that explores the fear of the suicidal impulse as highly dependent on a fear of physical transmission and the contagion of the masses.

By doing so, this study not only illuminates the prolific depictions of suicide in the interwar era, but also contemporary discourses of suicide that are still inherently tied to the idea of contagion. Though modern references to suicide contagions are far more metaphorical than Strahan’s invocation of “outbreak,” a 2013 pamphlet put out by the Center for Suicide Prevention, entitled *Suicide Contagion & Suicide Clusters*, nonetheless echoes modernist anxieties. Particularly citing a literary history of depictions of suicide, the pamphlet explains current suicide clusters as originating in “the Werther effect” (Olson 2), revealing a historical through-line of conceptualizing suicide as the result of suggestion and contagious vulnerabilities.  

9 Strict guidelines for media outlets in the reporting of suicide still gesture towards this underlying fear of proliferating “social ills,” and as Marsh convincingly argues, the discourses that dominate current debates on preventing suicide concentrate on revealing “suicidal subjectivities” in order “to contain or eradicate them” in the population at large (7).

To address this ongoing account of suicide as an epidemic, or a psychic contamination, in relation to urban crowding, this dissertation bridges contagious bodies with infected psyches. Though crowd theories are essential piles in this structure by virtue of their repeated references

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9 I use this pamphlet only as one example of many of its kind. A quick search of suicide and contagion will provide access to similar newspaper articles, informational websites, and studies published within the past few years.
to crowd feeling and affective infection, modern affect theory forms the foundation of this conceptual bridge in that it registers the way subjective feelings manifest themselves on the surface of bodies as affective sensations. Embedded in critical discourses of emotion, and addressing “atmospheres of sociality, crowd behaviors, and contagions of feeling” (Seigworth & Gregg 8), the branch of affect theory I invoke here argues that bodies can catch feelings in the same way they might catch a cold, and thus act as the conduits for the transmission of affect within and between social groups. Represented perhaps most clearly by Teresa Brennan’s *The Transmission of Affect* and Anna Gibbs’ “Contagious Feelings,” this body of research argues that affects come from without to invade the individual and transform their subjective experience of the world, and sees the individual as porous rather than completely self-contained. While scholars like Sianne Ngai have focused on the relation of affect (particularly the negative affects explored in *Ugly Feelings*) to situations of suspended agency, affect theory by and large aligns with fin-de-siècle concerns with possession by external forces and the consequent curtailment of agency, and is especially useful for interrogating modernist notions of crowd feeling.

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed argues against these theories of contagion, citing that it is the objects of emotion which circulate through the crowd rather than the emotions themselves (11). Lauren Berlant, in *Cruel Optimism* and *Desire/Love*, advocates a similar viewpoint, and still, this view on the transmission of affect is equally relevant to modernist explorations that likewise place a great deal of emphasis on the circulation of contaminating patient zeroes (the general, collective body of Ellis Island immigrants in Dos Passos and the highly specific figure of Robin Vote in Barnes). In fact, the texts considered here are particularly notable because they, more than most, incessantly slip between these conceptualizations of affect (a tautological slipping and sliding that is notable in both the crowd
theories and suicide studies published in the modernist era as well). For example, while the Ellis Island immigrants become the objects of emotion circulated in *Manhattan Transfer*, their affectivity takes on a life of its own, figured as the fires that rage throughout the narrative once any particular vignette has been infected by their presence. Similarly, Robin Vote may constitute the primary object of circulation in *Nightwood*, but the affects she generates gradually come to infect of their own accord, leaking from person to person in the novel’s spillway motif. Given this indeterminacy concerning the transmission of affect within the texts, both views are necessary, and reveal, perhaps better than any single and coherent framework, the concomitantly destabilizing and driving force of affect within the novels.

Importantly, it is within these modern considerations of affect (as opposed to the modernist evocations of it), that affect is externalized to the extent that it becomes unanchored from subject and object, in regard to small group and one-on-one relations in addition to the crowd at large. Brennan’s and Berlant’s examinations of affect and fantasy are particularly useful for interrogating affects transmitted throughout small groups within the context of the larger metropolis, which becomes especially important in *The Waves*, *To the North*, and the works of Barnes. Grounding an interrogation of the modernist desire for a completely autonomous and self-contained subject, they explore this idea of pure bodily and psychic integrity as a fantasy constructed against the recognition that the self is inherently porous, an affected and affecting being, even within the seemingly ideal space of the romantic dyad.

**Psychic Contamination in Literary Modernism**

Volatile and disruptive affects make a prominent appearance in the texts considered here, and quite consistently, we see that psychic contamination along with a heightened degree of sociality become defining features of urban life, not only for the era’s suicidological discourses,
but for its literature as well. Thus, in order to answer the aforementioned questions about the symptoms, transmission, and origin of modernism’s suicide epidemic, it is crucial to study the scientific discourses that place psychic processes in the realm of an “outbreak” alongside literary depictions of suicide. For, prolifically depicted across a wide range of modernist texts, suicide becomes contagious not only within the scientific discourses of the era, but also within its cultural imaginary. As the suicide rates rise, concerns about the individual’s relation to the crowd emerge, generating an entire body of theory that figures the individual as susceptible to the infectious thoughts, impulses, and feelings of others. Alongside these theories, a strand of modernist literature materializes, which first depicts self-destruction as a means to self-containment, cleanliness, and immunization, but which gradually shifts towards depicting it as the inevitable result of a fatal contamination, a germ causing greater and greater degrees of collateral damage. By concentrating on Anglo-American interwar novels of the city where possession by the crowd is prominent, we can see that this particular subset of modernist fiction problematizes this possibility of self-contained safety, and that this theoretical problem is highlighted by modernist texts in which suicide shifts from being a voluntary escape from the intensity of crowd feeling to an involuntary impulse caused by its highly contagious affects. In some of the texts examined, the elimination of the infected, or suicidal, individual restores the health and vitality of the social system, whereas in others the system is compromised to such an extent that suicide becomes the only way for any character to retain bodily integrity and control.

In “Contagious Feelings,” Anna Gibbs argues that “Bodies can catch feelings as easily as catch fire: affect leaps from one body to another, evoking tenderness, inciting shame, igniting rage, exciting fear – in short, communicable affect can inflame nerves and muscles in a conflagration of every conceivable kind of passion” (1). This communicability of affect is
highlighted in John Dos Passos’ *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), where what remains most *transferrable* between characters is psychic stress, figured throughout the novel as the real or imagined threat of fire. Chapter One therefore argues that the fiery suicides in *Manhattan Transfer* enact the ultimate quarantine, or purification, from contagious urban affects. Like modernist crowd discourses that locate patient zero in foreign or otherwise feminized bodies, the novel’s affects originate in the Ellis Island immigrants who are frequently aligned with the terrifying specter of the arsonist. By examining the purifying role of fire in the suicides of Bud and Stan, and in the conflagration of Anna (or in the violent acts which end the novel’s three main sections), this chapter argues that *Manhattan Transfer*’s preoccupation with psychic contagion is deeply entrenched in the communicability of affect, and particularly in modernist preoccupations with crowd psychology and the capability for individual agency therein. The novel thus re-imagines suicide as more than the inevitable fate of deviant and mentally isolated individuals, but rather, as an epidemic rooted in the transmission of affect from body to body, and in the impulse to escape the overstimulation of modern urban experience in favor of isolationist fantasies of self-containment.

Building upon the history of modernist crowd theory and suicidology provided in Chapter One, the second chapter moves from America to the crowded streets of Virginia Woolf’s London, and to a more focused history of Woolf’s involvement with Wilfred Trotter’s theories of the herd. Tracing the highly volatile and affective crowds in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), “Street Haunting” (1930), and *The Waves* (1931), this chapter complicates the notion of suicide as escape, which we see so clearly enacted in Dos Passos’ text, and also places suicide in a more gendered context. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa’s philosophy of interconnection and the staging of collective response to everyday London experiences, such as the motorcar and the airplane,
suggest an overwhelming level of affective transmission in urban crowds – one which Septimus consistently aligns with the brutish qualities of the masses. His “inability to feel,” or his shell-shock, paradoxically inoculates him from herd affect. But in order to avoid being drawn into the affective riptides of the urban sphere, Septimus seeks an “isolation full of sublimity,” and his suicide enacts this final separation and self-containment, serving as an escape from herd instinct. Yet, Virginia Woolf’s famous literary suicides reveal modernism’s transition in miniature. For, while self-destruction creates a self-affirming isolation for Septimus, for Rhoda, it is an involuntary inundation. In *The Waves,* she likewise seeks the shell of self-contained identity to separate her from the affects of the herd, but despite her attempts to isolate herself in fantasies that bolster her sense of agency and identity, she is ultimately contaminated, crowded out at the level of both story and narrative and absorbed into the waves of affect that permeate the text.

Building on Woolf’s depiction of affect, Chapter Three interrogates the effects of London’s moody atmospheres on the ethereal heroine of *To The North* (1932), and exposes Elizabeth Bowen’s overt alignment of affect and infection throughout her oeuvre in order to read the novel’s murder-suicide as the result of a highly infectious suicidal impulse. A striking parallel to Rhoda, Bowen’s heroine Emmeline begins the novel as a London flâneuse, only to enter into an unconscious, suicidal fugue state immediately before her tragic car accident. Infiltrated by feelings that are consistently aligned with the primitive impulses from “beyond the pale,” Emmeline is infected by savage affects. Her glacial manner, or the protective ice-sheath harboring her identity and autonomy, is melted by feverish feelings, and once open to the emotion of others, she is quickly overwhelmed, killing not only herself, but her lover as well. Moving from figurations of affect as fire (Dos Passos) and floods (Woolf) to that of air, mists, and clouds, Bowen depicts an even more insubstantial, and thus insidious, metaphor for
infection. Accordingly, this chapter also reveals a sharp escalation in the amount of collateral damage as suicide proliferates outward to kill those beyond the suicide herself.

Chapter Four examines Djuna Barnes’ more cosmopolitan perspective, first interrogating her overt depictions of suicide in “The Doctors” and “Spillway.” In both stories, the affects of others often overpower individuals, not only overtly animalizing them, but directly transmitting the suicidal impulse of one character into the mind of another. Pairing these stories with references to suicide that were edited out of original drafts of Nightwood (1936), I claim that the self-destructive impulses of the novel’s characters are attempts at self-containment in response to Robin, the text’s “infected carrier” and “nightbeast.” Tying the figure of the flâneuse to the transmission of affect, Robin thus affects the psyche and impinges on the agency of all those with whom she comes in contact, forcing Nora to face her unconscious and instigating Dr. O’Connor’s narrative. By reading suicidal ideation as directly transmissible to other characters – through a spillway, or a drainage channel for overwhelming affect – this chapter explains O’Connor’s infamous collapse as a result of Nora’s self-destructive desire. It also ultimately elucidates Robin’s role in Nora’s two slips into unconsciousness, the last of which likewise fells both Robin and the dog, and which has become one of the most famously enigmatic endings in modernist fiction.

Commenting on psychic pain, or what contemporary suicidologists call “psychache,” Sara Ahmed has written that “while the experience of pain may be solitary, it is never private. A truly private pain would be one ended by a suicide without a note. But even then one seeks a witness, though a witness who arrives after the anticipated event of one’s own death” (29). It is crucial to note that the texts presented here thoroughly illustrate Ahmed’s claim. For, not only do they embed the suicidal act in ongoing relations of sociality, but by virtue of their
epidemiological concerns, they address critical issues surrounding how we currently conceptualize self-destruction. Providing a view into psychic development that is still prevalent in today’s intense anxiety over “copycat” or “cluster” suicides and the ethical issues surrounding media coverage of self-murder, these modernist discourses show us how human beings are thought to affect one another. Studying them alongside their echoes in our contemporary culture may provide insight into a still highly influential history of our society’s relationship to illness, death, and most importantly, life.

If we return to Clarissa’s line about suicide and the moderns, we can already see that the literary suicides of modernism are significantly complicated by their surrounding discourses. Rather than a literary epiphenomenon – a convenient method of ending, a banal depiction of pathology, a generic representation of the anomie of modern life – this attention to the figure of the suicide and its relation to discourses of epidemiology demands more scrutiny. For, as Clarissa notes, the moderns may not portray death in a way that makes it attractive to readers (the figure of the suicide is rarely ever so), but they nonetheless write about it with a frequency that borders on obsession. More importantly, many of them seem to regard self-destruction as purposive in a more positive (as in productive) way – as saving the individual and even sometimes as supporting the long-term health and vitality of social groups like the nation, the metropolis, and even the small, social networks of friends and lovers. How can an act that is, at its root, a destruction of life be seen as preserving it? Protecting it? This study’s emphasis above all is upon answering this question, mapping out and unraveling the convoluted modern psychic terrain that gives rise to a paradoxically life-preserving form of self-destruction.
“absolute fantasy is the only escape” – John Dos Passos, December 31st, 1917

Chapter One

A “Fire That Purifies”: Psychic Contamination and Suicidal Fantasy in *Manhattan Transfer*

Modernist literature abounds with characters who are melancholic, traumatized, and mad. Yet, while psychological breakdown is seen as a central preoccupation of canonical modernist fiction and as indicative of the crisis of modernity itself, it is nonetheless “modern suicide” that “provides the very image of modernism” (Stark, “The Price” 501). Scholars such as Jared Stark, Margaret Higonnet, and Holly Laird have written on the ubiquitous portrayal of suicide across modernist texts, yet contemporary criticism has heretofore ignored the way these depictions of suicide might comment on the construction of identity and agency within modernist urban space, and specifically within an alternative view of this space as defined by contact and communication rather than alienation and fragmentation – a place where enforced proximity produces intense interconnection rather than psychic estrangement.

Departing from depictions of New York City that confirm accepted critical narratives of urban space as the cause of psychic isolation and detachment, Dos Passos’ *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) particularly emphasizes this alternative view of city life, where a pervasive sense of connectedness, corruption, and claustrophobic chaos forces characters to seek out, rather than avoid, physical and psychic isolation. Suffering intersubjective contagion rather than

11 Here Stark specifically refers to the way modernism enacts formal suicide with its incessant desire to “make it new,” but his article likewise suggests a thematic engagement with agency and self-destruction that has yet to be thoroughly examined by modernist scholars.
intrasubjective anomie, Dos Passos’ characters are infected by the thoughts, affects, and impulses of others in the social environment, infiltrated by “foreign bodies” that threaten to annihilate their sense of self and self-willed action. Frequently driving them towards isolationist fantasies that culminate in the suicidal act itself, this threat of annihilation originates in a fear of contamination by the crowd and its affects, often signaled by the appearance of the Ellis Island immigrant and figured throughout the novel in the uncontrollable transmission of tenement fires within and across the novel’s vignettes. Infecting the psyche of nearly every character, fire often appears in moments of psychological tension and becomes a defining feature of the novel’s depictions of involuntary suicide and near-fatal accidents. By examining the role of fire in the suicides of Bud Korpenning and Stan Emery and in the conflagration of Anna Cohen (or in the violent acts that end each of the novel’s three main sections), we can see that Manhattan Transfer’s preoccupation with psychic contagion reimagines suicide as more than the inevitable fate of a deviant and mentally isolated individual, but as a modern epidemic rooted in the impulse to escape the overcrowding of modern urban experience in favor of isolationist fantasies of self-containment. A further analysis of the effect these deaths have on protagonists Jimmy Herf and Ellen Thatcher reveals that such self-containment is impossible, a problematic fantasy for characters and readers of the novel alike.

I. “But darling you’ll kill yourself”\textsuperscript{13}: Suicide as a Modern Epidemic

While suicide may be one symptom of the crisis inherent in modern life, there are more nuanced ways to examine modernist literature’s most popular method of ending. In her thorough history of modernism’s “proto-suicidological discourses,” Holly Laird tracks the widespread discussions of suicide in the modernist period, which were due in part to a belief that it showcased the “climax in suicide history,” or disproportionately high rates of suicide (526, 537).

\textsuperscript{13} Ellen Thatcher to Stan Emery (Dos Passos 182)
Though historians now realize that a sharp spike in the suicide rate was actually the result of improved record keeping and “rose proportionately with modernization, except during times of war,” the statisticians of the time period had no such perspective (537). Consequentially, suicide for the modernists took on the characteristics of an epidemic and renewed interest in deviant social phenomena as well as mental and social hygiene within the emerging fields of psychology, sociology, statistics, and evolutionary biology as well as in the established fields of medicine, law, philosophy, and the arts (528, 530).

Particularly problematic within this understanding of suicide as epidemic was the question of free will versus determinism in a society that increasingly saw suicide as the result of a sudden and uncontrollable impulse caused by severe mental illness. Ian Marsh summarizes the fin-de-siècle (and pre-psychoanalytic) perspective by explaining, “the standard view within medical circles is that suicide is no longer to be conceived of as a voluntary act, but there is a struggle to provide a scientifically plausible account as to why this might be. An internal force of some nature is postulated, that takes possession of the person, overpowers their reason and will, and impels them to suicide” (130). This shift in the potential for suicidal autonomy stems from Esquirol’s famous medical dictionary entry on “Suicide” in 1821, which initiated modernism’s later pathologizing of the suicidal act. Emphasizing an internal pathology that could be caused by “excessive passions,” Esquirol traces an origin for suicidality that is increasingly tautological; for, suicide is caused by passions that only reveal themselves in the act itself (113). Thus, according to Esquirol, “When the soul is strongly moved, by a violent and unexpected affection, organic functions are perverted, the reason is disturbed, the individual loses his self-consciousness, is in a true delirium, and commits acts the most thoughtless; those most opposed to his instinct, to his affections and interests” (qtd. in Marsh 107).
Reappearing within the works of the next generation of psychologists, Esquirol’s concerns over “passions” and autonomy are subtly co-opted into the newly emerging disease model of mental illness. In his 1892 edition of Responsibility and Mental Disease, Dr. Henry Maudsley postulates an “‘affective insanity’” (121), which overwhelms the intellect, agency, and instincts for self-preservation within the individual:

It is a fact that in a certain state of mental disease a morbid impulse may take such despotic possession of the patient as to drive him, in spite of reason and against his will, to a desperate act of suicide or homicide; like the demoniac of old into whom the unclean spirit entered, he is possessed by a power which forces him to a deed of which he has the utmost dread and horror. (133)

Given very little autonomy for the specific act of self-murder, here the individual is “driven,” “possessed,” and “forced” by his “disease” in the same way Esquirol’s patient “loses his self-consciousness” and enters a “true delirium” in response to passion. In both explanations, the individual is an object acted upon rather than an agential actor, but in Maudsley’s examination the demoniac force that alters normal organic functioning and causes mental illness seems to originate outside the individual. At the apex of this debate, S.A.K. Strahan claims in Suicide and Insanity: A Physiological and Sociological Study (1894), “there is nothing more voluntary, in the proper meaning of the term, in the death of such a one by his own act than there is in the silence of the mute, the jibbering of an idiot, or the convulsion of an epileptic” (66). As the century moves towards a close, suicide increasingly becomes the result of an external influence, yet is nonetheless indebted to internal, biological malfunction and emotional excess. Unlike previous eras when suicide was perceived as having a rational objective – to either avoid pain or to gain some altruistic good – suicides in modernity are perceived to be unintentional and involuntary,
the result of a protracted contamination. Marking the zenith of the suicide-as-epidemic mentality, this view epitomizes the likening of the suicidal impulse to an infectious disease, originating in a contaminant that intensifies affect and ultimately leads to a lethal possession.

Within this very popular and public discussion, Laird specifically places literature at the vital interpretive crossroads between the humanities and social sciences, in a position of negotiating beliefs and representations of suicide on both sides of the divide:

Developing rapidly from the mid-Victorian period onward, multidisciplinary collaboration and disciplinary competition advanced simultaneously and self-consciously around the suicide question, as around other major issues of that time such as labor, women, and industrialism. Amid these developments, literature functioned as an (inter)disciplinary player, serving up not only representations for dramatic value but also for inquiry into and indications of how it might–and might not–be known... suicide, while enigmatic, became a node around which turn-of-the-century discourses entertained abundant possibilities for analyzing and coexisting with, preventing and surviving, the suicidal. (528)

Thus, rather than view suicide as merely symptomatic of the crisis of modernity identified by other fields, modernist literature engaged with, and attempted to work through, the notion of suicide on its own terms (529). Despite some contemporary critical claims that the formal self-reflexivity and repetition of modernist literature results from a modernist “horror of death” and a desire to “elide the dying process” (Friedman 18), the frequency of suicide depictions in the literature of the period suggests a philosophical engagement with death in lieu of avoidance – an interrogation of suicide that is especially prevalent in texts like John Dos Passos’ *Manhattan Transfer*. Dos Passos famously stated that “the business of a novelist is, in my opinion, to create
characters first and foremost, and then to set them in the snarl of the human currents of his time, so that there results an accurate permanent record of a phase of history” (qtd. in Colley 4). The theater of violence depicted in *Manhattan Transfer*, felt directly through the deaths and near-fatal accidents of so many characters and felt vicariously through newspaper clippings about murder, suicide, and plumbing stopped by abortions, certainly portrays the historically popular view of suicide and murder reaching epidemic proportions. Yet, more importantly, the text’s formal and thematic engagement with contagion, fantasy, and violence suggests a theory of self-destruction in the urban sphere that relies on fin-de-siècle concepts of autonomy in mental illness rather than later psychoanalytic theories of suicide, and that challenges contemporary readings of modernist suicide as a result of psychic estrangement. Positing an alternative theory of self-violence as an involuntary act which is induced in response to overwhelming affective resonances, Dos Passos suggests that suicide is ultimately both the *result of*, and the *answer to*, a psychic contagion caught from the outside world.

While modernist suicidology does not usually specify where these external forces, or contagions, originate, it is highly probable that the “patho-logy” of the crowd, and particularly the affective transfer of other individuals, is a potential origin for the suicidal impulse in Dos Passos’ texts. While concern with social crowding was very prevalent in the modernist period, sociologist Georg Simmel perhaps offers the most succinct explanation of how social crowding transforms into psychic stress. In *The Metropolis and Mental Life* (1903), Simmel claims that “the deepest problems of modern life derive from the claim of the individual to preserve the autonomy and individuality of his existence in the face of overwhelming social forces, of historical heritage, of external culture, and of the technique of life” (409). The metropolis is

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14 I borrow this term from Seigworth and Gregg primarily to mean a study of affects or *pathos*, and of the *path* that those emotions, or intensities, follow within and between individual bodies and psyches (11).
unique in that it yields an “intensification of nervous stimulation which results from the swift and uninterrupted change of outer and inner stimuli” (410). In other words, urban dwellers must negotiate a heightened form of consciousness caused by a rapid crowding of objects, relations, and affects that are discontinuous, onrushing, and always unexpected (a type of consciousness depicted formally in many of the modernists’ avant-garde style). However, Simmel theorizes that the individual adapts to the threat of city life, that if not addressed would incapacitate him, by developing “an organ protecting him against the threatening currents and discrepancies of his external environment” (410). By holding others at bay through a type of cognitive detachment, or what Simmel calls a “blasé attitude,” the individual can prevent “shocks” and “inner upheavals” that would “uproot” his or her psyche (410). In other words, by creating a confining psychic husk, the individual can protect oneself from the influence of others.

Whether the individual is ultimately able to perform this encapsulation is drastically called into question by other contemporary theorists like Le Bon, Conway, and McDougall who posit the power of the crowd in removing the individual from affective isolation, individual autonomy, and the protection against psychic stress. Once fallen under the sway of affective transmission, the individual is sick, pathologized in mind through metaphors that locate infection in the body, or in the contact and communication between surfaces in the urban environment. Le Bon’s popular book, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (1896), published the year of Dos Passos’ birth, asserts the primacy of the crowd in modern urban life and claims that the “substitution of unconscious action of crowds for the conscious activity of individuals is one of the principal characteristics of the present age” (4). Unconscious action is initiated by the crowd’s openness to suggestion (or what Le Bon calls their “suggestibility”) and the contagious spread of opinion (73). Yet, this action is specifically linked to the spread of contagious
“emotions,” or what I translate as affects due to their subconscious impetus: “In the case of men
collected in a crowd all emotions are very rapidly contagious, which explains the suddenness of
panics. Brain disorders, like madness, are themselves contagions. The frequency of madness
among doctors who are specialists for the mad is notorious” (73). Here Le Bon aligns affective
transfer with a loss of psychic agency, but he also goes on to suggest that this rupture between
actor and self-willed action is indicative of not only mental, but also physical, contagion. For, as
Le Bon notes, “Ideas, sentiments, emotions and beliefs possess in crowds a contagious power as
intense as that of microbes” (73). When this “powerful mechanism of contagion intervenes,” the
individual in a crowd enters a “special state” where “he is no longer conscious of his act” and
functions “as an automaton who has ceased to be guided by his will” (73, 18-19). In this way,
both the psychic and physical integrity of the individual are breached by the affects of the crowd,
yielding an infection and deterioration of the pathway to self-willed action.

Sir Martin Conway’s The Crowd in Peace and War (1915) repeats this impossibility of
autonomous thought and action within the crowd when he writes that the individual is swept
“into another world” by crowd mentality, often committing acts he would never dream of on his
own (32). Like Le Bon, he also posits crowd mentality as an infection that somatically endangers
the individual: “The opinion of a crowd has no relation to the reasoned opinion of the majority of
its members, but is a mere infection passion which sweeps through the whole body like an
electric current, and is frequently originated and propagated from a single brain” (26). Here
Conway shows an even stronger theoretical link to later theories of affect when he asks, “does
man send out wireless messages without knowing it?” or “has it something to do with our
subconscious self?” (37). Positing a mode of subconscious transmission, Conway even directly
references emotions (better conceptualized as affects) when he writes that “by infection and
influence, by the absorption of {crowd} atmosphere, the emotions of individuals are to be aroused or even created” and that “the crowd is the medium in which the germ of individual emotion is hatched and spread” (187, 309). Like Le Bon, these affects are figured through the body. Thus, “To go into a crowd is like going into a cholera village; the man who does so puts himself in the way of infection” (39).

For William McDougall, whose The Group Mind (1920) analyzes more highly organized assemblages and institutions in addition to the unorganized crowd of the street, it is infectious affect and its intensification that is responsible for group organization in the first place. For, in order to constitute a group mind, an assembly “must be capable of being interested in the same objects and of being affected in a similar way by them” (33, emphasis mine). Significant for our discussion of Dos Passos, McDougall even aligns affective resonance with a fire-engine: “Not every mass of human beings gathered together in one place within sight and sound of one another constitutes a crowd in the psychological sense of the word…But let a fire-engine come galloping through the throng of traffic…and instantly the concourse assumes in some degree the character of a psychological crowd” (33). “Intensification of emotion” is the primary result of crowd formation, and of course, this intensification reaches a higher pitch in the urban population where excitability runs high (35). It is also achieved directly through affective cues in that emotion and involuntary impulse are “capable of being excited in one individual by the expressions of some emotion in another,” or by physical “symptoms,” such as “the blanched, distorted faces, the dilated pupils, the high-pitched trembling voices, and the screams of terror of his fellows” (36). In a panic, for example, “the expressions of a startled few induce fear in their
neighbors, and the excitement sweeps over the whole concourse like fire blown across the
prairie” (37, emphasis mine).\(^\text{15}\)

While McDougall aligns affect with a fire that proliferates throughout the city streets, as
with Le Bon, Conway, and others, he also claims that crowd feeling constitutes a “mysterious
contagion” (40), or a “direct communication of emotion” instigated by some sort of “primitive
sympathy” (42). Of course, as with the large majority of crowd theories, it is the coarser
emotions that are more communicable, and which are particularly dangerous to any sense of
individual agency. As scholar Teresa Brennan notes, these theories, strongly anchored in the
psychiatric debates of the time period, “designate a group as pathological precisely because it is
affectively imbued, and because the distinctiveness of individuals is swamped by the affects of
the group” (18). The “most susceptible are those who are least socially desirable,” or those who
are already infected with crowd feeling (18). In other words, those who instigate the fiery
infernos of affect that rage across Manhattan in Dos Passos’ novel are most likely to be trapped
in the contours of the crowd, sickened by their association with the masses and corrupting others
by affective incorporation. Given this somewhat tangled logic of cognitive and somatic infection,
we can see how an epidemic of involuntary suicide becomes possible in the scientific literature
of the time period, and especially within literary renderings of the crowded urban environment.

II. “The rancid sweet huddled smell of packed tenements”\(^\text{16}\): Crowding, Contamination, Affect

In order to see the relevance of these contemporary psychiatric and sociological debates
to Dos Passos’ work, it is crucial to note the prevalence of crowding and contamination (both
physical and psychic) in the novel’s formal and thematic elements. The very title of Manhattan

\(^{15}\) Conway also uses the fire motif, though less dramatically: “an ideal that arises in the heart of an individual is like
a spark struck from steel by a flint – gone in a moment, unless it ignites some flammable mass. An ideal that is
incorporated in a crowd is a burning lamp. It is only a crowd that can give continuity to the combustion” (313-314).

\(^{16}\) A description from Bud (Dos Passos 9)
*Transfer* not only gestures towards the modernist obsession with urban life, technological advancement, and trains, but as Heidi Bollinger notes, towards the crowded atmosphere of the stations themselves, most famously exemplified by Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro” (81). More directly, the title references motion – the *transfer* of people and materials by train, and, as I will argue, the *transference* of thoughts, diseases, and natural phenomena that paradoxically integrate Dos Passos’ urban spaces. Like the novels by Woolf, Bowen, and Barnes that will be examined in succeeding chapters, Dos Passos’ texts frequently invoke crowds, albeit in the broader context of the urban environment, where intense contact and communication characterizes social exchange. Excluding his journalistic writings, the works immediately preceding and succeeding *Manhattan Transfer* particularly concentrate on these milling crowds and their psychic effects on characters. *Streets of Night*, as the title overtly signals, focuses on the streets of Boston as reflected through Dos Passos’ Harvard years, and the *U.S.A. Trilogy* (*The 42nd Parallel, 1919*, and *The Big Money*) provides a look at life in the major cities of San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York, among others. Both works notably also include suicides – a thematic strain which runs through Dos Passos’ work perhaps more often than other terminal modernists, and is yet largely unaddressed in the critical literature. In addition to Wenny’s suicide in *Streets of Night*, *U.S.A.* is littered with casual suicidal ideation as well as the actual suicides of Daughter, Eveline Hutchins, and arguably, Charley Anderson.

While these novels showcase Dos Passos’ concern both with crowds and with psychic stability, it is *Manhattan Transfer* that delivers his most focused account of urban experience in densely populated New York. Moreover, it is likewise *Manhattan Transfer* that foregrounds

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17. “The apparition of these faces in the crowd;/ Petals on a wet, black bough.”
18. Eleanor Stoddard, Richard Ellsworth Savage, Mary French, Margot Dowling, and Janey Williams are a few of the major characters who explicitly encounter recurring suicidal thoughts, yet there are several minor characters (e.g., Emiscah) that also suffer from suicidal ideation. Suicidal tendencies have also been observed in Dos Passos’ earlier texts. For example, Michael Clark reads John Andrews’s decision to go AWOL as a veiled form of suicide (86).
depictions of suicide within that highly concentrated environment by ending each of its three major sections with deaths caused by affective transmission. The novel is centrally focused on the lives of two main protagonists Ellen Thatcher and Jimmy Herf, and follows their respective efforts to succeed as a Broadway actress and a writer. Yet, spanning the turn of the century, WWI, and the Jazz Age, *Manhattan Transfer* also depicts New York during its transition into one of the world’s great metropolises, revealing the harrowing details of urban life through a vast constellation of characters. Some of these figures, like the deckhand Congo Jake who becomes a rich bootlegger during Prohibition, are imbricated in the lives of Ellen and Jimmy, but the storylines of others, like the bearded immigrant who (to the horror of his wife and daughter) shaves after seeing a King C. Gillette ad in the novel’s first chapter, briefly surface and vanish, making a slight ripple in the narrative arc. Thus, while critics often refer to the novel as an explication of “urban loneliness” amidst “crowds who are all strangers to one another” (Colley 23), the novel itself is crowded with storylines that reverberate, influencing the way other events, characters, and environments are understood and interpreted. By paying critical attention to depictions of death, and particularly to the way suicides enact this reverberation in the urban sphere, we can see the novel’s alternative investment in urban crowding rather than isolation as a precipitating factor of self-destruction. Rather than linking suicide to intrasubjective anomie (as most contemporary critics of modernism do), Dos Passos suggests that intersubjective contagion, or the transmission of affect, is the primary causal factor. Read through this lens, *Manhattan Transfer* epitomizes the struggle of the individual mind against the barrage of its social surround and highlights issues of autonomy and psychic self-containment in the crowd.

While Dos Passos’ overarching thematic concern with suicide draws attention to the separation between the individual and others by its literal enactment in life and death, the formal
elements of the novel emphasize contact – cuts and sutures across the narrative body through montage editing. By stitching together fragments of individual character narratives, snippets of popular songs, newspaper headlines, and advertisements, the novel embeds the reader in a new composite whole where an endless rush of sensory information places seemingly contradictory elements side by side. In this cinematic montage of New York City, characters, objects, and events appear and reappear throughout the succession of vignettes, emphasizing a feverish sense of crowding and circulation across the narrative cuts. Through these incisions, a sense of exposure is thus highlighted, as is a sense of infection or infiltration. Not only are various genres blended together at the level of the text itself, but the bodies, minds, and lives of the novel’s characters are in constant contact as well. References to bodily decay and disease, popular ideas, and affects (e.g., a sense of foreboding produced by a popular song or a newspaper clipping) leap from one vignette to another, drawing together seemingly disparate situations and discrete psyches and removing any vignette from complete isolation.¹⁹

Beyond the new points of contact created through montage, the novel also emphasizes a concern with crowding and affective transmission at the level of narration, or point of view. Unlike the psychological turn inward that characterizes Dos Passos’ early novels, the surface-oriented aesthetics of *Manhattan Transfer* particularly privilege the external qualities of objects and people, or those aspects of the environment directly available to perception. Ed Lowry, among many others, has called the novel a visual text, and more specifically, a street film, in that it depicts a way of life in the city rather than the interpretations of urban space by a conscious “I” (1631). Through a camera lens that neutrally records everything and privileges nothing, the novel aligns foreground and background at the same level of focus, creating an effect which “is

¹⁹ Donald Pizer has described these techniques of narrative suture as “interlacing” or developing “narrative clusters” (e.g. when characters appear in narratives other than their own) and “cross-stitching” (e.g. when certain events drive an entire section of the text, joining multiple storylines) (45, 54).
comparable to that produced by a procession of faces glimpsed on the crowded street” (1631). Thus, while some details in the overcrowded frame may seem more or less important depending on our orientation to the shot, the reader is nonetheless engaged with multiple surfaces rather than a sustained first person narrative, so much so that “individual characters become an indistinguishable part of the scene, merging with their fellow crowd dwellers” (Bollinger 74). Yet, though the narrative objectively narrates, and thus formally enacts, the visual rather than cognitive register of urban experience, Lowry notably claims that Dos Passos, as director, “seeks to intensify the emotional quality of his theme by finding those images which, in a psychosocial sense, will fully embody the action unfolding on the screen and lead the audience to a direct, emotional-sensual experience of that action” (1633). In essence, “these materials, the fictional equivalent of the director’s shot list…are exploited for their affective values, the psychological response they produce in the reader” (1633, emphasis mine).

While Lowry’s foundational article on the novel’s formal elements stresses the way in which multiple surfaces can powerfully affect, or impress upon, the reader’s psychology, it is curious how little criticism has focused on the way surfaces impact the cognition (and thus psychic contamination) of the novel’s characters. All cognitive and affective reaction seems to take place only at the level beyond the text itself. Accordingly, the way in which characters interact as surfaces, or mere bodies, has been catalogued extensively. Early criticism of the novel claims that the characters are driven by the most basic interactions with objects in their environment: “the manner of the narrative is not of a sort to emphasize ideal objectives at all as a determinant of action, but rather to suggest that the whole thing is a matter of stimulus and response” (Beach 58). Not only are the characters of the novel perceived as isolated and detached, unable to form any social bonds within the crowded urban environment of New York,
but even within their own consciousness, they seem flattened and depthless. Thinking within the novel is “non-purposive,” and the human organism works automatically in an environment in which “certain conditions set going certain types of behavior” (58). For Joseph Warren Beach, and for many others, the novel’s lack of psychology denies it any real characters, and people are “at best, a succession of stimuli followed by their responses” (64). This lack of intentionality implies a reduction, or complete lapse, of autonomy within the city – a view which Iain Colley promotes when he suggests that the “city reinforces the helplessness of the human will”:

The personal will…dwindles to a gnawing itch for economic success or consumes itself in vain self-reproaches. Where before them had been a primary stress on the position of the rebel trying to forward his struggle or personally acquired values, now the frame is largely filled by the many who can never shake off their conditioning. The characters are defined for the reader by their being placed in an area of probabilities – whatever happens to them is them. The urban accidents with which the book is filled are often genuinely accidental in the sense that nobody bears direct responsibility for them. (49)

This insistence on sensation from the physical surround (the itch), and essentially on a lack of intentional action in the narrative (conditioning and probabilities), highlights issues of agency that are prevalent within the novel, and which certainly bear further exploration. However, the absolute dichotomy between exterior and interior, somatic response and cognition, belies the complexity of Dos Passos’ text, and specifically the way in which the body and the psyche are inextricably entwined in many of novel’s major scenes. As Sartre perceptively noted, “For Dos Passos there is no break between inside and outside, between body and consciousness, but only

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20 This opinion is repeated by Charles C. Walcutt: “Psychologically, [the novel] depicts persons who are not persons but a succession of reactions to stimuli” (83).
between the stammerings of the individual’s timid, intermittent, and fumbling thinking and the messy world of collective representations” (qtd. in McGlamery 78).

To reconcile the divide between soma and psyche in Dos Passos’ characters and to successfully place them in relation to intentional action, I believe the novel requires us to turn back towards the affective response Lowry notes above, and specifically, towards affective transfer between individuals in the crowd. In other words, we must engage with points of contact at the surface and their resultant impressions on the psyche, or the specific paths of communication between social beings within the text. Recent criticism has (I think, correctly) continued to focus on the visual onslaught that characterizes the reader’s experience of the novel, yet there has also been much more focus on the relations that underlie the complex psychosocial structure of the novel – most notably, the individual’s psychic reaction to the social environment and their capacity for action within it.  

This concentration on the role of the social surround and its possible threat to psychic integrity is crucial to integrating a view of the novel which recognizes the psychological depth of its characters while still paying tribute to its formal and thematic focus on the impact of the urban environment – the contact between surfaces, or the affective transfer between people and things, that is inherent to its densely populated spaces.

Affect has been described by Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg as a “visceral force” that is “beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing” (1). While never fully separable from conscious thought (as thought must necessarily be embodied), affect lies beyond the realm of pure cognition (2). It is inherently tied to the body as both a pre-conscious response and projection out into the world, but one that is powerfully capable of affecting the way we perceive and assess our environment. Teresa Brennan has defined affect as a “physiological shift accompanying a judgment” in that affects are always in some way changing.

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21 E.g. Iain Colley, Desmond Harding, and Tom McGlamery
our psychological orientations or evaluations even if they are not doing so at the level of conscious deliberation (5). A change in our social environment – a smile, a shout, a cough, etc. – affects us at the physical, pre-conscious level, producing positive and negative responses that are tied to our cognitive interpretation of the situation. Unlike feelings, or emotions, which are “sensations that have found a match in words,” and are thus essentially produced by our own thoughts about our sensory states, affects are inherently less personal (5). They may prompt thoughts that did not previously exist or even modify our existing states. Originating outside our psyche, affects precede us; they exist in the social environment and can be transmitted from person to person, influencing not only the bodily response of individuals to those around them, but also their psychic orientation.22 As “intensities” that circulate between bodies, affect “marks a body’s belonging to the world of encounters” and specifically “arises in the midst of inbetween-ness,” or in the circulations of the crowd (Seigworth and Gregg 1-2). Yet again, this inbetween-ness does not limit affect to the purely physical register, or to the contact between surfaces. Through the interaction of bodies, and impressions from cues in the visual, auditory, or otherwise perceivable sensory environment, affects affect our cognitive perception of the world in fundamental, yet potentially indiscernible, ways.23

While theories of affect are currently undergoing a resurgence in academic popularity, the aforementioned nineteenth- and early twentieth-century crowd theories by Le Bon, Conway, and McDougall – particularly the crowd theories focused on “group mind” and “herd instinct” – take the transmission of affect as both bodily and psychic influence for granted (Brennan 17). Though Brennan accurately notes that these modernist theories tautologically ignore a method of

22 Sianne Ngai explains the early split between emotion/affect as originating in psychoanalysis for the “practical purpose of distinguishing third-person from first-person representations of feeling” (25).
23 That is not to say that individuals, in all their specificity, do not maintain a certain orientation to the world. Rather, even in our ability to absorb the affect of others through sensory stimulation, the thoughts we attach to that affect remain our own (Brennan 7).
transmission, they do share a common perception of the self as violable and vulnerable to social contagion, unlike later psychological theories that posit the individual as the self-contained origin of all thoughts, feelings, and compulsions (e.g., Freudian psychoanalysis). Not only were these theories highly influential at the time, but their knotting of bodily and psychic contagion along with issues of autonomy and crowd behavior reveals a complicated situation in which, as Brennan notes, not all those in the crowd are seen as equally susceptible to contamination. It is specifically those considered “least socially desirable” that bear the burden of affective transmission and from whom the contagion seems to originate. Likewise, it is this group that induces a remarkable anxiety over individual integrity and agency, or what I would call a panic of self-containment.

Affect has often been noted for its “stickiness”\(^\text{24}\) in that certain responses become attached to images, objects, and people as they circulate through social groups. In Dos Passos’ work, alongside the thematic concern with murder, suicide, and violence, there is a great deal of attention placed on foreigners and their status within the ever-growing and ever-diversifying America. Consequently, *Manhattan Transfer* not only figures crowds, but also prominently displays the Ellis Island immigrants as foreign bodies entering and infecting the streets of New York City. The affects that get attached to these foreign crowds are highly negative in that characters are often reminded of the potential germs, or physical threat, these outsiders carry. If we consider the text’s anxiety over self-containment, these negative depictions become more understandable, especially given Dos Passos’ cosmopolitan sentiments. Brennan writes that “the self-contained subject maintains itself by projecting out the affects that otherwise interfere with its agency (anxiety and any sense of inferiority) in a series of affective judgments that are carried by the other” (113). Thus, the characters in *Manhattan Transfer* often project their negative

\(^{24}\) See Anna Gibbs, Sarah Ahmed, Lauren Berlant, etc.
affects onto those arriving from Ellis Island, turning their own anxiety over bodily and psychic integrity (i.e. cleanliness) into a judgment on foreign inferiority (i.e. dirt and illness).

In this way, an invasion of psychic security is figured through bodily infection by unclean, foreign (or otherwise feminized) bodies, and it is figured as such not only in the crowd theories of the time period, but directly in modernist literature. The desire to save oneself from the intensifying affects of the crowd leads to a turn towards solidifying the physical and psychic boundaries of the self against others – a boundary that Brennan claims has been historically constructed in the years following the modernist period, but which I argue that the modernists were keenly desirous of attaining. If the turn away from a recognition of affective transfer was the turn towards the Western fantasy of affective self-containment which Brennan claims is so crucial to our current notions of identity (12), then I argue that modernism initiated this turn, primarily through its vastly influential literary tradition. In particular, a strand of modernism exemplified by texts like Dos Passos’ *Manhattan Transfer* is driven by an anxiety over affective transmission and the porousness of the affected and affecting individual in urban life. Unlike some notions of mental illness which take the patient’s pathological affects and acts to be entirely their own, or an anomaly of individual character, suicide in the novel becomes a collective “psychogenic epidemic” or a process that is “social in origin but physical in effect” (3). Produced by social interactions within the environment when affects from one person or group of people enter another, this epidemic aligns with modernist models of psychic contagion and the era’s legal and psychiatric views of suicide as an involuntary act.

III. “Fire fire, pour on water”25: Figuring Affective Transfer and Psychic Stress

In “Contagious Feelings,” Anna Gibbs argues that “bodies can catch feelings as easily as catch fire: affect leaps from one body to another, evoking tenderness, inciting shame, igniting

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25 A quote from Stan’s pre-suicide stream of consciousness (Dos Passos 214)
rage, exciting fear – in short, communicable affect can inflame nerves and muscles in a conflagration of every conceivable kind of passion” (1). This communicability of affect is highlighted in *Manhattan Transfer*, where what remains most transferrable between characters is psychic stress, figured throughout the novel as the real or imagined threat of fire. As Brian Massumi has noted, “the affective reality of threat is contagious” (58). Like a fire alarm, threat compels attention without content and produces an actual experience regardless of the necessary sign – i.e. the sight of a real fire (64). While the individual’s actual absorption by the crowd is unlikely, the affective threat of this absorption produces a contagious panic at the corporeal and psychic register, becoming more psychologically real the more panicked people become.

Given Gibbs’s figuration of affect as fire and Massumi’s example of threat as fire alarm, it is perhaps not surprising that the feverish overcrowding and overstimulation of the novel repeatedly culminate in the spectacle of fire and its uncontrollable transmission within and across vignettes. Not only used as a formal device to suture the vignettes of montage, the depiction of fire thematically contributes to the sense of impending contamination in the novel, and as several critics have noted, constitutes the psychological tension, or threat, at the heart of the text.26 By examining the city’s consumption of Bud Korpenning, Stan Emery, and Anna Cohen, we can see that *Manhattan Transfer*’s preoccupation with psychic contagion is deeply entrenched in the communicability of affect, and in modernist preoccupations with crowd psychology (or pathology) and the capability for individual agency therein. Linking these three deaths with their effects on main protagonists Jimmy Herf and Ellen Thatcher, we can also track the ways the novel figures suicide as a modern epidemic rooted in the transmission of affect from body to body – a sickness that generates isolationist fantasies of self-containment and self-willed action.

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26 E.g., Lisa Nanney, who writes that “The frequency of the intrusion of the fire engine suggests Dos Passos’ awareness of it not only as a vehicle for moving with continuity from one shot to another, but also as a sign of the nature of the city – a volatile, consuming power like fire” (165).
In addition to the uncontrollable transmission of somatic diseases, such as STDs and influenza, affect proliferates between the characters of *Manhattan Transfer*. Figured through the tenement fires that frequently ignite in the novel’s sensory background, affect passes between characters in much the same way as the literal conflagrations that reappear incessantly throughout the novel and marks contagion or transmission as the defining feature of urban life. Although in the light of dawn to certain characters the city merely appears “scorched as if a fire had gutted it,” New York City is in reality constantly on the verge of combustion and its aftermath, signaled by the “rails of fire escapes” and “ashcans” littering Broadway (33). In the first section alone, Ed Thatcher witnesses the horrific burning of a tenement building and its inhabitants directly after reading a newspaper article officially declaring New York the world’s second metropolis, and Emile and Madame Rigaud later witness a raging inferno across the street from their delicatessen (13, 96). Beyond indicating the susceptibility of the city to imminent destruction, fire directly threatens the human body when Anna Cohen bursts into flames in the novel’s final section, and likewise points to the psychic trauma of witnessing these combustions for other characters. For example, as a bystander to Anna’s horrific accident, Ellen Thatcher (our sometimes heroine) will feel that “The moaning turmoil and the clanging of the fireengines wont seem to fade away inside her” (338).

While fire often appears as background noise in the novel’s cinematic collage of sensory information, moments of high anxiety or emotion are almost always signaled by the appearance of fire trucks or sirens, such as when Stan tells Ellen he loves her or when Ellen aborts Stan’s child (182, 227). Susie Thatcher’s fear of being alone in her apartment transforms into a fear of

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27 Joe O’Keefe acquires syphilis overseas during the war while Uncle Jeff dies of the Spanish flu in New York. The text also makes reference to typhus (231), cholera (231), and cancer (250). More metaphorically, print itches Jimmy “like a rash inside me” (301).
28 For example, “A fire engine roars by” little Jimmy Herf when he first meets his relatives in New York, Stan Emery wants to paint his car “red like a fire engine,” etc. (59, 147).
fire that is not simply frightening, but maddening: “Suppose there’d been a fire. That terrible Chicago theater fire. Oh I’ll go mad!” (20). And even for children in the novel, fire comes to symbolize terror of the unfamiliar, as when Jimmy Herf’s growing pains transform into a fire engine in his dreams\cite{29} and when his son Martin substitutes the sirens of a fire engine for his own wailing and childish fear of the dark.\cite{30} While these examples showcase the way fire is closely associated with psychological terror, it is important to note that fire is likewise correlated with the human swarms of the city, and specifically their ability to crowd the individual. As noted above, Susie Thatcher specifically recalls a fire in which hundreds died, some trampled to death in their attempts to escape. Likewise, her daughter Ellen later echoes this fear of the swarm and aligns it with the sound of sirens during a party: “Men’s hands crawl like bugs on the unbreakable glass. Men’s looks blunder and flutter against it helpless as moths. But in deep pitblackness inside something clangs like a fire engine” (154).

Spreading from vignette to vignette, fire thus becomes an inescapable part of the city and an integral part of each character’s psychic existence. The kaleidoscope of characters who witness, dream of, and fear fires invokes a sense of modernist crisis through a collective, though often sublimated, terror of city life, and of the arsonist in particular. “Firebugs,” or those who commit arson, create a spectacle of unchecked proliferation and haunt the text as anomalous agents whose reason for acts of devastation is unknown but whose capacity for wreaking havoc is immense. Jimmy panics when “a man with a can of coaloil brushes past him” because “the thought of firebug gives him gooseflesh. Fire. Fire” (70). Yet, the fear of firebugs stems not only from their inexplicable motives, but also from an all-too familiar understanding of the pleasure

\begin{itemize}
  \item \cite{29} “His legs ached as if they’d fall off, and when he closed his eyes he was speeding through flaring blackness on a red fire engine that shot fire and sparks and colored balls out of its sizzling tail” (60).
  \item \cite{30} “From outside above the roar of wheels comes a strangling wail clutching his throat. Pyramids of dark piled above him fall crumpling on top of him…Nounou walks towards the crib along a saving gangplank of light. ‘Don’t you be scared…that aint nothing…Just a fire engine passing….You wouldn’t be sceered of a fire engine’” (316).
\end{itemize}
the spectacle of fire affords. Ed Thatcher runs in terror from the “tallowy sagging cheeks and bright popeyes” of the “firebug” who lights the tenement building near his home on fire and is unable to “forget the smell of coaloil on the man’s clothes” (13). However, like the firebug who “the papers say {} hang around like that to watch it,” Ed Thatcher also came out to view the show (13). Stan will later plead with Ellen, “Let’s go to the fire Ellie” (182), and in fact, throughout the narrative, fires are often well attended. “A crowd was jammed up against the policelines” outside Mme. Rigaud’s (96), and a crowd is likewise stationed outside Stan’s apartment building during his self-immolation (215). Ironically, Stan’s wife Pearline is thrilled at the prospect of witnessing this conflagration before she realizes it is her apartment and that her husband is still inside: “It was a fire. She sniffed the singed air. It gave her gooseflesh; she loved seeing fires” (215). The catalyst of a deadly inferno that spreads quickly through the city streets, firebugs become the origin of uncontrollable disorder in city space and are considered pathological by the other characters despite the fact that most share their pathological desire, if not their impetus for action. This strangely concomitant fear of fire and desire to witness its devastation becomes more understandable if we consider the ability of fire to destroy that worth saving as well as that which is perhaps more hazardous than fire itself. The fire escapes that litter the scenes of the novel overtly suggest the text’s solution to psychic stress – fire AS escape from those who have fallen ill to, or those who may still infect others with, psychic contagion.31

Previous criticism has noted how Manhattan Transfer utilizes both suicide and fire as motifs for prefiguring ends,32 but has rarely joined them together in a thorough analysis of

31 Fire escapes often function ironically in the text, never as escape routes from actual fires, but from awkward social situations (e.g., in the case of Oglethorpe discovering Stan and Ellen’s affair {166}).
32 Iain Colley writes that “Fire and fire-engines are the central and unifying metaphors of Manhattan Transfer” in that “they symbolize the threat of apocalyptic destruction, and the panicky and unavailing human efforts to avert it” (50). Likewise, Ed Lowry notes that “the symbolic drama of the fire engines which throughout Manhattan Transfer combat the Heraclitean fires of disordered change is central to Dos Passos’ meaning” (1634).
suicide within the novel. Phillip Arrington’s focus on the fire engine as a symbol of illness, death, and destruction proves one exception, but Arrington reads the novel’s many suicides and fatal accidents as symptomatic of “America’s crumbling myth” (439). Like Babylon and Nineveh (other cities referenced in the text), New York City will be destroyed by its own decadent success (439). The confluence of fire and self-harm represents the apocalyptic flames that signal ends as well as potential renewals, and like Iain Colley (51), Arrington believes this “Apocalypse is writ small, in Bud Korpenning’s suicide, Stan’s self-destruction, Anna’s disfigurement—in short, in the destruction of individuals rather than the City, or the whole world, itself” (442). Ultimately, in these critics’ readings, the three spectacular deaths that end each of the novel’s three sections work together as a representation of the slow death of the city rather than as a sustained analysis of the suicidal impulse. Following the common assignation of Dos Passos as cultural critic, they engage with Dos Passos’ unique depiction of the city as a place in both “historical (diachronic) and mythic (synchronic)” terms and provide insightful readings of the novel’s preoccupation with fire (Harding 128). However, Colley, Arrington, and others problematically overlook Dos Passos’ engagement with the details of individual character experience by conflating suicides and accidents and by glossing them both as simply indicative of a deeply flawed American socio-political system. In order to truly examine the role of suicide in the novel as well as the specific ways Manhattan Transfer figures fire as the affective transfer that becomes its catalyst, one must closely examine the depictions of fire in individual suicides throughout the text.

IV. “I want to go byby”33: The Isolationist Fantasies of Bud, Stan, and Anna

A link between crowds, contagion, and suicide is forged from the very outset of the novel through the alignment of Ellis Island immigrants and city outsider Bud Korpenning. The first

33 Stan Emery to Ellen Thatcher (Dos Passos 178)
chapter begins with an epigraph describing the “broken boxes, orangerinds, spoiled cabbage heads” that float under the Ellis Island ferry where newly arriving immigrants are “crushed and jostling like apples fed down a shoot into a press” (3). Jointly littering the entrance to New York City, actual refuse and the “undesirables” of the human population are pressed together, signaling the mingling of dirt or garbage inherent in public proximity and gesturing towards the transmission of germs through the “manuresmelling wooden tunnel of the ferryhouse,” or through both literal and metaphorical foreign bodies. The first vignette of the novel depicts the hospital where newborn (but unnamed) Ellen is birthed and where the “air {is} tinctured with smells of alcohol and iodoform,” or disinfectants (3). And in the second, longer vignette, readers are introduced to Bud Korpenning, the first named character of the novel, and likewise the character whose suicide at the end of the first section frames the entire narrative. Thus, in a concatenation resembling the pathway of an epidemic, the novel immediately moves from heaps of refuse, to uncomfortable propinquity and foreign bodies, to the hospital, and then to the figure of the suicide, or death. Spreading across the white spaces between each vignette, infection is already implicated in psychological, as well as somatic, pathology, and the city’s desire to sterilize, or to eliminate threatening bodies, appears as a latent aspiration.

This introduction to Bud is the novel’s first gesture towards contagious transmission – a gesture that increasingly articulates a psychological epidemic as the novel progresses. The crowding of bodies within physical space sends the least psychologically prepared characters into a fantasy of self-containment as a form of self-protection, yet these fantasies of isolation and bodily integrity incessantly end in psychic collapse and suicide. Bud is “pushed forward among the crowd through the ferryhouse” upon entering the city and already views the “expanse of river bright as knifeblades” (4). The brightness of reflected light as well as the tangled connotations of
both violence and purification in the river imagery foreshadow Bud’s impending doom. Moreover, Bud experiences his first intrusive fantasy, a flashback to his patricide, amidst the text’s overt signaling of the crowded and contagious urban environment. To Bud “the air smells of crowds” (16), or “the rancid sweet huddled smell of packed tenements” (9). And in the early pages of the novel, the foreign germ emerges again and again, emitting “a stale smell…from the tubby steamer” on which the immigrants enter New York City in impossibly crowded conditions (41). “All along the rails there were faces; in the portholes there were faces” and “the decks are black with people” on the transport ships where men and women wait beneath the ominous “drooping” of the “quarantine flag” (41, 53).

Driven to the city from rural upstate New York in order to avoid prosecution for his father’s murder, Bud chaperones readers into the modern metropolis. Entering the city alone, he plans to avoid the authorities by becoming “a needle in a haystack” within the city’s teeming streets (16). Incessantly repeating his desire “to get to the center of things” (4, 21), he is seen perpetually walking “further downtown towards the center of things where it’d be more crowded” (37). Yet, the more he seeks immersion, the more Bud is bombarded with threatening signals from his social surround. The most psychologically affecting of these is the attempted suicide Bud witnesses through a cab window where a “man in a brown derby hat… jerked a revolver up to his mouth” (51). At the sound of the shot, “The horses reared and plunged in the middle of a shoving crowd,” prompting the psychological terror that Bud will feel when he sees the man’s “head hanging limp over his checked vest” (51). While the present-tense action of the man “vomiting blood” fails to reveal whether this instance is a suicide brought to completion, the attempt in itself strongly affects Bud, invoking his own recent patricide: “His knees trembled. He got to the edge of the crowd and walked away trembling” (51). Like the panic-stricken horses
that attempt to flee, Bud walks away from the gathering crowd in order to contain and control the trembling. Affected at both the somatic and psychological level, his physical crowding is subtly aligned with psychological claustrophobia— a tension that can only be relieved by exiting.

This episode hints at the circularity of the novel’s social system (evinced by numerous references to revolving doors, squirrel cages, treadmills, etc. 34) in which the violent, or sick, individual calls forth a crowd—a crowd which then threatens to contaminate, or inundate, Bud and others with unwelcome psychic repercussions. Within these crowds, Bud is presented by a discomforting barrage of newspaper headlines, such as the newspaper article about young Nathan Sibbetts who “ADmits KILLING CRIPPLED MOTHER” (15), which reminds him of his deviant past. Moreover, Bud’s immersion within the city disconnects him from meaningful social ties with others as it simultaneously overcrowds him. Two short vignettes reveal Bud as shortchanged and derided by a woman who asks him to carry coal for her and as overtly ridiculed by a man who tells Bud to go ask the mayor for a job. With no work and no meaningful social contact, Bud quickly sinks into poverty and starvation, and is unable to mentally distract himself from the overwhelming possibility of capture. Leaving the one job he does find as a dishwasher when “a man in a brown derby,” who he mistakes for “one o them detectives,” enters the restaurant, Bud begins to show the hallmarks of paranoia (36, 37). Experiencing increasing feelings of persecution that reinforce his feelings of singularity and importance, Bud succumbs to paranoia’s foundational “fantasy of social recognition” (Trotter 103), and comes to associate the “brown derby” with his surveillance, arrest, and more importantly, suicide.

Overwhelmed by reminders of his patricide and the threat of homelessness and starvation, Bud arrives at his most mentally unstable condition when he is most immersed in the

34 Perhaps Jimmy Herf says it best: “my motion is circular, helpless and confoundedly discouraging” (148).
city. Spending his last night in a homeless shelter brimming over with other outcasts like himself, Bud begins to suffer from hallucinations that detectives fill the already crowded room, watching him and listening in on his conversations. Of course, the detectives of Bud’s fantasies are linked back to the man who attempts suicide by the brown derby hat, and the affective impact of this visual cue infiltrates Bud’s hallucinations in which he sees “standing there a man in a derby hat with a cigar in his mouth” (103). As he explains to one of the other bums, “I get scared here. Too many bulls an detectives in this town” (102). Yet, while Bud claims “there’s detectives follow me all round, men in derbyhats with badges under their coats,” he also claims that it is not only the detectives he is worried about: “Last night I wanted to go with a hooker an she saw it in my eyes an throwed me out…She could see it in my eyes” (103). The fear prompted by Bud’s persecutors is revealed in Bud’s own affect as the look in his eyes betrays him, signaling a cascade of powerful affective signals that threaten to leak Bud’s closely held knowledge of his crime. As with the prostitute, Bud mistakenly assumes that the Bum to whom he eventually reveals his parricide is another informant and, consequently, flees the homeless shelter the next morning.

After this departure, Bud’s paranoia immediately intensifies, and significantly, his sense of physical crowding is paralleled by increasing references to fire, or psychic contagion. As Bud leaves the shelter, he sees another “man in a derby hat” as the sun rises, glowing “the way iron starts to glow in a forge” (104). As downtown is “brightening” and growing “pearl, warming,” Bud imagines, “they’re all of em detectives chasin me, all of em, men in derbies, bums on the Bowery, old women in kitchens, barkeeps, streetcar conductors, bulls, hookers, sailors, longshoreman, stiffs in employment agencies” (105). It is only when this litany ends and Bud sees the smoke over the river as “fleshpink climbed into light” that he realizes he “can’t go
nowhere now” and that the river appears “smooth, sleek as a blue-steel gunbarrel” (105). His suicidal impulse driven by the crowd of working class individuals who each function as a stand-in for the suicidal man in the brown derby, Bud comes to feel threatened by his successful immersion in the population he once sought to lose himself in – a threat signaled by the sunrise and its veiled likeness to the brightness, warmth, and light of a fire.

Here Bud overtly begins to suffer from what Dos Passos’ contemporary Georg Simmel described as “overwhelming social forces” (Simmel 409), or what we might describe as the overpowering, confusing, and highly enigmatic affective resonances of his social surround. Teresa Brennan argues that affects drive fantasies, and, as Lauren Berlant suggests, they may also create “a sense of affective coherence to what is incoherent and contradictory in the subject” (Desire 75). Thus, while the threatening affective cues Bud experiences may initiate his involuntary pre-suicide fantasy, stripping him of psychic autonomy, this fantasy nonetheless becomes a foundation of order by binding the incoherencies of self that lead to his psychic destabilization. Though we can see how social contact is the crucial impetus for fantasy, or the protective, psychological burrowing, which allows individuals to both isolate themselves from a threatening surround and to imagine a certain amount of bodily and psychic integrity, we will also see that mental collapse ensues for Bud (and later, for Stan and Anna) when fantasy fails to bind this affective excess.

For, within Bud’s profound paranoia, he experiences a pre-suicide fantasy that incorporates the novel’s leitmotif of fire, foregrounding a psychic contamination via affect and an unconscious attempt to bind its destabilizing effect. Immediately after his hopeless thought, “can’t go nowhere now,” and a paragraph break, a stream of images bursts into the narrative, indicating Bud’s involuntary experience of the fantasy rather than his active construction of it:
In a swallowtail suit with a gold watchchain and a red seal ring riding to his wedding beside Maria Sackett, riding in a carriage to City Hall with four white horses to be made an alderman by the mayor; and the light grows behind them brighter and brighter, riding in satins and silks to his wedding, riding in pinkplush in a white carriage with Maria Sackett by his side through rows of men waving cigars, bowing, doffing brown derbies, Alderman Bud riding in a carriage full of diamonds with his milliondollar bride…. Bud is sitting on the rail of the bridge. The sun has risen behind Brooklyn. The windows of Manhattan have caught fire. He jerks himself forward, slips, dangles by a hand with the sun in his eyes. The yell strangles in his throat as he drops. (105)

In this true “fantasy of social recognition,” Bud’s desire is expressed through repetitive parallel clauses beginning with “riding” – clauses that, as they repeat, also escalate Bud’s wealth and success and indicate that he has found work capable of sustaining himself above the poverty-stricken masses. The carriage of four white horses immediately signals the entry into fantasy and fairytale, and the wealth signaled by the gold watchchain and ring quickly become satins and silks before Bud is showered in professional male adoration by a parade of doffing derbies, and finally depicted as sitting in a “carriage full of diamonds” with a new “milliondollar” version of his bride, Maria Sackett. Propelled to greater and greater financial and social success, Bud does not register the significance of the red seal ring, the pinkplush of the carriage, or the light behind them that grows “brighter and brighter” – adjectives that, as noted above, formed a part of his conscious awareness in the moments just before the irruption of his pre-suicide fantasy into consciousness. While it becomes obvious to the reader upon exiting Bud’s daydream that these colors are most likely influenced by the sunrise, it also becomes retroactively clear that these colors likewise suggest fire, and thus the danger of Bud’s mental state. In fact, only when “the
Like the fires that consume Manhattan’s claustrophobic spaces, Bud’s death-drive is fueled by the escalating proximity of the city’s inhabitants, and it is precisely Bud’s over-communication with the social environment, or his extreme excitation by the population and its affective transmissions, that leads to his demise. David Trotter writes that paranoia is fundamentally related to a fear of contamination by foreign matter, which may ultimately exert psychic control and limit the agency of the individual (68). Often driving the paranoiac toward isolation, this fear is rooted in a lack of both bodily and psychic integrity, or containment (68).

Bud’s isolation from the masses is precisely what drives the narrative core of the fantasy, resulting in his elevation from the common street-level of the derbies to the wealth, social status, and professional importance of the horse-drawn carriage. Yet, while a fear of proximity is precisely what drives Bud’s escapist fantasy, that same proximity becomes an inescapable presence within the fantasy itself. The reappearance of the suicidal man’s derby hat suggests the overwhelming threat of annihilation by crowding out even within this hallucination. Moreover, Maria Sackett’s inclusion signals Bud’s attempted escape from the crowded streets to the isolation of “Sackett’s woods” where he and Maria spoke of the dreams they shared for a life in New York City before Bud’s parricide and forced removal from the country. The death of past dreams is therefore sublimated in Bud’s final fantasy – a replacement fantasy that, as the ellipses indicate, has its vanishing point suicide.

Hence, it is important to note that Bud dies not from social detachment, but from his attempt to achieve it. Moreover, the sunset flashing off the windows of Manhattan has been previously associated with the easing of pain for Bud:
The light of the sunset flamed in the windows of factories on the Long Island side, flashed in the portholes of tugs, lay in swaths of curling yellow and orange over the swift browngreen water, glowed on the curved sails of a schooner that was slowly bucking the tide up into Hell Gate. Inside him the pain was less. Something flamed and glowed like the sunset seeping through his body. He sat up. Thank Gawd I aint agoin to lose it. (55)

Keeping himself from vomiting, Bud re-establishes bodily integrity, or containment, in a way that I would suggest foreshadows his later attempt at psychic containment in suicide. While fire throughout *Manhattan Transfer* often signals the inescapability of contagion, it is also aligned here with self-containment in a way that hints at its redemptive value. The flash of light off Manhattan’s windows again just before Bud’s suicide takes this redemption further by suggesting the purification possible in annihilation by fire. Therefore, while this flash indicates the impossibility of Bud’s escape from psychic crowding, it also directly leads to Bud’s cleansing and isolation by his subsequent drop into the water, or the “fire that purifies” (117).

Importantly, this flash of fire, serving as both an indication of psychic contamination and a method of purification, highlights the passivity of the suicidal act. “The windows of Manhattan have caught fire” employs a passive construction that indicates the unchecked spread of Bud’s contagious “suicidal impulse.” Furthermore, when “He jerks himself forward, slips, dangles,” Bud becomes the subject “he” which acts on the object of “himself.” This split referentiality is inherent in the suicidal gesture of taking oneself as object, and Bud’s objectivity (and lack of agency) escalates from the moment he “jerks” (an ambiguous verb in itself, connoting the uncontrollable epileptic seizures modernists associated with suicidal acts). “Slips” and “dangles” both connote a lack of voluntary action, or a helplessness usually associated with accident. Likewise, “the yell strangles in his throat as he drops” takes a disembodied “yell” as its subject –
a yell that seems to originate from outside Bud even as it is suppressed within his throat as he passively “drops” rather than “jumps.” Driven by the desire to isolate himself from the overcrowding of Manhattan, epitomized in the sunrise over the city and the raging fires of negative affect, or psychic stress, Bud’s suicide entails the passivity of falling prey to an epidemic and showcases the suicidal impulse’s dependency on affective transmission.

Although there are several mentions of suicide throughout the text, Bud Korpenning’s suicide and Stan Emery’s self-immolation are the most detailed and the most central depictions, leading the reader into the city (in the case of Bud) and finding the city’s swarming center (in the case of Stan). In both instances, the proximity of social life, or the overabundance of contact and communication, becomes a threat that must be stifled through escapist fantasy which ultimately results in suicide. Within the associative logic of the novel, fire comes to signal first the uncontrollable transmission of both somatic and psychic damage in city life and then its escape through purification and isolation.

Yet, if Bud hints at the association between claustrophobia and psychological breakdown (and the way fire mediates this relationship), Stan Emery, whose suicide ends the second section of the novel, depicts this association even more overtly. Unlike Bud, Stan has wealth, status, and the makings of an “aesthete-playboy” (Colley 53). A depressive alcoholic, he appears rarely throughout the first half of the novel, speaking cryptically to the novel’s more central characters and spending most of his time in drunken debauchery and in half-heartedly wooing Ellen Thatcher. However, Stan suffers a rare moment of sobriety and introspection the night before his suicide after he is thrown out of the Louis Expresso Association’s annual dance: “Stan jumps

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35 Tony Hunter threatens to kill himself during a late night discussion with Jimmy Herf (197), an outing to a night club is haunted by the “Santa Claus” killer who murders his daughter nearby and eventually “SLAYS SELF WITH SHOTGUN” (200), and as Arrington has noted, later Jimmy’s friend “Martin {Schiff} threatens suicide against the alarming background of a siren” (Arrington 441; 306).
with his eyes closed into a thicket of fists. He’s slammed in the eye, in the jaw, shoots like out of a gun out into the drizzling cool silent street” (212). Here, Stan’s jump into the “fists” achieves complete crowd immersion and likewise gestures towards Bud’s fatal fall. Moreover, the gun imagery invokes Bud’s morose depiction of the river before his suicide and is followed by Stan’s journey across the river by ferry. And again, like Bud, Stan experiences paranoid hallucinations in his final hours. When he finally regains consciousness, Stan encounters a moment of non-identity when he must remind himself of who he is:

I’m having DT’s. Who am I? Where am I? City of New York, State of New York….Stanwood Emery age twentytwo occupation student….Pearline Anderson twentyone occupation actress. To hell with her. Gosh I’ve got fortynine dollars and eight cents and where the hell have I been? And nobody rolled me? Why I haven’t got the DT’s at all. I feel fine, only a little delicate. All I need’s a little drink, don’t you? Hello, I thought there was somebody here. I guess I better shut up. (212)

Thus, like Bud, Stan hallucinates nonexistent bystanders, but suffers an emptying out of personhood to an even greater degree. Although he rejects the purifying river, his suicide at this point in the narrative clearly seems aimed at the affective incoherence emerging from within, and in many ways, shows an escalation of Bud’s suicidal symptoms.

Subject to the same crowding out and affective infection as Bud, Stan’s mental decline is primarily represented by the novel’s heightened self-reflexivity in the moments before his suicide. Within the page immediately preceding Stan’s death, the fairly lengthy epigraphs from the beginning of the first and second chapters of the novel are repeated almost verbatim right after one another, separated only by Stan’s drunken rendition of a few lines from a popular song.

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36 Every chapter of the novel begins with a short epigraph that functions as a condensed sensory depiction of the city—a predecessor to the “camera eye” passages that Dos Passos will later use in the *U.S.A. Trilogy*. 
Stan sits down on a bench to calm his DT’s, halting the flow of self-reflexive repetition, but the novel nonetheless begins turning inward on itself, entering Stan’s stream-of-consciousness and recapitulating the epigraphs that relate to the disgusting and claustrophobic conditions of the Ellis Island ferry and the destruction of Babylon and Nineveh – the doomed human swarms and their detritus which open the first chapters of the novel. It is crucial to note that this avalanche of self-reflexivity appears nowhere else in the novel, thus pointing to the core of the text and simultaneously highlighting the significance of Stan’s death in its interpretation as a whole.

If the appearance of fire in Bud’s suicide pointed to the psychological tension caused by proximity, then the flames in Stan’s suicide actualize this potential. Just before Stan sees “a million windows flash{} with light” in a way that echoes “the windows of Manhattan {which catch} fire” before Bud’s suicide, he gazes at an “Ellis Island tug” where “a stale smell came from the decks packed with upturned faces like a load of melons” (213, 105). This depiction of “packed” claustrophobia, and particularly the smell of the inhabitants from the Ellis Island tug, echoes the novel’s opening sequence (and its references to infection) and is reminiscent of Bud’s fear of contamination. The “broken boxes, spoiled cabbageheads, orangerinds,” or the refuse introducing the first chapter in the novel, reappears and the focus on contamination is directly linked with Stan when he “step{s} across the crack, stagger{s} up the manuresmelling wooden tunnel of the ferryhouse” (213). The ferryhouse, which has before been associated with foreign bodies (“the immigrants that lingered in the ferry house” [64]), is not only linked with manure and infection, but has now transformed Stan into a carrier of contagion. As in the beginning of the novel, this threat of bodily, and ultimately psychic, corruption is signaled through smell, and this noxious smell significantly reappears in the moments directly before Stan’s actual suicide.37

37 Brennan notes that while the modernists specifically privilege sight as conveying affect (as we can see in Bud’s view of the derbies), smell is perhaps the primary agent of affective transfer (57).
First made apparent in Stan’s disgust as he enters the apartment, this fear of the masses is re-invoked by the smell of Pearline: “It smelled funny, Pearline’s smell, to hell with it” (214). However, this disgust rapidly escalates as Stan starts the fire that will destroy him:

The street stood up on end. A hookandladder and a fire engine were climbing it lickety-split trailing a droning siren shriek. *Fire fire, pour on water, Scotland’s burning.* A thousand dollar fire, a hundred thousand dollar fire, a million dollar fire. Skyscrapers go up like flames, in flames, flames. He spun back into the room. The table turned a somersault. The china closet jumped on the table. Oak chairs climbed on top to the gas jet. *Pour on water, Scotland’s burning.* Don’t like the smell in this place in the City of New York, County of New York, State of New York. He lay on his back on the floor of the revolving kitchen and laughed and laughed. The only man who survived the flood rode a great lady on a white horse. Up in flames, up, up. Kerosine whispered a greasy faced can in the corner of the kitchen. *Pour on water.* He stood swaying on the crackling upside down chairs on the upside down table. The kerosene licked him with a white cold tongue. He pitched, grabbed the gas jet, the gas jet gave way, he lay in a puddle on his back striking matches, wet wouldn’t light. A match spluttered, lit; he held the flame carefully between his hands. (214)

The smell of the crowded domestic space transforms into the smell of the crowded inhabitants in New York, inciting Stan’s delirious laughter and perhaps explaining his mysterious one-line pre-suicide fantasy, “Kerist I wish I was a skyscraper” (214).³⁸ To tower isolated above the masses is Stan’s briefly stated fantasy, and like Bud’s carriage dream, it also emphasizes isolation. Yet, in the lines above, during the suicide attempt itself, Stan recognizes that “skyscrapers go up like

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³⁸ Like Bud’s fantasy, this wish intrudes on the text with the single line separated by white space on both sides, indicating the eruption of an involuntary fantasy into consciousness.
flames, in flames, flames” – that he, too, is inevitably unable to escape the proximity of the masses and the “smell in this place in the City of New York.” His grandiosity, different than Bud’s, lies in setting the “million dollar fire” that will consume these masses in conjunction with himself. The repetition of “fire,” “flames,” “burning,” “New York,” and “gasjet” and the circularity of Stan’s “revolving” movements throughout this short section mimic the novel’s earlier self-reflexivity of epigraphs, verbally re-enacting the proliferation of flames from wall to wall (or phrase to phrase) that both results from and solves Stan’s paralyzing fear of proximity.

Thus, rather than elide the dying process, here modernist self-reflexivity actually signals death, or the turning inward on oneself that constitutes the suicidal act. When Stan sings to amuse himself as the apartment is engulfed in flames (“the only man who survived the flood rode a great lady on a white horse”) he mixes the lyrics of two songs, which have both have occurred earlier in the novel and reference previous chapter titles.39 The Jack of the Isthmus song appears immediately before his pre-suicide wish to be a skyscraper, and thereby further exemplifies his desire for isolation, and more overtly, purification, or absolution. For, like Jack, Stan wishes to stand tall above the flood of feeling engendered by the threatening masses. Furthermore, the linguistic circularity of the death scene and Stan’s devolution into fits of laughter help us see that an affective feedback loop gone haywire is at the core of this modernist narration of breakdown. Faced with an irresolvable incoherence, one that is instigated primary by his interactions with other psychically stressed city dwellers, Stan is unable to contain the highly affective resonances of the metropolis in fantasy alone. Firebug and suicide both, his final act evokes more than just the decadence of a doomed city, but instead a particular rejection of, and desire to purify oneself from, physical and psychic contact with others.

39 Arrington points out this mix between the “white lady upon a great horse” and the “Jack of the Isthmus” song (439), both of which are reminiscent of Ellen, who discusses them with Stan at various points in the novel.
Of course, the text also highlights Stan’s lack of agency in suicide, particularly by endowing non-autonomous objects with desires and intention and by omitting Stan’s final act of lighting the kerosene. When Stan first enters the apartment, “the lock spun round in a circle to keep out the key” (214). Here the lock seems to be endowed with intentionality in that it spins round in order to keep Stan from entering. When Stan picks up a chair and crashes it through the window, “the chair wanted to fly,” and when Stan looks out the window, “The street stood up on end” and “a hook and ladder and a fire engine were climbing it lickety-split.” While the inversion of the street, ladder, and engine reveals a type of reversal related to a modernist self-reflexive world turning inward on itself, it also highlights the active production of desire and agency by objects usually perceived as things to be acted upon rather than actors themselves. In place of the firemen who are driving the truck and bringing the “hook and ladder,” the objects appear to generate their own movement. The agency of objects only intensifies as Stan’s actual death approaches. Objects moved by the flames (or by Stan) seem to move of their own accord: “the table turned a somersault. The chinacloset jumped on the table. Oak chairs climbed on top to the gas jet.” Yet, while we see Stan “lay in a puddle on his back striking matches” and “the kerosene lick{} him with a white cold tongue,” the first creation of fire in the reader’s eyes renders Stan passive – “a match spluttered, lit; he held the flame carefully between his hands” (214). The match is lit by no one, and Stan remains its motionless vessel. The paragraph ends with white space on the page before moving into the next vignette about Stan’s wife Pearline, thus eliding the individual act of self-destruction if not a depiction of suicide itself. Like Bud, in lighting the skyscraper that he imagines to be himself on fire, Stan takes himself as object – a passive recipient of psychic infection from the affects of a brimming metropolis.
Although an accident rather than a suicide, Anna Cohen’s combustion constitutes the major fire which ends the third section of the novel and comments most emphatically on the fates of the novel’s two main protagonists, Ellen and Jimmy. I consider her here with the two main suicides because her accident acts as the crucial, final frame to the narrative’s three sections and takes the passivity of psychic contagion and self-destruction to its extreme, (ill)ogical conclusion. Although technically not a suicide, Anna Cohen joins the novel’s list of characters who suffer horrible accidents fantasizing about isolation: Gus McNeil is hit by a train while driving across the tracks, daydreaming about his wife and moving West (40); Phil Sandbourne gets hit by a car daydreaming about leaving the crowded streets to get in a car with a girl he has just seen (144); and, as already shown, Bud commits suicide while daydreaming of being rich and getting married while Stan kills himself to the fantasy of being a skyscraper (105, 215).

Like those who came before her, Anna Cohen will come to harm daydreaming about isolation through ascension, though she dreams of Bud’s financial and social elevation rather than Stan’s more material manifestation. Stitching in the close quarters of the textile shop, Anna is a hardworking girl with no inkling of the degeneracy that could be argued for Bud and Stan, yet thoughts of her boyfriend Elmer and his revolutionary ideals send her into isolationist fantasy:

…Elmer in a telephone central in a dinnercoat, with eartabs, tall as Valentino, strong as Doug. The Revolution is declared. The Red Guard is marching up Fifth Avenue. Anna in golden curls with a little kitten under her arms leans with him out of the tallest window. White tumbler pigeons flutter against the city below them. Fifth Avenue bleeding red flags, glittering with marching bands, hoarse voices singing Die Rote Fahne in Yiddish; far away, from the Woolworth a banner shakes into the wind. “Look Elmer darling”
ELMER DUSKIN FOR MAYOR. And they’re dancing the Charleston in all the officebuildings. . . . *Thump. Thump. That Charleston dance. . . Thump. Thump.*

Perhaps I do love him. Elmer take me. Elmer, loving as Valentino, crushing me to him with Doug’s strong arms, hot as flame, Elmer. (337)

Like Bud, Anna’s fantasy revolves around the accomplishment of wealth, indicated by Elmer’s upper class “dinnercoat” and his transition from a working class laborer and party member to the leader of a revolution, and eventually, mayor. However, just as in Bud’s dream, Anna’s fascination with ascension causes her to ignore the warning signals of a “Red Guard,” the “bleeding red flags,” the “crushing” and “strong arms, hot as flame.”

Only when Anna surfaces from her daydream, do readers realize that she, like so many other before her, is the victim of a fire:

Through the dream she is stitching white fingers beckon. The white tulle shines too bright. Red hands clutch suddenly out of the tulle, she can’t fight off the red tulle all round her biting into her, coiled about her head. The skylight’s blackened with swirling smoke. The room’s full of smoke and screaming. Anna is on her feet whirling round fighting with her hands the burning tulle all around her. (337)

Like the objects in Stan’s apartment, the tulle seems to come to life as it “bits into her” and “coils about her head.” Nevertheless, the fire’s personification is heightened in Anna’s accident, moving from “licking” the kerosene cans in Stan’s apartment to having “red hands” that “clutch” at Anna with a strength “she can’t fight off.” The triumph of a red revolution is smothered with the “red tulle” that burns “all around her,” notably bringing Dos Passos’ political agenda to bear on the text, but also indicating a smothering of the individual by the spreading social ills of capitalism. The claustrophobia of Bud’s and Stan’s suicides is heightened here as
Anna is engulfed by the psychic stress as fire motif. As the passive victim of the third major fire in the novel, it is important to note that fire in this last section has progressed to a destruction of the “innocent.” No longer the instigator or instrument of self-harm, fire enacts a contagious spread to a character caught in the same fantastical imaginings as Bud and Stan but without any paranoia or aforementioned fear of the contamination of the masses – a socialist character.

This political bent is important given the text’s progressively more overt focus on eliminating the undesirable foreign bodies from American territory. The last section of “Rejoining City that Dwelt Carelessly” describes the deportation of the Reds Anna Cohen believes in, and these political dissidents are aligned with infection of the national body. In response to the waving of red handkerchiefs on the ferry, “people tiptoe gently to the edge of the walk, tiptoeing, quiet like in a sick room” (247). And, as an anonymous voice tells us, “they are sending the Reds back to Russia…Deportees…Agitators…Undesirables” (246-47). It is likewise important to note that Anna’s accident is framed mostly through the eyes of Ellen, who is visiting the textile store to buy dresses, and is preceded by the same human swarms that accost Bud and Stan. Earlier in the narrative Ellen has been assaulted by the “squalid smell like moldy bread” which comes off the children in Tomkins Square: “At her feet a squirming heap of small boys, dirty torn shirts, slobbering mouths, punching, biting, scratching; a squalid smell like moldy bread comes from them. Ellen all of a sudden feels her knees weak under her. She turns and walks back the way she came” (204). Physically weakened by the smell of crowded bodies, Ellen flees the scene just as she does before Anna’s conflagration. Immediately before entering the store, Ellen encounters the same smells of dirt and propinquity:

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40 This shift in viewpoint is similar to Pearlne’s depiction of Stan’s suicide as she arrives on the scene and to Captain McAvoy’s framing of Bud’s suicide from his perspective on a boat a few yards away.
The whistle blew, gears ground as cars started to pour out of the side streets, the crossing thronged with people. Ellen felt the lad brush against her as he crossed at her side. She shrank away. Through the smell of the arbutus she caught for a second the unwashed smell of his body, the smell of immigrants, of Ellis Island, of crowded tenements. Under all the nickelplated, goldplated streets enameled with May, uneasily she could feel the huddling smell, spreading in dark slow crouching masses like corruption oozing from broken sewers, like a mob. (335)

These lines harbor the novel’s most overt expression of fear of proximity and contagion as Ellen actually touches, and is repulsed by, a body which suggests to her the other bodies packed tight into Ellis Island and the tenements that so often go up in flames. The “huddling smell” which she feels “spreading” through the “masses” and “mob” like a “corruption oozing from broken sewers” is indicative of her fear of an unchecked spread of infection – a sullying influence that lurks beneath the shining varnish of “nickelplated, goldplated streets enameled with May” and threatens to follow her into the door she enters “beside a small immaculately polished brass plate” (335). Attempting to keep her pristine world separate from the soiled, claustrophobic living conditions of the lower classes, Ellen fails to enact separation within her psyche.

Beyond physical proximity and somatic disease, Ellen’s strange empathy with Anna in this section of the novel reveals a type of psychic transmission, almost as if her fear of the huddled masses leads to Anna’s combustion and her accident by fire. Ellen foreshadows the smothering heat from the burning tulle of Anna’s fire almost immediately after she has entered Madame Soubrine’s store: “Ellen suddenly felt hot, tangled in some prickly web, a horrible stuffiness of dyed silks and crêpes and muslins was making her head ache” (336). When Anna catches fire, the narrative immediately shifts to Ellen looking at herself in the fitting room
mirror, sensing her reflection is in danger. Investigating the back of the store, Ellen finds “something moaning out of the charred goods,” an “arm in shreds, a seared black red face, a horrible naked head” (337). As witness to Anna’s body being pulled from the blaze, she “tries to puzzle out why she is so moved” and feels “as if some part of her were going to be wrapped in bandages, carried away on a stretcher” (338). After the fire engines arrive and the police beat back the gathering crowds, this extreme empathy and identification with Anna pursues Ellen as she flees the scene, for “The moaning turmoil and the clanging of the fireengines wont seem to fade away inside her” (338). The affective impact of Anna on Ellen and her mysterious last question to readers, “What did I forget in the taxicab?” (339), suggests something psychic never to be retrieved – an uncompleted, or failed, attempt at psychic escapism through self-destruction that will keep Ellen tied to the masses of the city while Jimmy is free to escape them.41

V. “I must explain it. It’s a system.”42: Jimmy, The City, and Modernity’s Foundational Fantasy

Unlike Bud, whose suicide invokes the psychological tension signaled by fire, Stan Emery actually kills himself with flames, joining the conflagration symbolic of psychic tension to its instantiation at the novel’s very heart. In both depictions of suicide and in the depiction of Anna’s accident through Ellen’s eyes, fire appears as a signal of psychic contagion – of the inescapable proximity of urban inhabitants and the potential for destruction inherent in that propinquity – and as a potential method of purification. The deadly spectacles that end each section of the novel are preceded by an isolationist fantasy that removes the character from the affective transmission of the city, but the suicidal gestures these fantasies incite notably fail to reestablish the autonomy of the individual subject or to reduce psychic stress.

41 In her chapter “Manhattan Transfer and ‘The Center of Things,’” Janet Galligani Casey claims that both women have social guilt due to class status as well as a shared sense of cultural devaluation based in gender. They are historically tied in a way that Bud and Stan are not, which may work towards explaining the heightened affective transfer we see here.
42 Ellen to George Baldwin (317)
However, in order to accomplish these aims, the text does suggest an alternative “ending.” Unlike Bud, Stan, and Anna (supporting members of the novel’s vast cast of characters), the main protagonist Jimmy Herf does not submit to the novel’s suicide epidemic. Although Jimmy contemplates suicide earlier in the novel when he tells Congo Jake, “If I were sufficiently romantic I suppose I’d have killed myself long ago just to make people talk about me,” he avoids becoming a suicidal spectacle (325). After telling Ellen, “I might go berserk on you too someday,” Herf may have “gone crazy,” developed “amnesia,” or contracted “some disease with a long Greek name” by the end of the novel (224, 341). Nonetheless, his self-exile from the “smoking rubbishpiles” of New York City suggests a possible way out of the city’s psychic contamination as well as the potential to physically leave its conflagration behind (342).

Yet, how is it that Jimmy is able to escape the mass epidemic that inflames Manhattan Transfer? Unlike the other characters in the novel, Jimmy is an upper-class male artist figure, and a stand-in for Dos Passos himself. While his membership in an elite social class may inherently protect Jimmy from contamination, like Bud, Stan, and Ellen/Anna, Jimmy often encounters foreign bodies that threaten his somatic integrity. His narrative begins with his entrance to the city by boat and mimics the first epigraph and the contamination of the Ellis Island immigrants: “Streak of water crusted with splinters, groceryboxes, orangepeel, cabbageleaves, narrowing, narrowing between the boat and the dock” (58). Soon after, the cab taking Jimmy and his mother to the hotel pulls up to a square “smelling of asphalt and crowds” (59), immersing him within the smells that so assault Stan and Ellen as adults. Jimmy also encounters psychic stress in both its positive and negative connotations, as a witness to the raging infernos that spread throughout the city streets as both a child and an adult. And, moreover, both Ellen and Jimmy share childhood fantasies of grandeur, or isolation through
elevation in class status, with Jimmy explicitly described as “a little dreamer” by his mother (67). Perhaps more striking, Jimmy even dreams of killing Ellen, showcasing violent tendencies: “And suppose I bought a gun and killed Ellie, would I meet the demands of April, sitting in the deathhouse writing a poem about my mother to be published in the *Evening Graphic*?” (299-300). Given these textual details, one might wonder what protects Jimmy from falling ill to affective fever and self-destructive tendencies, and furthermore, why his departure from the city with no money, no prospects, and no foreseeable future is depicted in such positive terms.

Jimmy’s strange power to enact this separation reminds readers of the fact that neither Bud’s nor Stan’s suicide, or Anna’s death, is indicative of the larger failure of a city which has perhaps become immune to this type of psycho-social strain, and which may perhaps actually be *dependent* upon the destruction of its “undesireables” (Bud – murderer, Stan – alcoholic, Anna – lower class, woman, Jewish) as integral to its normal functioning. The city expels those who do not fit within its bounds and do not develop the appropriate level of psychic reinforcements; the contagion of psychic stress and the lack of agency it entails thus enact purification on a much larger scale than the individual psyche. Even in texts like *Manhattan Transfer*, which seem to lament individual deaths, there is often a sense of relief, positive transformation, or an *optimistic future* for characters like Jimmy Herf, no matter how implausible this future seems to be.

In Lauren Berlant’s theory of cruel optimism, optimistic attachments “exist{} when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing” (1). The affective structure of these attachments “involve{} a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that *this* time, nearness to *this* thing will help you or a world become different in just the right way” (2). Thus, “optimism is cruel when it takes shape as an affectively stunning double bind: a binding to fantasies that block the satisfactions they offer, and a binding
to the promise of optimism as such that the fantasies have come to represent” (51). Here, Berlant essentially proposes that we create a fantasy of “the good life” that becomes entrenched in our thinking and results in strong affective attachments, regardless of whether this life meets our expectations. While Berlant’s application of cruel optimism tends more towards an analysis of the mainstream desires of marginalized social groups, her theory is extremely helpful to analyzing the affective response of the audience towards Jimmy as well as Dos Passos’ drive to create a character able to leave the city. In Jimmy, and specifically in his turn away from the city and towards isolation, readers once again return to the scene of the fantasy of self-containment that undergirds so much of Western identity politics. Like the other characters, who repeatedly return to fantasies of isolation from their affective surround, Jimmy dreams of a life beyond the feverish crowding of the metropolis and embodies that dream within the text’s readership. There is ultimately no textual reason why Jimmy Herf is allowed a respite from contagion unavailable to other characters other than the fact that he functions as a fantasy of self-containment – a permanent, lingering possibility that modernist subjects can escape the psychic contamination of others and the threat to agency that infiltration causes. If, as Lisa Nanney writes, the modernist “self-contained artwork…was a reflection of the ‘self-contained individual’ one had to be to survive modernity” (9), then Manhattan Transfer offers this hope of survival in fantastic form. Inherently a work of cruel optimism, the text gives way to an unattainable modernist fantasy that the ideal subject – the white male artist or intellectual – can somehow remove the infectious, affective ties that bind each subject to every other in order to survive terminal modernism with self-contained identity and agency intact.
“To be immune, means to exist apart from rubs, shocks, suffering; to be beyond the range of darts … Immunity is an exalted calm desirable state, & one that I could reach much oftener than I do.” – Virginia Woolf, July 14th, 1932

Chapter Two

“The pack may howl, but it shall never catch me”: Affective Contagion, Suicidal Inoculation, and the Herd in Woolf

Critics have long noted Woolf’s fascination with individual experience in the modern metropolis. Yet, despite critical narratives that praise Woolf’s city streets as the space of transgression, and thus liberation, Woolf’s suicidal characters tend to emphasize the precariousness attendant on this urban potential, exhibiting a profound sense of insecurity at the level of personal identity and autonomy caused by the dangerous fluidity between the individual and the crowd, or between the receptive consciousness of the solitary mind and the affective projection of the masses. For, within novels that seem to manifest the interiority typical of high modernist explorations of consciousness, these suicidal figures challenge readers to focus on the contacts and collisions experienced at the surface, not only within but between characters on the city streets. Foregrounding the affective resonance of these collisions, or the powerful transmission of affect in the crowd, Woolf redraws the contours of psychic topography, erasing the partitions between self and other and evoking a continuous threat of psychic contamination in the urban sphere. By tracing the individual’s susceptibility to crowd affect back to the herd instinct underlying the sophisticated shine and speed of modern civilization, she ultimately portrays suicide as the result of affective inundation – both a capitulation to, and a desire to escape from, an atavistic “herd mentality.”

In “Street Haunting,” Mrs. Dalloway, and The Waves, Woolf articulates this sense of affective inundation as the collapse of identity. Accordingly, the characters of these texts turn

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43 Virginia Woolf, Diary IV, 117
inward, avoiding the dangerous influence of the crowd in order to bolster their sense of self. Pursuing “shells,” “husks,” and “seals,” they attempt to insulate, and thereby inoculate, their fragile identity from herd affect, repeatedly figured as eddies and waves. Though Septimus accurately diagnoses these affective flows as the root of mass violence, his vision will not save him from those who “hunt in packs,” and as a victim of shell shock, his temporary inability to participate in group feeling makes him a natural target for the novel’s “civilizing” forces. Yet, while Septimus’ suicide paradoxically grants him a self-affirming agency, removing him from affective influence, Woolf’s later depiction of suicide is far less optimistic. Indeed, the violence directed towards herd outsider reaches its apex in *The Waves*, as Rhoda’s disappearance within the narrative consciousness itself follows her overt repudiation of “the herd assembled” and her failure to isolate herself from others in the protective shell of fantasies and dreams. Crowded out at the level of narrative, Rhoda’s death is not a final assertion of self and self-willed action, but the dissolution of a dissenting voice into the masses. Though Rhoda, like Septimus, idealizes self-destruction as a means of avoiding submersion, her inability to assert herself in the suicidal act constitutes Woolf’s refutation that the individual can become a sealed vessel rather than a porous and permeable, affected and affecting being. Thus, portraying suicide as an attempt to achieve the self-containment and autonomy of an idealized, albeit impossible, modern identity, Woolf’s novels progressively reveal a potent anxiety over totalizing crowd affects, or the vestigial impulses of the herd. Moreover, they ultimately illuminate a crucial connection between modernism’s obsession with both the primitive and the suicide – a causal link that can be traced back through modernist crowd theories and their “proto-suicidological discourses.”

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44 I borrow this term from Holly Laird’s “Between the (Disciplinary) Acts: Modernist Suicidology” (526).
I. “What herd animals we are after all!”: Virginia Woolf and The Urban Crowd

In his essay, “Consciousness and Group Consciousness in Virginia Woolf,” Allen McLaurin examines the discourses on collective consciousness that dominated Woolf’s era, and in doing so, claims to address “a current of thinking which was of great importance in her lifetime, but which has since been somewhat neglected, or obscured, or treated in only a fragmentary way” (28). Despite his intervention the year of Woolf’s centenary (1982), more than three decades later this “current of thinking” is still relatively absent from Woolfian scholarship, and studies of the crowd in Woolf increasingly tend to depict urban immersion as a potentially transgressive, liberating, and thus celebratory, experience. Though it would be absurd to argue that Woolf’s crowds never offer her characters moments of freedom and revelation – Clarissa is, after all, positively elated by “life; London; this moment in June” (Mrs. Dalloway 4) – this celebratory narrative often fails to account for the darker moments of urban experience in Woolf’s oeuvre, and especially the constant need for “privacy” from “group feeling” exhibited in her work (McLaurin 33). For, in contrast to critical notions that the city’s isolating effects result in psychic collapse, Woolf, perhaps more than any other modernist writer, creates characters who desire, rather than avoid, being alone. Her frequent depiction of death as a form of privacy begins to explain the suicidal motivations of characters in her more experimental urban novels, yet it is only when McLaurin’s “effort of recovery” is taken up and Woolf’s oeuvre is reviewed alongside early twentieth-century crowd theories that these motivations can be adequately articulated (28).

45 Virginia Woolf, Diary I, 294
46 E.g., Marina Mackay’s “‘Is Your Journey Really Necessary?’: Going Nowhere in Late Modernist London,” Rachel Bowlby’s “Walking, Women and Writing,” etc.
That Woolf was highly interested in the crowd and its effects on the individual is indisputable. A burgeoning field of study during Woolf’s era, crowd psychology emerged in large part as a result of the population boom in the years leading up to, and shortly following, her birth. As Rachel Crossland notes, “the population of England and Wales alone more than doubled between 1841 and 1901,” and, consequently, the “understanding of crowd psychology rapidly became an urgent concern for those in government and other positions of responsibility in the early part of the twentieth century” (4). Accordingly, a slew of studies were published during this time period, many, if not all, of them by British physicians and researchers. Gustav Le Bon’s *The Crowd* (1896) would become a hallmark study in the field once translated from its original French, and it was followed shortly thereafter by the influential theories of Sir Martin Conway (*The Crowd in Peace and War* 1915), Wilfred Trotter (*Instincts of the Herd in Peace and War* 1916), William McDougall (*The Group Mind* 1920), Everett Dean Martin (*The Behavior of Crowds* 1920), and Sigmund Freud (*Group Psychology* 1922), among many others. As part of the Bloomsbury intellectual elite, the Woolfs would have been familiar with several of these texts, and thus rooted in a cultural context “which comprised rapid population growth and mass urbanisation,” it is no wonder that Woolf’s works, like the other literary, scientific, and psychological discourses surrounding her, naturally sought to “raise the question of the nature of the relationship between the individual and the mass” (Crossland 1).

Though some scholars have noted Woolf’s interest in groups during the rise of fascism in the years leading up to World War II, given the concerns over population growth and crowding during the first decades of the century, it is equally important to investigate group formation in Woolf’s earlier texts. Patricia Cramer hints at this necessity when she notes that *The Waves* embodies Woolf’s “lifelong preoccupation with group psychology” (“Jane” 448), and argues that
“Woolf was long familiar with discussions of group psychology” before her more overt analysis of the “dynamics of group formation” in *Between the Acts* (“Virginia” 166).\footnote{Cramer is primarily concerned with claiming the importance influence of “Jane Harrison’s matriarchal theories and Ruth Benedict’s *Patterns of Culture*…on Woolf’s ideas about group psychology” (167). Harrison’s influence is well-trodden ground in feminist Woolf studies, yet it is important to note that her *Themis* (1912/27) is described by Harrison herself as a “‘study of herd-suggestion, or, as we now put it, communal psychology’” (qtd. in Cramer 170).} As evidence of this longstanding interest, both she and McLaurin point to Woolf’s early interest in Unanimism, the French literary movement concerned with collective consciousness and emotion, which may be the first evidence of Woolf’s familiarity with group psychology, and importantly, shows her favorable response to its formulation of a group mind as early as 1913 (Cramer, “Virginia” 166; McLaurin, “Virginia” 115). For, in a review published that same year, Woolf praises Jules Romains, the movement’s founder, for his ability to “trace the mysterious growth, where two or three are gathered together, of a kind of consciousness of the group in addition to that of each individual of the group” (qtd. in McLaurin, “Consciousness” 34). Moreover, in contrast to the Unanimists, who were “patently optimistic,” Woolf was also familiar with the formulations of group mind represented by the aforementioned Le Bon, Trotter, Freud, and others (37).

McLaurin reminds us that these, “ideas about a ‘group mind,’ about ‘crowds’ – in other words, notions about group psychology – were very much in vogue at the time when Woolf began her writing career, and continued through the early decades of the century” (33-34). In her diaries, Woolf testifies to the popularity of these theories, explicitly acknowledging reading “Trotter & the herd” in 1917 and, somewhat belatedly, “Freud on Groups” in 1939 (*D1*: 80, *D5*: 252).

Importantly, the former treatise is an excellent intertext for Woolf’s earlier novels. For, while it is certain that the Woolfs owned Wilfred Trotter’s *Instincts of the Herd in Peace and War*,\footnote{Based on a review of the Woolf library, this fact is noted by Cramer (“Virginia” 166), Crossland (327), and McLaurin (“Consciousness” 36).} whose title invokes many of the popular summations of crowd mentality during the time...
period, Leonard Woolf would praise it directly in a review for the New Statesman on July 8th of 1916. As Crossland argues, his claim that Trotter’s “‘is not the ordinary beaten track of the writer on herd instinct and crowd psychology’ suggests the extent to which such works and ideas were familiar to both Leonard and his readers by 1916” (8). Not surprisingly, Virginia demonstrates this familiarity roughly a year later, mentioning Trotter in her diary when she writes, “Old Roger {Fry} takes a gloomy view, not of our life, but of the world’s future; but I think I detected the influence of Trotter & the herd, & so I distrusted him” (D1: 80). Though she immediately discounts her friend’s “gloomy view,” Woolf just as soon capitulates: “Still, stepping out into Charlotte Street, where the Bloomsbury murder took place a week or two ago, & seeing a crowd swarming in the road & hearing women abuse each other & at the noise others come running with delight – all this sordidity made me think him rather likely to be right” (D1: 80).

Undoubtedly influenced by Leonard’s assertions that “mankind is a wretched tribe of animals” (D1: 259), Woolf here associates the crowd’s animality with its potential for violence – a connection which periodically returns throughout her diaries, especially under the cloud of Hitler’s “mad voice vociferating” and the beginning of the second world war. “We are beginning to feel the herd impulse,” she claims at one point, and later, “rather like a herd of sheep we are” (D5: 166, 231).

Yet, Woolf is equally disdainful of crowds when they congregate in the guise of “docile herds” during peace (D1: 293). She surprises herself when she is swept up in the celebratory atmosphere of Peace Day 1919, exclaiming, “What herd animals we are after all!” (D1: 294). Of course, her suspicion of the crowd insists upon the potential for a spontaneous irruption of the barbarism she consistently aligns with war, and throughout her diaries, this herd/horde terminology also functions to displace or euphemize class antagonism under the guise of quasi-
scientific, anti-primitivist, sociological discourse. Nonetheless, this rhetoric of crowd threat is most likely to emerge whenever men and women are confined. In 1918 she writes:

One thing Adrian said amused me – how it positively frightened him to see peoples’ faces on the Heath “like gorillas, like orang-outangs – perfectly inhuman—frightful” & he poked his mouth out like an ape. He attributes this to the war – though I can remember other pronouncements of the same kind before that. Perhaps the horrible sense of community which the war produces, as if we all sat in a third class railway carriage together, draws one’s attention to the animal human being more closely. (D1: 153)

Shifting her brother’s country setting to that of the industrial city, Woolf figures “the horrible sense of community” through the transportation systems that supposedly modernize the individual and distance the evolutionary past. Thus, here, and repeatedly throughout her fiction, it is urban “community,” or enforced proximity, even in its most mundane manifestations, which bestializes the human and troubles Woolf. She exhibits this anxiety in another striking passage a year later, transforming members of the crowd into “brutish” beings who, when pressed together, form one affective consciousness repeatedly designated “it”: “Our verdict was that the crowd at close quarters is detestable; it smells; it sticks; it has neither vitality nor colour; it is a tepid mass of flesh scarcely organised into human life. How slow they walk! How passively & brutishly they lie on the grass! How little of pleasure or pain is in them!” (D1: 267). McLaurin cautions that Bloomsbury “interpreted the herd theory in a much more pessimistic sense than Trotter intended” (37), and from Woolf’s diary, his claim is certainly verified. For, in addition to the threat of urban violence posed by being at “close quarters,” Woolf often invokes the herd to signal small group belonging and its particularly punitive nature. Referring to Bloomsbury intrigues in which she has made a misstep, she writes, “I observe that I’m soon muzzled; & my
Like the era’s other popular treatises on the crowd, Trotter’s *Instincts of the Herd in Peace and War* focuses on the violence of crowds when individuals become caught up in crowd feeling, or shared affect. Just as Woolf’s diary entries show her cognizance of the emotional resonance within groups and her own susceptibility to crowd feeling once immersed, Trotter’s theory figures the “suggestibility” of the crowd as an affective contagion (33). Like Le Bon, who compares the emotions of the crowd to germs and microbes (73), and like Sir Martin Conway, who claims that “To go into a crowd is like going into a cholera village; the man who does so puts himself in the way of infection” (39), Trotter claims that crowd affects *infect* the individual, “exercising a controlling influence…from without” (48). In *Group Psychology*, Freud specifies the mechanism for this “controlling influence” and claims that what Trotter refers to as “the contagion and the heightened suggestibility” of crowds is really the “heightening of affectivity in groups” (13, 23). Explaining how Trotter’s theory relies on affect’s externalization of emotion, he writes, “The fact is that the perception of the signs of an emotional state is calculated automatically to arouse the same emotion in the person who perceives them” (27), and “There is no doubt that something exists in us which, when we become aware of the signs of an emotion in someone else, tends to make us fall into the same emotion” (35). Revealing an early twentieth-century perspective on the homogenizing effects of affect, here Freud illuminates the perceived threat to individual autonomy that I would argue underlies Bloomsbury’s, and particularly Woolf’s, “pessimistic” interpretation of Trotter. For, as Woolf seems well aware, Trotter’s main interventions in the field of crowd theory are twofold: pointing out the punitive nature of group think and situating small group belonging (once thought to insulate one from the
masses) as an equivalent hazard. By claiming that suggestibility is not solely dependent upon physical proximity, but upon an individual’s investment in a particular group, Trotter implies the very *ubi quy* of affective threat: “Man is not, therefore, suggestible by fits and starts, not merely in panics and in mobs, under hypnosis, and so forth, but always, everywhere, and under any circumstances” (33). Rejecting the idea that intrapersonal conflict is the result of psychic isolation, his focus on the retention of herd instinct, or mankind’s inevitable “gregariousness,” is thus particularly useful regarding Woolf’s interest in characters who feel threatened by an interconnection generally deemed “healthy,” and who exhibit the suicidal impulse in their distinct *desire for*, rather than *avoidance of*, isolation.

Yet, despite the prevalence of the herd in Woolf’s diary entries, the depth of Woolf’s pessimistic interpretation of Trotter and his ilk has not been sounded by Woolfian criticism. Though a select few have laid important groundwork in assessing the influence of modernism’s crowd theories on Woolf, fewer, if any, have explored the connection between the crowd and suicide in her oeuvre, especially as it is articulated through the affective ties theorized by early accounts of “group consciousness.” For an author whose body of criticism is leagues deep, this absence is particularly striking, especially given that the era’s popular treatises on the crowd and “herd instinct” are fundamentally based on the idea that the crowd figuratively, if not literally, entails the death of the individual, and that the collective consciousness of the crowd is achieved through the transmission of thoughts, ideas, and emotions by affective cues that overwhelm personal claims to autonomy and self-definition.

II. “Those wild beasts, our fellow men”49: Affect and the Herd in “Street Haunting”

While the danger of crowd immersion interrogated by early twentieth-century theorists and outlined by Woolf’s own diary entries has seldom been explored in Woolf’s oeuvre, and

49 Virginia Woolf, “Street Haunting,” 35
certainly not heretofore related to affect, it is precisely this nexus of urban crowds, affective cues, and threatened identity that best explains the connection between Woolf’s famed suicidal figures Septimus and Rhoda. In addition to repeated scenes of crowd immersion and communal gathering, which foreground the transmission of affect throughout London, both Mrs. Dalloway and The Waves highlight the possibility of affective inundation through their formal investment in individual streams of consciousness that always, inevitably feed into the broader sea. Moreover, in both texts, the suicidal figures repeatedly announce their sense of being overwhelmed by the feelings of others and perceive those around them in the guise of Woolf’s “brutish” and inherently violent mass. Though their suicides present a stark juxtaposition of success and failure, Septimus and Rhoda are each originally driven to self-destruction as an attempt to isolate, or inoculate, themselves from herd affect, and to maintain individual identity and autonomy. This attempt at self-maintenance in the face of the herd is most directly explored in Woolf’s “Street Haunting,” which forms an excellent intertext for an examination of both characters’ suicidal motivations. For, it is within this short essay that Woolf most succinctly articulates the effects of crowd affect on the individual, and contrasts the safety of isolation with the dangers attendant on group immersion.

The essay begins with Woolf’s description of a “rambling” walk through London on a cold winter’s night, begun on the pretext of buying a pencil. However, it becomes immediately clear that Woolf’s true purpose is to escape from the trappings of identity. For, while the objects in one’s own room “perpetually express the oddity of our own temperaments and enforce the memories of our own experience,” the anonymity of public space dissolves the definitive lines of individual personhood, allowing access to foreign thoughts and feelings (21). Woolf relishes this newfound freedom, losing herself in the streets and giving way to flights of imagination as she
peers in shop windows and houses; yet, the closer she comes to the city’s actual crowds, the
more indistinct, and consequently, vulnerable, she becomes. As she walks on, Woolf notes that
“the shell-like covering which our souls have excreted to house themselves, to make for
themselves a shape distinct from others, is broken, and there is left of all these wrinkles and
roughness a central oyster of perceptiveness, an enormous eye” (21-22). Here, at the essay’s very
outset, Woolf echoes Dr. O’Connor’s self-likening to a de-shelled snail in Nightwood (a crucial
detail which will be taken up in Chapter 4) and likewise aligns the loss of a protective “covering”
or “hous{ing}” identity with an increased susceptibility to perception, sensation – affect. The
smooth self-enclosure of an identity that makes one “distinct from others” is a fiction, whereas,
in fact, the true self is inherently amorphous and susceptible to environmental influences, giving
way to an “eye” that captures in its “wrinkles” and “rough” folds the various sensations from the
social surround. No longer separated from others by such a partition, “we are no longer quite
ourselves,” writes Woolf, when we enter the crowded streets: “we shed the self our friends know
us by and become part of that vast republican army of anonymous trampers” (20-21).

No longer a singular “I,” but, instead, a member of the vast army of “we,” “us,” and
“our,” Woolf enters the crowd purposefully, voluntarily sacrificing a notion of discrete identity
and enjoying her susceptibility to impressions. Recalling the externalized nature of affect, she
notes that “we are gliding smoothly on the surface” and initially views this empathetic
experience as pleasant (22). However, the sense of comfort in connection is short-lived, and she
will enforce a pause that curtails her ability to be moved, checking her physical progress and
preventing herself from being further “affected by emotion” (OED):

But here we must stop peremptorily. We are in danger of digging deeper than the eye
approves; we are impeding our passage down the smooth street by catching at some
branch or root. At any moment, the sleeping army may stir itself and wake in us a thousand violins and trumpets in response; the army of human beings may rouse itself and assert all its oddities and sufferings and sordidities. Let us dally a little longer, be content still with surfaces only – (23)

Here the crowd threatens the narrator’s agency in that its ability to “assert” itself upon her threatens to exact a “response.” Becoming caught up with her “army,” it is soon difficult to maintain the glib attention to surface detail typical of the flâneuse, and the “eye,” or “I,” is consequently in danger of plunging too deep, catching at a primordial branch or root. As Rachel Bowlby notes, “the essay that so vehemently advocates looking only at surfaces is also, by that very exaggeration, indicating that such an attitude may be hiding something else too” (213). A more ominous reappearance of the army of human beings, which is now an entity sleeping within Woolf rather than a group she joins on the streets without, is the text’s first indication that what is hidden is the danger of an animalistic regression – a re-absorption of the individual into the affective environment of the herd.

Woolf emphasizes this threat by subsequently placing her narrator in a series of “grotesque” encounters, which highlight the infectious nature of affective atmospheres and the primordial impulses underlying the sophisticated, metropolitan crowds of London. Her first encounter is with a dwarf, whose face is “lit up in ecstasy” as she adorns her “beautiful feet” in a shoe shop (24, 25). Sharing in her elevation, Woolf is equally deflated when the dwarf’s “ecstasy faded, knowledge returned, the old peevishness, the old apology came back” (25); yet, a more marked effect takes place immediately thereafter. For, upon exiting the shop, the dwarf “had changed the mood; she had called into being an atmosphere which, as we followed her out into the street, seemed actually to create the humped, the twisted, the deformed…Indeed, the dwarf
had started a hobbling grotesque dance to which everybody in the street now conformed” (25, 26). Infectious, the dwarf’s “mood” calls into being an “atmosphere” that alters Woolf’s perception of those she meets in the street: “the stout lady tightly swathed in shiny sealskin; the feebleminded boy sucking the silver knob of his stick; the old man squatted on a doorstep as if, suddenly overcome by the absurdity of the human spectacle, he had sat down to look at it – all joined in the hobble and tap of the dwarf’s dance” (25-26). Though this atmosphere at first only “seems” to call the grotesque into being within the mind of a similarly “overcome” Woolf, the “conform{ing}” and “join{ing} in” of “everybody” to the “dwarf’s dance” becomes real as the tenor of the crowd truly alters.

For, Woolf next encounters a “Jew, wild, hunger–bitten, glaring out of his misery” and “the humped body of an old woman flung abandoned on the step of a public building with a cloak over her like the hasty covering thrown over a dead horse or donkey” (26). Despite her generally positive reading of Woolf’s “ramble,” Bowlby concedes that here the crowd members become “desperate, even dead animals” and that “the grotesque is twisted in an unexpected direction” as “the wildness of the ‘sights’ is reciprocated in the bestialisation of the genteel spectator” (213). This bestialization is the result of the narrator’s response to her environment, revealed when Woolf claims that “at such sights the nerves of the spine seem to stand erect” (26), and, importantly, this response is particularly affective in nature. That is, Woolf’s description articulates the perception of another’s affective cue (the sight of the Jewish man’s “glaring… misery,” for example) as the cause of one’s own bodily reaction (a sensation in the spine), and in doing so, unwittingly invokes crowd theories in which the transmission of affect reveals the underlying instinct of the herd. Though Woolf’s use of the spine “as a focus of affect and perception” recurs throughout her oeuvre (Apter 86), the presence of the crowd makes the
body’s affective response more dangerous; once it is triggered in “Street Haunting,” these bestial fellow travelers assert themselves upon her, haunting her with their moods, and taking possession of her senses. Not only flaunting the dependence of cognition and emotion on the social environment, this scene ominously forecasts identity’s death, and “the stream of walkers” Woolf sees on the street shortly thereafter confirms the ability of affective “atmospheres” to eradicate individuality. As Woolf notes, “they are wrapt, in this short passage from work to home, in some narcotic dream” (32). In a collective trance, “dreaming, gesticulating, often muttering a few words aloud,” the crowd will drift home until “the sight of the clock in the hall and the smell of supper in the basement,” or the material trappings of identity, “puncture the dream,” paradoxically freeing them through confinement and isolation (32).

Despite this transposition of haunted and haunter, the narrator’s susceptibility to these moods and atmospheres crucially allows her the imaginative freedom to question identity, or the nature of “true self” (28). In contrasting the real position of her body in time and space against the imagined position of herself in fantasy, she asks, “Am I here, or am I there?”, and wonders whether the true self is the self-contained shell reified by one’s room or the oyster of perception (and imagination) released by the affects of others. Leaning towards the latter, she claims that “circumstances compel unity; for convenience’ sake a man must be a whole” though really we are “streaked, variegated, all of a mixture” (29, 28). This contrast between self-contained and porous identity will be crucial to an examination of identity in Woolf’s novels where characters constantly attempt to find safe harbor in reinforcing shells, but for the less vulnerable Woolf in “Street Haunting,” embracing fluidity means that she is not only affected by the atmospheres of others, but able to affect them in turn. This two-way transmission is revealed on her final stop to the stationer’s shop, in which she notes that “it is always an adventure to enter a new room; for
the lives and characters of its owners have distilled their atmosphere into it, and directly we enter it we breast some new wave of emotion…Here, without a doubt…people had been quarrelling. Their anger shot through the air’ (34). In this passage “anger,” an independent entity, literally forms the air, creating an “atmosphere” of “emotion” that will carry our narrator into the argument between husband and wife. Yet, this transmission of affect travels in both directions. Feeling their anger, but remaining calmly standing by, the narrator seems to dispel the air thick with emotion so that “the longer they stood there, the calmer they grew; their heat was going down, their anger disappearing” (24).

Thus, while the narrator repeatedly attempts to briefly put on the minds and bodies of others throughout her walk, this exercise of the imagination quickly becomes an uncontrollable effect of affective transfer once she is immersed in the social environment. Her belief that “into each of these lives one could penetrate a little way, far enough to give oneself the illusion that one is not tethered to a single mind, but can put on briefly for a few minutes the bodies and minds of others” is not simply the “illusion” she claims it to be, but a real effect of crowd immersion (35). It is a “delight{ful}” deviation from “the straight lines of personality” into the amorphous, affective atmospheres which challenge the concept of self-contained identity by placing the narrator once again onto “those footpaths that lead beneath brambles and thick tree trunks into the heart of the forest where live those wild beasts, our fellow men” (35). Only when she is once again home and in solitude does the self return to being “sheltered and enclosed” (36, emphasis mine). Immune to the atmosphere of others and cut off from the impressionable “oyster” of affective perception and transmission, the individual is alone, re-shelled, and, consequently, safe from the influence of the herd.
III. “They hunt in packs”\textsuperscript{50}: Septimus Smith, Shell Shock, and the Eddies of Herd Affect

By conjuring the primordial forest and “those wild beasts, our fellow men” while also leaving the narrator safe in the solitude of the civilized home, the conclusion of “Street Haunting” concommitantly palliates and exacerbates the sense of danger created by crowd immersion. Yet, far from haunting the streets as a “spectre \{which\} floats above the ground and is detached and immune from the dangers of the cityscape,” as Deborah Parsons suggests (41), Woolf is clearly haunted by contagious affects throughout the narrative; her safety, or immunity, is only achieved through a type of self-quarantine. In her novels, where characters likewise take to the streets in order to map out the contours of identity, this threat of herd affect is amplified and the desire for solitude more intense. For, though, on the surface, \textit{Mrs. Dalloway} seems to invoke the isolated introspection characteristic of high modernist texts, the novel’s constant transition between surface and depth – its perpetual focus on the movement and impact experienced by characters as they advance through the crowd, assessing life, each other, and most importantly, death – suggests the inherent communicability of the urban sphere. Indeed, Woolf’s characters are almost always portrayed in the company of others while they reflect upon themselves, and they are constantly transported, physically, emotionally, and evolutionarily, as they navigate the streets of London. Accordingly, they move and are moved by others consistently throughout the text, connected by affective nodes of technological transport – the car, the airplane, the omnibus – which heighten their sense of proximity and permeability, and ultimately threaten an affective inundation that will come to fruition in \textit{The Waves}.

Notably, \textit{Mrs. Dalloway} (1925), published just two years before “Street Haunting” was written (1927), begins on a similar note. Like Woolf’s persona in the essay, Clarissa will enter the crowded London streets on foot, taking a “plunge” into the city’s affective waters (3). And if

\textsuperscript{50} Virginia Woolf, \textit{Mrs. Dalloway}, 89
the “army of anonymous *trampers*” from the essay does not reappear, the underlying bestiality of the crowd’s “*tramp*” surely does: “In people’s eyes, in the swing, *tramp*, and trudge; in the bellow and the uproar; the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging; brass bands; barrel organs; in the triumph and the jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead was what she loved; life; London; this moment in June” (4, emphasis mine). Importantly, it is the ability to be physically moved, defined both by the age old trudge of one’s foot as well as by the newest technological methods of transportation, that affectively moves Clarissa in this passage. Yet, as in “Street Haunting,” this forward motion is also concomitant with an evolutionary step back, signaled by the triumphant, but undeniably bestial, “bellow and the uproar” of civilization.

Immediately followed by the text’s proclamation that “the War was over” (5), this roar situates the text within its historical context between the wars and within the discursive realm of theories of group mind, or herd instinct, which were still enormously popular. With characters like shell-shocked Septimus Smith and Anglo-Indian Peter Walsh, England’s history of war and imperialism is never far from view, and the violence of civilization is continuously and overtly linked to the bestial nature of mankind – the innately satisfying and frightening affective ties forged by herd mentality. Miss Kilman, whose German ancestry and pro-German sentiments figure as a reminder of the fanatic nationalisms based in herd instinct, invokes Clarissa’s own “brutal monster” of ill will when she thinks:

> It rasped her, though, to have stirring about in her this brutal monster! to hear twigs cracking and feel hooves planted down in the depths of that leaf-encumbered forest, the soul; never to be content quite, or quite secure, for at any moment the brute would be
stirring, this hatred...made all the pleasure...quiver, and bend as if indeed there were a
monster grubbing at the roots. (12)

Here, still within the novel’s very first pages, Clarissa is “rasped” by affective response, the
word itself denoting the harsh scraping of a rough surface. Imagining herself as a “brute” with
“hooves,” she aligns herself with the “brutish” beings Woolf associates with Trotter’s herd
throughout her diaries and recalls both the primordial forest and the beast beneath the brambles,
which form the concluding images of the crowd in “Street Haunting.”

The depictions of bestiality and affective response that open the narrative, as well as the
intertexts they directly invoke, consistently return throughout the narrative, and especially
through the point of view of Clarissa’s counterpart and the novel’s prototypical victim. As such,
Septimus Smith often conjures Clarissa’s inner “brute” in his descriptions of the novel’s
psychiatrists, but most directly when he imagines Dr. Holmes as the personification of “Human
nature,” or “the repulsive brute, with the blood-red nostrils” (92). Later, he will describe Dr.
William Bradshaw as one of those who “flies screaming into the wilderness” (98), and both
men eventually become “torturers” who force him to “communicate” (98). Aligning the doctors
with a primitive regression and the violence of nature, Septimus places them back within the
territory of crowd feeling from which he has been expelled, and for which (as we will see) he
must be killed in order to maintain the unanimity of the herd. In this guise, Septimus’ statement
that “Communication is health; communication is happiness” ironically belies the precariousness
of affective networks and “civilized” methods of curing the mentally ill (93). Indeed, for both
Septimus and Clarissa, it is Bradshaw who invokes the barbarity of past ages, and who does so
precisely through his excessively civilized course of treatment – his denial of the “unsocial
impulses,” or desire for isolation, presented by Septimus throughout the text (100). For, “Naked,
defenceless, the exhausted, the friendless received the impress of Sir William’s will. He swooped; he devoured. He shut people up. It was this combination of decision and humanity that endeared Sir William so greatly to the relations of his victims” (102). His “humanity” belied by his “swoop{ing}” and “devour{ing},” Bradshaw serves as the text’s prototypical beast. A man whom Clarissa views as “obscurely evil” (184), he is the representative of crowd feeling and the violent unanimity it engenders.51

Yet, while both Septimus and Clarissa reveal the bestial ties underlying modern civilization in their assessments of Holmes, Bradshaw, and themselves, it is Septimus who best diagnoses the crowd’s heightened affectivity as the unifying force, and thus danger, of urban life. Refusing to have children because he does not want to “increase the breed of these lustful animals, who have no lasting emotions, but only whims and vanities, eddying them now this way, now that,” Septimus grasps the predatory nature of the herd and its susceptibility to shifting, highly fluid affects (89). Though water imagery is commonly used throughout modern and pre-modern literature to portray the movement of individuals in the crowd (McLaurin, “Consciousness” 39), here Septimus aligns the eddies of the crowd not with the moving sea of people, but with the mechanism that moves them – their “emotions,” or affects. Caught in these currents, his fellow men engage in mob violence even during times of peace:

They hunt in packs. Their packs scour the desert and vanish screaming into the wilderness. They desert the fallen. They are plastered over with grimaces…In the street, vans roared past him; brutality blared out on placards; men were trapped in mines; women burnt alive; and once a maimed file of lunatics being exercised or displayed for

51 In one of the few examinations of affect in Mrs. Dalloway, Molly Hite explores the “affective indeterminacy” of the narrative voice towards its characters, claiming that Holmes and Bradshaw are the only exceptions to this tonal ambiguity. Their condemnation, I would argue, is a direct result of their blatant tie to herd impulse.
the diversion of the populace (who laughed aloud), ambled and nodded and grinned past him, in the Tottenham Court Road...And would he go mad? (89-90)

The brutality Septimus sees in the heart of man is not solely dependent on his experience in war, but also directly connected with his perambulations in the street and immersion in “the populace.” Their herd-like tendency to “hunt in packs” bespeaks his fear of being punished for “the sin for which human nature had condemned him to death” (91), and this sin, which recalls Woolf’s own “depredations in the herd” (D2: 81), is most terrifying to Septimus when he is simultaneously in public and outside the eddies and currents which constitute crowd feeling. “Far from showing any emotion” when his best friend and fellow soldier Evans dies (86), Septimus’ sin is “that he did not,” and does not, “feel” (91, emphasis mine). Suffering from shell shock, or shocked into a dubious, albeit partially protective, “shell,” Septimus is numb and thereby immune to the affects of the herd. Accordingly, he is depicted as “the last relic straying on the edge of the world” and as the novel’s “outcast, who gazed back at the inhabited regions” (93). Threatened by mankind’s tendency for mob violence, but more importantly, by the susceptibility to feeling that stimulates this violence, Septimus seems to enjoy the affective isolation his detachment has given him. Accordingly, it is Septimus, situated beyond the pale of Western subjectivity, who must ultimately perish in order to preserve the crowd, or what Richard Dalloway calls the “detestable social system” (116).

Though Septimus’ reaction to crowd feeling could be dismissed as a symptom of his mental illness, the affective resonance of the crowd is also revealed by the narratorial consciousness as it passes through other, “saner” characters. Infectious moods and atmospheres are repeatedly focalized around new forms of transportation, and here, in order to articulate the threat of the crowd in relation to Septimus, it is helpful to think through focalization and
transportation in their multiple definitions. As we will see in Bowen (Chapter 3), Woolf’s transportation is both physical and affective – the characters are moved by objects in motion, or are transported, while becoming spectators to transportation itself. In addition, the narrative discourse focalizes through the consciousness of several characters in the crowd, and the affective infection is likewise focalized in terms of medical parlance, meaning that the infection spreads through, but is nonetheless confined to, a particular site or group within the body politic. The most oft-cited moment of crowd behavior is, of course, the appearance of the motor car with its alarming backfire, which occurs shortly after Clarissa brushes away her thoughts of Miss Kilman, suppresses a recognition of the bestial nature underlying civilized modes of conduct, and soothes herself at Mulberry’s florist. Notably, the “violent explosion” of the backfire produces an effect that passes “invisibly, inaudibly, like a cloud” over the faces of the passers-by who begin to form a crowd, their “disorderly” faces taking on “something of a cloud’s sudden sobriety and stillness” as a result (14). It is in this moment that Septimus Smith will notice, “everything had come to a standstill. The throb of motor engines sounded like a pulse irregularly drumming through an entire body…Everyone looked at the motor car” (15). The stillness of the car causes stasis in the flow of pedestrians as the “crowd” quickly transforms into a “crush” (17), and its ability to draw attention unifies the pedestrians into one single affective being. Of course, it is Septimus, feeling an “isolation full of sublimity; a freedom which the attached can never know” (92), who is “terrified” of this effect as he recognizes the “gradual drawing together of everything to one centre before his eyes, as if some horror had come almost to the surface and was about to burst into flames” (15). Septimus’ intense response, though undoubtedly an effect of his madness, becomes strikingly clear in the context of crowd theory where isolation is
“sublime” because it results in “freedom” while proximity to others necessarily places one in the way of affective infection from the herd.

This infection is immediately revealed through the departure of the car, which, like the departure of the dwarf in “Street Haunting,” leaves “a slight ripple,” “ruffling the faces on both sides of the street with the same dark breath of veneration” (17, 16). For, in its presence, “something had happened”:

Something so trifling in single instances that no mathematical instrument, though capable of transmitting shocks in China, could register the vibration; yet in its fullness rather formidable and in its common appeal emotional; for in all the hat shops and tailors’ shops strangers looked at each other and thought of the dead; of the flag; of Empire…For the surface agitation of the passing car as it sunk grazed something very profound. (18)

The transmission of “shocks,” or “vibrations,” upon the common “emotional” surface of the crowd is immediately connected not only with the nationalist and imperialist efforts that define the birth of the self-contained Western subject, but also its dissolution in the broader populace. Hence, this play of surface and depth reveals the tension in which the British subject is formed, created by affective attachment to ideas of nationhood, which, in their very proliferation, constitute a threat to the notion of discrete identity – the inception of herd mentality and the violence of civilization.

In this way, the car becomes the novel’s first indication of the transmission of affect within the crowd, and explicates Septimus’ desire for isolation despite his belief that a lack of participation in crowd feeling constitutes a sin. Yet, if the cars themselves have the ability to “unseal” pedestrians like Mr. Bowley “suddenly, inappropriately, sentimentally,” it is the
appearance of the airplane that unites the crowd completely and fully destroys the partitions constitutive of self-contained identity: “Suddenly Mrs. Coates looked up into the sky. The sound of an aeroplane bored ominously into the ears of the crowd. There it was coming over the trees, letting out white smoke from behind, which curled and twisted, actually writing something! making letters in the sky! Everyone looked up” (20). Like the car, the plane will cause the crowd to act as one, its ears bent towards the drone and its body stilled by the spectacle. Personified, “the aeroplane turned and raced and swooped exactly where it liked” as “all down the Mall people were standing and looking up into the sky” (21, 20). While the plane in many ways represents technological innovation and is “a symbol of man’s soul” (28), it is crucial to note that it “ominously” “bores” into the ears of the crowd (20, 21). To “bore” is both to make a hole in something and to make one’s way through a crowd, and the airplane seemingly does both (OED). Penetrating the individual subjects beneath, it causes a sonic, affective ripple that passes through the crowd, and in doing so, unites them. Described as “dropping dead down,” the plane is also “ominous” in its ability to absorb the individual agency of those below it, leaving them as a vacant and static collective, bound together “in the pallor” of mid-day (20, 21).

Not only revealing the susceptibility of the individual to crowd behavior, these modes of transportation are immediately connected with both Clarissa’s and Septimus’ “transcendental theories” about the inherent connectedness of all humans (153) – theories that align with modernist crowd studies and Woolf’s own private theories about identity. Thomas C. Caramagno claims that one of Woolf’s greatest insights is that “the unity of consciousness is a tidy fiction with which to build out ‘comfortable cocoons’ of consistent identity” (296). Likewise, T.E. Apter argues that in Woolf’s texts, the self is “unbounded” rather than “self-contained or self-controlled” (84, 87), which often “puts personal identity at risk” (88). Septimus is certainly most
“at risk” in *Mrs. Dalloway*, and thus reveals the permeability of self most acutely; yet, as Septimus’ counterpart in the narrative, it makes sense that, as Christine Froula points out, Clarissa too “locates being in ‘Odd affinities’ – not discrete ‘subject and object’” (96). Defying philosophies of the subject as a unified identity that in its coherence articulates the sharp division between self and other, Clarissa reflects that “she would not say of any one in the world now that they were this or where that” (8). Recognizing a lack of self-contained identity, she envisions herself as a fluid assemblage of parts, called upon in certain situations to appear a unified self that is one thing only, amassed and enclosed: “That was her self – pointed; dart-like; definite. That was her self when some effort, some call on her to be her self, drew the parts together” (37).

Yet, precisely because Clarissa recognizes identity’s permeable boundaries, she sees herself as a component of the same affective “eddies” Septimus notes, or in her words, the “ebb and flow”:

> but that somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home; of the house there, ugly, rambling all to bits and pieces as it was; part of the people she had never met; being laid out like a mist between the people she knew best, who lifted her on their branches as she had seen the trees lift the mist, but it spread ever so far, her life, herself. (9)

“Laid out like a mist,” Clarissa is a part of the affective atmospheres that cohere between groups of people, influencing others through her presence even when she is not present, as Trotter suggests is not only possible, but typical of human relations. Clarissa makes this connection more overt when utilizing methods of modern transportation, for “sitting on the bus going up Shaftesbury Avenue, she felt herself everywhere; not ‘here, here, here’; and she tapped the back of the seat; but everywhere” (152-53). Moreover, her daughter Elizabeth will also recognize this
interconnection by way of omnibus as she thinks of the “power” of “crowds of people coming back from the city…to stimulate what lay slumberous, clumsy, and shy on the mind’s sandy floor to break surface” and to create an “impulse” (137). When, still riding, she hears military music, she reflects that one’s susceptibility to it is “not conscious” and that the influence of collective mood, or affect, “this voice, pouring endlessly, year in year out, would take whatever it might be…would wrap them all about and carry them on” (138).

Though this ethereal existence in the eddying affect of London crowds is profoundly comforting to Clarissa, and even to Elizabeth, it is crucial to note that its attendant herd “impulse,” its lack of “consciousness,” and its removal of individual autonomy is profoundly threatening to Septimus, who stands far beyond the pale of feeling. Like the trees that seem to lift up Clarissa’s being, Septimus feels that the trees in Regent’s Park are “connected by millions of fibres with his own body,” so much so that “when the branch stretched he, too, made that statement” (22). When a nursemaid spells out the words of the advertising airplane next to his ear, the “roughness in her voice like a grasshoppers…rasped his spine deliciously” (22, emphasis mine). Echoing the spinal response of “Street Haunting” and the rasping affect Clarissa encounters in her thoughts of Miss Kilman, this reaction gives Septimus “a marvellous discovery,” which is “that the human voice in certain atmospheric conditions…can quicken trees into life!” (22). Connected to the tree himself by “millions of fibres,” Septimus is thus quickened to life by his neighbor and her “atmospheric” affect. Accordingly, when Septimus writes his revelations that “Men must not cut down trees” and that “No one kills from hatred” (24), he implies that the murderous impulses that result in the slaughter of war are not a result of individual feeling, but of the collective affect—externalized and connective rather than subjective and isolating. Contrasted with his visionary ability, which is exacerbated by his
immersion in the crowd, his affective disability, or his inability to feel, is threatened by it. “Away from people – they must get away from people,” Septimus tells Reiza; for, he alone is aware of the dangers inherent in the transmission of affect.

While Septimus, like Clarissa, sees himself as part of a great, interconnected whole, his inability to fully participate in group feeling makes him a liability and demands he be sacrificed for that whole’s continuance. In Christine Froula’s reading of Mrs. Dalloway as a postwar elegy, she claims that Septimus’ death is an attempt at communication which “expects to be read” and that he dies “not because he is insane but because the world is” (116, 125). By reading his suicide alongside Trotter’s crowd theory and the modernist affinity for affective environments, we can add that Septimus dies specifically because he defies the affective resonances, and consequently, the values, of the herd. The narrative confides early on that “London has swallowed up many millions of young men called Smith” (84), and when Peter hears the ambulance after Septimus’ jump, he is struck by “the efficiency, the organization, the communal spirit of London” (151, emphasis mine). Signaling the end of Septimus’ detachment, or his “floating, on the top of the waves, while far away on shore he heard dogs barking and barking” (139), Clarissa’s party is, in part, the triumph of this communal spirit, or the herd, over the individual at the end of the novel. Finally crowded out by the pack, Septimus is no longer able to maintain his sublime isolation in life, and must seek that isolation in a departure – transportation from one state of being to another, and from a potential affective inundation to its ultimate stasis.

That suicide is a method of isolation and likewise a life-affirming and enabling self-construction is revealed by the affective connection of Clarissa and Septimus within the novel’s final scenes. For, as Froula points out, Septimus “is pushed, yet he also jumps” (117). Impinged upon by Holmes and Bradshaw, who represent “the whole world…clamouring: Kill yourself, kill
yourself, for our sakes” (92), Septimus nonetheless uses the act of self-destruction as a way of reinforcing autonomy. Though Septimus’ sensations of death (like Rhoda’s) are eclipsed from the narrative, Clarissa’s bodily reenactment fills this missing affective space: “Always her body went through it first, when she was told, suddenly, of an accident…He had thrown himself from a window. Up had flashed the ground; through him, blundering, bruising, went the rusty spikes. There he lay with a thud, thud, thud in his brain, and then a suffocation of blackness” (184).

Therefore, it is Clarissa who reveals what Septimus has ultimately achieved: “A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wreathed about with chatter…This he had preserved. Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate; people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded, one was alone. There was an embrace in death” (184). Defying the herd and also communicating its horror to others (for, not only Clarissa, but also Rezia, “saw…understood” [149]), Septimus feels the “closeness,” or proximity, of others “{draw} apart” and is finally “alone.” Preserving “a thing, wreathed about with chatter,” or the ring of solid identity which will reappear again in The Waves, Septimus has achieved the “centre” of self-enclosed identity. No longer one of the many “millions of young men called Smith” (84), he achieves both autonomy and a singularity in the act of death, allowing Clarissa to “assemble” her own self and finally come to terms with mortality (186).

IV. “A wave of emotion is in me”\textsuperscript{52}: Bernard, Affect, and Herd Consciousness in The Waves

If Septimus Smith is the first character in Woolf’s fiction to proclaim the existence of herd mentality in modern man and to fully articulate suicide as a method of self-differentiation from the pack, he is also the character who best presages the death of Woolf’s famous female suicide, Rhoda. For, though Clarissa feels her entry into the street “like the flap of a wave; the chill of a wave” (3), and Septimus imagines himself “floating, on the top of the waves” of the

\textsuperscript{52} Virginia Woolf, \textit{Diary IV}, 44
London populace (139), it is Rhoda who will experience the waves of affect closing over her, and who will be utterly dispersed outside the “circle” of self-contained identity. Paradoxically concentrating on this figure of enclosure, *The Waves* depicts a search for self-containment through a form that declares containment impossible. Blending the interior worlds of its characters into one consciousness, or affective being, the text portrays the permeability of identity at its most extreme, and by foregrounding the impossibility of containment through Rhoda’s submersion, it complicates *Mrs. Dalloway*’s solution of suicide as enabling self-construction. Though Rhoda, like Septimus, views suicide as a means of bolstering identity and asserting agency, her death is ultimately the result of a breach in her own “circle” – the protective shell she crafts for herself through fantasy and isolation. Often agreed to be “one of the eeriest suicides in modern fiction” (Oxindine 203), Rhoda’s disappearance and crowding out at the level of story and narrative offers a far more ominous vision of communal sacrifice – one that rejects suicide’s potential to serve as a voluntary self-assertion for the suicide (i.e., for Septimus) and as a life-affirming safety-valve for others (i.e., for Clarissa) and that posits the necessity of forced immolation in the name of totalizing herd consciousness.

Like the critics who extol Woolf’s crowded streets as the site of emancipation, many scholars have also glorified Rhoda’s suicide as a soaring flight from the strictures of patriarchy, language, heteronormativity, and a myriad of other constructs that threaten her position as a woman, lesbian, or supposed artist figure. Yet, while many acknowledge that *The Waves*, like

53 Christine Froula reads Rhoda’s suicide positively, citing it as an adventure within a novel that fundamentally seeks female freedom from identity and its attendant politics. Patricia Cramer likewise reads her death as a flight towards a utopian, Sapphic, intellectual community (“Jane”). Chloe Taylor argues for a Kristevian maternal return. Annette Oxindine gives a succinct account of many other positive readings, while offering her own counter-reading of Rhoda’s suicide as “a sign of the lesbian’s effacement within a social and linguistic system that denies her an articulation of self” (204).
its predecessors, exhibits the self as highly porous, few have attributed Rhoda’s misery to the fact that she, like Woolf’s other characters, is highly susceptible to affect and, consequently, wary of the debilitating crowd unanimity which will ultimately strip her suicide of both intentionality and self-definition. In Woolf’s “Street Haunting,” one’s sense of identity, and thus one’s defense from this unanimity, is wholly dependent upon the illusion of a protective “shell,” and building on this premise, The Waves will depict a far darker vision of Rhoda’s suicide than is often admitted – one that finds her constantly searching for, and failing to find, safe harbor from the affective riptides of the urban sphere. The “white circle” and “steel-blue circle,” which reappear when the group assembles throughout the narrative, figure this safe harbor, or self-enclosure, at the level of the group, and specifically its members’ desire to forge a closed, albeit shared, identity (22, 137). Rhoda articulates this desire for group unanimity as the need to “join – so – and seal up, and make entire” (21); yet, the desire to protect, or “seal up,” oneself often reappears throughout the text in similar guise.

For, Rhoda relentlessly pursues self-definition by seeking “shells” to insulate, and thus inoculate, her fragile identity from crowd affect, a fluid infection that is again figured by eddies and waves. Bonnie Kime Scott notes that “the figure of shells as protective, secreted forms, molded to life, recurs often in Woolf” (14), and T.E. Apter suggests that these and other “well-defended retreats” function as private, albeit temporary, “residences” (83), or quite literally, as a room of one’s own. Accordingly, the snail appears as a shielding figure for identity in The Waves, and Bernard, the novel’s controlling consciousness, alerts readers to the concomitant necessity and fallibility of this shield early in the text. Claiming that “a shell forms upon the soft soul, nacreous, shiny, upon which sensations tap their beaks in vain” (255), he notes that as a

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54 Christine Froula encapsulates this idea when she notes that the novel is “loosed from objectivist notions of a singular, discrete individual,” abandoning ideas of “the subject as bounded identifiable entity” (175).
shield from the piercing beaks of affective encounter, the shell of identity protects the “soft,” and hence vulnerable, “soul.” However, this shell is easily breached in the company of others. For, channeling the “oyster of perception” from “Street Haunting,” Bernard claims that by entering the crowd, he can dissolve “that thin, hard shell which…shuts one in” (288).

The danger of losing one’s shell is anticipated often throughout the text and, importantly, stems not from a vulnerability to the sea of people, but to the intensity of their wave-like affects. Caramagno writes that Woolf attempted “to describe the waves which were the motion of mood, the turbulence of self, the uncertainly of perception” (93), and Neville provides the first extensive depiction of this moody turbulence as he approaches London by train and feels his “heart draw{} out” towards the “swarms of people” (71). Imagining himself completely dispersed, he thinks, “the huge uproar is in my ears. It sounds and resounds under this glass roof like the surge of a sea. We are cast down on the platform with our handbags. We are whirled asunder. My sense of self almost perishes; my contempt. I become drawn in, tossed down, thrown sky-high” (72). This “uproar” not only recalls London’s bestial “bellow” from the opening pages of Mrs. Dalloway, but also the affective eddies Septimus fears will cause him to be “whirled asunder.” As in Woolf’s earlier novel, the waves here thus represent the heightened affectivity of the herd, and accordingly, Neville feels his “sense of self almost perish” as he loses his own individual contempt and is “drawn in” to the current of collective affect. This potentially lethal dispersion fuels his lifelong aversion to crowds, expressed as a fear of “eddying around” (180); and Louis, too, will later observe the “eddying in and out” of the crowd on the “protective waves of the ordinary” despite his own “sealed and blind” status (93, 94, 95).

While Neville is relatively sensitive, and Louis thus relatively immune, to the affective eddies of the crowd, it is Bernard, the text’s flâneur, who most extensively contemplates its
bearings on individual identity and becomes an important frame of reference for reading Rhoda. Importantly, it is also he who connects the influence of crowd affect with the mentality of the herd and its violent attack on individuality. For, Bernard, also entering London by train, imagines the city itself as one great animal body: “We are about to explode in the flanks of the city like a shell in the side of some ponderous, maternal, majestic animal. She hums and murmurs; she awaits us” (111). Feeling caught up in a “splendid unanimity” that is overtly reminiscent of Jules Romains and other theories of crowd mentality (111), Bernard is disinclined to break from the herd when he arrives, and “assume the burden of individual life” which “severs these beautiful human beings once so united” (112, 113). Consequently, he will “let {himself} be carried on by the general impulse” (113), the “pale-grey stream” of his mind flowing into the larger sea of collective experience:

I cannot remember my past, my nose, or the colour of my eyes, or what my general opinion of myself is. Only in moments of emergency, at a crossing, at a kerb, the wish to preserve my body springs out and seizes me and stops me, here, before this omnibus. We insist, it seems, on living. Then again, indifference descends. The roar of the traffic, the passage of undifferentiated faces, this way and that way, drugs me into dreams; rubs the features from faces. People might walk through me. And, what is this moment of time, this particular day in which I have found myself caught? The growl of traffic might be any uproar – forest trees or the roar of wild beasts. Time has whizzed back an inch or two on its reel; our short progress has been cancelled. (113)

Here Bernard reveals the threat of death this dissolution poses as his crowd immersion temporarily dulls his instincts for self-preservation, placing him in moments of “emergency.” His effacement – Bernard’s figural, and nearly actual, death – is preceded by the “roar” of the urban
surround, and his potential erasure, or his sense that “people might walk through me,” is tied to the “growl” of “wild beasts” and the devolution of the crowd. Nonetheless, rather than fear his primitive link to the herd, Bernard longs “to hear vague, ancestral sounds of boughs creaking, of mammoths” and treasures a heightened sympathy with his fellow men: “Am I not, as I walk, trembling with strange oscillations and vibrations of sympathy, which, unmoored as I am from a private being, bid me embrace these engrossed flocks….?” (114). Echoing the “oscillations” and “vibrations of sympathy” of Mrs. Dalloway’s motorcar, Bernard relishes the eddying affects of the street and the chance to be “unmoored” from the shell of his identity as he “breast{s} the stream of this crowded thoroughfare” (114-15). However, his merging with the crowd in order to feel the “mystical connection” connoted by the text’s streams and waves is only temporary (Kiavola 44). His discrete individuality reemerges: “It steals in through some crack in the structure – one’s identity. I am not part of the street – no, I observe the street. One splits off, therefore…I elaborate myself; differentiate myself” (115).

Thus, while Bernard reveals the momentary irruption of herd “suggestibility” into the consciousness of individuals in the crowd throughout the novel, it is crucial to note that, like Trotter, both he and the novel recognize the broad reach of this suggestibility into the domain of private life, or small group gatherings. For, it is not only the uproarious crowd that signifies the threat of inundation and death, but also the everyday intrusions of other individuals. Kime Scott claims that “the constitution of the self is a central enterprise of all the characters in The Waves” (32), and the format of the novel itself, in merging the characters’ own waves of consciousness into one another as their lives unfold, highlights the struggle this process of differentiation entails. Bernard alerts readers to the dissolution of self within smaller affective atmospheres early in the narrative when he remarks as a child, “when we sit together, close…we melt into
each other with phrases. We are edged with mist. We make an unsubstantial territory” (16). Though he states continuously throughout the text that he does not believe in singularity, here Bernard implies that the partition between the self and other must first be melted, and that this process is initiated by proximity and mutual belonging. It is the contact of body and surfaces, or the “mist” of affect “edge{ing}” the characters – that “unsubstantial” something – which allows the comingling of identity and exchange he seeks. For, Bernard notes early in the novel the drastic change in self which accompanies the addition of another individual, in this case Neville:

Something now leaves me; something goes from me to meet that figure who is coming, and assures me that I know him before I see who it is. How curiously one is changed by the addition, even at a distance, of a friend. How useful an office one’s friends perform when they recall us. Yet how painful to be recalled, to be mitigated, to have one’s self adulterated, mixed up, become part of another. As he approaches I become not myself but Neville mixed with somebody – with whom? – with Bernard? (83)

Here “something” leaves Bernard, and something likewise enters him. Becoming “mitigated,” “adulterated,” “mixed up,” and “part of another,” Bernard feels the dissolution of self-enclosed identity as their respective affects mutually influence each other. However, it is crucial to note that this influence can be “painful,” and that the affects which sweep over characters in the novel are not always soothing, but often violent and exacting.

Accordingly, when the characters join together for the two major reunions in the novel – one before Percival’s departure for India and one after this death – it is the exchange of affect which accompanies their proximity that contributes to their somewhat painful merging to a singular, unified consciousness. When they assemble for the latter occasion at Hampton Court, Bernard notices that “already at fifty yards’ distance I feel the order of my being changed” (210),

55 “I do not believe in separation. We are not single” (67); “(we are not single, we are one)” (68).
and thinks, “it is uncomfortable...joining ragged edges, raw edges” (211). Notably, the unification of identities, or the affects that “edge” them, produce a “shock” for which Bernard explicitly notes, “there is no panacea” (211). Recalling the sensation of warmth down his spine as a child in the bath, and evincing yet another example of the spine “as a focus of affect and perception” in Woolf’s fiction (Apter 86), he will note that “as long as we draw breath....we are pierced with arrows of sensation” (239). Thus, like the “beaks of sensation” that threaten to crack Bernard’s shell earlier in the novel, affect continuously “shocks” and “pierces” identity just as it soothes and unifies the raw edges of personhood into a larger whole. Puncturing the self-contained shell of identity, affect inundates the individual after the surface has been breached.

Indeed, by the novel’s end, Bernard will proclaim the triumphant overthrow of individual identity as a result of this painful “contact with one another” and will relish the fact that he does not know “how to distinguish my life from theirs” (281, 276):

And now I ask, ‘Who am I?’ I have been talking of Bernard, Neville, Jinny, Susan, Rhoda and Louis. Am I all of them? Am I one and distinct? I do not know. We sat here together. But now Percival is dead, and Rhoda is dead; we are divided; we are not here. Yet I cannot find any obstacle separating us. There is no division between me and them. As I talked I felt, ‘I am you.’ This difference we make so much of, this identity we so feverishly cherish, was overcome. (288-89, emphasis mine)

In this way, Bernard ends the novel by signaling the final breakdown of partitions separating one identity from another; yet, it is crucial to note that this unification is possible only because, “like eager birds,” he and the others have “tapped with remorseless and savage egotism of the young our own snail-shell till it cracked” (123). Thus, revealing a blatant self-destruction inherent in the combining of consciousnesses, Bernard undermines his final optimistic flourish. For, if the beaks

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56 As we will see, Dr. O’Connor will make almost the exact same claim in Nightwood, discussed in Chapter 4.
Bernard notes above are aligned with “sensation,” then the affects of the combined group consciousness, signaled by “we” and “our,” not only destroy individuality, but assuredly, those individuals who resist. “Hence the fierceness, and the tap, tap, tap of the remorseless beaks of the young,” which Bernard notes in the novel’s closing pages, depict a transcendence only possible through predation (288). Bernard, in his lifelong quest for empathetic connection and in his dislike for the separation inherent in the self-containment of Western identity, thus paradoxically promotes the unifying force underlying Western civilization’s most violent impulses – the affective influence of the crowd, or the demands of the herd, that will ultimately kill Rhoda.

V. “She who hung back...when the herd assembled”57: Rhoda Under Water in The Waves

Thus, at the novel’s beginning, and again at its end, Bernard’s juxtaposition of sensation and the shell reveal the ominous tension between unbounded affect and enclosure, permeability and self-containment, which characterizes explorations of identity in The Waves. And, significantly, it is Rhoda who first spots the ambling “grey-shelled snail” in the garden as a child (10), and who also hears the singing of birds who prey on these snails as her first conscious sensation: “cheep, chirp; cheep, chip; going up and down” (9). The battle between snail and bird reappears continuously throughout the text, not only in Bernard’s reflections, but also in the interludes which separate the novel into nine sections of play-poem dialogue, and which depict the course of the sun over the natural world for one day. Where death is the consequence of a breach in one’s shell, it is particularly significant for Rhoda that one interlude pairs a “snail shell, rising in the grass like a grey cathedral” with the violent death of the soft-bodied worm, “pecked again and yet again, and left…to fester” (74), and that another depicts a snail being tapped against a stone “furiously, methodically, until the shell broke and something slimy oozed from the crack” (109). For, described as having “eyes the colour of snail’s flesh” (200), and later, as

57 Virginia Woolf, The Waves, 203
the lover of Louis, who “delight{s} in snails” (96), Rhoda is the text’s overt, but oft-ignored, embodiment of a struggle to protect oneself from the affective onslaught of others.

Indeed, as the character most sensitive to affect, Rhoda is the text’s most vulnerable voice, always fearful of others and their threat to discrete identity and autonomy. As Karen Kiavola aptly notes, “Being with others is a painful experience for her…Only in solitude does she feel safe” (40-41). Accordingly, Rhoda is always in search of a protective solitude, and finds this enabling isolation in fantasies that bolster her sense of individual agency. Her dreamy escapism manifests itself early in childhood, and concomitantly, in the text’s opening pages, as she rocks petals in her brown basin. Relishing the autonomy in seclusion, she thinks, “I have a short time alone…I have a short space of freedom” (18):58

I will now rock the brown basin from side to side so that my ships may ride the waves. Some will founder. Some will dash themselves against the cliffs. One sails alone. That is my ship…The waves rise; their crests curl; look at the lights on the mastheads. They have scattered, they have foundered, all except my ship which mounts the wave and sweeps before the gale… (19)

Here, as the ship that sails alone, Rhoda imagines herself safe from “founder{ing}” or from the dissolution and death that threatens her selfhood from the very outset of the text. Triumphanty mounting the waves, she wards off the intrusion of others through these isolating fantasies. And, significantly, when faced with Bernard’s affective “shocks” in childhood – when “knocked against and damaged” or faced with “hard contacts and collisions” – Rhoda will “think of {her} Armadas sailing on the high waves” and imagine herself “sail{ing} on alone under white cliffs”

58 Many critics read the foundational childhood event of Jinny kissing Louis, and Rhoda’s separation from this moment as she rocks her basin, as the basis for Rhoda’s outsider status throughout the text. However, Rhoda’s obliviousness to the event itself and her enjoyment of seclusion in this moment work to complicate this reading of her suicidality as a direct result of isolation, or her theoretical placement outside the bounds of heteronormativity.
(27). Yet, despite these protective fantasies, Rhoda is ultimately “rocked from side to side by the violence of {her} emotion” and feels herself “pierced with arrows” that echo Bernard’s “piercing” beaks of sensation (43, 44). Repeatedly attempting to “pull {her}self out of these waters,” which threaten inundation as a result of the arrow’s breach, Rhoda reveals that the tides which pursue her are affective in nature, linked to bodies (“shoulders”) in the crowd (“people”), and capable of penetrating even her dreams: “they heap themselves on me; they sweep me between their great shoulders; I am turned; I am tumbled: I am stretched, among these long lights, these long waves, these endless paths, with people pursuing, pursuing” (27-28).

Recalling the eddies of crowd affect and the dispersion of the individual in Mrs. Dalloway and “Street Haunting,” Rhoda’s fluid pursuers signify the threat to identity that occurs in her contact with others. A drowning out of the individual in the face of the larger collective, this theme becomes more apparent when Rhoda goes to school and feels that “this great company, all dressed in brown serge, has robbed me of my identity” (33). Her sense of depersonalization only exacerbated as the text progresses, Rhoda will repeatedly claim, “I am not here. I have no face” (43). For, unlike Jinny, who lives in the body “always sending out signals,” and who relishes the affective eddies of the “heterogeneous crowd” – being “flung up, and flung down, among men, like a ship on the sea” (176) – Rhoda is easily overwhelmed by her contact with others. And, unlike Susan, who has formed “something hard” at school, she is never quite able to form the kernel of protective shell surrounding identity. In the midst of the sexual awakening and intellectual development that characterizes the experiences of each voice at this point in the narrative, Rhoda more than any other reveals a struggle to form the “knot” of identity amidst the tides of affective feeling:
There is some check in the flow of my being; a deep stream presses on some obstacle; it jerks; it tugs; some knot in the centre resists. Oh, this is pain, this is anguish! I faint, I fail.

Now my body thaws; I am unsealed, I am incandescent. Now the stream pours in a deep tide fertilising, opening the hut, forcing the tight-folded, flooding free. To whom shall I give all that now flows through me, from my warm, my porous body? (57)

Here, a fertilizing and freeing experience, this flood of emotion “thaws” Rhoda and distances her from the solitude of her childhood, echoing Woolf’s elated statement in *Moments of Being*: “I am a porous vessel afloat on sensation” (133). Similarly “unsealed” and “porous,” Rhoda, like Bernard, experiences the collapse of self-contained identity as a positive experience and desires, rather than abhors, the company of others.

Yet, even at this stage in the text, it is clear that Rhoda’s momentary elation and her acknowledgement of affective permeability poses a serious threat to her sense of self. Attempting to escape a world where she is constantly effaced by the communicability of affect, Rhoda seeks refuge in her daydreams, but lives in perpetual fear that they will be penetrated by reality, or the sensations constantly suffered in the presence of others. For, even in her fantasies she is pursued by the “hostile mob,” and even then, “somebody knocks through it. They ask questions, they interrupt, they throw it down” (56). In essence, Rhoda begins to fulfill Apter’s claim that when faced with “the way others can mould, distort, or ignore aspects and qualities” of personal identity, “assurance of some invisible part of the self, and solitude, offer{s} essential protection” for Woolf’s characters (88). But, crucially, “these defences are never perfect, never sufficient” (88). Accordingly, the “intermittent shocks” of herd affect, which Rhoda figures as the “spring of the tiger” throughout the rest of the text, persistently break through the daydreams that temporarily distance her from others and provide the illusion of a self-contained identity: “With
intermittent shocks, sudden as the springs of a tiger, life emerges heaving its dark crest from the sea. It is to this we are attached; it is to this we are bound, as bodies to wild horses. And yet we have invented devices for filling the crevices and disguising these fissures” (64). Noting that self-contained identity itself is a constructed fiction filled with “crevices” and “fissures,” Rhoda is increasingly wary of a breach, fearing the “heaving…dark crest” of the affective “sea.”

The springs of the tiger, or the ferocity of affect, are merely “part of the emerging monster to whom we are attached” (65) – the brute underlying humanity’s herd impulse.

As Rhoda enters adulthood alongside the other characters, this affective threat becomes even more explicitly tied to crowd immersion. At a party where Jinny relishes how “our bodies communicate” (101), Rhoda feels “terror, pursuing me” (105). Avoiding the “faint smiles” and “shafts of…indifference” of those who continuously enter through the door before her, Rhoda figures the affects of others as violent and penetrating (105). She will think to herself, “A million arrows pierce me. Scorn and ridicule pierce me” (105-6). And though she returns to her fantasies, Rhoda will find them less insulating and protective than they were in childhood and adolescence: “Alone, I rock my basins; I am mistress of my fleet of ships. But…I am broken into separate pieces; I am no longer one” (106). Dissolved, broken, dispersed, Rhoda flees in search of “a world immune” (107). But “not composed,” or self-contained, “enough” to share in that immunity, she feels “like a cork on the rough sea” of affect, “like a ribbon of weed…flung far every time the door opens” and the wave breaks (107).

At Percival’s going away party, or the first small group assemblage that takes place in the novel, the impossibility of affective immunity becomes even more pronounced, as does Rhoda’s

59 Woolf agrees with Rhoda’s concept of identity, stating, “All this confirms me in thinking that we’re splinters & mosaics; not, as they used to hold, immaculate, monolithic, consistent wholes” (D2: 314). In light of this fact, she also notes the importance of self-containment: “I am more comfortable when shut up, self contained” (D3: 222).
alignment with an identity forged in solitude. Bernard claims from the outset that “the authentics…like Rhoda, exist most completely in solitude” (116), and that “Rhoda loves to be alone. She fears us because we shatter the sense of being which is so extreme in solitude” (133). He thus ominously implies the threat to Rhoda’s identity harbored in this moment where the voices “are drawn into this communion by some deep, some common emotion,” or “‘love of Percival’” (126). As usual, Rhoda cringes from a communion that could be overwhelming, and Louis notes how she approaches the group stealthily, taking cover, “so as to put off as long as possible the shock of recognition, so as to be secure for one more moment to rock her petals in her basin” (120). The “shock” of affect and the reference to childhood isolation precede Rhoda’s feeling that in company she is “unconsolidated” and unable to form the shell of identity or “wall against which their bodies move” (122). Moreover, it is at this point that Bernard references the “remorseless and savage” tapping of “our own snail-shell till it cracked” (123), and likewise, that the affects of others, and specifically the “sharp breath of {Neville’s} misery” at Percival’s departure, “scatters {Rhoda’s} being” (122).

Importantly, it is in this moment of dispersion that Rhoda most directly aligns the “shock of sensation” with the violence of the herd. For, she claims, “The door opens and the tiger leaps…I am afraid of the shock of sensation that leaps upon me, because I cannot deal with it as you do…and if I fall under the shock of the leap of the moment you will be on me, tearing me to pieces” (130). Positing “you,” or the other six members of the assembly, as the tiger, and claiming that they will rip her apart with “the shock of sensation,” Rhoda unmistakably aligns group consciousness with heightened affectivity and her own resistance with death. Tying the violence of affect and their dispersion of identity to the predatory nature of the herd for the first time, she goes on to compare the others to “hound{s} running on the scent” (130), who, unlike
her, live “wholly, indivisibly” without such a paralyzing fear of affect’s piercing breach and consequent inundation (131). As the communal affect of the group merges them into one sealed identity, signaled by the “circle” which forms around them and by the characters’ various assertions that “one thing melts into another” (135), that “all things…run into each other” (135), and that they are “coming together, like separated parts of one body and soul” (137), Rhoda imagines Percival as a “stone fallen into a pond round which minnows swarm,” causing the group to “eddy” around him on the current of collective feeling (136). As she is implicitly aware, “by applying the standards of the West” in his prototypical embodiment of European colonialism (136), Percival’s affective magnetism evokes the herd mentality underlying civilization and carries certain expectations for group involvement that Rhoda may not be able to fulfill.

Thus, it is this section – the celebration of Percival as the embodiment of “Western male humanism’s underlying concept of a unitary self” (Myk 106) – that most overtly signals the violently totalizing herd affect within civilization and its threat to Rhoda. For Bernard, this primitive aspect is in plain sight when he claims, “of course, we are animals” (245); yet, Bernard also recognizes that Rhoda, in comparison with the other female voices of Susan and Jinny, is “wild” and uncatchable (247). Not easily assimilated into the herd, it is Rhoda who is most painfully aware of the threat of the herd and the savagery inherent in this seemingly positive moment of mutual identification. For, Louis will note that a dangerous surge of affect results from the group’s proximity and shared feeling for Percival: “Now the current flows. Now we rush faster than before. Now the passions that lay in wait down there in the dark weeds which grow at the bottom rise and pound us with their waves. Pain and jealousy, envy and desire, and something deeper than they are, stronger than love and more subterranean” (142). Notably, these shared, primordial, or “subterranean,” affects paradoxically make the others “immune” (143),
according to Rhoda, yet leave her vulnerable to the violence. Aligning the “pound {ing}” rhythm of this affect with “the dancing and the drumming of naked men with assegais,” Rhoda and Louis envision a sacrificial victim, or “the bleeding limbs which they have torn from the living body” (140). Moreover, invoking Septimus and Clarissa, Rhoda envisions the group “possessed” by “an imperious brute” and states that “their eyes burn like the eyes of animals brushing through leaves on the scent of the prey” (143).

Thus driven, the voices assembled to celebrate Percival are also unconsciously engaged in a process of sacrifice, which readers belatedly realize foreshadows Percival’s death. Throughout the “great procession” in which “the beloved,” or Percival, is strewn with violets, Rhoda and Louis see “Death…woven in with the violets…Death and again death” (141). However, it is crucial to note that Percival, setting sail for India and fulfilling the promise of Western colonialism, is not the sacrificial victim indicated by the text. By virtue of his name alone, Percival is linked to an epic tradition of masculine heroism that excludes Rhoda – an altruistic, duty-bound narrative of death that lies outside the bounds of female suicide. For, Rhoda is the text’s true outsider, never its beloved. And it is she, Louis notes, “who hung back and turned aside when the herd assembled” and galloped with orderly, sleek backs over the rich pastures” (203, emphasis mine). Consequently, it is her death, not Percival’s, that is eclipsed in its defiant assertion of individuality.

Nonetheless, it is Rhoda who is most affected by Percival’s death, and who is given the final word in the short section dedicated to his elegy. For, though Percival’s position as the herd’s totemic “beloved,” or as the symbolic threat of violence underlying the herd’s affective unanimity, presages Rhoda’s demise at the hands of her “pursuers,” his death also indicates for
Rhoda the impossibility of self-containment at the level of the individual and fuels her suicidal abandon. Perusing the crowded streets shortly after his death, she thinks:

Now I will walk down Oxford Street envisaging a world rent by lightening…Look now at what Percival has given me. Look now at the street now that Percival is dead. The houses are lightly founded to be puffed over by a breath of air. Reckless and random the cars race and roar and hunt us to death like bloodhounds. I am alone in a hostile world. The human face is hideous. This is to my liking. I want publicity and violence and to be dashed like a stone on the rocks. I like factory chimneys and cranes and lorries. I like the passing of face and face and face, deformed, indifferent. I am sick of prettiness; I am sick of privacy. I ride rough waters and shall sink with no one to save me. (159-60)

Engaging with the “reckless and random” world around her where cars become “bloodhounds,” and the humans who drive them are “hideous” and “deformed,” Rhoda deliberately puts herself in the way of the crowd and its “violence.” Her desire for “publicity” over her typically preferred “privacy” represents an acknowledgement that safe harbor from the affective eddies, or “rough waters” that might “dash” her “like a stone on the rocks,” is impossible. As she walks, the affects of the crowd – its “hate, jealousy, hurry, and indifference” – “froth” around her (160), and Rhoda recognizes for the first time that her search for protection is in vain.

Yet, in destroying Rhoda’s belief that protection from the crowd is even possible in the first place, Percival provides Rhoda with a crucial insight – a vision of the protection offered by the crowd, the herd, or civilization, itself. Rhoda discovers that “Percival, by his death, has made me this gift” (163), which is the vision of civilization as a protective shell in itself. Allowing her the sense of immunity she longs for, the vision of this triumph causes Rhoda to immerse herself
within the crowd even further, “fearlessly” putting herself in the way of “collision” and the “swarm”:

I will make a pilgrimage. I will go to Greenwich. I will fling myself fearlessly into trams, into omnibuses. As we lurch down Regent Street, and I am flung upon this woman, upon this man, I am not injured, I am not outraged by the collision. A square stands upon an oblong. Here are mean streets were chaffering goes on in street markets, and every sort of iron rob, bolt and screw is laid out, and people swarm off the pavement, pinching raw meat with thick fingers. The structure is visible. We have made a dwelling-place.(163-64)

Despite this disgusting vision of humanity “pinching raw meat with thick fingers,” the creation of a “structure {d}” “dwelling-place” is crucial, since Rhoda explains very clearly earlier in the narrative, “I wish above all things to have lodgment” (131). Finding the shell to protect her soft soul, Rhoda feels an immense sense of relief – freedom from injury as well as outrage. Thus, this section overtly indicates not only that her search throughout the narrative is one for self-contained identity, but that this “structure” is attained through the figural death of the individual within the larger collective. Accordingly, Rhoda’s “offering to Percival,” or the violets she flings into the waves, is accompanied by a newfound willingness to be inundated, absorbed: “Now I will at last free the checked, the jerked back desire to be spent, to be consumed” (164).

However, while Percival’s death allows Rhoda to experience for a moment the desire to submit to herd consciousness, its heightened affectivity, and the safety within the “steel blue circle” of the group, Rhoda’s visionary elation is ultimately short-lived. For, not surprisingly, Rhoda’s inherent vulnerability to affective encounter makes this existence inordinately painful and consequently uninhabitable. The suicidal ideation she evinces after Percival’s death, which constitutes her desire to dissolve her own particularity in the larger herd, returns later in the
narrative as she becomes increasingly crowded out by the other voices of the text. Yet, it becomes clear that this suicidality no longer represents Rhoda’s urge to join the others through the figural death of her individual identity, but now her resignation to the inevitability of her own literal demise within them. For, Rhoda is too unlike the other characters to be dissolved into their group consciousness safely; her submersion in the crowd must be necessarily violent – a drowning out of “all that is unique, rare, delicate, secret” (Martin 8).

Accordingly, the waves of affect that overtake her in the company of others increasingly take on the guise of a contagion in the later sections of the text:

“Life, how I have dreaded you,” said Rhoda, “oh, human beings, how I have hated you! How you have nudged, how you have interrupted, how hideous you have looked in Oxford Street, how squalid sitting opposite each other staring in the Tube! Now as I climb this mountain, from the top of which I shall see Africa, my mind is printed with brown paper parcels and your faces. I have been stained by you and corrupted.” (203)

Recalling the crowd’s earlier ability to make her love for Percival “impure, now touched by their dirty fingers” (160), Rhoda’s sense of affective inundation is exacerbated into a contamination that can “stain” and “corrupt.” Consequently, she will charge the herd with defiling the “white spaces” of her isolation with their bestial paws: “you snatched from me the white spaces that lie between hour and hour and rolled them into dirty pellets and tossed them into the wastepaper basket with your greasy paws” (204). Increasingly threatened, Bernard claims that “Rhoda flies with her neck outstretched and blind fanatic eyes, past us” (198), “obsessed with visions, dreaming” (274), increasingly desiring violence and isolation. Leaving Louis because she “fears embraces,” Rhoda corroborates this view when she confesses, “I desired always to stretch the night and fill it fuller and fuller with dreams” (205). Her vision of civilization, or
“the house which contains us all” (205), no longer comforts Rhoda in the years following Percival’s death. Forecasting her own demise towards the end of the narrative, she will picture her death as a submersion in the same affective tides that haunted her childhood dreams: “we may sink and settle on the waves. The sea will drum in my ears. The white petals will be darkened with sea water. They will float for a moment and then sink. Rolling me over the waves will shoulder me under. Everything falls in a tremendous shower, dissolving me” (206). The white petals of her Armada “shoulder{ed}” under the waves, Rhoda can not escape affective contamination and is no longer protected by the inoculating “house” or “shell” of civilization.

That Rhoda’s death is caused by her inability to escape the breach in identity made by the heightened affectivity of the herd is made apparent in the novel’s penultimate section and the second group assembly at Hampton Court. For, it is here Neville will claim, “There is always somebody, when we come together, and the edges of meeting are still sharp, who refuses to be submerged; whose identity therefore one wishes to make crouch beneath one’s own” (212). Though Neville speaks specifically of Susan, it is Rhoda who cannot be incorporated into the collective consciousness, still accusing the group of the predations she has feared throughout the text: “More cruel than the old torturers you will let me fall, and will tear me to pieces when I am fallen” (224). Here, as in the text’s other moments of assembly, Rhoda experiences a moment of inclusion that draws her back into the protection of the group, or the dominating herd mentality their common “mood” provides: “This is our dwelling-place. The structure is now visible. Very little is left outside” (228). Yet, as herd outsider and prevailing seeker of isolation, Rhoda cannot remain a part of this shared self-enclosure. Consequently, her permanent division will result in her dissolution, as she predicts in one of her final speeches; “If we could mount together,” she notes, it might be different, “but you, disturbed by faint clapping sounds of praise and laughter,
and I, resenting compromise and right and wrong on human lips, trust only in solitude and the violence of death and thus are divided” (231).

VI. “The house which contains us all”60: Affective Contagion, Sacrifice, and Civilization

Ultimately, Rhoda’s quest for solitude and an identity uncompromised by affective intrusions disallows her inclusion within the “dwelling-place” of group consciousness, civilization, and the herd. Yet, as Rhoda herself flatly states, “Very little is left outside” this “structure” (228). Acknowledging the precariousness of life beyond the bounds of herd consciousness, she is implicitly aware that the autonomy of the herd is necessarily stronger than that of any individual; accordingly, Bernard notes, “one cannot live outside the machine for more perhaps than half an hour” (154), and Neville, too, refers to civilization as indifferent to individuals when he claims, “The machine then works,” despite Percival’s death (153). This machinist imagery is undoubtedly more “modernist” in its comparison of the body politic to the high-speed, high-tech automatons of urban experience. Yet, as Gillian Beer notes, within The Waves, “the continued presence of sea, clouds, leaves, stones, the animal form of man, the unchanged perceptual intensity of the senses, all sustain {Woolf’s} awareness of the simultaneity of the prehistoric in our present moment” (111, emphasis mine), and certainly, the latter two entities proclaim her awareness of the violent herd impulse and heightened affectivity proposed by contemporary crowd theories.61 Thus, when Rhoda references the inability to live outside civilization in the textual moment preceding her suicide, she intuits the prehistoric preference for the herd’s continuance over that of the individual, and echoes Trotter’s belief that one acts not in order to ensure one’s own existence, but the survival of the larger collective (98). Beneath the

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60 Virginia Woolf, The Waves, 205
61 Beer’s article reads the prehistoric in Woolf as the result of Darwin’s influence, but, as I argue here, we could also attribute its presence to the theories of the herd that succeeded Darwin, were contemporary with Woolf, and were also, in large part, highly influenced by the theory of evolution.
sophistication of modernity lies a repeated connection between civilized life in the West and the
vicious herd of our evolutionary forbearers – both driven by the suggestibility of affect, its
potential to overwhelm individual agency, and its demand for self-sacrifice.

Therefore, by looking to Bernard’s references to the deaths of Percival and Rhoda in the
final section of the novel, we can see that Rhoda’s suicide is ultimately the result of affect’s
inherent communicability – its contagious transmission and, consequently, the ability of the other
voices of the text to overwhelm, and thus inundate, Rhoda, stripping her of an autonomous death.
Though many have read Rhoda’s suicide as a triumphant flight into the imaginative territory of
her fantasies, in The Waves Woolf does not let us indulge in the redemptive vision of suicide that
is possible in Mrs. Dalloway. For, Rhoda’s complete erasure from the narrative signals that her
death is the text’s true sacrifice – a death demanded by the herd in its own self-interest. She does
not receive the isolation she so longed for, readers are never assured that she has achieved some
sense of agency and selfhood, and unlike Septimus Smith, her death is never depicted as a
choice. Bernard envisions her death, as Clarissa does with Septimus, “feel{ing} the rush of the
wind of her flight when she leapt” (289). Yet, his ability to fully empathize represents a more
sinister absorption of her identity as he monopolizes the last section of the novel in a way that
Clarissa’s consciousness never does. Unifying the dialogue of voices that characterize the other
sections of the novel into his own extended monologue, Bernard laconically informs readers
“{Rhoda} had killed herself” (281) before enacting Percival’s triumphant return to the narrative
in the final lines: “Death is the enemy. It is death against whom I ride with my spear couched and
my hair flying back like a young man’s, like Percival’s, when he galloped in India. I strike spurs
into my horse. Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!” (297).
That Bernard and Percival get the final word is precisely due to Percival’s role as a masculine hero and the embodiment not only of Western civilization, but likewise, its celebration of self-contained identity, powerful autonomy, and immunity from influence, or affect. For, it is Bernard, who in crowding out the other identities by the end of the novel, achieves self-containment on a metatextual level. Claiming that he is “immeasurably receptive, holding everything, trembling with fullness, yet clear, contained,” Bernard has gathered all the voices into one unified and totalizing consciousness that is more than Bernard, not just Bernard, and is thus “immune” (291). Kiavola reads the lack of boundaries signified by the waves not as annihilation but as “a restorative wholeness” (30), and here we can see that this wholeness exists, but only for Bernard as representative of herd consciousness. For, if death and dissolution are the great adversaries of the novel, then Bernard’s ongoing integration (despite his many flirtations with dispersion in the crowd) and his ability to “hold everything” in one “contained” consciousness signify that the self-containment which preserves the individual, or the shell of identity that roots Western notions of self, is possible only through absorption into the larger herd. Woolf wrote, “I sometimes think humanity is a vast wave, undulating; the same” (D3: 22), and Bernard reveals more than any other character that the waves which break on the shore in the novel’s final line refer back to this affective absorption, to the inevitable fact that as affective and porous beings, Woolf’s characters are all implicated in its violence.

Thus, within “Street Haunting,” Mrs. Dalloway, and The Waves, the regression of the human is a constant motif, as is the heightened affectivity of the herd, and the resulting violent impulse against those who do not cohere with the group. William A. Johnson writes that “a community’s survival, or even the very process of hominization itself, is sustainable only in the presence of some working solution to the contagion of spontaneous violence” (5), and in Mrs.
Dalloway, the violent herd impulse is released in war and, during times of peace, under the guise of modern medicine. Consequently, Septimus’ suicidal inoculation redefines the contours of his identity, shields him from herd affect, and eventually reasserts his autonomy. Moreover, his death ensures the survival of the community by functioning as a safety valve for the violent herd impulse subsisting in other characters, namely Clarissa. Within The Waves, herd violence is especially notable through Rhoda’s sense of threat as a result of her opposition to the herd, and in the ritual dismemberment of Percival, recognized only in the eyes of the group’s outsiders, Rhoda and Louis. Exhausting itself in peace, Johnson notes that “ritual functions by imitating progress of spontaneous violence,” and does so “in order to reach its grand finale of all united against (the last) one” (6). Yet, in The Waves, Percival is not the final victim and returns at the end of the narrative in Bernard’s contemplations against death, invoked as part of the totalizing herd consciousness that fights against its own death and dissolution. Ultimately, then, it is Rhoda who forms the text’s true sacrifice – one who must remain unacknowledged with no group outsider left after Bernard’s (the herd’s) usurpation of the other individuals in the text’s final chapter. A safety valve for an entire group of characters rather than just one, her death never achieves the “world immune” from affect she so sought (107). It is incorporation by the group rather than isolation from it, a dispersion of self rather than its demarcation, and a succumbing to herd contagion rather than inoculation. A sharp departure from the literary tradition of depicting the watery deaths of female suicides as a restorative return to the embrace of the maternal sea, Woolf’s depiction of affective turbulence in The Waves reveals a fundamentally pessimistic perspective on the power of small group belonging and the crowd.
“Book dishes draw saliva to the mouth; book fears raise gooseflesh and make the palms clammy; book suspense makes the cheeks burn and the heart thump. Still more, at the very touch of a phrase there is a surge of brilliant visual images…any real-life scene that has once been sucked into the ambiance of the story is affected, or infected, forever.” – Elizabeth Bowen, 1946

Chapter Three

“AFFECTED, OR INFECTED, FOREVER”: EMMELINE, SUICIDE, AND ATMOSPHERIC AFFECT IN TO THE NORTH

Literary rivals and members of the illustrious Bloomsbury group, Virginia Woolf and Elizabeth Bowen represent the peak of British and Anglo-Irish high modernism. Accordingly, Bowen is often caught glancing back in the instant she steps forward, and like her British counterpart, constantly evokes the classic modernist tension between evolutionary history and rapidly changing urban centers beset by technological innovation, new methods of transportation, and increased levels of social communication. Yet, while the comparison between Woolf and Bowen is common – so common, in fact, that Joshua Esty has recently cautioned, “One should not, in a reconsideration of Bowen, invoke the predictable Woolf comparison without good reason” (258) – it is particularly useful for unearthing a shared but oft-ignored narrative of affective contamination and suicide in their work. For, together Woolf and Bowen evince strong support for a highly anxious strand of modernist fiction that is both wary and welcoming of attempts to undermine “Western male humanism’s underlying concept of a unitary self” (Myk 106), and that does so through recurring depictions of porous and permeable identities, affective transmission, and suicide within the urban sphere.

By figuring affect as an infection capable of transgressing the illusory boundaries between self and other, Bowen’s fiction demonstrates the complex integration of minds and bodies within modernity’s burgeoning networks of human and non-human agents, and consequently, exacerbates the communicability of feeling Woolf demonstrates within the

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London metropolis. Like Septimus and Rhoda, Bowen’s heroine Emmeline in *To the North* is particularly threatened by the infectious affects of London’s stagnant and swarming interwar crowds and seeks out a “confining husk” capable of insulating her from the moody atmospheres of others. Encased in an ice sheath that isolates and thereby quarantines her mind and body, Emmeline contains her identity and protects her autonomy, dreading a susceptibility to affects that drift through the streets like mist and threaten to disperse her own ethereal being. However, eventually infiltrated by the heated passion of her lover Markie and his oft-noted capability of “cutting so much ice” (Lee 70), Emmeline’s self-erected barrier melts and evaporates, resulting in an acute vulnerability to the affects of the crowd, repeatedly depicted as infecting civilization from beyond “the pale.” Revealed in the novel’s tragic car accident, this vulnerability is enacted through the murder-suicide that strips both Emmeline and Markie of any agency, leaving them “possessed” by overwhelming, mutually reinforcing, and “savage” affect in the final moments before the crash. Thus, depicting the menacing connectivity of modernism as intensified by the vestigial affectivity of the modernist subject, Bowen’s dark ending portrays communicable feeling as capable of engendering a highly infectious suicidal impulse – one that possesses the suicide from without, annihilates those closest as collateral damage, and ultimately proliferates beyond control.

I. “Affected, infected you were at every turn”\(^{63}\): Bowen’s Urban Networks, Affect, and Death

Markedly *unlike* Woolf, and more like Dos Passos, who became “a kind of modernist black sheep,”\(^{64}\) or Djuna Barnes, who claimed she was “the most famous unknown of the

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\(^{63}\) Elizabeth Bowen, *Heat of the Day*, 278

\(^{64}\) Moglen is describing *U.S.A.*, but the quote is clearly applicable to Dos Passos himself, whose more popular works remain virtually non-existent in twentieth-century reading lists. The quote in full describes *U.S.A.* as “a kind of modernist black sheep, a disavowed central text, at once widely recognized and studiously neglected” (93).
century,” Elizabeth Bowen is notable for having been “peculiarly neglected” (Lee 11).

Straddling the somewhat vague dividing line between the Anglo-Irish literary tradition and the towering works of European modernism that still define the era for many scholars (e.g., *Ulysses*, *The Waste Land*, etc.), her work can be difficult to place. For, though Bowen’s entire oeuvre is to some degree founded upon her preoccupation with the decline of the Anglo-Irish Protestant ascendancy, which places her firmly within the field of Irish studies, many of her novels are set outside of Ireland, reflecting the broader concerns of literary and cultural modernism. Even so, Bowen is often exiled from the modernist canon, her fiction consistently aligned with Victorian realism rather than the formal experiments of high modernism despite its inordinately hybrid and complex structure. Evincing a particularly stilted syntax and blending the traditions of the colonial gothic, comedy of manners, bildungsroman, spy thriller, and even Beckettian post-modern prose, Bowen’s ten novels (in addition to almost eighty short stories and many works of non-fiction and literary journalism) are ambitious formally as well as generically; they traverse the turn of the century and the post-modern era, the stranded lives of orphans and the doomed affairs of women, wartime espionage and prewar social customs, hotel life and the death of Big House culture.

Yet, while the scope of Bowen’s fiction is wide, seemingly addressing the entire landscape of literary forms and socio-political issues leading up to and following the major World Wars, the centering force of her work does not stray far from that of her Bloomsbury contemporaries. Like Woolf, she was deeply invested in the study of character – not just the idiosyncrasies and pathologies that determine the inner reality of any one individual, or what

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65 This is a widely cited quote in Barnes criticism originating from Barnes herself in a letter to Natalie Barney sent June 31, 1963. See pg. 3 of *Silence and Power: A Reevaluation of Djuna Barnes*. Ed. Mary Lynn Broe.
66 Most critical considerations of Bowen concede her formal hybridity, but for the latter affinity, see Mooney’s “Unstable Compounds: Bowen’s Beckettian Affinities.”
Bowen deprecatingly referred to as “Personal Life,” but the “abstract pattern” formed by a group when each character’s thoughts and actions rely on others. In other words, “she creates men and women ‘without qualities’ who operate as constellations rather than as independent agents” (Ellmann 23). Akin to Woolf’s insistence that in The Waves she meant to have no characters, Bowen’s refutation of modernity’s obsession with the personal reveals that identity within her texts is constituted less by a discrete disposition or consciousness than by the effects, or, as I argue, the affects, of others – the “encounters, impressions, impacts, shocks” that Bowen believed constitute her fiction and that threaten to disrupt both character and plot in points of contact as painful as they are prosaic (Preface to The Last September, Mulberry 123).

For Maud Ellmann, whose foundational work Elizabeth Bowen: The Shadow Across the Page seeks to reestablish Bowen within the canonical fold of high modernism, these points of contact often signify a network of both human and non-human agents. For, despite Bowen’s interest in character, she was equally obsessed with objects, and especially the objects supplied by, and fused with, place. In most of her fiction written during the war and interwar periods, the scene is predominantly London or other heavily trafficked urban spaces, and accordingly, the objects available to her characters are instruments of transportation and communication necessarily bringing them into greater contact and thus producing greater “impacts.” In general, Bowen boasts that her characters “zestfully... take ship or board planes,” that “few of them even are blasés about railways,” and that “motor-cars magnetize them particularly” (“Notes on Writing a Novel,” Mulberry 287); yet, it is in To the North, “her most cosmopolitan novel” (Plock 289), that her attention to gadgetry and its psychological and physiological repercussions

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67 In Bowen’s words, “‘The idea for a book usually comes to me in the shape of an abstract pattern. Then the job is to construct characters to fit the situation’” (qtd. in Ellmann 23). She refers to the modern obsession with one’s “Personal Life” throughout her history of the Bowen family and its own Big House, Bowen’s Court (see pg. 259).
68 Referring to a review of The Waves, Woolf writes, “Odd, that they (The Times) shd. praise my characters when I meant to have none” (D4: 47).
on the subject is most acute. In this novel, sisters-in-law Cecilia and Emmeline Summers – brought together by the death of Henry, husband and brother, respectively – begin the novel with a train ride and end it with a fatal car crash, indulging in an airplane ride and one terrifying taxi escapade in between. Taking advantage of technologies that reinforce interpersonal contact, and that, in doing so, carry the risk of fatal impact, Bowen’s “characters are ‘driven’ in every sense” (Ellmann 96). For, according to Ellmann, “Psychologically, they are driven by desire, or more precisely by the death-drive disguised as romantic love; physically, they are driven by every mode of transportation available in 1928 – by trains, buses, taxis, private cars, and even aeroplanes” (96). In her view, the increased dependence upon urban technologies during the interwar years results not only in this particular confluence of drives within Bowen’s fiction, but also in the blurring of subject and object, or more precisely, the grafting of their nervous systems. In To the North especially, networks of transportation appear to be wired into the neural networks of characters, “extending into every area of private life” and significantly diminishing their control over their own speech and actions (97). “Puppets of their own technology” (99), the characters suffer from the “psychological effect of the industrialisation of transport,” or “the utter helplessness of the human being in the midst of great masses in motion” (111), their lack of agency startling them into a nervous apprehension that for Ellmann characterizes the psychic state of the novel. “Nervousness,” she writes, “spreads through To the North like an infection,” revealing “the interconnectedness of minds, enmeshed in transport networks that traverse the boundary between the human and the technological” (110-11, emphasis mine). Like Simmel’s metropolitan subject, characters are either “dazed into apathy by constant bombardment of the nerves” (110), or overstimulated to the point of crisis.
This fear of dependence on the technology of transport – a fear of its size, speed, and potentially violent ability to usurp the life of the individual – reflects a prototypical anxiety of the modernist age. Accordingly, *To the North* explores this fear by portraying how the erasure of partition between subject and object can obliterate the subject when taken to its extreme, as when Emmeline fuses with her car, involuntarily killing herself and her lover in the novel’s climactic final scene. Yet, while critics have heretofore focused on the blending of subject and object in the novel’s fatal conclusion, it is Bowen’s turn back towards the subject that holds the potential for illuminating certain preoccupations in her work. For, as Ellmann acknowledges, the novel’s technologies likewise foster greater connectedness between *people* in that they “override the boundaries that separate one person from another, creating mysterious and uncontrollable relations of dependency” (98). And ultimately, it is this erasure of the boundaries separating people that most concerns *To the North*. The heightened proximity fostered by increased mobility within densely populated city spaces yields a particular vulnerability within Bowen’s characters to the externalized moods and emotions of other subjects – or, to affect at large. Objects certainly exacerbate this vulnerability by amassing crowds wherein individuals inevitably experience the “encounters, impressions, impacts, shocks” that threaten individual identity and agency (*Mulberry* 123), but it is an intersubjective and affective *infection* (e.g., nervousness) which best elucidates Bowen’s death drive in the fictional realm.

Few, if any, critics have assigned Bowen’s death drive to affect within her novels; yet, several have noted Bowen’s general interest in affect and the surfaces which mediate its transmission. Brook Miller analyzes Bowen’s use of “narrative affect” (362), examining how her subjects are formed and disciplined through emotional codes that the narrator must reveal without reproducing (363-64). Thereby accounting for Bowen’s “impersonal personal” voice and
her occasionally cryptic syntax (363), Miller begins to delineate the affective stance of the narrator towards its subject, or the very surface of the text, which, in turn, affects the reader. Vike Martina Plock moves further inward to the relationships between surfaces within Bowen’s fictive worlds, claiming that “Bowen’s fiction evinces…a determined devotion to style, forms, surfaces” (298). However, like most other critical narratives on Bowen, Plock’s astute analysis of sartorial connections in the novel interrogates the networks formed between subject and object, arguing for the communicability of materials covering the body rather than the affective communication of bodies themselves.69 Thus, while Ellmann’s reading of To the North is equally interested in the transposition of sentience between subject and object, especially in the narrative’s conclusion, it comes closest to examining the novel through its affective resonances, obliquely approaching the line of critique which posits suicide as the result of affective overwhelm. Pointing out the importance of the novel’s title (and its inherent interest in both direction and movement), Ellmann focuses on the definition of transportation. For, not only referring to the movement of objects or people across time and space, “transport” also denotes a capability of being moved – the OED’s third and final entry for the verb form being “‘to carry away with the strength of some emotion; to cause to be beside oneself, to put into an ecstasy, to enrapture’” (qtd. in Ellmann 97). Aligned with the idea of “transport” as a “remov{al} from this world to the next” (OED), emotion thus allows for a repositioning of the subject that creates potential movement between states of being, or life and death.

Though Ellmann’s reading focuses on the fact that characters are “transported by their passions” within both urban and cognitive space (97), it is this objective movement between states of being that suggests the possibility of real, material effects on the subject as a result of

69 This point is likewise taken up in Ellmann’s book, and in Elizabeth C. Inglesby’s “‘Expressive Objects,’” both of which claim that objects are sentient in Bowen’s novels and can communicate in the absence of a human mediator.
contact with the “transporting” emotions of others. Importantly, Bowen likewise points readers towards this vulnerability:

Someone remarked, Bowen characters are almost perpetually in transit. I agree, Bowen characters are in transit *consciously*. Sensationalists, they are able to re-experience what they do, or equally, what is done to them, every day…When they extend their environment, strike outward, invade the unknown, travel, what goes on in them is magnified and enhanced: impacts are sharper, there is more objectivity. *(Mulberry 286)*

Acknowledging transportation as both physical and psychological phenomenon, Bowen here particularly emphasizes her characters’ sensitivity to *sensations* within the social environment—not the emotional or subjective introspection characteristic of high modernism, but the “objective” “impacts” from outside the subject that shape cognition and its psychic counterpart, mood. Already implicitly referring to the circulation of affects within the crowd, Bowen also places her characters in the context of transmission, wherein what “they do” and have “done to them” is “magnified” and “enhanced” in an “extended” milieu. The movement of affects within increasingly dense urban spaces threatens not only more forceful “impacts,” but also extended reverberation within the characters themselves. Just as the gadgetry of modernity often crowds out the subjectivity of Bowen’s characters, the increased proximity of others has a similar effect, transgressing the line between private and public space and making each individual susceptible to the affective states of others.

While the early novels rely on the Big House or the hotel to constrict characters in the rarefied air of mutual strain and tension, Bowen’s interwar novels move into the swarming London streets. In the scraps meant to someday form her autobiography *Pictures and Conversations*, Bowen laments that so few of the people interested in her novels show curiosity
about the places in them: “Why?” she asks, “Am I not manifestly a writer for whom places loom large?” (*Mulberry* 282). Accordingly, much Bowen scholarship now predominantly concentrates on place, objects, and their psychological effects on the subject, concomitantly ignoring their effects on affect – the body’s external expression of emotion. Nonetheless, it is within this urban setting that Bowen claims we are “stacked and crowded upon one another in our living and moving” (“The Bend Back,” *Mulberry* 59), and that bodies can be said to most affect each other. For, despite her subjective sense of increased personal isolation within the modern city (59), Bowen concedes, “claustrophobia is the threat to every civilized mind” (“Eire,” *Mulberry* 32).

Marina Mackay has taken up this thread in regards to Bowen’s later texts, writing that the “late modernist city is an apocalyptic place; no longer a site of individual liberations as it was in the 1920s, it is now one big antechamber to an anonymous, violent, communal death” (1604). Consequently, “what is responsible for the ubiquity of pathological mental states in late modernism is that diminished world…spatial contraction” (1605). For Mackay, it is *The Heat of the Day* that best encapsulates this sense of contraction and sets Bowen up as a counter to Woolf’s “liberating” texts like “Street Haunting” and *Mrs. Dalloway*; yet, as we have seen thus far in Woolf (Chapter 2), and as we will see in *To the North*, this dichotomy between the liberating crowds of the 20s and the stifling swarms of the 40s is not as definitive as one might presume. Given the popularity (and perceived negativity) of crowd discourses within the first few decades of the twentieth century, the critical narrative asserting the unequivocally liberatory nature of interwar crowds is tenuous at best. Moreover, it is not only during the war, but in the years preceding it, that Bowen’s fictional crowds consistently threaten individuals, infiltrating their self-contained identity and depriving them of autonomous differentiation.
Though proximity certainly aids in the transmission of affect, it is also crucial to note that infiltration is possible precisely because, for Bowen, identity is not a self-enclosed entity in the first place, but rather, permeable rather than impenetrable, amorphous rather than discrete. Echoing Woolf’s ideas about the porous nature of self, Bowen will even go so far as to claim that our subconscious recognition of identity as illusory is a key part of reality, and thus, constitutive of a fantasy of coherent identity that drives character construction in fiction:

For a main trait of human nature is its amorphousness, the amorphousness of the drifting and flopping jellyfish in a cloudy tide, and secret fears (such as fear of nonentity), discouragement and demoralizing misgivings prey upon individuals made aware of this. There results an obsessive wish to acquire outline, to be unmistakably demarcated, to take shape. Shape – shape is the desideratum: hence the overlordship of characters in novels, who have it, over the desirous reader who has it not. (Mulberry 285)

Here the “obsessive wish to acquire outline, to be unmistakably demarcated” parallels the concept of self-contained identity. For, the loss of “shape” results in a paralyzing “fear of nonentity,” and presumably, attempts to bolster one’s sense of self. That Bowen’s “amorphous…flopping jellyfish” of human personality is adrift on a “cloudy tide” only reinforces the threat of being swept up in the currents that we align with the moods, or affects, of the crowd.70 This permeability and its attendant threat is reiterated in her preface to The Demon Lover and Other Stories, where Bowen claims that during the war she lived “both as a civilian and as a writer, with every pore open” and felt that “the overcharged subconsciousness of everybody overflowed and merged” (Mulberry 95). Importantly, she goes on to claim that it is not only the psyche but

70 In the juxtaposition between tide and shape, we can see an underlying similarity to Woolf’s images for affect and identity (eddies/waves and shells/seals) in the preceding chapter. It is perhaps unsurprising that Bowen once wrote to Charles Ritchie, “I think we are curiously self-made creatures, carrying our personal worlds around with us like snails their shells” (Glendinning 173).
the body that loses definition: “In war, this feeling of slight differentiation was suspended: I felt
one with, and just like, everyone else. Sometimes I hardly knew where I stopped and somebody
else began” (95). Under these conditions of crowding and dissolution, it is no wonder that
Bowen describes hallucinations suffered during this time as “an unconscious, instinctive, saving
resort on the part of characters” (96) – attempts at psychic and emotional isolation that Bowen
calls “resistance-fantasies” and “worlds-within-worlds” of “saving hallucination” (97).

While wartime certainly yielded different physical and psychological phenomena than the
interwar period depicted in To the North (1932), it is crucial to note that Bowen’s claims about
personal permeability, affective inundation, and saving personal fantasies of isolation are
nonetheless directly applicable to her earlier novel – an especially important claim in light of the
fact that To the North presents her longest sustained contemplation of suicide within an oeuvre
that is in many ways obsessed with self-destruction and death. Beyond the number of orphans
and outcasts in her novels, which in themselves point towards a death-like absence that
characterizes Bowen’s fiction, the novels often make this absence palpable through the real death
of one or more characters. Though Ellmann points to “the irresistible attraction of the death
drive” (3), or the “death-dealing power of desire” (11), as being a constant leitmotif in Bowen’s
fiction, and even notes the prevalence of suicide throughout her oeuvre, this self-destructive
tendency remains heretofore unexamined beyond its link to Bowen’s preoccupation with the self-
destruction of her class, the Anglo-Irish Protestant ascendancy. Despite being “profoundly
disconcerting” to some scholars (x), it is as easily disposed of as Bowen’s other themes from
“Personal Life” – the childhood traumas that inform her fiction and result in her oddly detached
and deracinated characters.

71 Perhaps Bowen’s most famous orphan, Portia in The Death of the Heart has recently lost both parents before the
novel begins. Deaths include: Gerald Lesworth in The Last September; Emmeline and Markie in To the North; Max
Ebhart in The House in Paris; Robert Kelway in The Heat of the Day; and the eponymous Eva Trout, to name a few.
However, given Bowen’s aforementioned interest in constellations of characters within confined spaces, the merging of subject, object, and other subjects within these spaces, and the loss of agency resultant from this arrangement, her many suicides should be read more ambitiously. For, suicide in fiction is rarely, if ever, simply the result of mental illness or trauma. More often, and especially in the anxiety-ridden fictions of modernity, it is a result of the interference of others, and in Bowen’s work, even constitutes possession. In her first novel, *The Hotel*, protagonist Sydney Warren exhibits this suicidal possession, and like Emmeline, does so in a car at the novel’s finale. She harbors suicidal thoughts from the beginning, described by Mrs. Kerr as “a person who runs on to spikes” (69), and by Mr. Milton as someone who “‘jump{s} on your feelings and put{s} a pistol up to their heads to make the poor creatures explain themselves’” (173). Yet, Sydney’s suicidal ideation escalates within the oppressive “atmosphere” of the hotel in which the affective states of others threaten to smother her: “Now, at some tone in his voice she was surprised by a feeling that some new mood, not of her own, was coming down over them like a bell-glass” (95). Persuaded into an engagement she does not want, as her car weaves down the mountainside at the end of the text, Sydney “sat back quietly and began to concentrate her whole will and imagination. ‘If it could be the next corner,’ she thought, ‘we should go over clean –’” (178). Fortunately, a cart in the road forces her to abandon the vehicle and frees Sydney from the influence of companions (family, fiancé, friend) who have essentially overwhelmed her sense of self by projecting their affects upon her. Though Ellmann notes that the hotel’s “inertia appeals to Sydney’s suicidal drive to shortcut life” (79), it is ultimately the inertia of her car – a gap in the process of being *transported* by the feelings of

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72 Ronald will claim, “‘I’m not afraid of an atmosphere’” (106), though it is the atmosphere precisely which accounts for the collective misery of most of the hotel’s occupants.

73 “She stood between Tessa and Mrs Kerr as inanimate and objective as a young girl in a story told by a man, incapable of a thought or a feeling that was not attributed to her, with no personality of her own outside their three projections upon her: Milton’s fiancé, Tessa’s young cousin, Mrs Kerr’s protégée, lately her friend” (178).
others – that saves her life. Finally able to assert her agency and break her engagement once the
car has stopped moving and the others leave, she escapes the soporific atmosphere of others and
awakens in order to regain autonomy and personhood, and thus, escape death.

Yet, Bowen’s later characters are not so lucky. In *Eva Trout*, the eponymous heroine’s
father has committed suicide before the storyline begins, presumably, but not definitively, as the
result of a manipulative relationship with her guardian Constantine. This suicide haunts the text
through Eva’s ensuing struggle over inheritance, and in *The House in Paris*, a similar
intergenerational haunting takes place through Naomi Fisher, the text’s closet suicide, and her
fiancé Max Ebhart, its actual victim. Fatally slashing his wrists under the influence of Naomi’s
mother, Max falls prey to Mme. Fisher, who, like all the grown-up women in the novel, exert a
“command of emotion in others” (21), so much so that Naomi confesses, “‘It was not his will; it
was a passionate act’” and that “‘he needed so much to escape’” (205, 203). In *The Heat of the
Day*, this escape is made more literal as Axis spy Robert Kelway suspiciously falls, and more
probably jumps, off Stella Rodney’s roof, killing himself and thus avoiding capture. In this
novel, noted for its focus on “liminal places” and “ambivalent affects” (Seiler 127), war, like
love, presents “a thinning of the membrane between this and that” (218) – a crowding of
London’s inhabitants to such an extent that affect becomes atmospheric, resulting in a physical
oneness (“the bloodstream of crowds”) alongside a “curious animal *psychic* oneness, the human
lava-flow” (309, emphasis mine). As Neil Corcoran notes, it is precisely this affective unanimity,
or perceived regression of the masses, which abhors Kelway and steers him towards Hitler’s
fascism and its investment in an “anti-democratization of feeling or sentiment of the kind which
produces the lies and evasions of British wartime propaganda” (175, emphasis mine).

Mrs. Arbuthnot reveals Naomi’s suicidal ideation when she writes: “And am I always to see you standing on top
of the rock in your long blue coat, looking down so intently as though you wanted to dive?” (33).
Similar in many ways to *To the North*, affective currents in *The Heat of the Day* attack characters in conjunction, bringing emotions out of the air like infection. In a conversation with Robert’s sister, Stella claims the germ of their discussion “‘was *plus fort que nous*; it was in the air,’” while Ernestine retorts, “‘Possibly you, Stella, brought it back from Ireland on you, like a cold or ‘flu?’” (208). Emerging from beyond the pale of London, here affect infects from outside, invoking Markie’s juxtaposition in *To the North* between affects that are “savage,” “native,” or from the “hinterlands,” and the reasoned self-containment of the “conqueror” with its “imperial forces” that keep these affects in check (187). Similarly aligned with primitive, or foreign, bodies that constitute both infection and regression, affect in *The Heat of the Day* proliferates throughout the narrative to contaminate all those with whom Stella comes into contact, and especially Louie Lewis. A mere bystander within the novel’s tense spy-counterspy love triangle between Harrison-Stella-Robert, working class Louie follows the dictates of fin-de-siècle crowd theories, which prescribe female, proletariat bodies as most susceptible to affect. Accordingly, Louie is highly vulnerable to the group’s affective influence, feeling as though she is “being crowded to death” after witnessing a meeting between Harrison and Stella (275):

Louie felt herself entered by what was foreign. She exclaimed in thought, “Oh no, I wouldn’t be *her*!” at the moment when she most nearly was. Think, now what the air was charged with night and day-ununderstandable languages, music you did not care for, sickness, germs! You did not know what you might not be tuning in to, you could not say what you might not be picking up – *affected, infected you were at every turn*. Receiver, conductor, carrier – which was Louie, what was she doomed to be? She asked herself, but without words. She felt what she had not felt before – *was* it, even, she herself who was feeling? (278, emphasis mine)
Worth quoting in full, this passage provides Bowen’s most explicit exploration of affective transmission, figuring affect not only as a “foreign” object emitted from the charged “air,” but also as “sickness, germs.” Affect as infection renders Louie psychologically and physiologically passive in any role so that it does not matter whether she is “receiver, conductor, carrier.” As she notes, in any case, “her” feelings are not her own; they blend her with Stella at the moment she most thinks of herself as separate, and more fortunate, than she. Later in the narrative, Louie clings to the memory of Stella like “some sick part of a mood” (278), and as the text’s ultimate “receiver, conductor, carrier,” it is she who is “instantaneously…struck, pierced, driven forward into a stumbling run by anguish – an anguish, striking out of the air” near the site of Robert’s death (329). “An anguish,” or an affect whose impersonality is highly emphasized, steals over Louie in this final scene, attesting to the independence of moods from their subjects in Bowen’s work, and more importantly, to the contagious influence of the suicidal impulse. Yet, of course, it is in To the North that suicide is foregrounded most of all, and thus, it is in this text that the obliterating impact of infectious affect is revealed most.

II. “Glacial manners” and “High gates”?75: Isolation, Identity, and Emmeline’s Ice Sheath

An intensification of many of the themes that typically recur in Bowen’s work, To the North most fully explores her preoccupation with modernity’s nexus of urban technologies, heightened affective contact, and death. The novel’s initial scene brings this nexus to the fore, as Cecilia Summers and Markie Linkwater meet on a train heading north from Milan – a journey through the “after-world” which leaves Cecilia feeling “as though...they were all going to execution” (4, 2). This alignment of the northern latitudes and death from the outset accounts for Maud Ellmann’s claim that the North denotes an “eschatological condition” rather than a true

75 Emmeline’s “glacial manner” (15) and Oudenarde Road’s “high green gates” (12)
locale (101), and, significantly, it is here that Markie, Emmeline’s future chaperone into the underworld, makes his first appearance. For, if Emmeline is the text’s archetypal angel, then Markie is surely her demonic counterpart. Described by critics as the “most sadistic of Bowen’s smouldering depressives” (Ellmann 61), and as outright “satanic” by Bowen’s own narrator (86), Markie’s foul mood causes Cecilia to imagine that “in the after-world, she might deserve just such a companion: too close, glancing at her…without sympathy, with just such a cold material knowingness” (4). Yet, despite this initial coolness, it is Markie’s demonic presence, the very proximity of his “too close” hellish heat, which will melt the ice sheath protecting Emmeline’s identity and fuel the novel’s catastrophic ending as both characters approach the North.

However, while the North, in its consistent alignment with death, appears both disabling and destructive, it is crucial to note that its icy chill is constitutive of the life-affirming qualities that enable Emmeline to maintain her autonomy and independence throughout the narrative. Conflating the negative connotation of death with positive connotations of impenetrability, isolation, and even quarantine, ice itself comes to figure a “confining husk” for Emmeline’s identity (304), which protects her from the crowded London environment, and more importantly, maintains her aloofness from the infectious affects of its denizens. Both “ageless” and “slight” with an “uneffusive glow” (13, 19), Emmeline’s ethereal physicality, or bodilessness, contributes to this aloofness, but her sartorial choices – the white fur coat, silver dress, and matching slipper – overtly signal her lack of affective contamination, or the purity maintained by her defensive sheath of ice. Many critics have noted the significance of clothes for revealing personality in Bowen’s texts, and accordingly, in To the North, Emmeline’s reappearing white and silver fabrics are consistently linked to her “cool-looking,” “singular,” and “solitary” nature amidst the “crimsoning faces” and “uproar” around her (23). By failing to materialize as anything more than

76 Vike Martina Plock’s “Sartorial Connections” is a prime example.
a reflective surface, she remains impenetrable to affect, and her oft-noted angelic appearance is as much, if not more, a result of this demarcation between herself and others as it is her supposed ethereality. For, it is precisely her separation that makes her impassive, and her unemotional “air between serenity and preoccupation” that makes “her look rather like an angel” (13).

Importantly, while Emmeline’s inherent remoteness and dispassion distance her from the heated affects of raucous Bloomsbury parties and the impassioned tête-à-têtes of her relatives, the preservation of her glacial calm is dependent on her continued isolation. She thus enacts a defensive strategy to keep others at bay, choosing a career that allows her to oversee the complex networks of early twentieth-century transportation without being herself transported by the affects of its patrons. Taking an aerial view of the world, “the map of Europe {is} never far from her mind, crowds rushing from platform to platform” (29); yet, it is crucial to note that Emmeline is never part of these crowds, unlike Cecilia (and theoretically Markie) who begins the narrative on just such a platform. Rather, her primary method of travel – by private car – is isolating, and though she runs a travel agency, her passion for the work stems from her delight in an omniscient, cartographer’s view of the world, never her own placement within it. Looking down from on high, Emmeline is obsessed by figures, charts, and travelogues; she “adore{s} fact” but is immune from affect, having “taught herself to respect feeling” (28). 77 By far the most mobile character (her business partner Peter suffers from motion sickness, Cecilia does not have a car, and Markie prefers to let others do the driving), Emmeline’s very mobility is the basis of her independence, and likewise, what allows her to continue her “fantastic detachment” in order to evade physical proximity and its resultant affective influence (34).

77 Contrary to Deborah Parson’s claim that Emmeline’s “public identity as a business woman hides a fundamentally emotional and dependent subjectivity” (126), here she is shown to be fundamentally unemotional and independent.
In addition to this aerial perspective, Emmeline’s detachment is also achieved in part through her willful adoption of shortsightedness – another optical shift that disables her perception of affects. By refusing to wear glasses, Emmeline creates a myopic bubble that disconnects her from the social surround (Lee 68), and constitutes the narrator’s charge that she is “short-sighted in every sense,” gazing with a “reluctance or inability to engage oneself closely with life on any terms” (28, 34). This disconnection allows other characters to charge her with an icy frigidity; her “recessive personality” and “glacial manner” will trouble Lady Waters (15), and even Cecilia will think her a shade “perverse” due to an “independence that would rather blunder than be directed” (13). However, by maintaining mobility and removing visual acuity, Emmeline strategically reduces contact with her social environment and preserves her autonomy, which is dependent on the “solitude” she finds so “precious” (13).

Of course, for Bowen place is especially important and symbolic in her fiction, and, accordingly, Emmeline’s insistence on taking the house on Oudenarde Road constitutes further evidence of her quest for affective isolation. For, despite Cecilia’s “feeling that Oudenarde Road was rather far out” and “a long way from everybody we know” (31, 12), Emmeline prefers this distance and insists upon it: “Emmeline, however, had been anxious to settle here” (31). The house itself is protected within the labyrinth of St. John’s Wood, which is itself “airy” and “uphill,” and therefore recollects an aerial view of London that Emmeline already enjoys through the world maps of her travel agency. Moreover, surrounded by “high green gates” and “garden walls” that guard the inhabitants’ “secrets,” the neighborhood is in itself protective and insulating, much like her own sheath of ice (12). According to Hermoine Lee, “Oudenarde Road…is as much of a safe retreat as one can find in London” (76), and, isolated from the larger thoroughfares, it enacts a sort of quarantine from the infectious affects of the urban crowd. It
“runs quietly” down into the Abbey Road, but the noise of this busier thoroughfare, a “funnel of traffic and buses,” seldom penetrates the neighborhood above (12). Emmeline’s home thereby forms a corollary to her own impenetrability, further exacerbating her already overdetermined separation from others and establishing her emotional control from the outset of the text.

III. “The impact of passion upon passion”78: Markie’s Affective Impact and Infectious Desire

While the text’s initial chapters establish Emmeline’s determined pursuit of isolation and self-containment, or *quarantine*, through nearly every aspect of her characterization, the latter half of the novel traces the melting, splintering, and ultimate collapse of her hard-wrought ice sheath under the heated affects of others. The primary agent of Emmeline’s downfall is, of course, Markie, and as Lee notes, Markie is “an essentially cosmopolitan villain” (76). For, not only representative of the metropolis – the single sprawl of London – Markie carries with him the wider, and more powerful affective resonance of a constellation of cities, and is easily able to contaminate the singular Emmeline. The role of the city in Emmeline’s downfall has been noted in Bowen criticism, and Deborah Parsons even goes so far as to claim that *To the North* presents “the struggle of woman as not so much to enter but to survive the urban environment” (124). Yet, while this description of the novel is undoubtedly true, Markie’s belabored cosmopolitanism and the recurring infectious atmospheres of Bowen’s urban landscapes suggest that what the novel really challenges Emmeline to survive is not so much the city itself, but the communicable affect inherent to its crowded setting.

It has become standard to read Markie’s infiltration as sexual conquest and Emmeline’s fate as that of a fallen angel,79 but even a cursory examination of Emmeline’s characterization at the beginning of the novel indicates that this reading along the lines of “classical formality”

78 In full, “the impact of the passion upon the passion” (Bowen, “Poetic” 160).
79 The innocence/experience reading is common throughout Bowen criticism, perhaps most recently epitomized by Nicola Darwood’s *A World of Lost Innocence: The Fiction of Elizabeth Bowen* (2012).
doesn’t quite cohere with the complexity of the text (Lee 68). Moreover, as many critics have
paradoxically noted, Emmeline maintains her innocence despite her murder-suicide, and Markie’s sexual conquest, though *resulting* in sex, never degrades Emmeline’s purity or is
directly connected with a fall. In fact, for Emmeline the sex act itself is aligned with levitation,
described as the “soaring flight of her exaltation” (176). Thus, reading the novel as a static
confrontation between innocence and experience rather than a dynamic interaction between the
multi-faceted contours of autonomy and affect not only oversimplifies Emmeline’s complex
declension into suicide, but belies the tension between isolation and contamination at the novel’s
heart. For, with innocence intact, it is not only what Emmeline loses, but what she gains, that
explains the strange vacillations characterizing her suicidality in the latter half of the novel.

Perhaps not surprisingly, a closer inspection of Emmeline’s suicidal trajectory reveals
that the gradual loss of her protective ice sheath is accompanied by the acquisition of a
dangerous sensibility, or susceptibility, to affect. Accordingly, Markie’s infiltration is
accomplished through his affective pressure, and like the infectious fogs that drift throughout
Bowen’s oeuvre, the atmospheric changes in his mood gradually affect, and thus, *infect*
Emmeline. Weakening her ability to withhold herself from others, these affects make her
extremely vulnerable to the larger affective environment of London and, consequently, threaten
both her autonomy and her sense of self. Of course, the imagery of the novel is crucial to this
more nuanced view of Emmeline’s suicidality, and it is by tracing the shifts and transmutations
of Bowen’s representations of affect that allows a reading of Emmeline and Markie outside of
the hackneyed angel/devil binary. While in the latter half of the text, Markie’s affects often slide
over Emmeline like bubbles, clouds, or other bodies of air, taking on the characteristics of an

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80 Lee even goes so far as to claim, “That the pure-hearted Emmeline should be driven to what is, in effect, murder
and suicide, is a badge of her innocence” (68).
atmospheric shift, these affects initially take a more solid form, mimicking the dents and surface impressions that result from objects touching, or in more extreme fashion, colliding. Attacking from without, these affective impacts mimic the shocks and blows experienced by Rhoda before her inundation by the waves, and similarly, they begin breaking the carefully constructed shell of Emmeline’s identity, leaving her increasingly open to more subtle affective influence as the novel progresses.

Indeed, Markie is especially notable in that, despite his sinister appearance and generally irksome personality, his character is defined by its ability to make an impression. Forbidding an intimacy that would compromise her independence and sense of self, Emmeline dreads even “the touch of a thought” regarding him (56); yet, when Cecilia first meets him, she “could not but be impressed” (7), and so, too, will Markie “impress” Emmeline during their time together (59). Quite pronounced, this feature of Markie’s is nonetheless widely disregarded, and critical inattention to its significance in terms of reading the novel through an affective lens that would complicate the innocence/experience model is troubling. For, as Lauren Berlant notes in *Desire/Love*, desire of the kind that Emmeline comes to experience throughout the course of the novel is fundamentally an “affective disturbance” that manifests itself “as an impact from the outside, and yet, inducing an encounter with your affects, makes you feel as though it comes from within you” (6). As an “impact” that produces what Berlant calls “a dent on the subject” (75), affect is an objective entity, capable of material, and sometimes violent, effects upon the individual. Importantly, Bowen echoes Berlant’s language of violence, impact, and affect when assessing the requirements of fiction: “there must be the conflict between consciousness of the one and of the other person. *There must be the movement and the impact of the passion upon the passion*, the project on the project. We cannot really accept, even in our most introverted
individualism, the idea of a one-man world, of the solitary consciousness reflecting everything else” (“Poetic” 160). Here Bowen aligns affect with the impact of passions that are entities outside the solitary consciousness, and by doing so, rejects the clear partition between subject and object that constitutes notions of discrete identity. Invoking her earlier claim that human nature is essentially amorphous and porous, she seems to claim that the basis of reality and of fiction is the individual’s fundamental receptivity to the affects of others.

Aligned with Berlant’s “affective dents,” the impressions Emmeline and Cecilia suffer bespeak Markie’s ability to influence others with his moods, and, repeatedly, this influence is associated with imagery that is violent, if not abusive. The first time Markie reaches his hand towards Emmeline, “she jumped as though she had been struck” (59, emphasis mine), and “this impact of Markie upon her” crucially “weaken{s} her defences that were not till now defences, so unconscious had they been and so impassable” (56, 60, emphasis mine). With the loss of these psychic reinforcements, Emmeline is suddenly made vulnerable and is likewise rid of the reflective surface ice that preserved her sense of self-definition and autonomy. Yet, though Markie may have “the effect of suspending her faculties” (59), her reduction to passivity is no quiet release of power. “A splinter of ice in the heart is bombed out rather than thawed out” (56), the narrator explains, and overcome with trembling, weeping, and “every nerve quivering from that collision” (60, emphasis mine), Emmeline attempts to flee Markie’s lethal blows.

To escape, she will resort to Faraways, a country house owned by her relatives that literally advertises itself as “Far Away.” The isolation of the estate, whose pace of life is perpetually contrasted with the rush of London by owners Sir and Lady Waters, sets up the dichotomy Lee notes between urban and rural in the novel (76). Even more removed than Oudenarde Road, it is therefore “Here {that} Emmeline, step-child of her uneasy century,
thought she would like to live” (76). Yet, even at isolated Faraways, Markie is able to touch Emmeline; his previous impacts having cracked her shield now ensure that he can affect her from afar. And, in fact, it is here that Emmeline, who is consistently described as “transparent” and “cool-looking,” first “turn{s} faintly pink” when shirking Lady Waters’ insinuations that Cecilia and Markie are lovers. The text’s first real indication that Emmeline is succumbing to affective pressure, this involuntary response paves the way for Markie’s letter, which leaves Emmeline feeling “as though someone had touched her” and that she is “no longer quite alone” (56). Importantly, the letter itself, delivering Markie’s feelings in more direct language than heretofore expressed, and thus representing a turning point in the narrative, is described as “bumptious.” Rooted in “bump,” as a noun the term denotes “a blow somewhat heavy” or “a sudden collision, more or less violent,” and as a verb, “to strike heavily or firmly,” or “to impinge heavily upon; of persons, to push…violently against, or on any object” (OED). Though Markie’s “bumptiousness” may seem a harmless, though annoying, form of self-assertion, and the word itself an apt descriptor for his arrogant self-delivery throughout the narrative, these denotations are crucial when applied to the letter. For, the letter itself strikes more violently, more surreptitiously than Markie in that it effectively (affectively) grafts Markie’s feelings onto Emmeline for the first time. She “receive{s}” from it “an impression of vast space, of a vast moment” (56, emphasis mine), which foreshadows the atmospheric infection to come. However, the letter’s immediate effect is to transfer Markie’s moody violence directly onto Emmeline’s actions. As she removes the letter to a nearby drawer, slamming it shut in the process, readers are explicitly alerted that “it was not in {Emmeline’s} nature to shut a drawer violently” (56).

In this way, Emmeline’s flight to Faraways and her vehement dismissal of Markie’s follow-up letter signal the initial impact of Markie’s moods – the long-avoided splintering of the
wall of ice Emmeline has so carefully constructed as well as Emmeline’s newfound susceptibility to the transmission of affect. Nonetheless, by opening Emmeline to the possibility of love, the “affective dents” of Markie’s desire temporarily dispel Emmeline’s longing for isolation. For, even while still at Faraways, she begins to relish “the sense of {Markie’s} intimate presence” (67). The letter, though associated with the violent bombing of the ice splinter in Emmeline’s heart, causes the “shock” of their last meeting to fall away upon further consideration (67), and Markie’s affect subsequently steals over Emmeline: “Til now, a face not approaching or some fixed object had delayed her drifting fancy an instant, till it trailed on like a vapoury shadowless thin cloud over a tree. She laid hold on nothing. Now, like a cumulus mounting in dazzling soft rocky whiteness, one pleasure in an identity, Markie’s, reigned in her perfectly clear sky” (67). Momentarily inflated, Emmeline sees Markie as a part of her airy world for the first time, and having succeeded at impressing his identity upon her, it is now that his affective influence becomes atmospheric rather than material, insidious rather than violent, and pleasurable rather than painful, despite its ominous power to “reign” over her.

Accordingly, it is at this point in the narrative that Emmeline, now open to affective transfer, begins to be overwhelmed by others. What will soon become her complete dispersal is first registered as her heightened sensitivity to affects other than Markie’s, figured as both an infection and a dream, which in their intensity yield a disturbing loss of agency. “Emmeline who had been accustomed to walk so blindly, now found about lovers linked in the street her own transfiguration or malady,” and imagines she is “in a dream” as she traverses London (155, 144, emphasis mine). Feeling as though “the world shrank” before her (155), Emmeline’s sense of infection is linked with her increasing claustrophobia and her explicit fear that desire is a communicable disease. Yet, unlike Bowen’s “life-saving hallucinations,” at this point in the
narrative, her experience of affect is nightmarish in its depersonalization. For, “something disturbed her with its insistence, some humming at the back of her mind that was not a mind” (144), and in her agitation and distraction, Emmeline will feel that “place and time shivered to radiant atoms, were in disorder” (146). Though this general sense of unease is overtly linked to Markie’s presence in her life, the true origin of Emmeline’s “new weakness” is primarily revealed by Tripp, her secretary (155). For, Tripp’s “emotional presence...had a startling touch on herself. Here was feeling, clawed like a bear and winged like an angel” (155). As Emmeline is well aware, Tripp’s “emotion” impacts her through its transformation into a more general and objective “feeling,” or affect, figured in a violent (“clawed bear”) yet ethereal (“winged angel”) guise. For this reason, Tripp’s tantrum in the office over Emmeline’s supposed lack of feeling (“it does not affect you much,” she says [148]) is upsetting precisely because it invokes Emmeline’s newfound susceptibility, not only to Markie, but to the airborne, infectious affect he carries with him: it “repeated a hundred crises, marked between him and her in these spinning rings of excitement and pleasure, of which till now Emmeline had hardly been aware” (155). The danger of this new vulnerability is clearly indicated shortly after Tripp’s outburst when Emmeline attends a party and is nearly hit in the face by a rogue ice chip as she passes by a young man hammering a block of ice for drinks (160). A violent attack that overtly parallels the impact of Markie’s affects on Emmeline’s ice structure, this incident foreshadows Emmeline’s violent breakdown in the face of a potentially lethal “malady.”

IV. “We’re going north”\textsuperscript{81}: Icy Solitudes and Suicidal Possessions

Importantly, it is not until Emmeline’s psychic landscape is made manifest, or until the lovers fly to Paris, that the novel clearly figures affect’s inherent danger through highly

\textsuperscript{81} Elizabeth Bowen, \textit{To the North}, 96
infectious, atmospheric imagery. For, Markie not only steals over Emmeline like clouds, impressing his identity and his moods upon her, but also forcefully impinges upon her psychic independence and agency. At first, flying out of the aerodrome, “an exalting idea of speed possessed Emmeline” (167), and she is “returned to her element” (168) where cumulus clouds float like icebergs (170) and there exists a “remoteness,” “coldness and clearness of feeling” (171). Yet, this arctic isolation which so enraptures Emmeline, and which seems to return her to the impenetrability she retained at the novel’s outset, is tainted by Markie’s moody presence. Emmeline’s status as “possessed” – a word, seemingly innocuous, but nonetheless suggestive of fin-de-siècle claims that suicide constitutes possession (as outlined in Chapter 1) – will reappear in fantastic form during her fatal crash and, in a retrospective reading, hints at her already precarious position. Indeed, Emmeline is soon made aware of her utter lack of control: “of something increasing and mounting and, like the clouds, bearing in on her by their succession and changing nature how fast and strongly, though never whither, they moved. She was embarked, they were embarked together, no stop was possible; she could now turn back only by some unforeseen and violent deflection” (171). Speed becomes a liability in this ominous atmosphere, and the impending “violent deflection” seems to originate in the clouds “bearing in on her.” For, “oppressed by plunging once more in this shadowy network” of human existence, back to the “pavements running with life that crowd the eye in a moment and numb the spirit” (173), Emmeline cannot possibly maintain her detachment when she and Markie touch down in Paris. Their first afternoon offers nothing but “suspended crisis” (174), the nature of which seems to lie in the “fusion” of Markie and herself as each is “forced so close to the other” in the consummation of their affair (174).
Hermoine Lee reads Emmeline as “an unwakened ice maiden, the unfallen angel” (69); yet, it is clear that Emmeline’s death is caused precisely by her melting, waking, and subsequent fall from these airy heights. The ice which early in the narrative, and even once again in their plane ride, seems to comfort Emmeline with its imitation of her own discrete and deflecting surface, soon becomes a barrier – her disconnection with others forcing her to war with herself. When Markie visits her home in Oudenarde Road before their trip, Emmeline reflects that her protective self-containment is somehow flawed:

This idea of pleasure as isolated, arctic, regarding its own heart only, became desolating to Emmeline as a garden whose flowers were ice. Those north lights colouring the cold flowers became her enemies; her heart warming or weakening she felt at war with herself inside this cold zone of solitude. She desired lowness and fallibility, longing to break the mirror and touch the earth. (131)

Yet, Emmeline will suffer acutely from Markie’s initial affective dents and the “warming” and “weakening” of her heart to follow – her self-exile from the “cold zone of solitude.” In Paris, this warming process is complete, for Emmeline seems as though “she might have melted in some corridor of their hotel,” “her {body} vanishing” (176). Her “absence” during the sex act galls Markie, especially its indication of her “abandonment” of self and self-willed action (177). For Markie, who relies “on the enmity of the will” (185), or precisely what Emmeline has lost in becoming literally and figuratively penetrable, her transcendence of discrete identity and agency is painful. While the “heat quiver{s} up” in Paris, both parties feel an “oppressive contraction of space” (178), and the uncomfortable binding of affective influence.

This dissolution of her body into air forms an important corollary for Emmeline’s loss of agency under Markie’s affective influence – a loss that at first represents “the passionless
entirety of her surrender” (177), and later her sense of identity. For, afterwards, “Emmeline seldom asked herself is she was pleased or how things were going. Just aware of a differing tenor in all their meetings, she accepted as natural his variations of mood. High or low, drifting over the hours, iridescent or darker passing a shadow, she saw their happiness like an immortal bubble, touching a moment objects it seemed to enclose…. 82 Reducing Emmeline to extreme passivity, Markie’s moods thus “drift” over her, alternatively offering iridescence and threatening shadow, but nonetheless enclosing them both in the same affective atmosphere. Approaching her as atmosphere itself, his affects are like “heat,” “light,” and a “flame burning”: “When he spoke or approached it was for an instant as though the veil parted: something unknown came though – though he was all the time formlessly near her like heat or light. His being was written all over her; if he was not, she was not: then they both dissipated and hung in the air. But still something restlessly ate up the air, like a flame burning” (224). Written over and dissolved, Emmeline’s identity is “dissipated” and “hung in the air” of Markie’s moods, and her agency is threatened by incorporation, not simply by Markie, but by the larger social environment. Her protective covering gone, Markie’s infiltration opens the floodgates for the crowds Emmeline once was able to float through “solitary…but never alone” (23). For, readers are told that “this touch of strangeness on her nerves,” or Markie’s foreign affect, gradually “bound her up more closely with life,” entrenching her within the affective networks from which she was heretofore so aloof (223).

Though Emmeline will try to recreate the isolation of Faraways by renting a country cottage for herself and Markie soon after the lovers return to London, it is clear that she is no longer capable of her former detachment and that quarantine of any sort has become impossible.

82 This bubble first appears after Emmeline returns from Faraways, when her “world, that had hung shining throughout the week like a bubble on some divine breath, contracted suddenly to this room…the scene of some terror from which she had lately fled” (82).
Her agency and identity nullified by Markie, the narrator informs us that “for the first time in her life her plans were dependent on someone else’s” (232), her temper is “less angelic,” her “candour…had lost transparency,” and Julian, Cecilia’s lover, is “haunted” “by some quality she had lost…her composure” (237). No longer dispassionate, Emmeline now has a temper, is open to feeling – a fact which Markie will recognize with reluctance. For, “her wildness appalled Markie. And to this wildness, this impetus that he could not arrest, there appeared no limit. He dreaded the fall. He could wish he had never disturbed her, never possessed her but left her as he first saw her, smiling at him like a stranger across the room” (230). Figured here as a disturbance, Markie’s affects are revealed as the cause of an inundation, or the floodwaters resultant from Emmeline’s melted ice. Moreover, the re-emergence of Emmeline’s “possession” by Markie’s affect is crucial in signaling an even further erosion of her self-control. Julian will advise her that “perhaps between friends the surface was meant to be rough” (241), but Emmeline’s newfound sensitivity to the affects that rub against and dent her now take on a morbidly powerful cast, instigating thoughts of death (239). Thus, Emmeline feels “speechless so often, as though {she} were climbing a mountain” in an effort to re-attain her airy, isolated heights far from the “pressure of London” (240, 47). For, it is precisely the “roar of London” and the dissolution of her last outpost of isolation that terrifies her when Emmeline receives Cecilia’s telegram and realizes she is to marry Julian: “timber by timber, Oudenarde Road fell to bits, as small houses are broken up daily to widen the roar of London” (257). Enraged by Emmeline’s request to abandon their country retreat in order to return to Cecilia in London, Markie ends the relationship, causing an “agony” that marks the true beginning of Emmeline’s fall (260). For, when she tells Markie, “I think you will kill me,” she accurately forecasts the future (262).
Emmeline is described as existing in “the mortal solitude of an illness” after Markie’s rejection (277); yet, it is precisely her loss of solitude that is the source of infection. For, though Emmeline feels lonely, seeking company in “the roads of St. John’s Wood” by night and “the streets of east Bloomsbury” by day, she is, for the first time in the narrative, no longer alone (277). Suddenly “crowded out” of the office (277), she is likewise crowded out by those she encounters walking, as revealed by the narrator in a direct address to the reader: “The pavements off Theobald’s Road are hot and narrow; you get jostled into the gutter or bumped on walls. All these years while Emmeline worked in her quiet office these streets, so noisy and near, had been going on: now she and they were acquainted” (279). That the “glacial manner” which formerly encased her in its protective covering has been breached by Markie is emphasized by repeated references to heat throughout Emmeline’s flânerie – here indicated by the “hot and narrow” streets that force Emmeline into rough contact with those around her. Though earlier in the narrative Julian is momentarily “hypnotised by the glare and vibration of traffic” (141), it is ultimately Emmeline who will, as her agency’s slogan suggests, “move dangerously” within the heady atmosphere of others (25). The affective dents caused by getting “jostled” or, once again, “bumped,” in themselves point to Emmeline’s loss of detachment, but the threatening “near{ness}” of others and Emmeline’s newfound vulnerability to affective inundation is indicated by an “intensification of London’s roar in her brain” (279).

Private and public are blurred as the affects of the populace form Emmeline’s internal maelstrom, and as the inner disturbance threatening her actually draws blood. Unable to elicit a response from Markie:

That week {Emmeline’s} hair went darker and dull, her face white: if anyone looked at her in the streets it was to wonder from what she was running away. Broken up like a
puzzle the glittering summer lay scattered over her mind, cut into shapes of pain that had no other character. Walking the streets blindly she did not know what she thought, till a knuckle grazed on a wall, a shout as she stepped off into the traffic recalled her from the depths whose darkness she had not measured. The bleeding knuckle, the angry face of a man shouting down from a lorry were like bright light flashed in her eyes: the nightmare drew back, waiting. One note held her ears through the hollow thunder of the traffic: in shells of buildings the whirr of unanswered telephones. These were insistent: she put her hands to her head… (279)

Like the aforementioned passage, these lines point to Emmeline’s rough contact with others; yet, here the dents of affect become lacerations, as “jostle{s}” and “bump{s}” transform into shards of glass that reflect Emmeline’s “glittering summer” and “cut” it “into shapes of pain.” Her shell of ice now “broken,” the bleeding knuckle and near plunge into traffic reveal Emmeline’s escalating vulnerability to those around her and the loss of independence and autonomy that formed the basis of her isolated detachment earlier in the narrative. “Walking…blindly” and without thought, her somnambulism and death-like pallor foreshadow her eventual possession by affect – a fate she is still capable of attempting to escape at this juncture by “running away” from the unanswered telephones that insist on interconnection – the “nightmare” of others.

Emmeline’s escapist desire to flee the crowd verges on the suicidal at this point in the narrative, and thus elicits a signpost to the reader as clear and direct as the signpost Emmeline follows “to the North” in the final chapter. Here death, but most especially suicide, is figured as a means of isolation from the endless ringing telephones and cacophonous roar of London. Its impetus is involuntary, and yet, paradoxically, a product of the desire to rediscover autonomy by isolating oneself from the live wire of affective influence. As Deborah Parsons writes, “In
Bowen’s London…urban wandering is no frivolous *flânerie* but instead a restless and desperate search for self” (201). Accordingly, the death drive Emmeline elicits here, typically conflated with desire and passion in Bowen criticism, is revealed at the novel’s end to be driven more by the need to reinforce identity and agency than by a desire for erotic undoing, or submission, in and of itself. The fact that Emmeline’s eyes flash with “bright light” in this short paragraph hints at this alternate reading of suicide in Bowen’s fiction; for, this brightness and insubstantiality, which is so often associated with Emmeline’s angelic but icy isolation, reappears in highly overdetermined form at the novel’s end. Here the light of recognition, and thus self-repossession, saves her from stepping out in front of the lorry and drawing further blood. Hence, it is this fatal attraction to self-actualization that causes Emmeline, like a moth, to blunder too close to the light.

Between Markie and Emmeline’s breakup and their final, fatal encounter forced by Cecilia’s well-meaning dinner party, the narrator conspicuously alerts readers to the fact that Emmeline has already been engaged in the act of re-fortifying her self. For, when Emmeline tells Cecilia she would rather not meet Markie again, Cecilia insists that she is “making mountains” (283). No doubt readers, along with Emmeline, are “struck by the word” in that it recalls both Emmeline’s claim to Julian that she feels out of breath, as if she were constantly climbing a mountain (283, 240), and Markie’s accusation that Emmeline lives in the rarefied air of the Alps (“one can’t live on the top of the Alps” [227]) – a peak whose pristine and isolated condition is untenable in the modern world. Thus, Cecilia’s seemingly innocuous accusation provides a double reference for readers, signaling Emmeline’s efforts to painstakingly rebuild the ice sheath protecting her sense of identity at this point in the narrative while also alluding to her inevitable failure. That Emmeline has achieved some semblance of her former detachment is revealed by
her renewed isolation; she will give in to Cecilia’s plan reluctantly, with “such detachment that the battle seemed already lost, or won” (282, emphasis mine), and will look through her with a “wandering icy gentleness like insanity’s, gentleness with no object” (284). Her discrete personhood and stubborn autonomy, always aligned with her icy brightness throughout the text, are thus emphasized in their final interview, and for Julian as well, Emmeline’s angelic translucence is heightened. Watching her descend the staircase, he aligns her newfound distance with her death, emphasizing the suicide as self-preservation motive in Emmeline’s return to her “serene” former self: “Her beauty surprised him. Very tall, silver and shining, her hair tonight at its brightest, face at its most translucent, her unnatural serenity caught at his heart like a cry. Were she dead, she could not have come from farther away” (285).

As their last encounter primarily consists of Markie’s attempt to transport Emmeline with his passion and Emmeline’s struggle to resist being carried away, it is fitting that it takes place in a car. The speed of the drive, the unreality atmosphere of their surroundings, and the hypnotic repetitiveness of their argument lends the scene a sense of fatalism foreshadowed by Cecilia and Julian’s assessments of Emmeline earlier in the evening. For, as Markie tries again and again to break through the sheath of ice housing, and protecting, Emmeline’s autonomy, it gradually becomes clear that the isolation of death remains the only method of escaping his affective influence. At the beginning of the drive, Emmeline retains her detachment, and Markie is startled by her “unseeing” eyes in addition to “her distance and renewed unconsciousness of himself” (289, 290). This distance, associated with her internal luminousness, is unbearable for Markie, who will once again try to conquer her. And to that end, he will repeatedly try to touch the light encasing her: “her white fur coat, slipping apart, showing a silver knee and some quenched light running among the folds of her dress: she was so close, his nerves leaped into his fingertips”
(296). However, Emmeline’s sharp “‘—Don’t touch me’” reveals the very root of their trouble (296). This verbal cue along with her other affective responses – particularly her contraction when they are jostled together on tight turns – repeatedly indicate Emmeline’s attempt to prevent a breach to her surface, or a recurrence of the denting and melting she has previously experienced under Markie’s impact. Her already cold fingers “harden” when Markie puts his hand over hers on the wheel (296), and there is “a drop in her voice, less resolution than deadness” as she repeatedly begs him to leave her alone (301), repeating “‘I only want to be quiet’” (297), “‘I have to be quiet now. You must leave me quiet, Markie’” (300). Her insistence on quiet (to prevent the recurrence of London’s roar) and her refusal to be touched (to avoid Markie’s infectious affect), points to Emmeline’s desire to escape all modes of threatening contact, and it is in going “to the north” (296), towards death, that she can do so.

Throughout the journey the repeated signposts that signal their direction are repeatedly associated with a lack of communication, or a cutoff point of some sort, which typically attracts Emmeline and panics Markie. In the first long passage devoted to their surroundings – Bowen’s ever-crucial delineation of the setting – this severance of communication is aligned both with glacial coldness (and thus Emmeline’s original isolation from affect), with isolation from the din of London, and with a dream-like possession that bespeaks the death drive:

The cold pole’s first magnetism began to tighten upon them as street by street the heat and exasperation of London kept flaking away. The glow slipped from the sky and the North laid its first chilly fingers upon their temples, creeping down into his collar and stirring her hair at the roots. Petrol pumps red and yellow, veins of all speed and dangerous, leapt giant into their lights. As they steadily bore uphill to some funnelpoint in the darkness – for though lamps dotted the kerb the road ran and deepened ahead into
shades of pitch like a river – this icy rim to the known world began to possess his fancy, til he half expected its pale reflection ahead. Cut apart by cold singing air he and she had no communication… (296-97, emphasis mine)

Here the affective “heat” of the crowded London streets is dispersed by the northern air, left cool in its isolation; yet, death’s force is magnetic, “tighten{ing}” on them, and seemingly funneling them towards its darkness. That Markie already begins to feel the possession which will fully occupy Emmeline in the succeeding pages speaks not only to the infectious lure of death throughout the narrative, but also to its reinforcement of identity – the self-reflexive encasement it provides through its “pale reflection” of oneself. As he intuits, Emmeline soon becomes lost in the reflective ice, “touch{ing} the chilly hand of peace” as though she is “quite alone now” in a “trancelike” state reminiscent of Bowen’s “saving hallucinations” (301-2). For, it is no longer Emmeline, but the North (i.e., the death drive caused by infectious affect) that is endowed with agency; it is “the North – ice and unbreathed air, lights whose reflections since childhood had brightened and chilled her sky, touching to life at all points a sense of unshared beauty—” that now “reclaim{s} her for its clear solit...” (302). Its air “unbreathed” and uncontaminated, its beauty “unshared” and unaffected, the North bolsters Emmeline’s identity just as she abandons it. For, it is at this moment that Emmeline becomes truly possessed: “Speed, mounting through her nerves with the consciousness of a direction, began to possess Emmeline – who sat fixed, immovable with excitement” (302, emphasis mine). Bereft of consciousness and animation, “the car hardly holding the road seemed to him past her control” (298).

The climax of the chapter occurs during Markie’s final assault, as Emmeline and Markie’s mutual possession incites his attempts to drag up every painful memory and “expose{}}
every nerve in their feeling” (304). Yet, Emmeline’s quarantine is reinstated as death approaches; for, she “{feels} nothing” as their speed mounts:

—Like a shout from the top of a bank, like a loud chord struck on the dark, she saw ‘TO THE NORTH’ written black on white, with a long black immovably flying arrow.

Something gave way.

An immense idea of departure—expresses getting steam up and crashing from termini, liners clearing the docks, the shadows of planes rising, caravans winding out into the first dip of the desert—possessed her spirit, now launched like the long arrow. The traveler solitary with his uncertainties, with apprehensions he cannot communicate, seeing the strands of the known snap like paper ribbons, is sustained and more than himself on a great impetus: the faint pain of parting sets free the heart. (304, emphasis mine)

Possessed by departure in its ultimate form, here Emmeline is compared to the traveler who is once more “solitary,” beyond the communicative network that would tie her down like so many “paper ribbons” to those around her. “More than {her}self,” she gains an identity as she moves towards death, freeing herself from the heart, or the symbolic seat of affect. That this possession by the death drive, which jettisons Emmeline into the icy atmosphere where she is most at home, causes a repossession of identity and its comforting, confining partition from others, is directly indicated by the narrator, who claims that “For this levitation a total loss of her faculties, of every sense of his presence, the car and herself driving were very little to pay. She was lost to her own identity, a confining husk” (304, emphasis mine). Departing from Bowen’s similar ending in “The Demon Lover,” described by Corcoran as “a story about the relationship between possession and self-possession” (163), it is crucial to note that here Emmeline’s fate seems to
merge both states of being. Comforted rather than terrified, she becomes dispossessed of her identity and agency precisely in order to reinstate them.

That suicide allows for a repossess of self at the cost of possession by its impulse is indicated by the involuntary nature of the crash and the emptiness of Emmeline in the moments leading up to her death. When Markie looks at Emmeline, “She looked into his eyes without consciousness, as though in at the windows of an empty house…she was not here, he was alone. Little more than his memory ruled her still animate body, so peacefully empty as not to be even haunted” (305). “Speed stream{s} from her unawares,” as Emmeline seems “twice…magnetized into…rushing arcs of light” (305). Yet, her moth-like approach to the flame is nonetheless purposeful. Returning to the point before the fall, where “nothing could be as dear as the circle of reading-light round her solitary pillow” (28), Emmeline’s driving redraws the hard brightness encircling her solitude – the “wild swing of their lights…drew a sharp line, like fog round a lamp, round the circle of mindless serenity where she sat merciless, ignorant of their two lives” (305). “Head-on, magnetized up the heart of the fan of approaching brightness” (306), Emmeline at last disappears into the light she seeks – the ultimate isolation of death, which preserves her identity, her autonomy, and her detachment from the affective pain of “a thousand vibrations of impact” (305).

V. “The threat to every civilized mind”\textsuperscript{83}: Infectious Affect From Beyond the Pale

Thus, in a reversal of the liebestod’s generic expectations,\textsuperscript{84} Bowen’s To the North ends in a flight from love rather than its consummation. Emmeline’s final placement in the icy solitude of the North secures her isolation and belabors the fact that Emmeline and Markie’s deaths cannot be romanticized along the lines of Tristan and Isolde or Romeo and Juliet. Not a

\textsuperscript{83} Elizabeth Bowen, “Eire,” Mulberry, 32

\textsuperscript{84} Literally “love’s death” (OED), the liebestod enacts the consummation of love through death, often by way of a joint suicide.
mutual suicide, but a murder-suicide, and one that is as devoid of intentionality as it is explicitly divorced from the merging of identity associated with the liebestod’s idealization of tragic love, their fate provides a morbid, modernist twist to that romantic literary tradition. While Wendy Parkins sees Cecilia’s marriage and Emmeline’s death as playing out the death or marriage duality possible for heroines of the nineteenth-century novel, and thus undermining modernism’s supposed “liberatory potential for women” (84), even this generic category is equally ill-fitting. For, in its focus on the proliferation of affective networks and death, To the North continually calls attention to a new phase in history, particularly through Lady Waters’ claims that “modern life” is “increasingly complex” (78), “a restless age” (211), and frighteningly “decentralized” (212). These metatextual comments justify Hermoine Lee’s claim that Bowen sits above the emotional content of the novel, using the passion of its characters in order to further her own “clinical” analysis of the modernist age (78), especially if these violent symptoms are viewed in the context of modernist conceptions of identity – conceptions which vacillate between aligning humankind with the triumphs of Western civilization and with the ignominy of its primitive past, and which border on viewing the individual as the powerful bearer of humanist thought and as a mindless member of the bygone herd.

This dichotomy reappears throughout To the North in ways that are subtle, yet nonetheless provocative, in that susceptibility to what is variously feeling, emotion, or affect, is aligned with savagery beyond the pale of civilization, or with a patient zero originating from the uncharted hinterlands reminiscent of Celtic folklore. Emmeline’s protection from feeling, and its subsequent loss, drives the novel forward; yet, it is crucial to note that all four of the primary characters avoid feeling throughout the narrative. Emmeline, by virtue of initially succeeding, is particularly remarkable, especially given that her overt alignment with the North, and hence,
oblique association with the hinterland itself, accounts for her particular vulnerability to affect and its repercussions once impacted by Markie. Julian struggles to overcome “the nervous edge of feeling” (134) and “endeavor[s] to keep himself closed against the disturbance” (134). Cecilia, still recovering from the “ravaging, disproportionate” effects of Henry’s death, reveals that her “alliance” with Emmeline is “largely defensive,” meant to repel future emotional upheavals; for, “around Oudenarde Road a kind of pale was put up against one kind of emotion: nothing on that scale was to occur again” (184, emphasis mine). Moreover, the pale of reason against emotion reappears within Markie when Emmeline inspires a “nervous frenzy” in Paris: like natives before the solid advance of imperial forces, aspiration, feeling, all sense of the immaterial had retreated in him before reason to some craggy hinterland where, having made no terms with the conqueror, they were submitted to no control and remained a menace. Like savages coming to town on a fair day to skip and chaffer, … feeling crept out in him from some unmapped region. (187)

Here it is precisely the inability to outline or map this border territory – its very resistance to taking the “shape” Bowen imagined so crucial to identity – that terrifies Markie, and arguably, the other characters as well. Traveling towards the tundra without ever arriving at a verifiable end-point, going “To the North” insists upon the loss of personal autonomy in the face of “feeling” and the violent affective pressure such a journey invokes.

By tracking these resistances, it is clear that Bowen’s text is obsessed with the psychic terrain that falls between the numbness of Simmel’s cultivated blasé attitude and the constant disorientation of affective overwhelm. To submit to any emotion, one subjects oneself to the possibility of a hostile takeover – one that threatens not only individual will, but identity itself. Hence, how to maintain “control” forms a central preoccupation in the novel despite the fact that
ascertaining agency in the face of “immaterial” forces makes this debate insoluble. Affects originating outside of the subjects continue to exert an almost atmospheric pressure within them, and it is precisely these moods, beyond the grasp of the characters but so often infiltrating their psychic defenses, that make the plot “go.” Constituting the basis of the novel’s transportation, affect is what allows the characters to “move dangerously,” or to be moved at all (25). It is what gives Emmeline’s life “its first conscious form” (218), and it is ultimately what takes that consciousness away through an annihilating, affective infection. It is what constitutes the modernist subject in the fiction of both Bowen and Woolf – a liminal position between discrete personhood and disturbing non-identity, between the self-contained, impenetrable, modern individual and the porous, permeable pre-Enlightenment self. More importantly, it is what allows progressively more collateral damage as not only affect, but its lethal effects, become infectious, taking down increasingly more victims in the proliferating, but nonetheless vestigial, affective networks of modern civilization.
“Man lives between the dreadful press of groin and grave.” – Djuna Barnes85

Chapter Four

“I stood in the centre of eroticism and death”:
Affective Spillways and the Suicidal Logic of Desire in Nightwood

If literary modernism often portrays suicide as an epidemic rooted in the transmission of affect, then Djuna Barnes carries this suicidal logic to its devastating conclusion. For, while Dos Passos, Woolf, and Bowen also render affect as an infectious disease, the avoidance of which drives their suicidal figures, each ultimately offers an escapist fantasy of isolationist self-containment at the novel’s end. In Manhattan Transfer, this escape is destined only for the idealized subjects of modernism – white, male artists or intellectuals. In Mrs. Dalloway, the prerequisites for those worthy of escape expand, as Clarissa becomes the direct beneficiary of Septimus’ demise, and in The Waves, it is the entire community, encapsulated in Bernard, which survives at Rhoda’s expense. Though smaller in scale by virtue of its attention to a particular quartet, even To the North ends with Julian and Cecilia safe in the comfort of the domestic space on the night of Emmeline and Markie’s fatal crash, ensconced in a civilization the lovers eschew in their journey toward the hinterlands. Yet, Nightwood resists this escapism, and in doing so, furnishes a much darker dream. For, while suicidal ideation in Barnes’ texts is similarly the result of contagious affect and the ensuing desire to isolate oneself from its assaults on identity and agency, there is no immunity in her textual world. No quarantine exists for the subject because subjectivity itself is shaped by affect, the projection and incorporation of which forms an integral, and fundamentally inescapable, part of psychic life. This inescapability is foregrounded throughout her oeuvre in the recurring motif of the spillway, which Barnes uses to depict the suicidal impulse itself flowing from one character to another, thereby positing a slippery and

85 Undated note, Collected Poems with Notes Toward the Memoirs, 5
highly infectious death drive. By repeatedly connecting this figure to the blood spill of the disembodied heart in *Nightwood*, Barnes reveals communicable affect – the inevitable result of erotic desire – as a central concern of her oeuvre and the primary instigator of an impulse to control oneself, and others, through the suicidal act.

Although, on the surface, *Nightwood* seems less invested in staging suicides or the oppressive urban crowds which prompt them in the aforementioned texts, Barnes’ oeuvre is widely regarded for its interest in the degeneration of mankind into its bestial forbearers, thus aligning with the anxiety-ridden social science underlying modernism’s theories of the overly emotional and regressive masses. Moreover, the suicidal ideation in the texts preceding *Nightwood* and in expurgated sections of the novel itself reveal the final manuscript’s complex but suppressed interest in affective transfer and self-destruction in the urban sphere. In particular, the overt depictions of suicide in the *Spillway* stories, which were revised and republished over the course of her career, and which together form the germ of *Nightwood*’s foundational themes, evince Barnes’ enduring interest in death as a mode of self-construction, and likewise indicate the projection of negative affect, or the use of others as affective spillways, as the psyche’s primary mode of dispensing with invasive thoughts and feelings in order to create the boundaries of identity. The protagonists of “The Doctors” and the titular “Spillway” especially showcase the centrality of the spillway motif in Barnes’ work, not only by implying that overwhelming affect is at the root of suicidal ideation, but also by attempting to offload this affect onto others in order to maintain their sense of self-coherence. While “The Doctors” portrays the protagonist’s suicide as the ultimate method for establishing autonomy and self-containment when the projection of negative affect onto another fails to offer sufficient relief, “Spillway” portrays the successful projection of affect as the direct cause of suicide in another. That the impulse to project what in
one subject is overwhelming or traumatic culminates in the suicide of a separate individual – or that the suicidal impulse shifts from intrasubjective to intersubjective origin between these stories – suggests Barnes’ view that boundary construction is inherently dangerous to others, and, like the suicidological discourses of the modernist period, that suicide is the result of an involuntary (affective) possession from the outside world.

By tracing this model of projection and affective spillways throughout the original drafts, and particularly in Dr. O’Connor’s narrative in “Bow Down,” we can elucidate a similar strain of suicidal transference in Nightwood – one that increasingly attributes overwhelming affect to the proliferation of desire and its intrinsic fantasies of control. As “the infected carrier of the past,” Robin serves as the text’s particular origin of affective contagion, poisoning others with desire, an encounter with its attendant affects, and a lust for mastery over these affective disturbances. In O’Connor, and particularly in Nora Flood, this search for control repeatedly kindles a longing for the night world, or a form of suicidal ideation which signifies the novel’s own internal contradiction – the flight into death, figured through the night, unconsciousness, and dreams, as yielding complete isolation and power over both oneself and the beloved object. Yet, while Nora’s suicidal ideation posits self-destruction as a method of boundary construction and an assertion of autonomy, the collapse of Nora, the Doctor, and Robin due to Robin’s affective projections (and Nora’s affective Flood-ing) at the novel’s end reveals a shift in the novel’s suicidal logic akin to the shift which occurs between “The Doctors” and “Spillway.” The text’s inclusion of these divergent conceptualizations of suicide – one as a self-motivated act designed to grant isolation, self-containment, and control of affect (i.e., as a means of escape), and the other as an involuntary possession by the affects of others (i.e., as an impulse that is inescapable) – reveals the text’s fundamental anxiety that the sense of mastery over oneself, sought after and
inspired by the affective disturbances of desire, is fundamentally impossible, and that desire’s overwhelming and precariously unanchored affects increase the vulnerability of everyone in the urban milieu. That both types of self-destruction inherently preserve desire, if not the desiring subject, reveals the text’s own suspicion that desire itself is rooted in a muted suicidal ideation, or in the morbidly thrilling prospect of risking self-obliviation while in search of self-control.

I. “Shortcuts” to Nightwood: The Short Stories, Suicides, and Affective Spillways

Originally collected and published as A Book in 1923 and revised for A Night among The Horses in 1929, the majority of the stories that came to form Spillway did not reach a wide audience until the publication of The Selected Works of Djuna Barnes in 1962. Although the initial publication of these stories took place well before the publication of the major works for which Barnes would become famous, their first revision and republication under the title A Night among the Horses directly preceded the publication of Nightwood in 1936, and their further revision and republication succeeded the publication of The Antiphon in 1958 when Spillway was included in The Selected Works. Occupying a strange place in Barnes’ oeuvre, the Spillway stories thus stand as book ends for the texts that ensured her place within the modernist canon – revenants that begged revision and haunted the production of the works that established her reputation as a female rival to such literary giants as Joyce, Eliot, and Proust. Yet, although they frame Barnes’ most well known texts, the stories are often relegated to the margins of critical discourse about them. Not entirely forgotten but not often read, they wander the

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86 In addition to modern critics, Barnes’ contemporaries frequently compared her to these authors, as glossed by Deborah Parsons: “The Brooklyn Eagle recommended it {Nightwood} as ‘an excellent companion piece for ‘The Waste Land’”; a reviewer in the New Statesman and Nation described it as ‘a view of modern civilization and contemporary social life that, for bitterness and crazy violence, leaves the darkest chapters of Ulysses far behind’; and the New York Herald Tribune compared Barnes’ ability to spread a ‘quality of moonlight over dissolution’ with the work of Proust and Baudelaire, and the ‘corrosive bluntness’ of her tongue with Joyce” (61).
periphery of Barnes’ most enigmatic fiction, creating a critical vantage point on a shared set of concerns which remain integral to Barnes’ oeuvre, and especially to *Nightwood*.

While the stories may have engendered only a small body of criticism, that critical discourse is nonetheless consistent in its focus on death and desire as the organizing principles of Barnes’ work – her attention to the former overtaking the latter in most critical interpretations. According to Cheryl Plumb, despite cutting many of the stories from *A Book* and *A Night Among the Horses* that dealt with death directly, “preoccupation with death is still apparent” throughout *Spillway* (*Fancy’s Craft* 55). In “Writing Towards *Nightwood*,” Carolyn Allen corroborates this assessment, specifically addressing the way Barnes’ “seduction stories” provide a basis for understanding the mother-daughter dynamics of lesbian desire in *Nightwood*, while also identifying the “fascination with the void” at the heart of her work (58). The “void” is likewise evoked by Louis F. Kannenstein’s claim that the stories assert “‘the terror of the impossibility of being,’” and is inherent in James B. Scott’s observation that “‘In the deepest sense, {Barnes’} stories can be said to show how and why death can be the only affirmation in a meaningless universe’” (qtd. in Plumb 51). Gearing her analysis towards the moments of despair and the annulments of personality that fuel *Nightwood*’s apocalyptic vision, Elizabeth Pochoda claims that the *Spillway* stories are useful “shortcuts” for talking about the novel’s “horror” (182). And finally, Diane Warren observes that the stories “emphasize the importance of the perception of death to the construction of individuality in Barnes’ works: an aspect which becomes increasingly important in *Nightwood* and *The Antiphon*” (99). Likewise entangled in the fabrication of desire, the construction of the self through death in Barnes’ fiction continues an ongoing theme of her early journalism, most notably in her article “What is Good Form in Dying?,” which “explores the possibilities of suicide as a statement of comme il faut fashion” –
hair color determining the most stylish, and thus appropriate, method of self-destruction (100). However, in contrast to the satirical humor Warren identifies in this piece and in Barnes’ early poetry, such as her poem “Suicide,” Warren argues that Barnes’ short stories approach their subject matter with “a persistent awareness of human isolation and (self)estrangement,” stylistically transitioning to the pathos that will come to dominate Nightwood (99).

Criticism of Barnes’ stories thus often takes a decidedly feminist, psychoanalytic tack, exploring desire alongside death, but also mistakenly aligning this nexus of drives with an isolation that dissolves communication between individuals. For, while psychological isolation is associated with Barnes’ overtly introspective texts, and often seen as part and parcel of modernist subjectivity itself, both the stories and the novel strain against this reading. As John McGuigen writes, “Rather than feeling conventional isolation, which implies a coherent self, in Nightwood a person is forever broken, fragmented, and inconsistent on the surface” (29, emphasis mine). Taking up this lack of coherent selfhood, or what she calls a lack of “integrity,” Suzanne Ferguson also focuses on the interconnections, or “contacts,” between Barnes’ characters, stating: “‘Their human contacts are lacerations. They lack even the integrity in isolation that comforts the characters of Hemingway or the early Faulkner, for they are estranged from themselves’” (27). For both critics, isolation is impossible precisely because Barnes’ characters have no coherent sense of self, and if McGuigen sees Barnes’ characters as “forever broken,” then the shards of personality that must inevitably participate in some form of human contact create the “lacerations” Ferguson references. All human communication seems highly negative in this reading, but nonetheless, remains a constant element of psychic life.

87 Given Barnes’ use of spillways to figure affective flooding, Nightwood’s status as a roman à clef about Barnes’ relationship with Thelma Wood, and Nora’s (or the auburn-haired Barnes’) collapse at the end of the novel, it is significant that “The redhead must drown, the blond ‘hang sweetly debonairly, and perseveringly by the neck’, and the brunette take a ‘slow green poison’ in a ‘fashionable and well-lit restaurant’” (Parsons 8, emphasis mine).
Moreover, the play of “surfaces,” or “contacts,” noted by both critics specifically points to a type of communication that implicates the body as well as the psyche, and, consequently, the affective flows between these bodily surfaces are of crucial importance to interpreting the many incoherent selves in Barnes’ work. Constantly in contact, each bound to each by a network of transmission, the characters struggle to find, rather than escape, isolation when every touch is an exposure to unwanted affect – a potential wound, a “laceration.” Because communication in Barnes’ work is so inherently threatening, the characters are often liable to being overwhelmed, and perhaps the strongest indication of this danger is revealed by Miriam Fuchs’ exploration of an oft-ignored facet of the short stories – their very title. Writing that in Nightwood, as in the short stories, characters are “unable to find an outlet or spillway for their anguish,” Fuchs glosses the term as such:

In the stories of Spillway there is often an emotional “spillway” that rechannelizes {sic} feelings of helplessness and isolation. Its specific form may not be pleasurable, yet still it exists as an alternative to the completely isolated personality. For some characters who are whirled about by stimuli they never quite understand, the spillway is passivity or acquiescence, while for others it is a private fantasy, endless travel, or psychological regression. Whatever the case, the suffering begins with detachment from origins. (1)

This definition is imprecise at best, and gestures to standard modernist claims about an intrinsically isolated subjectivity that, as I will continue to argue, does not seem possible in Barnes’ texts. However, Fuchs’ contribution is nonetheless important in its acknowledgement of how characters seek a release from unwanted feelings and the role of spillways in providing this release in Barnes’ oeuvre. Defined as “a channel or slope built to carry away surplus water from a reservoir,” or as “a natural feature providing a channel for the overflow or escape of water from
a lake,” spillways primarily dispose of that which is “surplus,” “overflow,” or “escape{d},” and though naturally present, they can also be built (OED). By emphasizing the pre-existing presence of “spillways” in the social environment as well as the ability to create them when needed, and by narrowing Fuchs’ definition so that spillways signify another person on whom we “rechannel…feelings,” or project negative affect, we can combine this term with the complicated nexus of desire, death, and self-construction in the aforementioned critical literature in order to better read the complex interactions, or play of surfaces, between Barnes’ characters. For, exploiting the permeability of mind and body, they consistently project their affect onto others, using the psychic and corporeal lacerations of contact in order to bolster their own sense of self and to deny the often overwhelming, and even self-destructive, nature of desire.

While each of the Spillway stories incorporates death and dying to some extent, “The Doctors” and the eponymous “Spillway” most directly implicate Nightwood’s particular use of affective spillways as well as the novel’s coterminous obsession with contagion, desire, and self-destruction. “The Doctors,” in particular, reveals Barnes’ early interest in suicide as a mode of self-construction and perhaps her most definitive portrayal of death as offering both self-coherence and self-control. First published as “Katrina Silverstaff” in 1921 (Warren 106), its revised title medicalizes the traumatic affect displayed throughout the story and explicitly points readers towards one of Nightwood’s victims – the infamous Dr. O’Connor, who, like Katrina, never attains a doctorate in gynecology. “{Losing} her way somewhere in vivisection, behaving as though she were aware of an impudence,” Katrina not only forgoes her degree, but “never recover{s} her gaiety” after the dissection (The Selected Works 54, 55). Perhaps in penance, she transitions from a degree in gynecology to one that allows her to be “useful to animal and birds”; yet, she falls out of the “stream of time” her husband Otto (a successful gynecologist) inhabits.
Adopting the characteristics we associate with Robin throughout *Nightwood* – “abstraction,” “withdrawal,” and “silence” – Katrina is opposed to the “fervour,” mobility, and “heavy gusts of hope” associated with Dr. Otto (55, 56). And, given her experienced slips in time and her subsequent difficulty with expression, readers are left to assume that she has suffered a traumatic break as a result of witnessing the dissection. *Effecting* a strong change in Katrina’s *affect*, the recognition of vivisection’s violation, directly in terms of the violation of animals by humans, and implicitly in regards to the violation of women by men, produces her profound pulling away from life and vitality.

While some critics have claimed that Katrina’s suicidal ideation stems from the isolation of marriage and bourgeois family life, it is important to note that Katrina seems to *seek out*, rather than suffer, isolation from these patriarchal institutions. In fact, as the story later reveals, it is precisely her flattening of affect and rejection of human contact that become a method of re-establishing the boundaries of self, boundaries which have been symbolically threatened by the act of vivisection and the medical interrogation of the desiring female/animal body. For, Katrina’s drive to bolster these boundaries is indicated in the very first line of the story, and likewise, her first words: “We have fashioned ourselves against the Day of Judgement” (54). The story thereafter traces this project of self-fashioning, which will ultimately consume her, and the similarly biblical lines scattered throughout the text tend to signpost this project of self-construction as well as the traumatic violations that constitute the project’s catalyst. For, Katrina’s phrase not only gestures towards a wish for salvation, but also includes the plural “we” that, situated directly beneath the story’s title, specifically indicates the story’s titular doctors. Seeking absolution on behalf of herself and her husband, Katrina thus obliquely refers to

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88 For example, Diane Warren’s reading of “The Doctors” foregrounds Katrina Silverstaff’s isolation within marriage and the confines of the bourgeois family. Ultimately, she claims the text indicts religion and traditional femininity, the rhetoric of which inherently makes women “vulnerable to self-sacrifice” (116).
vivisection as the wrong to be rectified, and the self-directed injunction which follows – “Be still” (54) – points towards the traumatic, or overwhelming, level of affect caused by her witnessing, revealed throughout the story in Katrina’s facial twitching, her grimacing, and her subsequent attempts to stifle these unwanted affective responses. Indicating a need to control, or still, the body and psyche, Katrina reveals the need for boundary construction and the re-integration of self from the story’s outset.

Her primary tool for self-fashioning is Rodkin, a “travelling peddlar of books” (56), who stops at Katrina’s door in order to sell her a Bible and whom she will ultimately use as both an affective spillway and a means to suicide. Departing from her usual dismissal of such peddlers, Katrina admits Rodkin, who is described as “a slight pale man with an uncurling flaxen beard, more like the beard of an animal than of a man” (56). Yet, gaining Katrina’s attention precisely because his innate animalism hearkens back to the object of vivisection, or the original trauma, Rodkin also attracts her with his deathlike appearance: “with a shock of the same, almost white hair, hanging straight down from his crown, {he} was – light eyes and all – hardly menacing; he was so colourless as to seem ghostly” (56). “White,” “light,” and “colourless,” Rodkin’s ghostly mien “shock{S}” Katrina’s plot of self-fashioning into motion, her attraction to Rodkin embodying her desire for death and the reinforcement of identity and agency Katrina associates with its lack of consciousness. Hinting at the potential for agency in her demise, and likewise demonstrating a transition from passivity into action, Katrina explains Rodkin’s role as a “means” to her end: “‘You see…some people drink poison, some take the knife, others drown. I take you’” (58). Thus, as reminiscent of both the bestial and of death itself, Rodkin provides Katrina with the overdetermined ability to restage the original crime and attain a sense of mastery. Katrina alerts readers that salvation is only possible when it becomes “impossible
again” (57), and to that end, she seeks “Not help” but “hindrance” (57). In order to re-unify her shattered subjectivity, she needs a boundary between herself and others, and vivisection will allow her such. For, it is by becoming the violator of another, casting off her previous violation and its attendant affective excess, that Katrina can reinstate an autonomous self.

Her attempt to re-establish control by using Rodkin as a spillway for her own traumatic affect is revealed in the combative exchanges during their first meeting, and again before their affair, insofar as the highly pressurized dialogue strives to place Katrina in a position of power and self-containment while concomitantly diminishing the physical and psychic integrity of Rodkin. She repeatedly struggles to deny his agency, telling him it is “‘my affair,’” “‘it has nothing to do with you,’” and “‘You can do nothing, not as a person…I must do it all’” (58). As Katrina extensively catalogues Rodkin’s powerlessness, “a tremour {runs} off into her cheek, like a grimace of pain” (57), and the escalation of this uncontrollable affective response into “a gesture of anger and pride” instills “fear quite foreign” in Rodkin (57). This slip from an involuntary “tremour” into an outright “gesture,” or projection, indicates Katrina’s first attempt at discharging her affects onto Rodkin, and in order to continue doing so, she must deny him any expression of affect or any communication that will interfere with her own projection. Further implying his animalistic instrumentality, she later states “‘I do not permit you to suffer while I am in the room’” and “‘I insist…that you will not insult me by your attention while you are in the room’” (58). Consequently, Rodkin is reduced to merely listening and reacting to Katrina. He responds “without expecting to” by “barking” out like an animal under the knife, and later he “‘can not help himself,’” hearing “his voice saying, ‘I want to suffer!’” (58). Unable to control his body, Rodkin begins “shaking,” tries to “stop his tears,” and cannot “comprehend what {is} happening” (58). In essence, he experiences a complete degeneration into laboratory animal, and
although Katrina claims, “‘it is the will…that must attain complete estrangement,’” it is clearly Rodkin’s will that must be sacrificed (58).

While the results are disastrous for both herself and Rodkin, Katrina’s plan in one sense succeeds, as she seems to overcome her own traumatic affect and reintegrate a divided self. As Katrina’s earlier biblical references alert readers to her project of re-integration, Rodkin’s biblical references, prompted the following morning by the consummation of their affair, support Katrina’s nihilistic view of self-construction as dependent on destruction – the destruction of others through their instrumental value as spillways and of herself in the suicidal act. Rodkin first asks, “‘Shall the beasts of the field, the birds of the air forsake thee?...Shall any man forsake thee?’” (59). Pochoda claims that this quote references Ecclesiastes 3 verses 18 and 19, or the idea that “a man hath no preeminence above a beast” (182), and though Katrina does not move, “something under her cheek quiver{s}” when Rodkin delivers this phrase (The Selected Works 59). Rodkin’s non sequitur, while potentially indicating a cognizance of his own violation, also hearkens back to Katrina’s original “impudence,” or her witnessing of vivisection. Yet, the quiver of Katrina’s cheek, which would seem to suggest the lingering presence of traumatic affect, and thus Katrina’s failure to offload her affects onto Rodkin, is immediately silenced by Rodkin’s next line. He muses, “One. One out of many….the one” (59). This second quote is crucial in that its loose reference to the unity of God – the repetition and emphasis of “the one” – also presages Katrina’s attainment of reunification. Here, Rodkin is presented with the exact moment of Katrina’s fashioning of a coherent self, and likewise, her slip into an isolated catatonia. Upon waking, she “with {draws} into herself” and is eventually described as completely unresponsive and unaware of Rodkin’s presence (59). Thus, having re-established a sense of isolated self-containment through re-enacting vivisection and asserting her agency with
Rodkin, Katrina seems to have sinned her way to salvation, though she suffers a complete emptying out of personhood as a result. Whole and unto herself, she has moved beyond traumatic affect, and yet, in so doing, has fled the scene of affect altogether.

As affective spillway, Rodkin, on the other hand, is filled with sudden “terror” (59), suffering intensely overwhelming affect, an emptying out of identity, and a reduction in agency. Claiming “‘last night I almost become somebody,’” Rodkin quickly asserts, “‘I’m nothing, nobody—,’” when faced with Katrina’s silence. Unable to approach her, Rodkin involuntarily moves towards the door, admitting against his will, “‘You are taking everything away. I can’t feel—I don’t suffer, nothing you know—I can’t—’ ” (59). Rodkin’s inability to articulate his state at this moment is significant in light of his earlier loquacity, and what feelings he does express are noticeably all negations in the face of Katrina’s active role in “taking.” With “the heart of a dog,” a phrase highly suggestive of Nightwood’s final scene, Rodkin returns to Katrina’s home days later, sees the funeral wreath, and adopts Katrina’s former status as symbolic victim, mourning as she mourned for the violation of the bestial she saw within herself. The story’s ending, which briefly delimits Rodkin’s decline into alcoholism and his “burst{ing} into tears” at the sight of Otto and Katrina’s children (60), confirms Katrina’s successful displacement of her affect onto Rodkin in addition to her complete destruction of his personal integrity.

Consequently, “The Doctors” seems less about patriarchal violence towards women than about the inherent violence of desire and the universal violence directed towards the animal within the human. For, Rodkin, in his bestial guise, represents the vestigial impulses of humankind not yet stifled by civilization, and thus aligns with the crowd theorists of Barnes’ era who argued that those representing any sort of degeneration or regression were most receptive to affect and most liable to losing themselves under the influence of others (see Chapter 1). While I
agree with Diane Warren’s reading of Katrina’s affair as an elaborate fort/da game of psychic reunification after the trauma of vivisection, my reading goes beyond claiming that the patriarchal structures of family and church fix self-sacrifice rather than the good bourgeois life as Katrina’s only method for achieving salvation. After all, it is difficult to read the affair as wholly self-effacing given Katrina’s sadomasochistic adoption of vivisection’s practices against Rodkin – a figure who is beast much more than man and who is consistently glossed over in critical readings of the text. The story’s preoccupation with traumatic affect, the vulnerability of the bestial, and with the power structure of retribution between violator and violated already moves towards the dynamics that will come to dominate Nightwood.

More importantly, the story must also be read in the context of its suicidal logic, and within that context, we must define suicide as a “means to an end” that is not always, only death but also potentially self-construction. By off-loading overwhelming affects onto another, or by using an individual as a spillway in the most literal sense (i.e., as an emotional drainage channel), self-containment becomes possible. Here, it is Katrina’s use of Rodkin that allows her to become whole again, effectively ruining his life but allowing her some measure of reunification as she leaves hers. Thus, rather than view suicide as the result of trauma or banal pathology, as a nihilistic renunciation of the many meaningless and ultimately devastating bourgeois demands on the subject, or as a sacrifice made from guilt by the person who does not value, and feels they should value, these demands, it is possible to regard self-destruction as both purposive and productive. Paradoxically necessitating self-preservation through terminal self-negation, “The Doctors” shows itself to be much less a story about the imposition of marriage and sex on the female subject, than a story about suicide as a primary method of controlling traumatic affect, albeit one that re-establishes the boundaries of somatic and psychic integrity at the cost of life.
“Spillway,” the story succeeding “The Doctors” in Barnes’ collection, and the most overtly suicidal, has gained even less critical attention though it introduces even more direct “shortcuts” towards Nightwood’s suicidal logic. Originally published in 1919 as “Beyond the End” (Plumb 62), the title clearly points its audience towards death, and with the story’s endpoint already revealed, the plot of “Spillway” is far simpler to narrate. Divided into two parts, it begins with the return of Julie Anspacher and her child to her husband Paytor’s home after a five-year absence in a distant sanitarium. With “one lung gone, the other going,” her doctors diagnosed Julie with tuberculosis – obliquely referenced as the “‘white death’” or “‘love disease’” – and given her just six months to live (63). Although Julie has outlasted her prognosis, she is uncured at the outset of the story and returns home in order to inform Paytor of her affair with one of the men at the sanitarium and to introduce him to the resultant child, Ann. Importantly, Julie does not seek salvation or forgiveness, though she suffers as a result of what she has done. Overcome with misery, she explains, “I am alien to life, I am lost in still water” (66), and, like Katrina, suffers from traumatic affect that is as much an illness as her corporeal infection. Also echoing descriptions of Robin, which depict her as the absence of natural life or an ominous force with the power to silence it, Julie is aligned with Robin’s “stillness,” which allows her to become as invisible, forgotten, and indistinct as a drop of water in a pond. Through similar phrasing, Julie’s claim above thus evinces a strikingly Robin-esque otherness and aligns her both with the death-like obliteration of the self that epitomizes Robin’s character throughout the text and with the dangerous communicability of affect inherent to the networks of desire which surround her.

89 “Sometimes she slept in the woods; the silence that she had caused by her coming was broken again by insect and bird flowing back over her intrusion, which was forgotten in her fixed stillness, obliterating her as a drop of water is made anonymous by the pond in who which it has fallen” (Nightwood 177-78, emphasis mine).
In her utter alienation, Julie is unable to return to innocence, yet seeks an understanding of her actions and her suffering, directing her interrogation towards Paytor. Hoping for that “strange other ‘something’” in Paytor, which is “all but obscene,” Julie wants him to intuit what has happened to her and to explain its purpose. With “the tears streaming down her face,” she begs for self-knowledge, hoping he can provide an organizing principle for her volatile affective state, or a counter-balance for the death-like vacuum she represents (68): “I thought, he will be able to divide me against myself. Personally I don’t feel divided; I seem to be a sane and balanced whole, but hopelessly mixed. So I said to myself, Paytor will see where the design divides and departs…well, in other words, I wanted to be set wrong” (67). Like Katrina, Julie wants a “hindrance,” or a boundary that will re-integrate the self and its autonomy. After all, she explains to Paytor, “of course I love you. But think of this: me, a danger to everyone – excepting those like myself – in the same sickness, and expecting to die; fearful, completely involved in a problem affecting a handful of humanity – filled with fever and lust – not a self-willed lust at all, a matter of heat” (65-66, emphasis mine). Not “self-willed” but “a matter of heat,” “sickness,” and “fever,” Julie’s sexual exploits mirror Robin’s lack of volition, animalism, and lust, while also aligning her desire with the “danger” of contagion that prefigures the deadly communicability of affect to come. Her blood-laced coughs, or the effluvia caused by her decay, are linked to her state of being “lost in still water” (66), and likewise, her capability to effect the liquid spillways of suicide. Living a death within life, Julie exists beyond all human conception of thought or action, made “primitive” by her “misery” in the same way as Robin, existing in an affective state so extreme it “is without proportion”:

“…I’m not asking to be forgiven. I’ve been on my knees, I’ve beaten my head against the ground, I’ve abased myself, but –” she added in a terrible voice, “it’s not low enough, the
ground is not low enough; to bend down is not enough, to beg forgiveness is not enough, to receive? – it would not be enough. There just isn’t the right kind of misery in the world for me to suffer, nor the right kind of pity for you to feel; there isn’t a word in the world to heal me; penance cannot undo me – it is a thing beyond the end of everything – it’s suffering without a consummation, it’s like insufficient sleep; it’s like anything that is without proportion. I am not asking for anything at all, because there is nothing that can be given or got – how primitive to be able to receive – ” (65)

Resembling *Nightwood*’s preoccupation with descent, or its imperative to “Bow Down,” this lengthy passage, in its sheer repetitiveness, its utter abasement, and its overwhelming emphasis on being low enough to the ground in penance, registers both the worldly suffering and the otherworldly damnation that Julie (and Robin) endure. More importantly, it links this suffering with a sickness, invoking the impossibility of both psychic and corporeal healing.

As the first part of the story ends with Paytor claiming that perhaps he will be able to explain “something” to Julie “later” and wandering up to the shooting loft “where he practiced aim on the concentric circles of his targets,” the second half of the story begins with “darkness…closing in” (68). As Julie waits for Paytor below, she can hear him “walking on the thin boards above, she could smell the smoke of his tobacco, she could hear him slashing the cocks of his guns” (69). Her memory from childhood of kissing the dead priest eerily aligns with Paytor’s proximity to death, and pacing as he paces, just one floor below him, Julie wonders if she has made a mistake in bringing Ann back to Paytor’s family while she is “ill and coughing.” Seemingly concerned with infection – spilled, or coughed, blood – Julie almost decides to leave, even pinning up her veil as if for departure. However, the lulling rhythm of the pendulum in the mantel clock and Paytor’s feet “walking back and forth, back and forth” hold her in place: “What
could she do, for God’s sake, what was there that she could do? If only she had not this habit of fighting death. She shook her head. Death was past knowing and one must be certain of something else first. ‘If only I had the power to feel what I should feel’” (69). Julie’s wish that she “had not” a “habit” of fighting death at this moment implies an ongoing suicidality, but also an enduring resistance, which is crucial given the fact that her affective state, figured by her heart, is described by Paytor as being particularly strong: “but your heart—that is good—it always was” (64). Thus, while this passage seems to suggest that Julie’s problem remains one of feeling, and specifically a lack of the “power to feel” what one “should feel,” it ultimately points to her immunity in contrast to Paytor’s relative vulnerability to (affective) infection.

Accordingly, it is precisely at this moment in the story that the transmission of affect seems to come to the fore, drawing Julie’s confused notions of death into a causal relation with her own strange somnambulism and Paytor’s suicide. For, just as Julie thinks of death (the priest’s and her own), she seems to enter a fugue state: “Then it seemed that something must happen. ‘If only I could think of the right word before it happens,’ she said to herself. She said it over. ‘Because I am cold I can’t think. I’ll think soon. I’ll take my jacket off, put on my coat…”’ (69-70). Suffering from a sudden onset aphasia, Julie can’t understand words or express herself; she becomes cold, can’t think, and must repeat her thoughts in order to remain focused. Sitting up, Julie must also “run{ } her hand along the wall” to find her way to her coat and attempts to keep conscious by reminding herself of her inability to focus: “‘I can’t think of the word,’ she said, to keep her mind on something” (70). This sudden, and seemingly inexplicable, mental distraction escalates in the final lines of this short story, conflating the somatic and psychic effects in Julie with the death wish and its consummation in Paytor:
She turned around. All his family… long lives… “and me too, me too,” she murmured. She became dizzy. “It’s because I must get on my knees. But it isn’t low enough,” she contradicted herself, “but if I put my head down, way down – down, down, down…” She heard a shot. “He has quick warm blood—”

Her forehead had not quite touched the boards, now it touched them, but she got up immediately, stumbling over her dress. (70)

The passage begins with Julie affirming both Paytor’s strength (perhaps her justification for both confession and return) and her own vitality even as she begins losing her ability to speak altogether. Becoming “dizzy,” she starts to faint, and yet she immediately associates her bodily reactions with her inability to “get on {her} knees” and “bow down” low enough. The repetition of “down” narrates her concurrent action of descent, as she self-narrates her forehead going down to touch the boards of the floor. It is only after Julie hears the gunshot and thinks about Paytor’s “quick warm blood” that her head finally touches “low enough.” Thus, only at the exact moment of his death, signaled here by the em dash after “blood,” is she liberated from her somnambulistic state and able to rise “immediately,” reentering life.

Though it is unclear whether Julie receives absolution, her sudden, almost mechanical release from the physical act of repentance suggests that Paytor’s death precludes her from bowing down any further. As he descends into death, Julie rises back into consciousness, making their fates uncannily dependent upon one another in the final moments of the story. It is worthwhile to note that this physical, and even psychological, interdependence is foregrounded throughout the story in the symptoms of Julie and Ann. As they approach Paytor’s house, Julie coughs and then Ann “as if in echo” (63), and later, while waiting for Paytor, Julie hears Ann
cough in her sleep and immediately coughs too (69). While this coughing draws attention to Julie and Ann’s infectious sickness, and specifically to the influence of bodies and blood in general, it also clearly marks out the transmission of affect – a physiological event in one party as directly causal of a physiological response in another. Paytor’s inability to modulate his “loud voice” (66-67), which is repeatedly referenced throughout his exchange with Julie, along with his “grimacing and twitching” (68) belie the “anger and disorientation” (Plumb Fancy’s Craft 66) in Julie’s own “pained voice” (The Selected Works 66). In such a remarkably short story, this doubling clearly foreshadows the intense alignment between Julie and Paytor in the final lines.

Transmuting from a purely physiological to a psychological event, Julie’s briefly conscious death wish becomes a mutually reinforcing death drive, leading to Paytor’s suicide and Julie’s own slow drift towards unconsciousness. Deborah Parsons claims that the characters of Barnes’ stories “seem to respond to forces which remain inaccessible to the reader” and that Barnes “does not typically foreground consciousness or sub consciousness, if anything hinting at a blood-consciousness” (23). In reading Paytor as Julie’s spillway, we can begin to discern some of the forces in Barnes’ work, and to likewise note the crucial importance of the body – its blood, and consequently its heart and its affects – in relation to the psychic states of her characters. After all, as Julie’s spillway, Paytor allows her to keep living, physically feeling what she “should” feel for her and therefore obviating her need to bow down. Finally achieving the connection that binds them psychically and corporeally, that “strange other ‘something’” Julie

90 Here we have two coughs (denoting affective transfer), while in “The Doctors” there are two tremors on Katrina’s cheek, and in Nightwood there will be two terrifying slips into unconsciousness for Nora. This level of doubling is indicative of the power of affective dyads, and the way each partner uses the other as an affective spillway.

91 Adela Pinch has written convincingly about how thinking about others in nineteenth-century British writing was thought to actually affect and sometimes harm them. We can see resonances of this strain of thought in Barnes’ spillway motif, yet it is Barnes’ very body-consciousness and her concern with affect that removes the purely psychic realm from my consideration here.
wanted from Paytor while she was still at the sanitarium turns out to be a deadly affective contagion that nullifies individual agency and threatens the possibility of discrete identity.

Thus, in regards to both publication history and thematic import, “The Doctors” and “Spillway” both act as both precursors and codas to Nightwood, drawing attention to aspects of the novel that relate back to their own suicidal logic. In both stories, a dangerous transmission of affect reflects on the porousness of individual consciousness and its resultant susceptibility to influence. Founded on the process of using another as a spillway for one’s own intolerable affect, the romantic dyad thus becomes defined by a dangerous, and sometimes deadly, level of affective transmission, rooted in what Daniela Caselli calls the “characters’ disturbingly seductive inability to be ‘contained’” (137). While the suicide following this projection of affect in “The Doctors” allows Katrina to rebuild the boundaries of self, “Spillway” escalates this projection until the affects associated with the suicidal impulse become contagious, with Julie significantly affecting, and infecting, the character whose strength is overdetermined, in a family where “not one of them {was} in their graves before ninety” (The Selected Works 68). By depicting suicide as a means of isolation, self-containment, and control as well as a possession of the individual by contagious impulses, these stories serve as an important starting point for interrogating the transmission of affect in Nightwood, providing two interwoven interpretations of the suicidal act that elucidate one of the most infamously vague endings in modernist fiction.

II: Suicidal Beginnings: the Doctor, “mad Wittelsbach,” and “Bow Down”

In her article, “A Story beside(s) Itself: The Language of Loss in Djuna Barnes’s Nightwood,” Victoria L. Smith begins by claiming that within the novel, “there are no suicides, no anguished and twisted returns to heterosexuality, and no horrible confrontations with a hostile world, at least not directly” (194). This assertion is central to Smith’s thesis that Nightwood
utilizes a strategy of oblique, melancholic signification in order to shape itself around an absence – the loss felt by those who no longer have access to history, memory, and representation. Yet, her qualifying clause (“at least not directly”) is noteworthy, especially in regard to its first referent, suicide. It is certainly true that none of the characters experience a return to heterosexuality by the end of the narrative; in fact, many reviewers argue for a further “descent” into bestiality. Moreover, the characters remain sufficiently ensconced in the Paris-Berlin-Vienna “underworld” that accepts them even if it fails to comfort them; it is only through stories about off-stage characters and events – the Jews forced to run in the Corso and the prostitute Mademoiselle Basquette’s tragic rape, for example – that we hear of a world hostile to the marginalized subjects who populate the novel. However, there are suicides in Nightwood’s early drafts, and while these suicides are not retained in the final manuscript, conspicuous suicidal ideation and references to off-stage suicides remain ubiquitous throughout the text. Only by acknowledging the novel’s suppression of its original foregrounding of suicide, a suppression that likewise occurs in its critical discourse, do the dynamics of desire in Barnes’ work become clear and the characters’ perpetual slips into unconsciousness become intelligible.

By examining the original draft of Nightwood – the third revision of the text, often called the Dalkey Archive version – that Barnes seemed to prefer but which was cut down in order to appease a wider audience, the prominence of suicidal ideation in the text becomes apparent. The title itself, long assumed to have been crafted by Eliot, but eventually proven to be Barnes’ own creation, explicitly gestures towards the novel’s interest in death. In a letter to Emily Coleman, Barnes writes, “‘Nightwood,’ like that, one word, it makes it sound like night-shade,

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92 E.g., see Frank, Winkiel, Cole
93 All material from the original text is cited from Cheryl Plumb’s Nightwood: The Original Version and Related Drafts. Plumb states, “Perhaps, however, one action speaks to Barnes’s abiding interest in the original third version of this work: she saved all copies of the typescript, not just the first carbon with Eliot’s emendations” (xxiv).
poison and night and forest, and tough, in the meaty sense, and simple and singular, like
Lavengro or whatever it is when spelled right” (viii, 211). Not only a “poison,” but specifically
“night-shade,” “Nightwood” evokes the act of taking in (or affectively taking on) that which
leads towards death. The exotic plants of the forest, like the type of Lavengro dahlia Barnes
references and the “carnivorous flowers” surrounding Robin in the reader’s first view of her (38),
are tempting, but only insofar as they are lethal to what they seduce. A desire for death is thus
inserted in the text’s very title, and this trajectory of terminal desire – a form of suicidal ideation
that forms the text’s main logic – is mapped out in miniature within the novel’s first chapter.

While critics have oft noted that the title of “Bow Down” encapsulates society’s primary
command to subjects inhabiting the margins of social and political life, unlike the novel’s title,
they have seldom connected it with death. A demand for self-abasement and abjection, the
phrase and its corresponding genuflection are immediately associated with the history of Felix’s
Jewish heritage and his search for validation in the novel’s opening pages. This association
makes sense given that Felix’s deference towards nobility is described at length, and in his visit
to the Berlin circus, and later to Count Altamonte’s, he will see and discuss a variety of abject
figures such as the gender-bending trapeze artist Frau Mann, the war-traumatized transvestite Dr.
O’Connor, queer bear-fighter Nikka, and the truncated prostitute Mademoiselle Basquette.
However, while “abjection is figured through a series of gestures and practices through which
characters demurr {sic} or defer,” Leigh Gilmore notes that “in the present tense narration…no
one, arguably, is made to bow down. Nor do any of the stories that the characters tell involve
their own abjection—except in Barnes's manuscript” (620). Gilmore’s qualification refers to the
final pages of the Dalkey Archive’s version of “Bow Down,” which are expurgated from the
final text and contain what she calls the Doctor’s “obscenity trial” (620) – the text’s first real
indication that bowing down, its primary imperative, implies succumbing to a suicidal ideation generated by the affective spillways of others.

In this lengthy passage, the Doctor describes being brought in to court after he is caught having sexual relations with a man in an alley. To Frau Mann, the Doctor explains what happens “the night I popped Tiny out to relieve him of his drinking, when something with dark hands closed over him as if to strangle the life’s breath out of him and suddenly the other, less pleasing hand, the hand of the law, was on my shoulder and I was hurled into jail” (26). Here the “less pleasing hand…of the law” replaces the “dark hands” of pleasure, and the Doctor’s sexuality is put on trial. Brought into court after an overnight stay, he describes his panic: “Oh God! I was in a twitter, my heart bleeding and my long golden curls catching in my French heels!” (27, emphasis mine). His prayers to Marie Antoinette, who like him is one of “two blasphemed queens,” his taking of the officer’s hand so that he walks “beside him, feeling a little as if I had a mother,” and his cross-dressing despite “how ugly He {God} made me,” border on tragicomic (26-27). Yet, real tragedy looms as the image of the bleeding heart appears – the novel’s predominant figure for dangerously uncontrollable affect. Describing his march to court soon after, the Doctor immediately connects this figure with the suicidal act:

“Well the next morning I was being hurried along – holding onto my pants, because they had cut the suspenders for fear of suicide. So there I was, covered with snow and shame, shuffling along holding on to my pants, my heart breaking, shuffling along in one loose shoe and the other loose shoe – they’d snatched out the laces too for fear of hanging – and me looking right and let under my eyebrows – crying and shamed, (crying and needing a friend and afraid I’d see one).” (27, emphasis mine)

While the Doctor’s overwhelming shame can be attributed to his capture, its designation of his
sexuality as criminal, and its ability to make that criminality visible, it is crucial to note that the Doctor interrupts his own narrative twice in asides that align his painful exhibition with the suicidal motives attributed to him by his jailors. Indeed, the shame within this scene is concentrated not upon the Doctor’s cognizance of his sexuality or his criminality per se, but on his inability to walk with dignity. Repeatedly, he is “hurried along,” and, “shuffling along,” is left “holding onto {his} pants” and struggling with “loose shoe{s}.” Through this repetition, and through the formal offsetting of the removal of suspenders and shoelaces by em dashes, the passage centers upon the Doctor’s defunct clothing, and especially upon its ability to make the Doctor’s suicidal ideation visible. Thus, it is precisely the visibility of his despair that seems to form the kernel of the Doctor’s shame, and between these two overt references to suicidality, the breaking heart, or affect’s implosive potential, lies nested. Importantly, the Doctor’s story does not deny his jailors’ implication. In fact, by unnecessarily clarifying that he lost his shoelaces because they (like suspenders) could be used for hanging himself, the Doctor transforms a seemingly irrelevant detail in the first one-line aside into the monologue’s veritable theme.

This story, in conjunction with the story that introduces it, thereby reveals the Doctor’s own blatant suicidal ideation throughout the text. For, it is important to note that the bulk of the passage immediately preceding the Doctor’s narrative, or his “obscenity trial,” is given over to an even longer contemplation of another suicidal sodomite, Ludwig II. And it is the Doctor’s description of both his own trial and the trials of “mad Wittelsbach” that form the kernel of the expurgated section as a whole – a suicidal logic that, read back into the final draft of Nightwood, provides a crucial tool for re-interpreting the Doctor’s role throughout the text. Inserted immediately after the Doctor and Frau Mann depart from Count Altamonte’s and leave Felix for the cafés, the tale of “mad Wittelsbach” is introduced, and as it progresses, comes perilously
close to describing the Doctor. He begins by explaining that the king is “called infirm because he’d had everything but a woman and a lace collar,” though he assures us, “I wouldn’t be too sure about the lace collar” (23). Playing up historical accounts of Ludwig’s homosexuality, the Doctor accuses him of cross-dressing, and in doing so, notably aligns Ludwig with the proclivities that bring the Doctor into court in the succeeding pages. Moreover, touching on one of his favorite topics, masturbation, the Doctor claims that Ludwig’s bed contains “a cross sunk in the parquetry, which was put there to remind the Mad King that one day he forgot himself, and put a hand on his nature” (24). He goes on to tell us what he could not possibly know, that “he had it inlaid, and whenever he felt that he was about to lay hands on himself, he put his best foot forward and over that sign and prayed like a good Wittelsbach that his hand might be withheld” (24). Like the Doctor, who will later regale listeners with the tale of his own public masturbation and tears in church, Ludwig’s “rosary fell and lay there weeping” after he fails to resist the urge (24). Finally, in addition to cross-dressing and masturbating, the King, like the Doctor, is unwilling to have sexual relations with women; “he had come near to taking Sophia {his fiancé},” but is unable to do so before she sleeps with another man (23). As he imagines Ludwig throwing her marble bust out the window in retaliation, the Doctor watches it fall and sees it becoming “something nobody ever intended” (23) – a figure which, in its immanent doom, parallels both men’s deviant sexuality and suicidal ideation.

Comparing his own experiences with those of Ludwig, the Doctor will increasingly identify with Ludwig’s suicidal thoughts, explain his strange behaviors, and even showcase an erotic desire for the dead figure. Departing from the historical accounts which claim Ludwig’s perceived “madness” was caused by his withdrawal from governmental activity, his profligate spending on ornate building projects (his many famed Bavarian castles), and the political
scheming of those who wanted to usurp the throne, the Doctor continuously claims Ludwig’s purported madness is the result of a sexual desire with no outlet, a condition the Doctor himself experiences, and which leads to affective responses that we have seen before in the text. For, as “München’s good women” explain to the doctor when he asks them why they thought Ludwig mad, “‘he wept a long while and then he got that way’” (24). Of course, this affective response (the sort of melancholy usually associated with more romantic versions of madness) is succeeded by their claim that “‘He whipped his servants’” (24). A violent sloughing off of affect, or an infliction of one’s own pain onto others, showcases “mad Wittelsbach’s” use of spillways, and importantly, the Doctor identifies the cause of Ludwig’s violence as an affective disturbance, or love. Suggesting that his behavior “‘Sounds like love…all the love in the world and none of it used’” (24), he implies that Ludwig suffers from an excess, one that requires a spillway to offset the imbalance and shore up his sense of self.

Disempowered by feeling, and in this case, desire, Ludwig seeks a profound isolation in order to contain his identity and maintain self-control, thus aligning with the protagonists of Barnes’ short stories, and, as we will see, eventually with the Doctor himself. For, as O’Connor explains, it is only when one is entirely alone that one has absolute freedom:

So I often think, what kind of a nature was it this man had, sitting there in his Winter Garden where he – all by himself – listened to music, riding about on his lake dressed up like Lohengrin in a boat like a swan. What’s so crazy in that? If wanting a theater all to yourself is madness, I’m madder than most; and if screaming would empty the world out I’d scream until I broke. (23)

In this passage the Doctor not only emphasizes Ludwig’s isolation, which is textually noted by the dashes that literally separate him from the rest of the sentence, but he also questions whether
the desire for isolation is inherently “crazy.” Revealing Ludwig as an important figure in his ruminations and strongly empathizing with Ludwig’s wish for a world emptied out of its inhabitants, the Doctor’s willingness to scream until he breaks foreshadows his own eventual decline into “nothing but wrath and weeping” (175), and, as I will argue, his own desire for isolation from those that come to him to learn of “degradation and the night” (171). His identification with Ludwig reaches its zenith when he shortly thereafter displaces his own loneliness onto Ludwig’s habit of “ordering his dinner up through a trap-door, all by himself eating his noodles and schnitzel,” substituting “I” for “he” when he presses, “And is that crazy now? I’ve called it loneliness all my life” (24).

Although historically it is unclear whether Ludwig killed himself or was murdered for political reasons, it is crucial to note that the Doctor reinterprets history so that Ludwig’s suicide is a conscious act in search of freedom and autonomy. He will claim that:

“he ended it all…by drawing the waters of Starnberg over him, after that he could do as he pleased. Turn belly up or back up and nobody to say him nay, until they snatched him out by the hair and laid him correctly face against the wall, which is called the grave. And it’s strange and awful how many people there are who can do what they want only off a roof, or through a rope, or under water, or after the shot is silent.” (24-25)

Through the assertion that “he ended it all,” the Doctor makes Ludwig’s death a voluntary choice, a last act that paradoxically allows him to “do as he pleased” afterwards. His emphasis on the number of people who “can do what they want only off a roof, or through a rope, or under water, or after the shot is silent” aligns death with a potentiality for empowerment, or self-affirmation in self-negation. Thus, “mad Wittelsbach” seems to gain autonomy in his will to die along the same lines as Katrina in “The Doctors,” and the Doctor’s sympathy with this suicidal
logic makes his later description of the jailers’ fear of his own suicide on the night of his trial especially noteworthy. Moreover, his own erotic desire for the dead figure showcases a lust for those with a death wish, or his own particular death fantasy, both of which ultimately make his suicidality more believable. Visiting Ludwig’s castle in order to see his bed, the Doctor asks one of the attendants in a whisper, “Was he large?” (25). He also questions whether the attendant knew “what I meant or was he thinking of character?,” making the nature of the question explicit for readers and Frau Mann both (25). Finally, if there is any remaining doubt, the Doctor admits that he is terrified his question will be overheard by its echo on the palace walls and recognizes that he needs to “draw his {the attendant’s} mind off” the subject (25).

Drafts of the original manuscript show Barnes indicating that the three-page “mad Wittelsbach” section “can be cut if you {T.S. Eliot} think there are too many doctor’s stories – see Coleman on other ms” (Plumb 189). Yet, Barnes’ wording suggests that she allows the deletion of the Mad King Ludwig section not because she believes it irrelevant, but because she was under pressure to reduce the length and number of the Doctor’s monologues throughout the text overall. Because of all the Doctor’s anecdotes in the initial chapter, this story is the longest, most detailed, and least directly relevant to establishing the text’s cast of abject characters, we can see why it might suffer from the editor’s blue pencil while the vignettes on Nikka and Mademoiselle Basquette stay. Censorship also likely contributed to its excision in that the dual stories reveal the Doctor’s sexual orientation rather overtly. Gilmore claims that this passage is “a story that Eliot cuts in toto” due to its clear representation of gay male sexuality, and thus, its likelihood of inviting censorship (620). Plumb agrees, writing that “Certainly because he anticipated potential difficulty with the censors, Eliot blurred sexual, particularly homosexual, references” (xxiii, 189); the inclusion of Wittelbach’s story and the Doctor’s trial in conjunction
with the already veiled homoeroticism of the preceding Nikka passage might have tipped the scales, preventing publication.

Yet, while I agree with Gilmore and Plumb that Eliot’s removal of this particular section along with other passages containing explicit references to male same-sex activity was instrumental in avoiding an obscenity trial, and in guaranteeing the publication of the novel, I would argue that there is another, larger theme obscured by Eliot’s expurgations. After all, the novel still deals with the stories of “inverts,” contains an episode with the Doctor dressed up as a woman, and obviously centers on the romantic relationships among Jenny, Nora, and Robin. If cutting passages dealing explicitly with male homosexuality helped evade censorship, it certainly did not drain the text of its non-heteronormative sexualities or lesbian narrative. However, what those cuts do drastically remove from the final story is the suicidal ideation that is present from its inception.94 As Julie Taylor notes, the two stories are connected primarily in that the Doctor’s thoughts on suicidal Wittelsbach eventually circle back towards thoughts of his own self-destruction (128)95 – both stories alike in directly portraying same-sex male desire, but different from many of the other narratives in Nightwood by their direct engagement with suicide. Like the veiled homosexuality that remains in the first chapter (i.e., Nikka), suicidal references are retained in the final manuscript, but only in covert form. In fact, the Doctor’s last story before leaving Count Altamonte’s concerns the “headsman” who must “supply his own knife,” and

94 And here I truly mean by its inception, for the very first drafts of “Bow Down,” originally entitled “Bow Down and Run Girls Run,” included the stories of Nancy, Nell, and Hazel. The story is littered with sexual violence and is punctured at its center by Nell’s suicide (Plumb “Revising Nightwood”). “Run, Girls, Run!” was ultimately published as a separate short story in Caravel in March of 1936.
95 Taylor is the only critic I have found who deals with this episode in detail. She, too, recognizes Wittelsbach as the counterpoint to the Doctor (specifically in terms of shame) and notes that the Wittelsbach and “trial” passages are related primarily by references to suicide. However, Taylor suggests these passages were deleted due to “embarrassing” stylistic excesses reminiscent of Gothic, camp, and sentimental literature – genres which offended modernist sensibilities – rather than their dangerous content. Taylor also claims that the Doctor’s shame “promises self-annihilation yet ultimately delivers the opportunity for perversely nourishing attachments” (128), and thus reads this scene more positively than I will, given the novel’s troubled ending.
who, in general, “often end by slicing themselves up” (*Nightwood* 27). This line of thinking—one that *heads* towards the self-condemned and suicidal—ends promptly upon the Count’s return, and is taken up again in the Doctor’s “mad Wittelsbach” story immediately after the Count’s guests depart in the original version. In the final text, however, this trajectory is cut short by expurgations, and the Doctor’s later statement, “Listen, I don’t want to talk of Wittelsbach” signals an omission that loses the ironic humor attached to the original (30), where it occurs after the Doctor’s three page description of Wittelsbach’s suicide and just before references to his own suicidal ideation.

Critic Jane Marcus has suggested that the novel’s “political unconscious is located in this seemingly irrelevant chapter”; yet, I would argue that the novel’s unconscious, plain and simple, is rooted here as well (229). And it is an unconscious bent on self-destruction. The suicide with which the Doctor strongly empathizes, his strong identification with the dead figure, and his own erotic fantasies for Ludwig drastically affect the way readers must interpret the Doctor’s own suicidality in succeeding pages as well as the drift towards the unconscious, or bowing down, that occurs consistently throughout the rest of the text. After all, the Doctor references the birthplace of Ludwig II (i.e., Nymphenburg) in his explication of night/the unconscious /death in “Watchman, what of the Night?” (88), and “the mad King of Bavaria” reappears just before the Doctor’s collapse in “Go Down, Matthew” when he will “scream with sobbing laughter,” “made so miserable by what {they} are keeping hushed” (172, 175). Unable to find a spillway for his own affective disturbances (incited both by war and by desire) *and* the affects that others project upon him, the Doctor yearns for the same isolation as the Mad King at the end of his life: “‘Why don’t they let me alone, all of them?’” (174). Unlike Ludwig, O’Connor claims, “I’m not the one to cut the knot by drowning myself in any body of water, not even the print of a horse’s hoof, no
matter how it has been raining” (172), but his protestation is unconvincing given his immanent and involuntary collapse. His final narrative slides into a succession of long pauses signaled by the em dash, and ultimately unable to “get to his feet,” the Doctor is bowed down at “‘the end’” under “‘nothing, but wrath and weeping!’” (175). Suicide as an isolating method of escape has transformed into an inescapable possession by others, and Teresa de Lauretis reads this final phrase as indicating the finality of death (“nothing”) as a result of excessive affect (“wrath and weeping”) (129). Although the text does not specifically indicate that the Doctor loses consciousness, its final emphasis on affect’s reduction of agency suggests the terminal weight he carries as the spillway for everyone else’s self-destructive desire throughout the narrative. Thus, while Barnes’ novel particularly showcases this downward motion in moments of affective overflow between Nora and Robin, “Bow Down” allows us to trace the text’s emergent suicidal gesture – a compulsion censored and condensed yet still troubling the final manuscript.

III. “Love is death, come upon with passion”: Affective Disturbances in Nightwood

Like Katrina in “The Doctors” and “mad Wittelsbach” in original drafts of “Bow Down,” Nightwood is invested in a suicidal logic that foregrounds the desire for one’s own death as a desire for isolation from, and control over, affective disturbances. Yet, the final draft of Nightwood, more than any of the aforementioned texts, reveals desire itself as the root of this self-destructive search for mastery in that it forces an encounter with overwhelming and disorienting affects, which, in turn, threaten identity and agency. Although desire initially tends to generate fantasies of self-coherence for each character, it ultimately inspires a need for mastery over the beloved object, and this aggression threatens to dismantle not only the object, but the subject, of desire. By exploring the text’s investment in affect as well as the way desire and fantasy are bound up in its projection, we can see that this obsession with control forms the

96 Djuna Barnes, Nightwood, 146
core of Nightwood’s suicidal ideation, and that, through affective “Spillway{es},” this ideation tends to slide dangerously between characters, infecting them with a deadly impulse. By also using the text’s investment in obscurity and instability to read its own figural slips, we can begin to understand Nightwood’s portrayal of suicide as both an escape from affect and an inescapable affective impulse, and to account for the novel’s excessively disturbing pathos – its underlying claim that the turn towards night, or death, which epitomizes the desire for autonomy, self-containment, and quarantine in its characters is always, already a failed project.

Although Nightwood is a profoundly psychological novel, and comfortably aligns itself with the introspection characteristic of modernist explorations of subjectivity, it is no less invested in the body and its surfaces as a site of inscription and projection. Despite its interest in dreams and memory, and the great body of psychoanalytic criticism this interest has spawned, the novel’s particular attention to embodied experience is also beginning to be recognized. Deborah Parsons writes that Barnes’ “protagonists resemble silhouettes, or marionettes, who present angular and impenetrable exteriors” (23), and although I explicitly argue against this supposed impenetrability, Parsons’ focus on the surface, or what can be brought to the surface (i.e., “blood-consciousness”) moves away from standard psychoanalytic readings (23). Daniela Caselli similarly writes that in Nightwood, “Barnes vindicates surface over depth” (159), and goes further in claiming that the novel is “too emotional,” that it “refuses to be contained” (156), and that its “affective theory” comprises an “anti-sentimentality {that} is also surrounded, tainted, and infected with the sentimental” (176, emphasis mine). Even Victoria L. Smith’s aforementioned article claims that the text is “beside itself in the psychic or affective sense” (195), though her argument focuses on melancholic narration and utilizes the framework of trauma theory made popular by Cathy Caruth. Teresa de Lauretis’ more recent article,
“Nightwood and the ‘Terror of Uncertain Signs,’” posits a psychoanalytic reading of Nightwood through the drives, to which she sees affect as subordinate; yet, de Lauretis’ argument also goes the furthest in noting the prominence of affect in the novel. In particular, she locates the night as “a figure for sexuality as traumatic, unmanageable excess of affect” (120), and suggests that in her alignment with the night, Robin herself manifests “an excess of affect that cannot be bound to a suitable Object” (121). Though I read affects as generating (rather than following) urges and impulses, I agree with de Lauretis that desire and death are linked throughout the narrative by the subject’s violent encounters with desire’s “unmanageable quantity of affect” and “the shattering effects it has on the ego” (127).

While these critics have set the stage for further investigations into affect within the novel, Julie Taylor’s recently published book-length study of Barnes’ oeuvre, Djuna Barnes and Affective Modernism, represents a crucial step in understanding Barnes’ work through the lens of affect theory. Barnes’ interest in feeling, and specifically depression, is well documented, critics often noting her references to Robert Burton’s highly philosophical medical textbook The Anatomy of Melancholy (originally published in 1621). However, Taylor focuses previous discussions of emotion and the body in Barnes’ work by concentrating on affect and its inherent communicability, beginning with the premise that “In works that allow us to further comprehend the variousness of the modernist project, Djuna Barnes describes how affects circulate between bodies – and between texts and bodies – in ways that are at once generative and disruptive” (1). Repeating claims made by McGuigen and Ferguson (see section I) that Barnes “deconstructs… coherent subjectivity” (5), Taylor argues that in Barnes’ texts, affective transfer acts as the force of deconstruction – “that feeling at the surface – in a highly relational manner – might define and blur the boundaries of the subject” (18). Thus, noting Barnes’ investment in surface, circulation,
and the “feelings of objects rather than fixed objects – or identities – themselves,” Taylor claims that *Nightwood* rejects depth psychology in order to show us how “subjects are shaped within the contingencies of affect” (111). Though Taylor is far more interested in how Barnes invokes affective ambivalence in the reader through what she calls a “trauma structure,” her reading of *Nightwood* through affective displays of shame particularly highlights the *contagious* nature of affects, and provides a basis for my reading of projection through spillways.

Given that affect theory is widely used to interrogate texts that deal with the shaping of queer and/or racial subjectivity, and that *Nightwood* has spawned a large body of criticism on characters who are marginalized in terms of *both* sexuality and race, it is strange that the novel’s relation to affect has been so seldom explored. For, while much of the text is concerned with interrogations of character psychology, feelings and thoughts (or what Dr. O’Connor will call the heart and soul) are always related back to the body and its affective states. The Doctor calls our attention to the comingling of the ethereal and gross anatomy within each individual early on when he states, “I, as a medical man, know in what pocket a man keeps his heart and soul, and in what jostle of the liver, kidneys, and genitalia these pockets are pilfered. There is no pure sorrow. Why? It is bedfellow to lungs, lights, bones, guts and gall! There are only confusions” (25). And for these confusions, the Doctor admits from the outset, “I have no panacea” (22). For, in *Nightwood* these “confusions” between body and psyche constitute the complicated nature of affect and its transmission, which are constantly figured through the language of disease. This model is implicit in the Doctor’s statement shortly thereafter that “No man needs curing of his individual sickness; his universal malady is what he should look to” (35). By invoking a “universal malady” that precludes remediing one’s “individual sickness,” the Doctor refers back to the vulnerability inherent in being “pilfered” by others. That one’s heart and soul are

97 Taylor also reads this quote in particular reveals the text’s “somatic understanding of affect” (114).
externalized, or kept in one’s “pocket,” not only suggests the surface-oriented nature of feeling and thought (their roots in affect), but also the danger to autonomy inherent in that externalization. Bringing what should be inside out, the Doctor points readers towards the permeability of self – the likelihood that one will suffer from the contagious psychic and bodily states of others, in the face of which, one’s individual efforts at self-containment, or at “curing…individual sickness,” provide no immunity.

Recalling Teresa Brennan’s argument in The Transmission of Affect (see Chapter 1), we know that “the self-contained subject maintains itself by projecting out the affects that otherwise interfere with its agency (anxiety and any sense of inferiority) in a series of affective judgments that are carried by the other” (113). Thus, the “fantasy of self-containment” crucial to modern conceptions of identity, or the idea of the individual as the distinct origin point for all thought and action, is fundamentally based in the projection of negative affect (13) – in unloading onto others affects which threaten to dissolve personhood. While Brennan claims that we project affects in the psychoanalytic sense of reading our own anxieties into others, seeing in them the threatening weaknesses or affective states we refuse to see in ourselves, it is crucial to note her claim that we are also capable of literally projecting our own affective states onto others.

Engaging with a contagion theory of affect that is particularly important for a reading of the affective “spillways” in Nightwood, Brennan states that “introjecting” one’s own negative affects effectively burdens the individual, whereas “dumping” those affects onto others frees them of a potentially paralyzing affective burden (5). Like a seesaw, “dumping” produces a change in the affective states of both individuals, one sinking under the burden of affect as the other rises with its release – a poignant image if we remember Julie and Paytor’s final movements in “Spillway,” and if we look forward to the several collapses of Nora and the Doctor throughout Nightwood. In
this way, “dumping” onto others, or using them as “spillways,” is the norm of psychic life. It participates in the construction of the illusory boundaries between ego and environment, and as the characters in *Nightwood* reveal, effects the inherent violence of desire.

Drawing on the work of Brennan and other theorists in the growing field of affect studies, Lauren Berlant likewise interrogates the idea of the self-contained subject. The result of a process of individuation that Berlant agrees is primarily historical rather than “natural,” this relatively modern formulation of Western subjectivity denies the destabilizing effects of affects on the subject, and though Berlant does not explicitly propound affect’s contagion theory, she does implicitly work towards illuminating the “affects that…interfere with agency,” which Brennan notes above. In *Desire/Love*, she suggests that a primary source of interference is desire, which produces an “incoherence of libidinal activity” and “multiple, diverse and divergent aims” (51). For Berlant, desire’s lack of coherence necessitates that fixed, or stable, identity is always a failed project – a fantasy of sorts (51). Identity is merely “a mirage of the ego that gives you an ‘I’ and a name to protect you from being overwhelmed by the stimuli you encounter, and/or a mirage of the social order, which teaches you to renounce your desire’s excess and ambivalence so that you can be intelligible” (52). Here, it is important to note the “I” serves to “protect” one from being “overwhelmed” by stimuli, or what Berlant earlier clarifies as “an encounter with your affects” brought on by desire. The self, then, is constructed in order to combat potentially destabilizing affective encounters, and Dr. O’Connor signals *Nightwood*’s anxious recognition of affect’s threat to identity early in the text: “’if one gave birth to a heart on a plate, it would say ‘Love’ and twitch like the lopped leg of a frog’” (30). That the disembodied heart (the metaphorical seat of desire) will twitch and “say ‘Love’” without the cognizance of an “I” suggests the way in which affects precede, rather than originate in, the self. That it will do *so like*
the leg of a frog further indicates the involuntary nature of affective reaction – its excessive presence as easily stimulated by experimental electricity as by the conditions of reality.

As the Doctor indicates, and as Berlant notes, desire is thus fundamentally an “affective disturbance” – one which inevitably makes “a dent on the subject” from without but which seems to originate within the illusory “I” (75). Echoing Brennan’s view of affect under a model of contagion, and likewise the perspective of modernity’s crowd theorists, Berlant writes:

Desire visits you as an impact from the outside, and yet, inducing an encounter with your affects, makes you feel as though it comes from within you; this means that your objects are not objective, but things and scenes that you have converted into propping up your world, and so what seems objective and autonomous in them is partly what your desire has created and therefore is a mirage, a shaky anchor. (6)

The foundational way of constructing the self, desire, like the “ego” of the above quote, is here based on a “mirage” and is organized around fantasies that allow “a sense of affective coherence to what is incoherent and contradictory in the subject” (75). Though desire is at its most basic level “a state of attachment,” it is also “the cloud of possibility that is generated by the gap between an object’s specificity and the needs and promises projected onto it” (6). Here, Berlant motions to an aspect of desire crucial to Nightwood – that in order to achieve a sense of coherence and generate this “cloud of possibility,” desire, or namely, its resultant fantasy, must rely on a fundamental misrecognition. It “misrecognizes a given object as that which will restore you to something that you sense effectively,” or affectively, “as a hole in you” (76).

Along with this fundamental misrecognition, which we will see applied to Robin repeatedly throughout the text, another more sinister violation takes place. For, what Berlant calls “the scene of fantasy…may well play out a competition between the subject’s desire to be
recognized by her object and her desire to destroy the object she desires” (80). Drawing on Freud’s model, Berlant asserts that to love an object can be an attempt to master it, or to destroy its alterity: “Here, aggression is not the opposite of love, but integral to it: one way to think about this is that in love, the lover hungers to have her object right where she can love it. This is why sadism, masochism, and perversion are not exceptions to the rule of desire in Freud’s model, but integral to human attachment” (25). Not only a threat to the desired object, desire becomes a threat to the self, because “regardless of how it is experienced by the desiring subject, desire can overwhelm thought, shatter intention, violate principles, and perturb identity. It is as though desire were a law of disturbance unto itself to which the subject must submit to become a subject of her own unbecoming” (26). Obviously relevant to Barnes’ ubiquitous, but heretofore ignored, entanglement of affective spillways and suicide, Berlant’s claims align with Nightwood’s bleak conclusion in their assertion that desire and love “destabilize and threaten the very things (like identity and life) that they are disciplined to organize and ameliorate” (112, emphasis mine).

Drawing on “The Doctors” Elizabeth Pochoda hails Nightwood a “vivisection of love” (184), but given the novel’s investment in affective transfer, we can also see how it could easily be read as a story of “love disease” (“Spillway” 63). Berlant defines love as “the embracing dream in which desire is reciprocated: rather than being isolating, love provides an image of an expanded self, the normative version of which is the two-as-one intimacy of the couple form,” and she goes on to state that “In the idealized image of their relation, desire will lead to love, which will make a world for desire’s endurance” (7-8). “But,” she qualifies, “there is a shadow around this image” (8). In Nightwood, we might claim that the shadow overtakes the image, in that the “expanded self” and the “two-as-one intimacy of the couple form” increasingly mean the destruction of both parties. Nora tells us that Robin “would kill the world to get at herself if the
world were in the way, and it *is* in the way. A shadow was falling on her – mine – and it was
driving her out of her wits” (165). Recognizing the burden of her fantasies on Robin, or the
“shadow” of desire and the dream of love it generates, Nora endows Robin with the capability of
killing the entire “world” in order to maintain the sense of identity and agency threatened by
Nora’s “expanded self,” and ultimately suggests that the “two-as-one-intimacy of couple form”
is impossible in *Nightwood* – or if possible, only possible in the death of all.

For, desire – its fantasies of control and its forced encounter with overwhelming affect –
does not remain safely within the boundaries of dyadic transfer, but proliferates outward,
affecting the entire cast of characters like an epidemic. Given the modernist era’s interest in
crowd theories, which couch the language of affective transmission in the language of disease (as
“germ,” “infection,” “contagion,” “microbes,” and even specifically “cholera”), it is no wonder
that the Doctor aligns affective projection with a “malady” in the quote above, or that he gestures
to its “universal” effects. The character most aware of the communicability of affect, the Doctor
often advises against conceptualizing the body as “sealed, discrete, impermeable” (Heise 313),
and his monologues function as “a discussion of the maladies with which the other characters are
also stricken” (Frank 480). Traversing the modernist Meccas of Paris, Berlin, Munich, Vienna,
Budapest, and New York, and quite often participating in nighttime flânerie, Barnes’ characters
are always in motion and perpetually in contact, participating in what Thomas Heise calls the
“contagious intimacies” of the city’s “underworld” (316). Yet, it is Robin who remains the
epidemic’s origin point, creating affective disturbances in all those with whom she comes into
contact, inciting desire and its self-destructive quests for control.

Unaffected herself, but the cause of overwhelming affect, Robin is thus described as
having an “undefinable disorder” (126). “As a figure whose primary interest arises from her

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98 See Le Bon (“contagion,” “microbes,” 73) and Conway (“germ” 309, “infection,” “cholera” 39)
ability to provoke feeling in others” (Taylor 135), the desire Robin inspires in Nora, or more specifically, the encounter with affect that desire for her produces, is overtly figured as a disease by the Doctor, who claims that Nora is “experiencing the inbreeding of pain” and “suffering (which is merely to say that you have caught every disease and so pardoned your flesh)” (Nightwood 138). Here, pain and suffering – the affective “dents” or “lacerations” that desire makes upon the subject – become liable to transmission in their alignment with disease; that love and its attendant desire produce an influx of affect as invasive as a disease itself is echoed in descriptions of Robin throughout the text. For, as the one character capable of affectively influencing all others, Robin is repeatedly figured as disease and the harbinger of death – “the infected carrier of the past” (41). Frequently associated with unconscious states, when we meet her in “La Somnambule,” she has just fainted, “invad{ing} a sleep incautious and entire” (38). She smells of fungi, which feeds on the detritus of death, and also oil of amber, “which is an inner malady of the sea” (38). Like the “universal malady” of affect, Robin’s own “inner malady” poses as a lethal affective infection, and like the “carnivorous flowers” that surround her, Robin resembles the novel’s title. Not only in her role as stand-in for Thelma Wood (nighT. Wood), but also in her evocation of the same suicidal connotations that Barnes associates with the title’s unique appeal, Robin’s magnetism is an attraction to death. Like the poisonous nightshade Barnes admired, she will come to infect the other characters with her “inner malady,” her face “the face of an incurable” yet to be affected by its own affliction (45).

IV. “I can’t live without my heart!”99: Suicidal Fantasies and Affective Control

The characters of Nightwood are as susceptible to affective transmission, or as inherently incoherent, as the characters of Barnes’ short stories. As a result, their desire for Robin, and the misrecognitions and fantasies this desire generates, initially act as a cohesive force on each

99 Djuna Barnes, Nightwood, 165
personality. For Felix, Robin is a “destiny” that “stand{s} before him without effort” (46), and allows him his dream of raising a son who will also appreciate, and participate in, the great aristocratic past. His fantasy of Robin, or the “cloud of possibility” his desire for her generates, is linked to shoring up his own identity through the creation of an inheritor who can join the past with the present and project Felix’s genetic lineage and personal history into the future. Yet, Felix’s belief in Robin’s ability to provide this self-coherence is fundamentally misguided; his fantasy of her is an extreme abstraction, almost completely divorced from the characteristics that identify her in actuality. The narratorial voice admits as much when it states that, for Felix, “Thinking of her, visualizing her, was an extreme act of the will; to recall her after she had gone, however, was as easy as the recollection of a sensation of beauty without the details” (45). After Robin flees their marriage, nearly killing their child Guido in the process, Felix admits his misrecognition to the Doctor, modifying his previous “recollections” to an “image,” or in Berlant’s terms, a fantastical “mirage”: “If I should try to put it into words, I mean how I did see her, it would be incomprehensible, for the simple reason that I find that I never did have a really clear idea of her at any time. I had an image of her, but that is not the same thing. An image is a stop the mind makes between uncertainties” (119). Felix’s lack of comprehension is sustained throughout the narrative as he struggles to understand Guido through a recovery of Robin, but his mind’s “stop…between uncertainties” is never overcome, and he leaves the narrative shortly after confessing that this situation has left him in “mental trouble” (117-18).

Though Robin’s existence as an “image,” or the “shaky anchor” of desire, is explicated most fully through Felix’s narrative in the novel’s opening chapters, both Nora and Jenny will reiterate his mistake. In Nora’s case, this misrecognition is highly overdetermined, not only in that it repeats Felix’s yearning for a monogamous intimacy that Robin specifically rejects, but
also in its correspondence with a moment of actual recognition in the text. This scene is perhaps one of the most memorable in *Nightwood* and takes place at the Denckman circus where Robin and Nora meet: “…one powerful lioness came to the turn of the bars, exactly opposite the girl, she turned her furious great head with its yellow eyes afire and went down, her paws thrust through the bars and, as she regarded the girl, as if a river were falling behind impassable heat, her eyes flowed in tears that never reached the surface” (60). The scene belabors the importance of recognition through its focus on the lioness’s “yellow eyes” and her affective reaction, or the tears that appear, when she regards Robin. Yet, despite witnessing this moment, in which the lion bows down before Robin’s own animality, Nora remains completely oblivious; the “light” of comprehension present in the “dusty eyes” of the “animals, going around and around the ring” completely escapes her (59). Like Felix, she will build a fantasy of self-coherence on Robin, going so far in her vision of “the two-as-one intimacy of the couple form” (Berlant 7) as to claim that she has no sense of self without Robin. “‘She is myself,’” she will state, and, “‘Have you ever loved someone and it became yourself?’” (*Nightwood* 136, 161). This affective disturbance overtaking her identity, Nora is unable to understand Robin and is ultimately driven “mad.”

Jenny’s case of misrecognition, unlike Felix and Nora’s, is not constituted in a moment but in Jenny’s very personality, which is constantly aligned with artifice and fabrication, especially in regards to love. The narrative persona tells us that Jenny “could not participate in a great love, she could only report it,” that “she had to fall back on the emotions of the past, great loves already lived and related,” and that when she “{falls} in love it {is} with a perfect fury of accumulated dishonesty” (74, 75). Seemingly incapable of recognition in the first place, Jenny is “a dealer in second-hand emotions,” and so appropriates “the most passionate love that she knew, Nora’s for Robin” (75). Accordingly, Jenny likewise adopts Nora’s fantasy of

100 Nora admits, “I’ll never understand her,” and later claims, “I went mad and I’ve been mad ever since” (92, 154).
monogamous, domestic bliss and relies on Robin as an ordering principle of her own sense of self. By the end of the narrative, like Nora, “She did not understand anything Robin felt or did” and becomes inundated by traumatic affect, labeled by the text as “hysterical” (177).

Thus, by invoking and then reflecting on moments of fundamental misrecognition, the text overtly signals Robin’s role as a fantastic mirage. Bound up with fantasies of monogamy, Robin is likewise integral to fantasies of self-coherence, and her incompatibility with these fantasies is particularly emphasized throughout the text by her real or attempted sacrifice of the relationships’ issue. All three lovers will share a child with Robin (real or symbolic) as part of their initial domestic arrangement; yet, Robin’s frustration at their misrecognition causes her to smash one child (the doll she gives to Nora), attempt to smash another (Guido, her real child), and abandon a third (the doll she gives to Jenny). While Robin’s actions seem to clearly mark the gap between expectations that she provide a stabilizing force for identity construction and her actual ability to do so, the desire Robin inspires in other characters throughout the text, and the fantasies of self-coherence this desire provides, increasingly lead to aggressive attempts to control her. For, both Jenny and Nora will strike Robin in dramatic encounters that threaten to destroy both the lover and beloved. ¹⁰¹

Even so, the first real indication of this self-destructive search for mastery appears in the text’s original fantasy of Robin. As bridal eland “stepping in the trepidation of flesh that will become myth,” Robin evokes the “image of a forgotten experience, a mirage of an eternal wedding” and “insupportable joy” (41). Overtly figured as a “mirage” – a term Berlant specifically uses to describe the object of desire and the identity of the desiring subject, both of which are given a sense of coherence through fantasy – Robin first makes her affective “dent” as a being Felix can never possess (“flesh that will become myth”) but who can nonetheless provide

¹⁰¹ These clashes can be found on pgs. 83, 153, 154, 160.
some measure of coherence if he can bind her in place through the “eternal wedding.” Yet, the fantasy pivots upon the desire to ingest, and thus master, Robin, and the narration soon shifts from free indirect discourse focalized through Felix to a first person plural through the possessive pronoun “our”: “Such a woman is the infected carrier of the past: before her the structure of our head and jaws ache – we feel that we could eat her, she who is eaten death returning, for only then do we put our face close to the blood on the lips of our forefathers” (41). While this fantasy already points towards the desire for mastery inherent in desire itself, it is crucial to note that the desire for control slips from Felix to the novel’s entire readership. Felix’s “human hunger,” which makes “our head and jaws ache” therefore signals the text’s acknowledgement of Robin’s presence in the fantasy of others – readers and characters alike. Given this brief but all-inclusive gesture as well as the fact that Robin’s “insupportable” desirability is figured as an “infection,” the tone of the passage turns ominous.102 The desire to “eat her…who is eaten death returning,” and to thereby consume infection and death, is a suicidal gesture that puts “our face close to the blood on the lips of our forefathers” – predation and the grave.

Though this foundational fantasy of Robin reveals the death drive at the heart of all desire for her, it is primarily by moving from this generalized fantasy of control toward Nora’s dreams that we begin to see the novel’s implication that desire and its failed modes of establishing control often yield a self-destructive impulse paradoxically meant to isolate the subject from desire’s overwhelming and threatening affective disturbances. As Berlant notes, the force of desire can ultimately destroy the desiring subject; yet, Nora reveals this destruction of the self as especially productive of self-coherence and mastery in her dreams of Robin. For, within these

102 Caselli refers to these textual breaches as an infection at the level of the text itself: “its relative stability is infected by the occasional use of second person narrative, first person monologues, and repetitions” (157).
fantasies, her destruction of self is a construction of self, aligning with the suicidal ideation of Katrina in “The Doctors,” “mad Wittelsbach” of the original “Bow Down,” and Dr. O’Connor during his trial, and thereby demonstrating the text’s first strand of suicidal logic.

For, it is in Nora’s dreams – the realm of the unconscious associated with both the night and death throughout the novel – that she is able to control the dangerous intensity of her affective responses to Robin, and even Robin herself. It is here that the text most thoroughly explores “desire as a force to exceed what is rational or contained” as well as “the horror of twilight – the loss of consciousness, the destruction – we long for” (Kiavola 60, 69). This self-destructive mastery is revealed by the narratorial voice soon after Robin and Nora buy their house in Paris and we learn that:

In Nora’s heart lay the fossil of Robin, intaglio of her identity, and about it for its maintenance ran Nora’s blood. Thus the body of Robin could never be unloved, corrupt or put away. Robin was now beyond timely changes, except in the blood that animated her. That she could be spilled of this fixed the walking image of Robin in appalling apprehension on Nora’s mind – Robin alone, crossing streets, in danger. Her mind became so transfixed that, by the agency of her fear, Robin seemed enormous and polarized, all catastrophes ran towards her, the magnetized predicament; and crying out, Nora would wake from sleep, going back through the tide of dreams into which her anxiety had thrown her, taking the body of Robin down with her into it, as the ground things take the corpse, with minute persistence, down into the earth, leaving a pattern of it on the grass, as if they stitched as they descended. (Nightwood 61-62)

This lengthy passage, both stylistically and thematically dense, begins with a focus on bodily connection, and consequently, the affective ties that deny self-containment. Importantly, the
“fossil of Robin” is both “maintain{ed}” and held in stasis (“beyond timely changes”) by Nora’s blood – fundamentally unalterable except through her will. Bound up in Nora’s heart, this fantastic image of Robin is not only sustained by Nora’s blood, but controlled by it, and it is not only Nora’s image of Robin, but the real Robin, that is mastered. For, the center of the passage slips between Nora’s conception of Robin as a fixed fossil and her “animation,” supporting Parsons’ claim that Nightwood is “an expression of {Barnes’} belief in the blood-consciousness of the human beast” (60). Bringing Robin to life only to imagine her dying in the real world, it is crucial to note that in Nora’s mind, Robin’s death involves her being “spilled” of Nora’s blood, indicating Nora’s belief that the actual, living Robin is corporeally linked to her. The alignment between blood spill, death, and the heart (affect), foreshadows the spillway between Robin and Nora at the novel’s end; yet, Nora’s delusion of control persists as Robin takes to wandering the pedestrian strewn streets of nighttime Paris – Nora imagining she might be able “to bring Robin back by the very velocity of her beating heart” (Nightwood 67).

However, it is only through sleep, dreams, and ultimately death that this control exists. The tenuousness of Nora’s control over Robin (and because they are connected, control over herself) is signaled by Nora’s “anxiety” when she “wake{s} from sleep,” and necessitates safe removal into the “tide of dreams.” Her act of “taking the body of Robin down with her into it, as the ground things take the corpse” reveals Nora’s belief that death is the only way to master the object of desire, and signals that in the unconscious, or in the dream world that is so akin to death, this complete control is possible. That death likewise yields control over desire’s affects, or a counterbalance to the “agency” of Nora’s “fear,” is signaled by this action as well; for, the

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103 Bonnie Kime Scott reads Nora’s dreams, and their obsessive return to death and burial, similarly as an “attempt to hold onto love” (116-117). Karen Kiavola likewise reads them as attempts to control the beloved, specifically noting the suicidality bound up in this search for mastery when she states that they are “a place where desire connects not only with the annihilation of the ego and individuality but with the desire to destroy the other, the beloved” (92).
passage closes the wound of Nora’s affective lacerations – her “appalling apprehension,” “fear,” “anxiety,” and “crying out” – when she and Robin “stitch...as they descend{.}” The fact that Nora takes both herself and Robin down into the grave is particularly striking, insofar as it indicates that Barnes’ desiring subject, in its fantasy of mastery, will risk itself along with the object of desire, and that mastery is inherently bound up with suicidal ideation in her text. The narrator tells us that “To keep her...Nora knew now that there was no way but death. In death Robin would belong to her” (63), and the control offered by death becomes a recurring theme in Nora’s dialogue as the novel progresses. She not only claims, ““I can only find her again in my sleep or in her death”” (137), but also states that Robin is only truly hers when she is “dead drunk” (154). And, perhaps most obviously, Nora even requests of Robin, “Die now, so you will be quiet, so you will not be touched again by dirty hands, so you will not take my heart and your body and let them be nosed by dogs – die now, then you will be mine forever” (153-54). This passage along with Nora’s panicked exclamation shortly thereafter, “I can’t live without my heart!” (165), return readers to the text’s first image of the heart as a disembodied organ capable of being contaminated (or affected) by touch, and therefore, to the Doctor’s anxiety about affect’s origins. In fact, it is through this very circularity that Nora reveals the heart of the novel as affect and its terrifying uncontrollability. Her similar anxiety over contamination – “dirty hands” and being “nosed by dogs” – and her belief that mastery can only be resurrected by a removal showcases the text’s own anxiety that affect threatens identity and agency, presenting a disorder that can only be corrected by death.

The highly aggressive fantasy of burial noted in Nora’s initial dream suggests the suicidal

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104 Elsewhere in the novel, Nora states: “Love is death, come upon with passion” (146); “we love each other like death” (148); and ““Once when she was sleeping, I wanted her to die. Now, that would stop nothing’” (137). Moving from love as a kind of death, to the joint act of loving “like” death, to the suggested necessity of her own death in addition to Robin’s, Nora frequently reveals a suicidal ideation subtending her homicidal urges.
nature of the text’s search for order, and is repeated in her two succeeding dreams later in the text. In the first, Nora sees her grandmother being “drawn upon” by her unconscious, the condensations and displacements of the dream world appearing likewise as “something being done to Robin, Robin disfigured and eternalized by the hieroglyphics of sleep and pain” (69). In her second dream later in the narrative, Nora sees her father, her grandmother, and herself – “one living and one dead and one asleep” – and feels “as if I were burying them with the earth of my lost sleep” (158). Asserting her agency in their deaths, she claims, “This I have done to my father’s mother, dreaming through my father, and have tormented them with my tears and with my dreams: for all of us die over again in somebody’s sleep. And this, I have done to Robin: it is only through me that she will die over and over” (158). Particularly ominous, this passage points to the veracity of the Doctor’s assessment that Nora is “blood-thirsty with love” (157) and critical assessments that “the terminal position of Nora’s love is thus a will to death” (Cole 399). Moreover, it likewise suggests that Nora is not only overwhelmed by the affects (“tears”) induced by her desire for Robin, but desirous of projecting these affects outwards (of “torment{ing}” others). Consequently, these passages more than any others point to the dangerously self-reflexive nature of Nora’s death fantasy. After all, “it is only through me,” Nora claims, that “she” will die, and she will do so “over and over.” This self-reflexivity, and its relation to spillways, is crucial to interpreting the highly refracted affective transfer at the end of the novel in which self-destruction as a means of self-possession transforms into an involuntary, but equally deadly, possession by the affects of others.

V: “Possessed” by Affect: Robin’s Spillways and the Final Flood

While fantasies and dreams reveal Nora’s suicidal impulses as fundamentally rooted in a desire to control Robin as a means to establishing her own self-coherence, Nora’s attempts
ultimately backfire. As she gradually comes to function as Robin’s spillway throughout the narrative, she is inundated by Robin’s affect on two separate occasions, resulting in complete collapse. By pairing these traumatic moments with the collapse of the Doctor, occurring just before Nora’s in the final scene, we see the potency of Robin’s affective dumping and can trace its escalation throughout the narrative as the suicidal impulse slips from a means of establishing mastery to an involuntary and highly contagious possession which places the subject beyond any means of agency. For, while Nora’s first collapse results from Robin’s direct use of Nora as a spillway, the second collapse – the Doctor’s – is produced indirectly by Robin as Nora overwhelms him with her own affective overflow. Proliferating out from the original romantic dyad, projected affect thus poisons the Doctor as bystander before turning back self-reflexively to fell Nora, the dog, and Robin in the final chapter’s triadic fall.

Though Nora and the Doctor reveal the effects of Robin’s projections, or her use of affective spillways, most overtly, this tendency for projection is signaled at the outset of the novel in a brief episode of violence between Robin and Felix. In this scene, shortly after Guido’s birth, Robin strikes Felix “in a fury” so powerful “that the muscles in her neck stood out” (53). By placing this strike immediately after Robin’s “shuddering in the double pains of birth and fury” and emission of “frantic cries of affirmation and despair” (52), the text directly links the overwhelming affect produced in birth to Robin’s need to expel, or dump, this affect onto another. Departing from her signature trait throughout the text (her affect-less resignation), Robin’s “bloody gown” causes her to “cry {} like a child who has walked into the commencement of a horror,” “as if this act had caught her attention for the first time” (52). This stunning entry into affect, or Robin’s emergence into “blood-consciousness,” generates her desire to slap Felix, and it is crucial to note that when Robin does so, “she grinned” (53). The
text is careful to note that this grin is “not a smile” (53, emphasis mine), or a positive affective response, but a more neutral reaction, implying that it functions as a release of the excess from Robin’s psyche and returns her to the affect-less state which constitutes her equilibrium.

Though Robin’s propensity for spillways is revealed in this initial violent scene, her projection of negative affect becomes more sinister in its consequences for Nora. While the birth of an unwanted child sparks Robin’s negative emotions and retaliation against Felix, Nora’s surveillance of Robin’s infidelity – the second major rupture in the novel – necessitates Robin’s second spillway. Occurring just after Nora witnesses “the double shadow” of Robin and Jenny kissing outside her window, the “intensity of {Nora and Robin’s} double regard” and the “fear” in Robin’s gaze paralyzes Nora, preceding her death-like faint at the end of the chapter:

Unable to turn her eyes away, incapable of speech, experiencing a sensation of evil, complete and dismembering, Nora fell to her knees, so that her eyes were not withdrawn by her volition, but dropped from their orbit by the falling of her body. Her chin on the sill she knelt, thinking, “Now they will not hold together,” feeling that if she turned away from what Robin was doing, the design would break and melt back into Robin alone. She closed her eyes and in that moment she knew an awful happiness. Robin, like something dormant, was protected, moved out of death’s way by the successive arms of women; but as she closed her eyes, Nora said “Ah!” with the intolerable automatism of the last “Ah!” in a body struck at the moment of its final breath. (70)

In this passage, the mutual gaze of Nora and Robin has a profound effect on Nora, affectively infecting her with the anonymity and lack of agency characteristic of Robin throughout the text. “Dismember{ed}” by a “sensation of evil,” Nora passively experiences the projection of Robin’s affect (her “fear”) as a physical effect on her body, causing the initial fall to her knees, the
reiterated (and thus overdetermined) “falling of her body,” and the inability to “turn her eyes away.” Yet, the passive construction of the phrase, “her eyes were not withdrawn by her volition,” suggests that autonomy exists in this scene, and that it exists in Robin as she gains power through affective dumping. For, unlike Nora, Robin is “protected” and “moved out of death’s way” in the exact moment that Nora approaches the unconscious state that typifies it and the “awful happiness” of her sacrifice – an image that, in its polarity, once again refers back to the original couple of “Spillway.” Moreover, Robin, “like something dormant,” is figured through the language of disease, and thus aligned with a dangerous potential for overwhelming affective transmission – a capability that reminds readers of her initial depiction as an “infected carrier” and a “malady.” Her “dormant” sickness shows no symptoms; yet, those affective symptoms are easily transferred to Nora, engendering a slip in suicidal ideation and Nora’s figurative death.\footnote{Caselli also notes the predominance of death in this scene, claiming that “Nora does die” (177).} That her eyes are “dropped from their orbit by the falling of her body” suggests not only the drop in line of sight, but also the slip into a death-like unconsciousness, connoted by the rolling back of the eyes in their sockets as Nora closes her eyes twice in this scene. Her twice repeated “last ‘Ah!’” “in a body struck at the moment of its final breath” likewise complements the rolling back of the eyes typical of death scenes with a “final breath” as proof of termination. Thus, “struck” by the affects of Robin, Nora’s body succumbs to Robin’s persistent straining towards insentience, her final sounds a death rattle whose “intolerable automatism” indicate the utter stripping away of conscious awareness and intention.

This affective entanglement of Nora and Robin – its visceral immediacy and terminal trajectory – intensifies throughout the narrative, explicated most thoroughly in the novel’s penultimate chapter “Go Down, Matthew” and exemplified in the final pages of “The Possessed.” In “Go Down, Matthew,” the Doctor visits Nora’s home and, catching her in the act
of drafting a letter to Robin, attempts to stop her. Though the chapter begins on these innocuous grounds, Nora’s highly-wrought emotional state and the Doctor’s attempts to comfort her quickly lead to one of the most dense, philosophical, and linguistically baroque discussions in the novel. If Nora first goes to the Doctor in order to understand the night world Robin inhabits in “Watchman, What of the Night?,” then her focus in this second discussion is to explore the consequences of that knowledge – a path that increasingly invokes death as a consequence of desire and ultimately ends in his collapse. While Robin’s affective projection leads to Felix’s stunning slap and Nora’s faint, it is in “Go Down, Matthew” that Robin’s use of other characters as affective spillways proliferates beyond the immediate romantic dyad, inundating bystanders who happen to be in the path of desire’s affective infection.

This profound example of affective transfer takes place at the end of the chapter when Nora’s interjections finally usurp the Doctor’s torrent of philosophy, and he retreating in silence to the safety of the nearby café. Throughout Nora’s recounting of her relationship with Robin, the Doctor repeatedly complains that he is being used to relieve Nora’s feelings; however, it is not until Nora takes over the conversation entirely that he succumbs as a spillway. For, earlier in the conversation when Nora claims that her love for Robin “rots me away” (161), he “snap{es},” “I was doing well enough…until you kicked my stone over, and out I came, all moss and eyes; and here I sit, as naked as only those things can be, whose houses have been torn away from them to make a holiday, and it my only skin – labouring to comfort you” (162). The loss of house and skin, protective coverings from the potential lacerations of affective transfer, figuratively place the Doctor in the role of the de-shelled snail, but still he goes further in blaming Nora for his vulnerability when he uses her own rhetoric against her: “Ah, yes – I love my neighbor. Like a rotten apple to a rotten apple’s breast affixed we go down together, nor is there a hesitation in
that decay, for when I sense such, there I apply the breast the firmer, that he may rot as quickly
as I’” (163). Here the Doctor likens his aforementioned “labour” to a “love” that rots him to the
same extent that Nora’s love for Robin rots her, which is appropriate given Nora’s claim that her
“love” and the strength of its affective disturbance “goes everywhere; there is no place for it to
stop” (161). As “neighbor{s},” their affective transfer, here figured as the direct application of
breast to breast, or heart to heart, rots both parties until they bow down “together.” The Doctor
alerts readers to the sinister aspect of this affective transmission by admitting that a pause in
“decay” will cause him (the universal neighbor) to “apply the breast the firmer.” However,
obliquely referencing affective dumping, the Doctor’s claim to the position of power wherein he
uses others as an affective spillway so that they “may rot as quickly as I,” is, by virtue of context,
more likely an accusation against Nora’s cruel utilization.

Accordingly, the Doctor continues to indicate his role as dumping ground for the pain of
others and the effects of these affects on himself throughout Nora’s speech – signposts that are
repeatedly ignored by Nora as she vacantly listens or volleys new evidence of her misery his
way. Early on he tells her, “‘Personally, if I could, I would instigate Meat-Axe Day, and out of
the goodness of my heart, I would whack your head off along with a couple of others. Every man
should be allowed one day and a hatchet just to ease his heart’” (137). Here, the Doctor’s
homicidal urge emerges as a desire to ease his heart rather than Nora’s, and he indicates why just
a few pages later with one of his characteristic rhetorical questions: “‘Do you know what has
made me the greatest liar this side of the moon, telling my stories to people like you, to take the
mortal agony out of their guts, and to stop them from rolling about, and drawing up their feet,
and screaming, with their eyes staring over their knuckles with misery which they are trying to
keep off, saying ‘Say something, Doctor, for the love of God!’” (144). Identifying his role in
“tak{ing} the mortal agony out of their guts,” the Doctor catalogues a powerful list of negative affects, the intensity of which bespeaks Nora’s “misery” when he critiques her “wail{ing}” and “screaming” (164).

For, as Nora begins to take over the narrative, drawing him further into her remembrances of Robin and her pain, the Doctor gradually becomes overwhelmed to such an extent that he claims the conversation is killing him. He cries to Nora, “‘A broken heart have you! I have falling arches, flying dandruff, a floating kidney, shattered nerves and a broken heart!’” and critiques her for being able to “‘ruffle me the wrong way and flit about, stirring my misery’” (164). Nora’s misery has fully become his own, and in this moment, the Doctor claims, “‘I come dragging and squealing, like a heifer on the way to slaughter…protesting his death’” (164). Attempting to escape that death, the Doctor will leave Nora’s apartment in “confused and unhappy silence” – his inability to talk and his “stagger” as he reaches for coat and hat a foreshadowing of his eventual collapse in the café. After all, even after his escape to the local haunt, the Doctor will again gesture towards his impending death: “‘What do they all come to me for? Why do they all tell me everything, then expect it to lie hushed in me, like a rabbit gone home to die’” (171). Unable to contain, or keep “hushed,” the overwhelming affect Nora, Felix, and Jenny dump on him throughout the narrative, the Doctor references the Mad King of Bavaria once again, suggesting that even his suicidal misery has an ability to infect him: “‘Some people…take off headfirst into any body of water and six glasses later someone in Harlem gets typhoid from drinking their misery’” (172). Thus, it is ultimately the transmission of affect and his role as spillway that bow down the Doctor at the end of the narrative. His claim that “‘If you don’t want to suffer you should tear yourself apart’” and his reference to the three piles of Caroline of Hapsburg – “‘her heart in the Augustiner church, her intestines in St. Stefan’s and
what was left of the body in the vault of the Capucines’” – reveals the source of his damnation, that she was “‘Saved by separation, but I’m all in one piece!’” (174). Unable to stop affective transmission by disconnecting the heart and the body – or by destroying the feedback loop between cognitive, emotional, and corporeal functioning – the Doctor is prone to others’ projections and to the dumping of unwanted affect that forms an integral part of dyadic desire despite his removal from the dyad itself. His involuntary collapse, which signals the text’s devolution into “‘nothing, but wrath and weeping!’” (175), reveals him to be the primary victim of affective spillways in the novel, ironically reversing his healing function throughout the text and showcasing the terminal trajectory of affective possession that will destroy Nora in the novel’s final chapter.

While the Doctor’s collapse reveals the concatenation of affective dumping from Robin to Nora, and from Nora to the Doctor, it is within “The Possessed” that this affective dumping takes its most self-reflexive, and consequently threatening, turn. Re-enacting the dream sequence within which Robin and Nora are buried together and reinvoking Nora’s previous collapse as spillway, the episode suggests that the affective binding between Nora and Robin, based in desire, mastery, and fantasies of self-coherence, effectively leads to their figurative, if not literal, burial. Burial, or death itself, is first invoked by the chapter’s description of Robin, who has drifted further towards deathlike anonymity that ever before. She returns to New York “distracted,” “as if the motive power which had directed {her} life, her day as well as her night, had been crippled” (176). Her agency reduced from its already nearly non-existent state, Robin’s identity is likewise in danger of dissolution, as we are told that “in her speech and in her gestures there was a desperate anonymity” (177). Epitomizing the girls who “turn the day into night” and emanate “something dark and muted,” Robin here begins to have the “unrecorded look” the
Doctor associates with lesbian love and “the continual blows of an unseen adversary,” or the affective dent of desire (101). Receding into the night world, the ominous vacancy within Robin at this point in the narrative and her turn from Jenny and towards Nora indicate a shift in affective attachment that associates desire with death more strongly than ever. For, already associated with death throughout the text, as Robin kneels in church within the final pages, she is thinking of it, “fixed in an unthinking stop as one who hears of death suddenly; death that cannot form until the shocked tongue has given its permission” (177).

That this death will figuratively be Nora’s is indicated first and foremost by the setting of the final chapter. Ensconcing herself within Nora’s chapel, Robin has set the scene for burial: “On a contrived altar, before a Madonna, two candles were burning” (178). It is crucial to note that Nora has associated herself with Robin’s Madonna in her confessions to Dr. O’Connor in the preceding chapter. As she wanders Naples in search of Robin, Nora sees that “in open door-ways night-lights were burning all day before gaudy prints of the Virgin” and finds one room in which this scene is paired with a young girl: “Looking from her to the Madonna behind the candles, I knew that the image, to her, was what I had been to Robin, not a saint at all, but a fixed dismay, the space between the human and the holy head, the arena of the ‘indecent’ eternal” (167).

Likewise important are Nora’s statements, “At that moment I stood in the centre of eroticism and death,” and “I knew in that bed Robin should have put me down. In that bed we would have forgotten our lives in the extremity of memory, moulted our parts, as figures in the waxworks are moulted down to their story, so we would have broken down to our love” (167). Here, not only does Nora conflate desire with death once again, but she makes the strikingly ominous claim that Robin should have “put me down.” That death is connected with a return to the core of desire, or love, and likewise the essential core of narrative, or story, itself, establishes death’s redeeming
properties. However, death is no longer within Nora’s power, but now lies in the hands of Robin, thus invalidating any claims that “the eternal” can be used to bolster Nora’s agency or identity.

Though the vast majority of critical responses to the text turn their primary attention to interpreting Robin’s fate in the final pages, the text’s investment in affect and both corporeal and psychic permeability makes it impossible to read Robin’s fate in the absence of Nora’s. For, the text’s heightened self-reflexivity, as noted in the return of the Madonna, only escalates further in this last chapter, and prevents any one character’s fate from being isolated from another’s. Serving as a coda for the entire novel, the chapter’s meaning is highly dependent on the reader’s (re)interpretation of familiar figures, and as Joseph Frank notes, is “not knit together by action or thinking, but by reference and cross reference of images and symbols which must be referenced to each other spatially throughout the time-act of reading” (439). While the figure of the dog and Robin’s affect-less grin both make their reappearance, “The Possessed” also adds a layer of its own reflexivity within its few short pages as Robin’s movements become increasingly circular and her expressions mirror the animal world around her. She “circle{s} closer and closer” to Nora’s decaying chapel (177), and as she does so, mimics the behavior of animals she finds in the woods. We are told that “those that came near, she grasped, straining their fur back until their eyes were narrowed and their teeth bare, her own teeth showing as if her hand were upon her own neck” (177). Here, as subject and object blur through affective transmission, the differences between Nora and Robin begin to blur as well. The bark of Nora’s dog, which Caselli reads as the text’s figure for “inhuman affect” (180), brings Robin “up, rigid and still” while “half an acre away Nora, sitting by a kerosene lamp, raised her head” (178). Their final moments mediated by the dog – the figure for affect both Nora and the Doctor align with Nora and Robin’s relationship throughout the text – both women seem corporeally and psychically connected in these last
crucial moments. For, as Nora leaves her house to investigate the dog’s strange behavior, she enters the night “well advanced” with which Robin is so aligned. Seeing that a light shines in the chapel, and surmising that Robin is within, she is immediately flooded with feeling, beginning to run, “cursing and crying” until “blindly, without warning, {she} plunge{s} into the jamb of the chapel door” (178). Yet, felled within this funereal context, Nora directly affects Robin’s subsequent action: “at the moment Nora’s body struck the wood, Robin began going down. Sliding down she went; down” (179).

The repeated action of “sliding down” recalls Julie’s attempt to bow down low enough to the floor in penance in “Spillway.” However, here neither character is released by the other because their affective overflow results in the draining away of consciousness in both – in a doubled figural death. At this point, Robin begins her famous play with the dog, moving forward as it moves back, delighting in its “quivering,” its “terror,” and its “agony,” as she whimpers along with it (179). As she repeatedly strikes the side of the dog, barks at him, and crawls after him, essentially inciting him into a frenzy “of misery,” she enters the deathlike anonymity and release from affect she is in search of throughout the text. The fact that she, as well as Nora, has become overwhelmed is revealed in this play wherein Robin is “grinning and whimpering” while the dog simply whimpers, and is “grinning and crying with him” while the dog merely cries (179-180, emphases mine). Returning to the affect-less grin, not smile, associated with her striking of Felix, Robin seems to use the dog as an affective spillway, or mode of relief, at the end of the narrative, attempting some form of recovery after Nora’s threatening fall.

Yet, Robin nonetheless ends the novel affectively overcome, or “weeping” as Nora weeps, just before the moment when she collapses, as Nora collapsed, on the floor. Depicted as “lying out, her hands beside her, her face turned and weeping” (180), she is caught in her own
affective spillway, thus suffering Nora’s Flood, or the affective inundation that is her namesake throughout the text. Overcome, yet perversely at rest, by the end of the narrative, she is unable to escape the affective binds that tie her to others, and echoing the Doctor’s earlier description, becomes the girl that “lies upon the floor, face down, with that terrible longing of the body that would, in misery, be flat with the floor; lost lower than burial, utterly blotted out and erased so that no stain of her could ache upon the wood, or snatched back to nothing without aim – going backward through the target, taking with her the spot where she made one—” (101). The desire to be buried, “utterly blotted out,” “erased,” and “snatched back to nothing” evokes suicidal ideation as an answer to excessive affect, and the “going backward through the target, taking with her the spot where she made one” specifically echoes the self-oblation that Nora evinces as she attempts to gain control over Robin in her dreams. Ultimately, this circularity and these figural slips reveal that in attempting to possess the beloved, not only Nora, but Robin, has become “the possessed,” refracting the volatile affects of desire until both women are overcome by the blood spill which leads to their own figural, and involuntary, self-oblation.

Significantly, this final act of “possession” seamlessly evokes modernist suicidology. In fact, it is difficult to see how Barnes’ “coda” and her use of spillways could lie any closer to an explication of the suicidal impulse, as stated by Dr. Henry Maudsley in Responsibility and Mental Disease. In Maudsley’s description of suicide’s “affective insanity,” which causes one to be “infected” by “excited feelings” (172), he aligns the suicidal impulse itself with exactly the same type of possession which Nora, and eventually Robin, suffers:

It is a fact that in a certain state of mental disease a morbid impulse may take such despotic possession of the patient as to drive him, in spite of reason and against his will,

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106 Caselli notes Donne’s sermon on the death queen as the root of Nora’s name: “in her death we {are} all under one common flood, and depth of tears.” The passage is underscored and marked in the margin of Barnes’ copy (161).
to a desperate act of suicide or homicide; like the demoniac of old into whom the unclean spirit entered, he is *possessed* by a power which forces him to a deed of which he has the utmost dread and horror. (133, emphasis mine)

This interchangeability of suicide and homicide within the “morbid impulse” speaks to the suicidal and homicidal urges bound up in Nora’s desire for Robin throughout the text, and the reference to the “demoniac” or “unclean spirit” is particularly apt given the chapel’s morbidly spiritual cast. Although any definitive description of Nora’s state (or fate) remains absent from the final passages of the novel, it is difficult to read her as conscious given the text’s repetition of earlier death dreams, the obvious burial setting, and the novel’s continuous struggle to master affect through death. It is likewise difficult to understand why Robin’s final death pose has been so often ignored, especially given the Doctor’s famous pronouncement that “Nora will leave that girl some day; but though those two are buried at opposite ends of the earth, one dog will find them both” (113). Figuratively buried by overwhelming desire, Nora has been felled by affective projection and Robin by the inescapability of affect itself, both girls lying in a death-like faint on the floor in *Nightwood*’s chilling final scene.

**VI. Coda: Guido as Western Identity’s “only survivor”**

Given the debilitating deluge of affective spillways throughout the novel and their power to leave Felix in “mental trouble” (117-118), Jenny in “hysteric[s]” (177), the Doctor in an alcohol-/affect-induced breakdown, and Nora in a faint, we can see that Barnes’ most famous text fundamentally posits the individual as porous, affected and affecting, likely to be drowned in the contagious psychic and bodily states of others. The self as both completely coherent and

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107 Though Dianne Chisholm is certainly right to point out that we can’t *know* how Nora experiences this scene, or whether she remains conscious, most critics (one notable exception being Jane Marcus) tend to read Nora as unconscious in the novel’s final moments.

108 Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*, 68
contained is threatened through the figures of Felix, Jenny, and the Doctor; however, it is through Nora that we see the complete collapse of the notions undergirding Western identity. For, “she was known instantly as a Westerner,” and at her salons, “one felt that American history was being re-enacted”: “The Drummer Boy, Fort Sumter, Lincoln, Booth, all somehow came to mind; Whigs and Tories were in the air; bunting and its stripes and stars, the swarm increasingly slowly and accurately on the hive of blue; Boston tea tragedies, carbines, and the sound of a boy’s wild calling; Puritan feet, long upright in the grave” (56). Though all the characters are aligned with the West through their identification as the “détraqués” of famous European cities (57), Nora’s status as a Westerner, and specifically as an American, is highly overdetermined. Consequently, her collapse in the final chapter can be read as the collapse of Western identity itself, and the text’s strongest indication that affect – its threat to identity and agency and its unavoidable drive towards self-destruction – forms the heart of the text, or the kernel of profound anxiety that has long made this text so disturbing for its readers. Dianne Chisholm claims that “Nightwood unleashes feelings that are so incommensurable (“obscene and touching”) that they test the limit of rational perception. It is between narrator and reader, not between characters, that this riot of sensibility is communicated” (186). Though Chisholm overlooks the communicability of affect at the textual level, she correctly identifies the disturbing effects of the novel, which Barnes described in a letter to Emily Coleman in October of 1935, before the novel’s publication: “It may serve in time, in years to come…but now, because it is such a new kind of writing, it makes the reader crazy. I have seen people suffer headache and nose bleed over that book, Muffin for one, become tired, collapse, sleep. An overdose – and so a poison” (Plumb “Revising” 158). Here, Barnes moves beyond the affect of the textual world to summarize the affective reactions the book produces in its audience, from headache, to nosebleed, exhaustion,
and a collapse into unconsciousness, while also reading these responses as representative of the novel’s own suicidal gesture – the self-administered overdose signaling a desire for death. If this desire not only fells the characters, but those in the extra-textual world as well, it is perhaps no wonder that Nightwood’s bleak conclusion leaves no character standing.

That is, except for Guido. In Nora’s first dream, Robin is depicted as having the smile of an “only survivor” (68). Yet, given Robin’s final pose and her inundation by affect, her status as “survivor” seems relatively tenuous. That ascription, I argue, is better left to Guido, who, though certainly doomed by his alignment with Robin and her affective projection, remains unharmed at the end of the novel. Guido, who “is very like her {Robin}” (125), is also aligned with a “malady” from the outset, figured as excessively affective, as a disease, and as a death-like entity throughout the text. The Doctor claims that he is “born to holy decay. Mentally deficient and emotionally excessive, an addict to death” (114), that “the excess of his sensibilities may preclude his mind,” and that “his sanity is an unknown room” (128). Guido’s excess is repeatedly linked to affect, figured through “emotion” or “sensibility”; yet, affect’s earlier correspondent – the heart – also appears when Felix explains that Guido, the prototypical “modern child” is, like his father, “adhering to life now with our last muscle – the heart” (43). Prone to an excess that is based in the body and psyche both, Guido is accordingly associated with Robin’s affective contagion and death. He experiences her lack of volition from his very birth: “The child was small, a boy, and sad. It slept too much in a quivering palsy of nerves; it made few voluntary movements; it whimpered” (52). And as he ages, he too, is an “infected carrier of the past,” yearning towards death and going on the same “errand on which the Baronin is going” (130). For, according to the Doctor, he is “that sick lamenting, fevered child” for whom “death in the winter is a tonic” and whose “sole provision for old age is hope of an early death”
(134). Therefore, as the being whose birth transforms Robin into “a catastrophe that had yet no beginning” (53), and induces her use of affective spillways, Guido serves as the catalyst for affective contagion and as its crucial origin point. Yet, compared to the “Mad King of Bavaria” by the Doctor in the final moments before his fall (“Felix said to me, ‘Is the child infirm?’ I said, ‘Was the Mad King of Bavaria infirm?’” [171-72]), even Guido, the “survivor,” reveals that desire’s generation and the very futurity of the Western subject is inextricably tied to an infirmity that manifests itself as a propensity for self-destruction.

Thus, by examining desire, affect, and death throughout Barnes’ oeuvre, we can see that the self-destructive impulses embodied in the characters of Nightwood are attempts at isolation, self-containment, and self-control in response to overwhelming affect brought on by desire’s “dents” in the subject. That the final manuscript merges this suicidal logic with the threat of suicidal possession at the novel’s end not only reveals the text’s shift from depicting suicidal ideation as an escape from overwhelming affective transmission to a completely involuntary and inescapable inundation by affect, but also from suicide as productive to inherently, and inarguably, destructive. The Doctor states, “every man dies finally of that poison known as the-heart-in-the-mouth” and that “the eater of it will get a taste for you; in the end his muzzle will be heard barking among your ribs” (148). Gesturing to the predatory nature of desire in a novel where each character is fundamentally “poisoned” by affect, or by their ingestion of another’s bestial “heart,” the Doctor overtly summarizes what Barnes’ text seems to suggest – that desire and its attendant affects not only constitute the Western subject’s most aggressive disease, but also, its fatal, and inescapable collapse.
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