

The Fisher King's Wound

When we speak of castration we generally refer to one of three things: the destruction of the male sex organs involving the removal of the testicles and/or the penis; the inability to deliver semen either because of impotence or chemical castration; or the disjuncture between the physical body and that body's own perceptions of agency, which is often referred to metaphorically as psychological castration. These particular views of emasculation and its impacts are a fairly recent development. In 1786 Richard Payne Knight, a respectable member of Parliament and the son of a Herefordshire vicar, scandalized London society with the publication of *A Discourse on the Worship of Priapus: and Its Connection with the Mystic Theology of the Ancients*, an investigation of early phallic cults. Although Payne Knight's work partially predicts the methodologies of comparative anthropology advanced a century later by J.G. Frazer, the lavishly illustrated book's reconsideration of the divine implications of the phallus in Roman, Greek, Egyptian, and Indian ceremonial and mystical traditions, led to accusations of libertinism and immoral decadence. Payne Knight writes at the beginning of *The Worship of Priapus*:

Men, considered collectively, are at all times the same animals, employing the same organs, and endowed with the same faculties: their passions, prejudices, and conceptions, will of course be formed upon the same internal principles, although directed to various ends, and modified in various ways, by the variety of external circumstances operating upon them. Education and science may correct, restrain, and extend; but neither can annihilate or

create: they may turn and embellish the currents; but can neither stop nor enlarge the springs, which, continuing to flow with a perpetual and equal tide, return to their ancient channels, when the causes that perverted them are withdrawn.¹

Although ostensibly a comment on the synthesis of all human experience, the priapic suggestiveness in these opening lines is difficult to ignore. The recurrent fascination in Payne Knight's language with images of *flowing currents*, of *extensions*, *passions*, and *conceptions* conjures curiously the penis's connection to both urine and semen. By the final sentence, this current of fluids can scarcely be held back, unleashing finally in a seminal overflow suggestive of the phallus as an emblem of visionary creativity. Joscelyn Godwin suggests that the upset surrounding *The Worship of Priapus* aligns Payne Knight with 'the more famous infidels of his century, such as Voltaire and Edward Gibbon, in turning the tables on the Christians, who had changed a teaching of love into one of the most oppressive institutions the world had ever known'.² It wasn't masturbation, in its ironical twin pretexts of 'self-love' and 'self-abuse', that was most disturbing among the eighteenth-century beau monde, but the veneration of the generative powers of the phallus. As Thomas Laqueur describes in *Solitary Sex*: 'Modern masturbation can be dated with a precision rare in cultural history. It was born in, or very close to, the same year as that wild and woolly and profoundly self-conscious exemplar of "our" kind of human, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. [...] It is a creature of the Enlightenment'.³

Sometime between 1708 and 1716—"in or around 1712"—the then-anonymous author of a short tract with a long title not only named but actually invented a new disease and a new highly specific, thoroughly modern, and nearly universal engine for generating guilt, shame, and anxiety.⁴

That masturbation is, for Laqueur, validated and named by the history of Rousseau, Swift, and Defoe (those authors who came at the beginning of 'authorship') draws a striking point of comparison between authorship and celebration of the phallus, a connection which would underscore key narratological developments during the interwar period and would be necessarily undercut by feminist critical theory in the second half of the twentieth century.

Contemporary scholarship supports Payne Knight's view that early cultures possessed basic understanding of the sexual functions of humans and a belief that men and women played distinctive reproductive roles that could be diminished or amplified through fertility rituals. Among the most prevalent of the Western fertility cults was that of Attis. Priests of Attis would ritualistically castrate themselves in an ecstatic frenzy of music and dance on the *Dies sanguinis* ('Day of Blood') in what Piotr O. Scholz describes as an 'expiatory sacrifice' in which 'pain and suffering [was used] to free themselves from sensual lust in the hope of overcoming the materialism of life and saving their soul'.⁵ When the cult of Cybele and her consort Attis reached Rome in the early second century BCE, the practice flourished and the earlier Phrygian legends were syncretized with the foundation myths of Rome, transforming Cybele into a state deity elevated to the title of *Mater Magna*, the great mother.⁶

While early Christianity notionally condemned the practice of castration, the devotional model of sexual self-sacrifice reappeared regularly in the form of celibacy, with gnostic sects also occasionally returning to the ideal, if not the practice, of emasculation as a pathway to enlightenment and embodied divinity. As Scholz suggests of the Buddha, Akhenaten, and Jesus, 'each of them is frequently depicted as sexless so as to emphasize the idea of the timeless within time, wedged between this life and the one that lies beyond death, while at the same time pointing to paradisiacal life after death in which earthly desires are non-existent'.⁷ But castration played other roles within the Christian church as well. After the church had officially forbidden woman singers, the production and training of castrati became a lucrative business, with the potentially lethal operation undertaken on boys between the age of 8 and 12 by parents or masters willing to take the risk for the potential of great fame and wealth at the Papal court. It was a persistent tradition and the last surviving castrato of the Italian Classical tradition, Alessandro Moreschi, died in 1922.

Gary Taylor argues in *Castration: An Abbreviated History of Western Manhood* that 'in the world before Freud, castration could produce a powerful voice, a powerful general, a powerful intimate of women and emperors, a powerful spirituality. The eunuch could only serve the purposes for which he was created by being in some way powerful'.⁸ While there are historical examples of emasculation as a desirable, even sought after condition that could lead to fame, wealth, and security, castration was also used as a form of punishment as early as the Code of

Hammurabi. This was particularly the case during times of war when the castration of a defeated enemy could mean not simply a form of punishment but a guarantee that combatant bloodlines would not be continued in captivity. Castration was a way to “produce” lucrative “products”, products that were in great demand as guardians of sanctuaries, attendants at the courts of various rulers, and keepers of harems.⁹ Eunuchs could become high-ranking court officials, who, through no longer being able to take a new bloodline to the throne, were allowed duties and powers as appropriate with their own noble—but not royal—parentage. The practice famously flourished in the royal courts of East Asia and the Middle East, and, indeed, continued well into the modern period.

Biological, sociological, and psychological understandings of emasculation before the twentieth century were thus widely diverse. Castration could be both a punishment and a prize. It could be a way to ensure wealth and security or to condemn a prisoner to reproductive oblivion or death. It could be, as the cult of Attis suggests, a ritual of both self-love and self-abuse. Working in a distinctly apophatic vein, Taylor defines masculinity through its negative: what masculinity is not and what masculinity is when it becomes deprived of its most vital symbols:

the eunuch, the castrated male, has always been understood in opposition to the uncastrated male. But at the same time, the anomaly of the eunuch shadows and challenges the sexual norms of manhood. The eunuch circles the unsaturated man like a scarred satellite, eternally exiled and intimately distant, its faithful circuit illuminating and enabling us to locate that center of gravity outside itself.¹⁰

It was only with Sigmund Freud that these various concerns began to fuse into our contemporary understanding of the relationship between sexual organs and psychosexualities. Taylor offers extensive evidence that it was only in the modern period, and particularly following Freud, that the penis and testicles were understood as a singular unit of manhood. Earlier cultures more closely connected to rural life and animal husbandry were well aware that the removal of the testicles was a routine operation which had the effect of sterilizing and taming the animal, but that the removal of the penis was a much more dangerous form of torture or punishment which almost inevitably led to death.¹¹

Freud’s writing on castration anxiety and its affects represents a collection of views that circulated widely during the interwar years, and would

have been familiar to many of the Anglo-American writers of the period. In its initial form as introduced in 'The Sexual Theories of Children' from 1908, the castration complex refers to two distinct moments of epiphany during the phallic stage (ages 3–6): (1) boys will come by knowledge that girls do not have a penis, which leads to the juvenile theory that the girl has been castrated (or, for girls, a related assumption that they have *already* been castrated), and (2) the fear that his own penis might similarly be removed leads the boy to search for the most likely culprit in this phantom castration—his own father. The first stage represents a new awareness of the child's own body and the second an inaccurate conjecture at the role the penis plays in human activity. Taylor underlines the resounding influence of this particular line of reasoning:

Every significant psychoanalyst of the twentieth century, orthodox or heretical, has repeated, developed, or reinterpreted Freud's theory of castration. In America at the beginning of the twenty-first century, millions of people who have never read a word of Freud know something about the psychoanalytic emphasis on castration.¹²

The field of psychoanalysis would never be able to get fully away from the influence of Freud's theory of castration anxiety; however, later theorists undertook some substantial revisions. In Seminar IV, Lacan expands Freud's two-stage theory of castration anxiety into three aspects: (1) the child's desire to become a replacement phallus for his (presumably castrated) mother, (2) a sense of prohibition from the symbolic Name-of-the-Father at becoming the replacement phallus, and (3) the decisive moment when the father demonstrates his own certain possession of the phallus. As M. Keith Booker points out, 'especially within the framework of Lacanian psychoanalysis, castration functions as an image of loss, of the void that is at the heart of human existence'.¹³ Lacan's preference of the term 'phallus' over 'penis' gestures towards a distinctive treatment of the phallus as symbolic of male psychosexuality and anatomical distinction between the sexes. The phallus, or erect penis, has represented to numerous civilizations the root of inspiration and creative power, and, as such, the source of natural fertility, a symbolism still maintained as a part of spiritual practices in some regions of South Asia.¹⁴ Lacan's view of the castration complex is dependent upon symbolic object loss, a theme which is, as the next chapter will show, unmistakable in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) but curiously not given the attention by

Freud that it deserves in this context. Perhaps the most striking aspect of these historical and psychoanalytic views of castration is the lack of any reference to the Arthurian legend of the Fisher King and his emasculating wound, a story almost perfectly poised to embody the universal, transhistorical features of psychosexual development, and one perfectly in tune with the symbolic mythographical foundation of Freudian psychoanalysis.

A body of Arthurian romances written in France and Germany from roughly 1190 to 1240 speak of a Fisher King who suffered an incapacitating wound to the groin that never healed and which led to the ruin and desolation of his kingdom. Kept alive in his enchanted castle where a collection of magical objects suspended time, the king survived but his wound never healed. In some versions of the story, the wounded king finds comfort in fishing, a trope that Hemingway would pick up over 700 years later in his portrayal of the emasculated Jake Barnes in *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) who similarly turns to fishing as a form of escape. A young knight called Perceval, Parzival, or Gawain comes upon the castle and is welcomed inside to a vast banquet, at the conclusion of which is a curious procession of objects including a lance that bleeds at the tip and, in various forms, a dish, cup, or tablet known as a grail. Trained in knightly virtue to speak little and to ask no questions, Perceval doesn't inquire into the role or function of these objects. When he awakes the next morning, the castle is deserted—the wounded king, his attendants, and the magical objects are nowhere to be found. A mysterious figure appears and chastises Perceval for not asking the king 'whom does the grail serve?' It is this mystically restorative question, he is informed, which could have healed the wounded king once and for all.

Although fragments of the story of the Fisher King's wound capture traces of earlier mythico-religious frameworks, Chrétien de Troyes's *The Story of the Grail* (c. 1180) is the earliest extant text to treat on the Grail romance in recognizable form. It is in *The Story of the Grail* that we first find a wounded king who, in Chrétien's words, 'was struck by a javelin through both his thighs; and he still suffers from it so much that he can't mount a horse'.¹⁵ But *The Story of the Grail* was left unfinished at Chrétien's death, leaving a fundamental mystery that he never had a chance to answer: what does the grail actually *do* and how might inquiring into the uses of the grail miraculously heal the emasculated king? Later writers had various explanations. Robert de Boron's *Joseph of Arimathea* (c. 1200) draws upon the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus

to portray Joseph of Arimathea receiving the goblet used in the Last Supper and journeying to England, before rejoining Chrétien's timeline in his companion work, *Merlin*. Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* (c. 1200–1210) also adapts Chrétien's earlier unfinished material and would later become the source of Richard Wagner's *Parsifal* (1882). There are, furthermore, two anonymous texts that develop these themes further: the *Lancelot-Grail* cycle (c. 1210–1215) and *Perlesvaus* (c. 1210). In each of these recounts of the Fisher King legend there is a clear indication that the knight errant could be converted to virtue through inquiring about the status of the king. If only the young knight had asked this healing question—'whom does the grail serve?'—the king would have been restored to health and the lands grown fertile again. Perceval's failure stems from both a lack of individuated empathy and an inability to claim his own independence from the tutelage of his masters.¹⁶

While the king's wound is not specifically defined as castration and in some accounts is located more figuratively in the thigh, the emphasis throughout these accounts is placed clearly on issues of reproduction, renewal, and the king's own involvement in the propagation of his people. In these early accounts the desolation of the land is most usually a literal rather than metaphysical effect of a king being unable to lead his knights in the defence of the realm. The Grail legends have long been a source of creative inspiration for writers and artists, with particularly exuberant accounts reaching greatest prominence with the medieval *trouvère* and in the art and poetry of the mid-nineteenth century, the so-called Arthurian Revival inspired by a reprinting of Thomas Malory's once-forgotten *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485) and the first translation of the *Mabinogion* published by Lady Charlotte Guest in 1838. However, the emasculated Fisher King and his enchanted castle rarely appeared in Victorian retellings of the Grail legends and would resurface only in the years immediately following World War I where it would give narrative point and sharpness to a shared public understanding of the psychological and, occasionally, physical unmanning created by the war.

The aftermath of the First World War demanded a search for a symbolic language to describe and reconcile trauma. Both Jay Winter and Dan Todman have questioned Paul Fussell's argument for a metonymic vision of shared trauma in his classic 1975 work *The Great War and Modern Memory*.¹⁷ Where Fussell's revision of the heroic mythoi of the Great War now feels most short-sighted is in its claim that the war was a conflict both devised and perceived in mythical terms which

aligned markedly well with British literary sensibility. While Fussell summons Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) as the hero-quest chronicle to best explicate the First World War, there seems to be wider literary evidence that other grand narratives were at play on the minds of civilians and soldiers alike as Britain drew itself in close and tended to the aftermaths of the horrors of mechanized warfare. War historian Kenneth Payne says that 'to display courage amid the carnage of the Western Front, with such grim odds, was to surrender oneself to fate and to go over the top. If anything the hero was someone who was prepared to return from leave, or from the sick bed, without deserting, in sound mind and ready to face the enemy artillery, machine-guns and wire again'.¹⁸ The images of emasculation and trauma in interwar literature have clear roots in the trenches, but this writing not only acts out the trauma induced by the First World War, but also demonstrates the recapitulation of spiritual wounds that haunt us all. Trudi Tate proposes that 'the wounded soldier is a visual reminder of the war. His body carries a complex of meanings back into civilian society':

He was a paradox: as a soldier, he represented a powerful social ideal of manhood, yet the act of soldiering had damaged the bodily basis of masculinity, leaving him scarred, mutilated, paralysed, or blinded. But he was not necessarily a "feminised" figure—often quite the opposite. Subjectivity and its relation to physical difference are much more complex than this, as the war writings repeatedly demonstrate.¹⁹

Significant, of course, is the role of symbolic modelling in all of these concerns. Indeed, the language of trauma—especially the traumatic remembrance of the First World War—is tied up in symbols and metaphors. Winter contends that 'the enduring appeal of many traditional motifs—defined as an eclectic set of classical, romantic, or religious images and ideas—is directly related to the universality of bereavement in the Europe of the Great War and its aftermath'.²⁰ The gruesome sight of the walking wounded and, in particular, 'the absent parts of men's bodies' came to, as Joanna Bourke suggests, 'exert a special patriotic power'.²¹

Carl Jung occasionally settled on the Grail mythos as a means by which to identify and describe the developmental patterns of humanity. His wife Emma Jung, an eminent psychiatrist and early developer of psychoanalysis, took particular interest in the psychoanalytic implications of

the Grail and produced, along with Marie-Louise von Franz, *The Grail Legend*. In this work, Jung and von Franz argue that

the grail legend is an especially stimulating subject for psychological consideration because it contains so many features that are also to be found in myths and fairy-tales. Moreover, it has lost far less of its fascination for contemporary men and women than have the latter, which may indicate that it still embodies a living myth.²²

This psychoanalytic interest in the Grail legend has led contemporary Jungian psychoanalysts including Eugene Monick and Robert A. Johnson to return to the Fisher King motif in their explorations of contemporary male psychosexualities. As Johnson argues, the story of the Fisher King's wound is about our 'wounded feeling function, probably the most common and painful wound which occurs in our Western world'.²³ And as Monick contends: 'To move from cutting to being cut off from, to chastity, to emptiness and the quality of voidness connects one with the psychological importance of castration for men. Castration as a metaphor refers to a man's deepest fear that his manhood might be lost or seriously compromised'.²⁴ Johnson acknowledges that 'much of modern literature revolves around the lostness and alienation of the hero. Moreover, we can see this alienation in the countenance of almost everyone we pass in the street—the Fisher King wound is the hallmark of the modern man'.²⁵ The ornate mystical views of Jung and his followers—views which continue to persist in many contemporary applications of depth psychology—have led one tradition of psychoanalysis to portray castration in a very different form to Freud, Kristeva, and Lacan: as an esoteric parable of ancient cycles of fertility, growth, and renewal dismantled by the First World War.

The legend of the Fisher King and his wound received notional attention in Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890–1915), but was only returned to prominence later in Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* (1920), a work of comparative mythology steeped in Theosophical philosophy and the universalist views towards faith-based ritual held by H.P. Blavatsky and G.R.S. Mead. Founded in 1875, the Theosophical Society rose to prominence in America in the wake of mesmerism and spiritualism before spreading quickly to Western Europe and India where its westernized forms of Hindu and Buddhist spirituality were welcomed and ultimately played a small yet significant role in the push towards

Home Rule. Theosophy offered a coherent pattern of knowledge which could be integrated easily into earlier occult movements, and, crucial to its widespread appeal, was open to men and women of all classes. Although the late-Victorian occult revival seemed to many to have fallen into obsolescence by the turn of the twentieth century, war reinvigorated these persistent interests. Modernist writers unconnected to Theosophy would have nevertheless been familiar with its basic premises and few, it seems, could avoid at least a discreet poke at Blavatsky's philosophies, as James Joyce did fairly often in his fiction.

It is a truism that modernist literature returned to mythological foundations for structure, character, and narrative arc, and—owing to the conspicuous absence of the Fisher King's wound motif in the nineteenth-century Arthurian Revival—it seems that the twentieth-century interest in the Fisher King legend is traceable to *From Ritual to Romance*. Almost immediately upon its publication in 1920, *From Ritual to Romance* led a diverse array of writers to the curious legend of an emasculated king as a means by which to describe and reconcile the traumatic aftershocks of the First World War. Leon Surette, one of few critics to recognize the occult origins of Weston's work, points out that 'scholarly ignorance of theosophy and the occult has led Eliot scholars and folklorists to accept *From Ritual to Romance* as a standard folkloric study belonging to the Frazer school'.²⁶ Weston's influential and yet ultimately untenable argument syncretizes Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, and Classical mythography to argue that the legend of the Grail and its key symbols (namely the Fisher King, the knight errant, the Grail castle, the chalice, the bleeding lance, the healing question) register the remains of an ancient fertility ritual of regicide, perhaps originating in India during the Vedic period. 'In this fascinating literature', Weston writes,

we have the, sometimes partially understood, sometimes wholly misinterpreted, record of a ritual, originally presumed to exercise a life-giving potency, which, at one time of universal observance, has, even in its decay, shown itself possessed of elements of the most persistent vitality.²⁷

While Weston's argument regarding the origins of the Fisher King mythos is ultimately flawed, it was an argument that proved to be hugely influential to the modernists largely because it gave much needed form to the growing awareness of wounded masculinity, alienation, and dis-sentiment. Weston's desire to articulate a *prisca theologia* (a unifying

current of esoteric knowledge joining all faith systems, a theme exemplified in both the title and the sentiment of Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine* [1888]) partially echoes but also refutes Frazer's central thesis in *The Golden Bough*. Frazer's chief contribution to early anthropology is the demonstration that myths arise to explain and bring coherence to inherited rituals, rather than what had been viewed as a logical sequence of communal myths naturally evolving into rituals to satiate the gods. It is an almost counter-syncretic view, in that the pentimenti of deities and myths that reveal the origins and subsequent developments of any culture are viewed not as the successive development and fusion of competing worldviews and mythographies, but as ways to rationalize the rituals brought by new settlers. In extending this argument, Weston imagined herself to be resolving a significant debate among Grail scholars, between those who believed the legend of the Fisher King had a Christian origin in the progression of Joseph of Arimathea from the Holy Land following the Crucifixion (an explanation reliant principally on Robert de Boron's *Joseph of Arimathea* and its followers) and those who maintained that the legend had a purely Celtic basis (a view that gained full force with the translation of the *Mabinogion* in 1838–1845 and which would remain in currency as late as 1963 with R.S. Loomis's *The Grail*). As Frazer magisterially outlines in *The Golden Bough*, kings since antiquity have been viewed as divine priests or gods incarnate with the ability to heal, transfigure, fertilize, or any of the other major miracles. That the Fisher King's kingdom is barren thus suggests that it is the godly power of fertility that has been destroyed and that his penis symbolically fertilized his entire kingdom. In *The Holy Grail*, Richard Barber describes the traditional Grail cycle as theologically conservative in nature—the training in virtue, courtly love, and the appropriate forms of worship of Christ serve as the central moral core from Chrétien onwards. Weston's principal intervention in the development of the Grail mythos, then, was her emphasis on the land laid to waste outside the Fisher King's castle, an emblem of lost fertility connected mystically to the emasculated king and the restorative power of the Divine Feminine as represented by the Grail.

In the preface to *From Ritual to Romance*, Weston acknowledges the influence of G.R.S. Mead, a prominent member of the Theosophical Society and Blavatsky's private secretary from 1889 until her death in 1891. Weston writes that Mead's

knowledge of the mysterious border-land between Christianity and Paganism, and willingness to place that knowledge at the disposal of others, I had, for some years past, had pleasant experience. Mr Mead referred me to his own translation and analysis of [the Naassene Document], and there, to my satisfaction, I found not only the final link that completed the chain of evolution from Pagan Mystery to Christian Ceremonial, but also proof of that wider significance I was beginning to apprehend.²⁸

Mead was offered the presidency of the Theosophical Society in 1907 following the death of Henry Steel Olcott, but following disagreements with leaders, formed a splinter group in 1909 known as the Quest Society, which aimed to move away from the tarnished reputation of the Theosophical Society following a series of widely publicized scandals and internal rifts.²⁹ It was the Quest Society with which both Weston and Ezra Pound found themselves involved, and it was Mead, as Demetres Tryphonopoulos argues, who had the biggest influence in Ezra Pound's engagement with esotericism and the occult.³⁰ Both Pound and Weston published work in the society's journal *The Quest: A Quarterly Review*, a publication which, along with articles from noted figures including A. E. Waite, W. B. Yeats, and Rabindranath Tagore, espoused Mead's belief that the ancient mystery cults of the near East had been maintained since antiquity and remained visible at various junctures of contemporary society, a belief which Pound would later reflect in *The Cantos* (1915–1962). It was in the pages of *The Quest* that Weston first began to outline her argument published in *From Ritual to Romance*. Early in *From Ritual to Romance*, Weston summarizes the key features of the various Fisher King legends:

- (a) There is a general consensus of evidence to the effect that the main object of the Quest is the restoration to health and vigour of a King suffering from infirmity caused by wounds, sickness, or old age;
- (b) and whose infirmity, for some mysterious and unexplained reason, reacts disastrously upon his kingdom, either depriving it of vegetation, or exposing it to the ravages of war.
- (c) In two cases it is definitely stated that the King will be restored to youthful vigour and beauty.

(d) In both cases where we find Gawain as the hero of the story, and in one connected with Perceval, the misfortune which has fallen upon the country is that of a prolonged drought, which has destroyed vegetation, and left the land Waste; the effect of the hero's question is to restore the waters to their channel, and render the land once more fertile.

(e) In three cases the misfortunes and wasting of the land are the result of war, and directly caused by the hero's failure to ask the question; we are not dealing with an antecedent condition. This, in my opinion, constitutes a marked difference between the two groups, which has not hitherto received the attention it deserves.³¹

Weston's interest here with the implications of 'antecedent condition' and causality is resonant. Her mythographical and literary historical reading finds traces of this legend in the *Mabinogion*, the earliest written records of Celtic oral traditions, syncretized by Christian writers during the twelfth century. It is here that King Brân the Blessed possesses a magical cauldron with the power to resurrect anyone put inside it. Brân's wound is in his foot rather than thigh or groin, but, like the 'swollen feet' of Oedipus, speaks to traumas of descent and lineage. Yeats believed, much like Weston, that the Grail legend grew from early Irish myth, and would develop this strand of thinking in his unpublished Celtic Mysteries ritual initiations, which emerged alongside the Celtic Revival heralded by George Sigerson's *Bards of the Gael and Gall* (1897), Douglas Hyde's *Love Songs of Connacht* (1893), and the translations of Lady Gregory.

But Weston's argument about the origins of the Fisher King and his wound has found little support among later Grail scholars. Barber argues in *The Holy Grail* that the potential echoes of earlier source material—most notably the Welsh romance *Peredur son of Eframw*—are symptomatic of Chrétien's reasonably functional awareness of literary convention at a time when originality was seen as questionable rather than a mark of genius. As Surette points out, Weston's methodological indebtedness to *The Golden Bough* has led her work to be read since its initial publication as a fairly standard work of academic anthropology in spite of its clear relationship to occultist views on pagan mythography.³² But in spite of what Surette describes as the 'goofiness' of the central thesis of *From Ritual to Romance*, Weston's work shows, in many ways, an accomplished capacity for the development of theme and symbol

across diverse historical and literary documents. It might be best viewed as—to borrow Alex Owen’s description of Blavatsky’s *Isis Unveiled* (1877)—‘an unruly amalgam of Western occultism, Buddhist and Hindu teaching’.³³ There seems to be little suggestion that Weston produced any of this in bad faith, as did Pierre Plantard, whose forgery of *Dossiers Secrets* instigated the Priory of Sion hoax, which would consume popular Grail scholarship during the final decades of the twentieth century. Barber concludes that *From Ritual to Romance* presents ‘an interpretation which has haunted twentieth-century literature to a degree quite disproportionate to its basis in fact’.³⁴ And the persistence of Weston’s claims is undoubtable.

While the modernist turn to the mythological perhaps goes some way towards explaining the recurrence of the Fisher King’s wound motif,³⁵ it doesn’t fully account for its insistent correlation with a narrative style predicated on absence, elision, and the *via negativa*. Nor does this most obvious correlation between style and substance inhere completely within the aesthetic and cultural figurations of the modernist decades. The primary concern here is the psychoanalytic interest in the Grail legend as a symbolic and deeply humane form that began to fuse with literary accounts of the Grail legend as a decisive cultural artefact to capture an array of suggestive tones in interwar writing. What these writers were thus drawing upon was not the Fisher King romances themselves, but upon Weston’s creative reimagining of the legends that drew greater than necessary attention to issues of sequence, causality, and precedence. To the extent that *From Ritual to Romance* elucidates a mystery cult—one which, as the subtext contends, persists to the present day although largely forgotten—it does indeed reflect the occultist beliefs surrounding the Theosophical Society and, later, the Quest Society. Owing to the conspicuous absence of the Fisher King motif in key works of the Arthurian Revival it seems that the twentieth-century interest in the Fisher King’s wound is dependent upon Weston’s esoteric arguments outlined in *From Ritual to Romance*. It thus wasn’t only Freud who would offer the Anglo-American modernists a way to rationalize and reconcile the emasculated male body between the wars, but it was also a widely misread 1920 work of Theosophical revisionist mythology. It is striking that, like Oedipus, the Fisher King had a curse placed on him and is left with an incurable wound as evidence, a description almost perfectly aligned with Freud’s developing notions of castration anxiety. The subsequent literary influence of Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance*, with

its own spiritual agendas influenced by Mead and the work of the Quest Society, reveals the extent to which mystical ways of knowing the visible, numinous, and historical worlds persisted well into the modernist period.

It was *From Ritual to Romance* that T.S. Eliot famously credited for suggesting 'the plan and a good deal of the incidental symbolism' of *The Waste Land* (1922), a poem that ponders the aftermath of the Fisher King's wound and the type of waste land that a debilitating wound can create in the masculine psyche, specifically the physical, psychological, and psychosexual wounds of World War I. There is little doubt that *From Ritual to Romance* was the key source in the modern return to the Fisher King legend; however, the relationship between Weston's revelation of ancient rituals of regicide in an ostensibly Christian mythography and the central themes of Eliot's poem remains uncertain. Leon Surette asserts that

Weston's book is a symptom of the spiritual decay that Eliot's poem—on any reading—evokes and bemoans. There is no reason to suppose that Eliot regarded it as a credible explanation of that decay. The very goofiness of Weston's thesis is, I think, an important point in the allusion.³⁶

While Surette's view that Eliot's footnoted reference to *From Ritual to Romance* is part of an ironizing game, many standard readings of *The Waste Land* are fairly consistent in accepting Weston as a reliable source. Cleanth Brooks's classic reading of the poem in *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (1939) is happy to take the influence of Weston's work for granted and the conclusions of *From Ritual to Romance* as authentic. Brooks sees *The Waste Land* turning to the legend of the Fisher King to build a contrast 'between two kinds of life and two kinds of death':

Life devoid of meaning is death; sacrifice, even the sacrificial death, may be life-giving, an awakening to life. The poem occupies itself to a great extent with this paradox, and with a number of variations upon it.³⁷

Echoing a categorically New Critical understanding of the construction and implication of authorship, Brooks reasserts significance of the 'plan' of *The Waste Land*, defining it as a providential move to finality, conclusion, and, even, redemption. However, F.O. Matthiessen and Hugh Kenner have suggested that the influences of *From Ritual to Romance*

were limited, and largely overstated in criticism surrounding the poem.³⁸ Eliot himself would write in 1961 that:

my notes stimulated the wrong kind of interest among the seekers of sources. It was just, no doubt, that I should pay my tribute to the work of Miss Jessie Weston; but I regret having sent so many enquirers off on a wild goose chase after Tarot cards and the Holy Grail.³⁹

Eliot's notes have led many to overestimate the literal correlation between precursor texts and their reconstituted appearances in *The Waste Land*. Just as *The Waste Land* moves through contemporary verse, ironic epithalamion, and heroic couplet, it ends with the detached tone of contemporary scholarship with Eliot's notes, a deeply ironic turn that has come to function as a part of the body of the poem itself. Eliot admitted that 'the poem was inconveniently short, so I set to work to expand the notes, with the result that they became the remarkable exposition of bogus scholarship that is still on view to-day'.⁴⁰ While much of this 'bogus scholarship' has been latterly validated by critical examinations of the poem, this holographic understanding of texts and of the relationship between texts differs principally from traditional Bakhtinian dialogism in its insistence on the fundamental interpenetration of discourse and visual culture in twentieth-century literature. Jo Ellen Green Kaiser joins in the view that although Eliot's notes for the poem offer few correct answers, their elusiveness and style have turned them into an essential paratext that legitimates the critical process undertaken in each approach to the poem. She advances the view that Eliot's notes 'deflect the cultural crisis represented in the poem onto the act of reading, suggesting that the disorder seemingly so evident in the poem is in fact the fault of the reader'.⁴¹ The notes are not, strictly speaking, an exercise in exegesis, nor can they provide an account of how the influences themselves are functioning, yet they do undoubtedly bespeak a mind trained to view allusion as a contagion that was caught in the past and then signifying some inherent meaning in the future.

Not only has the Theosophical substance of *From Ritual to Romance* and its relation to *The Waste Land* been left still largely unexplored, but the wider implications of the correlation drawn within the poem between rituals of mourning and a disconnection from the life force deserve more attention. Although scholars, including Lawrence Rainey, are of the mind that Eliot rapidly composed an initial draft of *The Waste Land*

during 1921 while travelling between London, Paris, and Lausanne,⁴² Eliot's biographer Lyndall Gordon has provided evidence that manuscript fragments suggest that Eliot began cursory work on the poem as early as 1914, and would continue writing it while studying at Harvard and Oxford and while living in London and Paris. Gordon's study of the drafts of the poem reveals the sporadic writing of sections—'a substantial hoard of private visions, fantasies, and ordeals'—and there is little doubt that an inception such as this must alter persistently held views of the relationship between history and allusion in the poem.⁴³ The question then is perhaps how one can attempt to date the inception of the poem: is it from the point that these 'visions, fantasies, and ordeals' begin to accumulate in Eliot's mind, or the moment at which he begins to effect a coherence which remains, in multiple ways, artificial? Surette makes the striking claim that

Eliot could not have failed to notice the occult nature of Weston's book, and that he submitted his long poem to Pound's scrutiny specifically because he knew Pound to have some competence in occult theories and beliefs.⁴⁴

While Eliot's connection to high-profile occultists such as Ezra Pound is undoubted and his portrayal of the tarot in *The Waste Land* is far more redolent of Masonic scholar A.E. Waite than of Jessie Weston, it seems that Eliot was taking something primarily different out of *From Ritual to Romance*: Weston's mythographical fascination with and glorification of regicide, a burden which Eliot saw as being taken on by every modern man. It seems unlikely that Eliot conceived of his poem as occult in nature, or, even, that Pound approached it in this way. Eliot's later religious conversion radically altered his spiritual perspective, but his early life in an eminent Unitarian family suggested to him the innate divinity of humanity and his substantial early reading in mysticism and comparative religion set him on a lifelong artistic course which sought to isolate and observe the spiritual narrative within the individual soul. While there is considerable evidence that Eliot overstated the influence of Weston in order to rationalize the unruly thematic shape of *The Waste Land*, the story of an incurable wound to masculine virility became especially poignant during the time at which soldiers were returning not only physically scarred by the devastation of mechanical warfare but psychologically unmanned by the effects of shell shock.

But beyond the clear influence on Eliot, beyond Hemingway's almost too-obvious recasting of Weston's Fisher King as Jake Barnes, beyond the plainly emasculated characters of D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) and William Faulkner's *Soldiers' Pay* (1926), *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), and *Light in August* (1932), and even beyond the knight errantry of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), George Moore's *Peronnik the Fool* (1926), and John Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961), the story grammar laid out in *From Ritual to Romance* appears widely throughout interwar writing, and sometimes very literally. As three additional examples—each published in the final year of the Second World War—we might consider Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), Christopher Isherwood's *The Berlin Stories* (1945), and Nancy Mitford's *The Pursuit of Love* (1945). With Charles Ryder, Christopher 'Issyvoo', and Fanny, one finds three knights errant who arrive at the Grail castle in the forms of Brideshead Castle, Fraulein Schroeder's boarding house, and Alconleigh. It is here that our narrating knights meet the wounded Fisher King they hope to heal—Sebastian Flyte, Sally Bowles, and Linda Radlett—each of whom will come to be connected to issues of fertility, reproduction, and rebirth through the decisive implications of syphilis, abortion, and miscarriage. The question that these knights errant could ask in order to heal this wound is perhaps, 'will you be mine?', but the novels don't allow for this healing, and the question remains unasked. While it is possible to view Sebastian Flyte and Sally Bowles as classic portrayals of the Fisher King, both *Brideshead Revisited* and *The Berlin Stories* curiously turn this usual formulation around and ultimately reveal the first-person narrators to be the wounded king who, himself, has set out on a quest for healing and redemption that will ultimately fail. In Waugh's and Mitford's novels we even find something of a mock fertility ritual involving jewelled tortoiseshell: in the former is the jewelled tortoise gifted to Julia Flyte for her *engagement* and in the latter are two pieces of tortoiseshell jewelry given as *wedding* presents to Linda Radlett.⁴⁵ What is missing from this chapter—and, indeed, from this book as a whole—are the more literal modernist treatments of the Grail quest such as Arthur Machen's *The Secret Glory* (1922), Mary Butts's *Armed with Madness* (1928), and Charles Williams's *War in Heaven* (1930). My intention is to not catalogue Arthurian influence in modernist writing nor do I intend to move further into mythological readings, yet one must also briefly acknowledge how widely the story grammar of the Fisher King legend is to be

found in interwar fiction. Rather, the focus of this developing argument is on the narratological implications of the Fisher King's wounded masculinity and the way in which incurable absence and elision would come to be one of modernism's most persistent techniques.

Modern literature regularly disturbed the flow of sequence and consequence—that is, the flow of cause and effect, or of story and plot—and in doing so gave presence to a mystical, intangible elision hovering just beyond the surface of the text. Fiction can never bear silence because in fiction silence is immobility and the challenges of representing duration in fiction have been well demonstrated. Henri Bergson explains in *Time and Free Will* (1889) that 'we find it extraordinarily difficult to think of duration in its original purity; this is due, no doubt, to the fact that we do not *endure* alone, external objects, it seems, *endure* as we do, and time, regarded from this point of view, has every appearance of a homogenous medium'.⁴⁶ The perception of duration is an abstraction too far for the human mind, and time can only be understood as a multiplicity of discrete events that are shaped into an imaginative simulation of sequence and consequence. In *Narrative Discourse*, Gérard Genette identifies the five key features of discourse of concern to narrative theorists—order, duration, frequency, mood, and voice—which together draw attention to 'the relationships between narrative and story, between narrative and narrating, and (to the extent that they are inscribed in the narrative discourse) between story and narrating'.⁴⁷ The significant correlation between 'sequence' and 'consequence'—two ways to reconcile the relationship between individual events across a duration—offers a way to understand the relationship between emasculation imagery, modernist masculinities, and the significant modernist developments in narrative form. E.M. Forster's famous remarks in *Aspects of the Novel* (1927) offer a useful illustration of the distinction between sequence and consequence: '*The king died, and then the queen died*, is a story, while *The king died, and then the queen died of grief*, is a plot'.⁴⁸ Echoing the Russian Formalist distinction between *fabula* and *syuzhet*, Forster suggests that a story is a natural *sequence* of lived experience while a plot concerns itself with the *consequences* that generated and shaped this experience (replace the word 'story' with 'sequence' and the word 'plot' with 'consequence' and Forster's meaning is largely maintained). Far more often than critics acknowledge, the organizational structure, not to mention the thematic underpinning, of fiction concerns itself with the sequence and consequence of biological reproduction. Forster's parable of the king and

queen is thus especially apt: has the king left issue before his untimely death like King Laertes or King Laius? Is the ultimately implied tragic outcome of Forster's plotline that the queen will be relegated through the ascendancy of a cadet line? The writers of Forster's own time had begun to lose considerable faith in causality and had begun to imagine the relationship between sequence and consequence—between story and plot—in stark new ways, breaking away from narrative forms that emulate the sequence and consequence of biological reproduction.

Classic understandings of plotting often fall into a three-, five-, or seven-act structure with patterns of peaks and troughs of action and attention which, when balanced effectively, create credible tension between the sine waves. Gustav Freytag's *Die Technik des Dramas* (1863) set out what is now the commonly accepted five-act structure of drama: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and denouement. Feminist critics including Susan Winnett, however, point out that these models of plot structure mirror the male sexual response cycle and are, to a certain extent, patriarchal in their very formulation.⁴⁹ 'Climax', from the Greek for 'ladder' and referring in narrative contexts to the highest point of tension in plot, is used both medically and colloquially to describe orgasm. In their influential 1966 work *Human Sexual Response*, William H. Masters and Virginia E. Johnson defined four phases of sexual response in humans: (1) excitement, (2) plateau, (3) orgasmic, and (4) resolution. Although both males and females follow these general four phases, each with attendant physiological changes, a primary distinction comes in the resolution phase in which males enter a refractory period leading to detumescence while females can enter into additional orgasmic phases. If narrative form has been traditionally conceived as correlated to male sexual response, then a feminist reconsideration can imagine narratives extending beyond their frames and achieving multiple climaxes or epiphanies separate to the immediacy of the textual surface.

As Rachel Blau DuPlessis argues, the 'contradiction between love and quest in plots dealing with women as a narrated group, acutely visible in nineteenth-century fiction, has one main mode of resolution: an ending in which one part of that contradiction, usually quest or *Bildung*, is set aside or repressed, whether by marriage or by death'.⁵⁰ Just as the ultimate and anticipated conclusions to female plots of self-possession and growth are 'set aside or repressed, whether by marriage or by death', narratives of masculine growth and development are similarly but not exactly undercut by gendered expectations. The 'plotless' works of high

modernism regularly position a moment of epiphany as a waypoint climax, one of many that can be achieved in the text. A reading of Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) concerned with the individuation of the female creative against the patriarchal machine of scholasticism, for instance, will be more concerned with the majesty of Mrs Ramsay's *boeuf en daube* or the final stroke of Lily Briscoe's brush than the simple journey to the lighthouse, which serves as the most obvious and necessary climax of Woolf's plot. But even in a more traditional proto-modernist novel such as Forster's *A Room with a View* (1908), a series of climactic epiphanies such as Lucy Honeychurch's journey through 'Santa Croce with No Baedeker', the witnessed murder in 'Chapter Fourth', and the lusty kiss from George Emerson in the Florentine field, serve as a triplicate rhythm of revelation leading to Lucy's own sexual discovery and fulfilment.⁵¹ Running alongside the inheritance plot of Forster's *Howards End* (1910) is a secondary, divergent portrayal of domestic space, in which the domestic boundaries of the nineteenth century have melted away in the twentieth, leaving the characters' fixtures and fittings promiscuously circulating in the wider world. Helen Schlegel's flippant suggestion that furniture 'alone endures while men and houses perish' is temporarily confirmed by the end of the novel when it is revealed that the Schlegels' furniture has, indeed, safeguarded their progressive worldview against the incursion of commerce and trade. The Schlegel sisters' hold on the spiritual endowment of *Howards End* is confirmed when, walking through the house that has been imaginatively reconstituted with their possessions, Margaret agrees with Helen that 'we know this is our house, because it feels ours'.⁵² It may thus be true that in *Howards End* furniture 'alone endures' and—accounting for the synecdochic extension that the novel invites us to inspect—is durable enough to record the social history of England. However, these particular implications become complicated not only by the inheritance plot which outlines the narrative but by Leonard Bast's and Helen Schlegel's private, passionate campaigns for progress that run almost perfectly contrary to one another. Increasingly disenchanted by her failure to realize a viable social application for the world of ideas, Helen suggests that furniture 'alone endures while men and houses perish' because of the failure of the houses around her to perform what she sees as their one advertised function: that is, to circumscribe and then finally protect an ancestral worldview, defining a bassinette or a sword as having belonged to a particular individual not, firstly, because they possessed the object, but because that object had once been

safely contained within their house. Although Margaret had become increasingly involved in the restricted world of the Wilcoxes, after her return to *Howards End* and the ensuing death of Leonard Bast, she changes her alliance and redirects her attention to her sister and Helen's unborn child: 'My life is going to be with her now. We must manage to build up something, she and I and her child'.⁵³ If one imagines a home as a container for lived experience then surely the homes of *Howards End* have failed their inhabitants as they move into the mysterious unknown future of modernity. This particular technique was pushing against the social driving force of redemptive futurity and by the certain appeal of familiarity in plotting and structure experienced by the audience.

The vast array of literary attempts to imagine the future owes considerable credit to a distinctive yet often unrecognized limitation of the English language. The English language has no true future tense to neatly delineate a real or imagined future and must draw upon an array of evocative linguistic illusions and effects such as modal verbs to suggest the future. Mark Currie describes the future-perfect form (auxiliary verb + past participle) as '[referring] to something that lies ahead and yet which is already completed, not what *will happen*, but what *will have happened*'.⁵⁴ This approximation of a linguistic future has, he continues, 'a hint of the impossible' and 'seems to ascribe to the future the one property that it cannot possess'.⁵⁵ But, as Currie continues, literary fiction necessarily implies the certain existence of a narrative future because the narrative must surely come to an end, if only because that end has clearly already been written. If within every narrative exists the seeds and sparks for a larger narrative, then we must consider a key role of writing to be excision, rather than creation. In *The Dialogic Imagination* (1975), Mikhail Bakhtin explains that

The present and even more the past are enriched at the expense of the future. The force and persuasiveness of reality, of real life, belong to the present and the past alone—to the "is" and the "was"—and to the future belongs a reality of a different sort, one that is more ephemeral, a reality that when placed in the future is deprived of that materiality and density, that real-life weightiness that is essential to the "is" and "was". The future is not homogenous with the present and the past, and no matter how much time it occupies it is denied a basic concreteness, it is somehow empty and fragmented—since everything affirmative, ideal, obligatory, desired has been shifted, via the inversion, into the past (or partly

into the present); en route, it has become weightier, more authentic and persuasive.⁵⁶

If the goal of narrative is to imply the existence of living characters in an authentic alternative world of fiction, then there is a further implication that these narratives spread out both temporally—that is, before and after the events described in the narrative—and contextually—that is, each of the characters is equally the protagonist in their own counter, unwritten narrative. Perhaps, then, to misquote Michelangelo's famous sentiment, every ream of paper contains within it a narrative, and it is the job of the writer to remove extraneous materials until they are left with the narrative of their vision.

A late push of Romanticism in the mid-nineteenth century sought to return coherence and unity to art. The word *Gesamtkunstwerk* has as many definitions as genres in which it is or has been employed. For Richard Wagner, who first formalized the term in *The Art-work of the Future* (1849) and *Opera and Drama* (1851), *Gesamtkunstwerk* was the blending of music, poetry, art, and dance into a total performance art, monumental in both its ambition and its impact. This was an aesthetic ideal that had its first, and still most famous, demonstration in Wagner's epic cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (1876), written two decades after his theoretical reflections on the possibility of a newly minted artistic modernity. For Matthew Smith, who frames the historical developments of the 'total work' with Jürgen Habermas's and Theodor Adorno's lifelong study of Wagner, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is defined by its compelling contradictions: it 'is a lantern image, a ghost in glass', but at the same time it is 'sensuous and concrete'; it is both 'modernity's leviathan' and its 'polestar'.⁵⁷ And, in many ways, these contradictions have fuelled subsequent discussion of the total work, which equally draw upon Adorno's correlations of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* with commodity and mass culture. Andreas Huyssen has read Wagner's theoretical and aesthetic interest in the *Gesamtkunstwerk* within the context of monumentality, defining the monument as the creator of 'generational memory, memory in public culture, national memory, memory becoming stone in architecture'.⁵⁸ There are broad implications to such a proposal, not least of which is the difficult connection between modern German history and 'the discursive totalitarianism that indeed underlies the concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and that mars so much of Wagner's theoretical and critical writing'.⁵⁹ In his writings on Wagner, Bernard Shaw does not refer specifically to

Gesamtkunstwerk, although he does clearly articulate his view on political implications of the monumentality created by Wagner. To Shaw's mind, Wagner's cycle was a 'poetic vision of unregulated industrial capitalism'.⁶⁰ Later writers would similarly point towards the particular political and sociological implications of Wagner's drive towards monumental completeness. Pushing against the colossal dramaturgy of Wagner, Brecht's epic theatre sought to explode these sister arts into their original fragmentary nature, exposing the interworkings of performance and revealing dramaturgical totality as an impossible and possibly subversive fantasy. For Brecht, *Gesamtkunstwerk* was nothing but an aesthetic dilution in which, as he described in 1948, 'the sister arts of the drama [...] offer themselves up and are lost'.⁶¹ Juliet Koss has suggested that 'his fear was not that spectators would lose their individual identities—this kind of fusion, he believed, could be advantageous—but that they would be hypnotized by a sorcery that he described with the term *Gesamtkunstwerk*'.⁶² Yet the break from tradition was not complete. Brecht's epic theatre continued to display the contribution of the sister arts of poetry, music, design, and movement, for instance, with the stark coincidence of music in *The Threepenny Opera* (1928) and *Happy End* (1929). Breaking them apart from the organic totality Wagner aspired towards and juxtaposing them awkwardly and productively against one another, Brecht continued to show the primacy of diverse modes of artistic production in dramatic composition.

There is little doubt that what I have been describing as a Fisher King narrative is tied to the experience of nostalgia as a curious form of embodied memory which reshaped masculine identity during the years 1919–1945. Referring originally to the feelings of desire for a lost homeland, nostalgia became a key trope after the war when the longing for an earlier time became all-pervading. Svetlana Boym connects this belatedness to a new force of wide-scale nostalgia with both a change in space and a changed understanding of how time articulates our space: 'the nostalgic is looking for a spiritual addressee. Encountering silence, he looks for memorable signs, desperately misreading them'.⁶³ In 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' (1940), Walter Benjamin uses the Mechanical Turk—the eighteenth-century pseudo-automaton which played chess through the workings of a concealed human—as a metaphor for the certainty of historical materialism. Benjamin doesn't suggest that, like the Mechanical Turk, historical materialism contains a fraudulent motivation, but that historical materialism will always win the figurative game

of chess because it possesses within it a messianic teleology. As his sixth thesis contends:

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was' (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it. The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer, he comes as the subduer of Antichrist. Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.⁶⁴

Benjamin's theory of messianic time supposes a different relation to sequence and event in understandings of history. For Benjamin, each historical period is defined by a sense that things will get better *in the future*—that a messiah of sorts will come—and that although this redemption will necessarily never arrive, each new revolutionary stance continues the developments of this lost hope from the past. The *longue durée* that Benjamin advances thus unsettles traditional views of 'tradition' itself, inviting us to read time, sequence, and consequence as essentially circular, with aberrations and mutations occurring as discrete events that merely give rise to other discrete events of similarly undistinguished nature. Modernist elision relies on immediacy as a means by which to conjure within the reader a sense not merely of the thematic machinations but of the world of the narrative that spreads out before and beyond the events themselves depicted. But modernism also found great interest in circularity, a narrative mode that stakes a claim on completion and fulfilment while at the very same time denying the certainty of conclusive ends. In Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (1931), Louis fears this very same kind of condemning circularity:

Where then is the break in this continuity? What the fissure through which one sees disaster? The circle is unbroken; the harmony complete. Here is the central rhythm; here the common mainspring. I watch it expand, contract; and then expand again. Yet I am not included.⁶⁵

If the narrative time of literary fiction also implies messianic redemption—either a *deus ex machina* or *peripeteia* which brings to the narrative definite sense of closure and relief—it risks contamination by the real-world time experienced by the reader. On the most mundane level one might recognize that the narrative proper of the text is the one being narrated, rather than the one not being narrated, and, indeed, contemporary narratology frequently discredits the role of a first-person narrator-protagonist as a self-conjured presence within the world of his or her own narrative.

This chapter has considered the curious correlation between two decisive features of modernist writing: the wide-scale thematic engagement with wounded masculinity and the bold stylistic reliance on elision and erasure as a means by which to unsettle both biological and narratological precedence. Although often viewed as two discrete developments which grew from distinctive sources, this chapter has argued that the modernist recapitulation of the Fisher King legend—initially in the form of Jessie Weston's Theosophical treatise *From Ritual to Romance*—directly coincided with stylistic attempts to portray absence and non-existence. If traditional narrative structure gestures towards both patriarchal values of the masculine call to action and the male sexual response cycle, then modernist innovation in narrative began to imagine new ways in which the gendered body could be replicated by and implicated in the creation of literary material.

NOTES

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