

“In One’s Skin and Flesh”: Aging Bodies and Transcendent Forms in Sheila Watson’s *The Double Hook*

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IN THE CLIMACTIC MOMENTS OF SHEILA WATSON’S 1959 novel *The Double Hook*, aging hermit Felix Prosper hovers over the laboring young woman Lenchen, whose impending delivery of a child is seen as a potential renewal of the moribund community to which both Felix and Lenchen belong. Felix yearns in this moment of crisis to transcend his body: if he could only shed his flesh and “molt and feather again,”¹ he considers, he might be of some use. Almost immediately, Felix’s desire is fulfilled: “His eyelids dropped. His flesh melted. He rose from the bed on soft owl wings. And below he saw his old body crouched down like an ox by the manger” (110). Felix moves beyond his “old body,” ambiguously coded here as both aged and outdated and described earlier as “a cumbersome coat folded and creased and sagging at the seams” (60), in order to fashion a new self from the wings latent within him. In the process, he momentarily transforms himself from a fumbling bystander at a modern nativity scene to a weightless angel, more suitable to the tableau in which he stands, which depicts the beginning of a new order founded on the ruins of the old.

This metamorphosis underscores a central tension within Watson’s novel (as well as within the modernist tradition in which Canadian literary criticism has often positioned it) between the

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¹ Sheila Watson, *The Double Hook* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1959), 110. Hereafter, page references to *The Double Hook* will be given in parentheses in the text.



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undesired corporeal and the transcendent. Felix's name, Prosper, attests to his dormant status as someone to whom the prosperity of this fragmented community is entrusted at its crisis point: he functions as a deliverer, handing the community off into a seemingly utopian future signaled by the as-yet-unmarked form of a child. Vaguely set in a remote valley in the interior of British Columbia, the novel follows its ostensible protagonist, James—the father of the child Lenchen is carrying—in the days after he has killed his mother, identified throughout the text only as the “old lady,” and has fled from the stagnant valley, which she goes on to haunt as a specter. Like Felix, characters throughout the novel vacillate between the postlapsarian experience of being mired in this valley community—defined in material terms of weight, decay, and aging—and a more appealing and ethereal mythic script, which is often described as “the glory,” an ineffable goal against which they frequently brush.

It is in part this thematic contradiction between the frailty of corporeality embodied by the old lady and the promise of a stable order outside it that has made the text the standard-bearer for Canadian modernism. T. D. MacLulich has claimed that the Canadian variant of modernism that flourished after the Second World War was largely disconnected from the aesthetic principles associated with international modernism, being born not of a drive for artistic innovation but of an investment in bringing sociological realism to a national literature that lacked it. Its task, which often necessitated a regionalist take on the universalism of quintessential modernist texts like *Finnegan's Wake*, was “to define the principal features of the Canadian social world and to articulate the typical ways in which Canadians were responding to that world.”² While the realism of early Joyce is thus typically seen as a vestige of nineteenth-century aesthetic tropes, MacLulich implies that it served instead as an important “waystation on the road to a more sophisticated outlook”³ in Canadian writing—a thematically progressive, if aesthetically tentative, response to the cultural air of idealism that dominated Canadian cultural discourse before the war. As Dennis Duffy proposes, it was only with later texts like Sinclair Ross's *As for Me and My House* in 1941, and more specifically its ironic tone and refusal to foreground “specific historic responses”⁴ to the prairie life it depicts, that Canadian fiction fulfilled the modernist project of “making it new”⁵ in aesthetic terms, emphasizing its formal autonomy from the referential world it previously sought to depict. Watson's novel, a formally rigorous text that betrays little interest in depicting the social conditions of its setting—much less in treating old age and illness with the full depth of what MacLulich calls sociological realism—is an instance of the latter development and has been read as a definitive example of Canadian modernism because of this relative consistency with the international tradition.

Nonetheless, even if the novel's apparent privileging of eternal matters over the “specific historic responses” to which Duffy gestures is a sign of its high-modernist inclinations (in content, if not also in form), it is important to note that Felix's transformation is not characteristic of the text's negotiation with the troubling world of old bodies from which he yearns to rise. Indeed, the old body is inhabited in the novel to a far greater extent than it is transcended. Critics like Margaret Morris have read these characters' embrace of the mythic in these climactic moments as a redemptive move, which enables them to situate themselves within a ritual continuity more stable than their bodies, bearing witness, she writes, “to the curious power they feel in

² T. D. MacLulich, *Between Europe and America: The Canadian Tradition in Fiction* (Toronto: ECW, 1986), 89.

³ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁴ Dennis Duffy, “Losing the Line: The Field of Our Modernism,” *Essays on Canadian Writing* 39 (1989): 179.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 176.

themselves ('the glory')."⁶ What remains to be considered, though, is the extent to which that search for stability depends upon the unstable body that incites it. Moreover, how is Watson's attention to a constellation of modernist values—including the new, the formal, and the ahistorical—mediated by the text's construal of the body as the weighty ground to which all flights to "the glory" must necessarily return?

In this paper, I contend that this anxiety surrounding the body as at once an incubator of dormant mythic prototypes and a limited appendage through which characters apprehend traces of a more resonant world speaks to a larger inquiry in Watson's novel concerning aging bodies and transcendent forms. That is to say, the novel is not, as Felix's transformation might imply, strictly invested in the expulsion of the aging body as abject—that which lurks on the outskirts of the known and acceptable, as Julia Kristeva puts it, ejected "beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable."⁷ Rather, it thematizes the process by which individuals define themselves with reference to these competing registers of the corporeal and the transcendent and simultaneously conceive of themselves as capable of eternity and as bounded by corporeal vestments that become worn and threadbare with age. To be sure, Watson's novel traces the desires of a community to escape the false fronts of their bodies and to embrace what they see as a more authentic destiny, one in which their prosperity is not dictated solely by the limitations of aging and by its intimations of mortality. But the narrative's record of their attempts to do so is marked by persistent failure and by the continued primacy of "old" bodies—both literally aged and figuratively outmoded—that, like Felix's, become creased.

The result is a complex example of Canadian modernism that passes the social realist way station, in MacLulich's terms, but maintains, in its emphasis on the body that cannot be escaped, an ambivalent distance to the nonrepresentationalism of international modernism—its turn, as Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane describe it, from "humanistic representation towards style, technique, and spatial form."⁸ I will consider the interplay between this ambiguous aversion to corporeality and the diminished capacity it promises and those inklings of what Morriss calls the "curious power" within characters who opt out of a life of embodiment and fixate on the eternal. I consider analogies between this dynamic within the text and gaps within literary modernism's aesthetics of purification and correction. Critics have made much of Watson's reverence for T. S. Eliot and of the editorial process that saw the novel molded into a traditional modernist work after the manner of Eliot's own revisions, a transformation that has been widely celebrated in Canadian literary criticism as the epitome of Canadian modernism in fiction.⁹ In considering the ways in which the novel complicates this reading of Watson's modernism, I am drawing on the work of critics such as Colleen Lamos on fissures within modernist manifestos' claims of textual autonomy. In *Deviant Modernism*, for instance, Lamos observes that canonical male modernist texts like those of Eliot, though ostensibly singular in their intentions to "identify and weed out error," are the site of profound anxieties about its always present "inherent

⁶ Margaret Morriss, "'No Short Cuts': The Evolution of *The Double Hook*," *Canadian Literature* 173 (2002): 56.

⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 1.

⁸ Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature, 1890–1930* (London: Penguin, 1991), 25.

⁹ For a thorough discussion of the motif of sacrifice within canonical critical appraisals of Watson's novel as a foundational text in Canadian literary modernism, see Donna Palmateer Pennee, "Canadian Letters, Dead Referents: Reconsidering the Critical Construction of *The Double Hook*," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 51–52 (1993): 233–57.

possibility, making the task of correction an endless struggle toward a transcendent goal.”¹⁰ Central to this formulation is the idea that while textual transcendence and perfection are typically the modernist’s desired ends, they are also inherently unattainable.

The implication of Lamos’s reading is that to speak of the modernist work of art as transcendent or beyond error is inaccurate: rather, one must consider the aesthetic work of modernism as a supposition *on* error and a record of formal attempts to purge it. Rethinking such projects in this way calls for a significant reconceptualization of high modernism, which is typically seen as being politically conservative in its advancement of aesthetic values such as textual autonomy—the responsibility of an artist only to the textual world he or she has crafted—and in its devaluation of genres like melodrama and sentimentality. As Suzanne Clark observes in her study of sentimental modernism, avant-garde intellectuals of the early twentieth century typically adopted an adversarial position not only to domesticity and sentimentalism but also to the referential, ground-tethered world that they evoked: that of history and of the social, precisely the realms MacLulich sees early Canadian modernism grounding itself in. The result of this concentrated effort to opt out of representation, Clark argues, was a dogmatic pursuit of a transcendent style and a concomitant denial that “style had a politics,”¹¹ as well as an endorsement of a masculinized formalism that avoided and deemed feminine the ostensibly mundane elements of reality from which modernism intended to depart.

However, despite this Lukacsian critique of the quintessential modernist text’s refusal to engage with the referential world, the aesthetic ideology whereby works of art were idealized as “incarnations of aesthetic value allegedly transcending . . . the material conditions of which they are the product,” Lamos argues further that modernist texts have always been responses to political conditions.¹² She draws attention here to the sometimes striking difference between the coherent programs with which modernism is so strongly identified and the “vagrant practices”¹³ of modernist writers like Joyce—that is, the persistence of such outlawed tendencies as political activism, sentimentality, and same-sex love in canonical works that are ostensibly the most uncorrupted by idiosyncrasy and consequently the most free from error. Indeed, although she notes that modernism has been characterized as bourgeois by critics like Terry Eagleton for elevating the literary work to iconic status, even its most canonical texts are not monolithic entities that bear the aesthetic mark of their creators’ triumphs over error. Rather, they are fruitful sites of “unresolved struggles,”¹⁴ where the central tenets of modernism are illuminated largely by their inability to be sustained within the texts themselves.

The Double Hook is a rich example of the kind of deviant modernism Lamos describes, a novel with its own complex history of textual errancy and revision, as well as an unresolved tension between its project of giving form to the universal crises of modern subjects and its refusal to extricate itself from bodily and spatial particularities. Originally more clearly set in the Caribou country where Watson worked as a schoolteacher but made increasingly universal and geographically unmoored in subsequent drafts, the manuscript was famously edited by Professor

¹⁰ Colleen Lamos, *Deviant Modernism: Sexual and Textual Errancy in T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Marcel Proust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 17–18.

¹¹ Suzanne Clark, *Sentimental Modernism: Women Writers and the Revolution of the World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 4–5.

¹² Lamos, *Deviant Modernism*, 4.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 2. See Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1976).

Frederick Salter, who has been elevated in assessments of the novel's place in Canadian modernism to the status of Ezra Pound, to whom Eliot famously dedicated his finished version of *The Waste Land*. Among other key revisions, Pound has been credited, in his capacity as Eliot's confidante and editor, with the removal of that poem's opening monologue by a rowdy Irishman discussing the lurid details of his prior night in Boston and has thus been seen as largely responsible for the finished poem's austerity.¹⁵ Salter has similarly been treated as the textual godfather of Watson's text—its guarantor of modernist weight and appropriate subject matter. Moreover, as F. T. Flahiff observes in his afterword to the novel, many of Salter's editorial suggestions were made in the interest of ensuring that the text was properly "dealing with things eternal and not transitory"¹⁶—with soft owl wings, we might conclude, and not the aging bodies from which they emerge.

Ensuring the text's legibility as a modernist work of fiction, by this token, consisted largely of stripping it of its geographic and cultural specificity, including removing the ethnic markers that identified the old lady and her daughter Greta as part Native. As Salter explains in his preface to the first edition, published by McClelland and Stewart in 1959, in the novel's completed form

Mrs. Watson disaccommodates man and studies him. She finds him in a pocket of the Rockies, but the exact geographical location matters little; the scene is, as it were, accidental. Dwelling in this remote valley is a mixed, scrub, unpedigreed or mongrel group, but Mrs. Watson does not dwell on racial distinctions, nor does she attempt a "regional" novel, though she might have done. She is concerned with the response to life of homo sapiens, and her conclusions, drawn from an untutored group, may be equally valid in the most sophisticated society.¹⁷

Though Salter's comments might be explained as merely an effort to sell the novel internationally as a cosmopolitan work of high modernism and thus to assure readers of the unimportance of prior knowledge of British Columbia for a thorough engagement with the text, one is struck as well by this language of stripping and purity. To read Salter's description of it, *The Double Hook* is a peculiar anthropological text, whose subject is not the behavior of a tribe in a remote valley or the idiosyncratic response of some individuals to what they perceive as the physical horrors of aging, but nothing less than "the response to life of homo sapiens." By extension, the international modernist project in which Watson's text supposedly participates is largely a disembodied clinical study of humanity divorced from such accidental details as ethnicity and geography.

My goal in this paper is in part to demonstrate the extent to which the text itself complicates Salter's claim. Far from stripping the human to an elemental form resembling *King Lear's* unaccommodated man, *The Double Hook* emphasizes the impossibility of divorcing the self from the body, through which it apprehends the world, and from contingencies like the physical process of aging. Moreover, I argue that "the scene" of the novel, to use Salter's term, is largely the human

¹⁵ See David Chinitz, "T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide," *PMLA* 110, no. 2 (March 1995): 41–49. Chinitz describes Pound's revisions as a process of bringing out the authentic (and canonical) *Waste Land* latent within Eliot's own manuscript: "A long poem called *The Waste Land* that begins, 'April is the cruellest month,' largely shaped the course of literature and criticism for years to follow. One can only imagine the effect of a long poem called *He Do the Police in Different Voices* beginning, 'First we had a couple of feelers down at Tom's place'" (44). See also Franco Moretti, *Modern Epic: The World System from Goethe to Garcia Marquez*, trans. Quintin Hoare (New York: Verso, 1996). Moretti characterizes Pound's depersonalizing revisions as a process of disembodiment of the poem, which "must become an utterance that tells its own story—voices without a body" (186).

¹⁶ F. T. Flahiff, afterword to Watson, *The Double Hook*, 120.

¹⁷ Quoted in Pennee, "Canadian Letters, Dead Referents," 234.

body itself, and that it is not accidental but central to the text's engagement with its characters' various "response[s] to life." I will consider the vacillation between weighty bodies and transcendent forms as it is illustrated in the recurring trope in which characters extend their limbs upward toward "the glory" above and find themselves either mired in the valley below or punished for their intemperate success. More specifically, I will focus on this trope as it pertains, first, to the peripheral characters Heinrich and Kip—the former too young to be a patriarch and the latter disconnected from the filial chain that binds the rest of the community—both of whom come closest to that immaterial encounter, and, second, to the old lady, who similarly seeks glory, but with a degree of excess that is associated by other characters with her unruly body. In both of these examples, I argue, the frail body serves as the primary locus for the community's anxieties about and nostalgia for what I will term formal coherence. It is the unsettled territory from which individuals begin to yearn for a new, and this time permanent, kind of settlement.

Heinrich, the son of the also aged Widow and younger brother to Lenchen, is a helpful point of entry because his marginal position within the community as an ineffectual aspiring patriarch who can neither challenge James's conduct with Heinrich's sister, nor fence off the area where the old lady wanders, makes him the most clearly invested in the possibility of a world beyond his body. Consequently, he is the first of many characters in the novel we find dwelling on the light's interaction with the material world around him, in a recurring motif, and the first of many to see the world floating "like a mote in a straight shaft of glory" (17). The impressionist trance that results from this strange play of light on bodies serves as an occasion for Heinrich to meditate on the separation between the lapsed world of things in which he resides and the redemptive, if dangerous, light that he sees flashing "like the glory against the hide of things" (19). Unlike his horse, which can stand in sunlight "knowing only the saddle and sting of sweat on hide" (18), however, Heinrich presumably exhibits his human knowing of things beyond the corporeal through his awareness of this juxtaposition between the light that flashes and the screen on which it is projected. Heinrich thus becomes a knowing subject when he first perceives a realm more permanent and more desirable than his body. To yearn for a more stable form beyond the corporeal, in other words, is in the novel's scheme to recognize the body as distinct from that form, if not a corruption of it.

Although Heinrich yearns for this glory partly as compensation for his ineffectiveness on the ground, in the embodied life that calls upon him to effectively set the reproductive boundaries of his family and to keep interlopers like James and later Kip from his sister, for Kip the pressure to be more than his body allows is largely a function of his status as the community's designated seer.¹⁸ A perennial outsider, the only character unrelated either by blood or by marriage to the old lady—and thus the most separate link in the filial chain with which the community is introduced—Kip similarly desires to grasp something of the eternal: "He stood on the doorstep looking at the moon. Stood roped to the ground by his weight of flesh. Reaching out to the white tongue of moonlight so that he might swing up to the cool mouth. Raising his hand to the white glory for which he thirsted. Then remembering: Coyote got the old lady at last" (48). The glory in this passage can be figured only with recourse to an oppositional body; more to the point, it can be articulated only through the phenomenal realm of vision and touch. It is only through Kip's reaching out—his raised hand, in other words—that he can come closer to his target, whose absence is felt in his body as a thirst. As with Heinrich, the move to the eternal for

¹⁸ At separate points, other characters ask Kip what his eyes have seen (46) and, when he is blinded by James, lament, "Who'll see anything worth seeing now?" (69).

Kip is thus an embodied move—a pursuit of permanence conducted with frustrated recognition of “the weight of flesh.” It is telling, then, that when James attacks Kip for “playing round with the glory of the world” (116)—for probing into his relationship with Lenchen—he targets Kip’s eyes: though they are Kip’s best gateway to the transcendent, they are also a painful reminder of his status as a man roped to the ground and subject to the physical limitations and injuries entailed by that status.

Kip is punished by James, who is presumably anxious to police this attempted access to the glory, much as the old lady is marked from the start of the novel as ill-mannered for her insistence on fishing “even if the reeds dried up . . . shamelessly . . . without a glance” (11–12) to those around her. Interestingly, given her aversion to spatial borders throughout the text, in the prose poem with which the novel opens, the old lady is made the orientational point around which the remaining characters and their positions within the community are located:

In the folds of the hills

under Coyote’s eye

lived

The old lady, mother of William
Of James and of Greta

lived James and Greta
lived William and Ara his wife
lived the Widow Wagner . . .

until one morning in July

This final line’s turn from the initial list of the community’s inhabitants—gathered and vertically organized under the heading of the still-living old lady—to the temporal specificity of the July morning when the hierarchical structure was ruptured marks the novel’s entrance into its narrative. Significantly, that point of entrance is the exit of the old lady’s body, which is hidden in the attic of what is now James and Greta’s home as the narrative begins. That is to say, the novel proper begins on the “one morning” on which this vertical hierarchy is inverted, resulting in James’s apparent assumption of his role as the community’s patriarch in the void left by the dissolution of its prior matriarchy.

Despite the finality that this spatial overlay suggests, the old lady’s subsequent appearances after she is killed on the first page both by James’s hand and his proclamation that she will fish no longer are marked by both corporeal and spatial instability—by a transgressive body that does not heed the boundaries others erect in front of it. The old lady is at once decomposing in her home and roving the valley, seemingly in every place at once—“in every fold of the country” (33). The first section of the novel is structured as a series of fragmented sightings of her elusive body, which fishes without catching any fish. Moreover, these sightings are refracted through the observing lens of those whose property lines the old lady has breached, so that her body effectively exists within the text only as perceived by other characters, including Felix, who intends to catch her; Ara, who is offended by her inappropriate distance as her mother-in-law; and the Widow, whose scandalized cry of “So old, so wicked, fishing the fish of others” (16) is an admon-

ishment against her lack of propriety. Common to all these responses is shame toward this woman who attempts to exceed the limits of her body, which is effectively a displaced shame—an uneasy recognition of their own quests for glory enacted by a parodic, elderly body, which is at once definitively “old,” as her name implies, and also dead. David Belin and Lisa Cartwright argue that such moments of shameful recognition are central to intersubjective identity formation. In becoming conscious of oneself observing another person, they propose, “the spectator who looks for the first time finds a foundation for the self.”¹⁹ Similarly, the inhabitants of this community understand themselves as members of it, bound by the same ethical guidelines, through this comparative declaration that they are not as inappropriate, as excessive, or as out-of-season as the old lady.

It is productive here to consider how the Widow’s internalized shame and denial of her proximity to the old lady are analogous to the shameful expulsions that granted the text its own modernist foundation. Marlene Goldman has situated the wide-scale aversion to the old lady in an interesting geopolitical context, claiming that the matriarch’s insistent presence in the community after her death may be read as an instance of paracolonial haunting. She notes that Canadian ghost narratives are often preoccupied with unfinished business concerning the legitimacy of land settlements, and she claims that Watson’s text is no different, insofar as its early drafts explicitly identify the old lady as part Native. The community formed in the concluding section of the novel, it follows, is predicated on the expression of embodied threats to its cohesion in the form of the physical presence and galvanizing desires “of nomadic native peoples and women who refuse patriarchal and Christian models of domestication.”²⁰ If the community responds to the old lady’s disrespect for propriety with a mixture of shame and hostility, then, and brands her refusal to stay dead uncouth, it is because they fear she has a legitimate claim to their land and that the persistence of her body is proof of that claim. In this sense, Watson’s novel enacts what Kathleen Woodward identifies as the tendency within psychoanalytic discourse to model generational identity as a competition between the “virtually unrepresentable” older generation and its successor.²¹ The old lady’s roaming corpse, then, is an uncanny return of what the community has attempted to stamp out, if not in its members’ initial uneasy existence on the land then certainly in the utopian nativity scene at novel’s end, where each individual is granted his or her place at the start of a new order that presumably abolishes all traces of the old. Moreover, what haunts them is not just the unsettled nature of the terrain they are on but also the suggestion that the aged body is not, in fact, a coat that can be discarded at will. The old lady is placed at the top of the map, then, because she grants the community coherence in its uniform rejection of her, focalizing their corporeal anxieties on an abject outlier that must be made into an example of what will not be tolerated.

Whether the old lady is successfully stamped out of the text by these shameful glances and scornful dismissals, however, is another question that goes to the heart of both the novel’s complicated depiction of corporeality and its ostensible project of constructing an autotelic universe.

¹⁹ David Benin and Lisa Cartwright, “Shame, Empathy and Looking Practices: Lessons from a Disability Studies Classroom,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 5, no. 2 (August 2006): 157.

²⁰ Marlene Goldman, “Coyote’s Children and the Canadian Gothic: Sheila Watson’s *The Double Hook* and Gail Anderson-Dargatz’s *The Cure for Death by Lightning*,” in *Unsettled Remains: Canadian Literature and the Postcolonial Gothic*, ed. Cynthia Sugars and Gerry Turcotte (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2009), 55.

²¹ Kathleen Woodward, “Inventing Generational Models: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, Literature,” in *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations*, ed. Kathleen Woodward (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 152.

Goldman's reading accounts for how the narrative's "modernist cleaning house"²²—whereby the old lady and her unmarried daughter, Greta, die so that James might build a shelter to house his legitimate family "further down the creek" (115)—is predicated on reading the Canadian landscape as a wilderness to be settled. Moreover, everything from James's utopian vision, in the novel's closing pages, of a new home free from the stain of his mother's shadow, to his sister's self-immolation, and to fallen patriarch Felix's momentarily granted desire to transcend his corporeal vestments would appear to suggest that this purging has been successful. The narrative, it would seem, has reached a settlement, mirrored in James's triumphant mastery of a disorderly location that once defeated him. Yet the novel's conclusion undermines these transcendent desires and the supposed bodily erasures in which they result, and in the process, it troubles both James's lapsed desire for another Edenic moment and, by analogy, the modernist impulse toward textual autonomy. For all the promise that his newborn child would seem to signal, the first sight with which James is greeted upon his return is that of his sister's bones. Moreover, his reverie about his future home is interrupted by the contingent presence of other people, bodies that, "in the emptiness of the fenced plot, seemed to occupy space that should have been empty" (115). His brother William's and future brother-in-law Heinrich's bodies "roped him to the present,"²³ we learn, and though his immediate response is to shut his eyes, seeing in his mind "only the seared and smouldering earth, the bare hot cinder of a still unpeopled world,"²⁴ James is called back from his apocalyptic vision of a world unpeopled by a physical gesture as slight as William's hand on his sleeve. Consequently, when James admits with resignation that he "ran away . . . but circled and ended here the way a man does when he's lost" (115–16), he is admitting his failure "to bolt noisily and violently out of the present" (79) as he had wished to do, his inability to become part of something permanent. Angel, another seer figure frequently paralleled with Kip, is thus wise to propose that if loneliness is "being in one's skin and flesh, there's only more lonely people there"—outside the valley, and anywhere one might flee toward—"than here" (75).

This commanding reassertion of the primacy of the body as well as the impossibility of anything beyond the most transitory of escapes from it, I contend, is powerfully at odds with the narrative's apparent emphasis on redeeming the community through the formal purging of the old lady from its textual history and the melting away of Felix's unusable flesh in its penultimate moments. The effect is cyclical: a reinstatement of the map with which the novel began and a return to the corporeal predominance of the old lady before the community's disruption on the July day on which the narrative began. Though it is possible to read the child introduced at the novel's close as a subversion of that order—a transcendent opening within this discourse of weighty corporeality, conceived by the fertile daughter of the Widow and the previously sterile son of the old lady—James escapes the town only to circle back to it and kills his mother only to grant her a more powerful second life in death: the lone description of the child is tellingly of a newborn whose back is perfectly straight so that he might "carry round what the world will load on his shoulders" (117). Furthermore, in the novel's enigmatic closing lines we turn again to Coyote, who claims to set the child "on the sloping shoulders of the world" (118).

Admittedly, it could be argued here that the baby's entrance into the world is proof of the community's successful grasp on a parallel order located outside their bodies—a way for them to

²² Goldman, "Coyote's Children," 57.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

bolt out of the present, as James sought to do, into either the reproductive futurity of Lenchen's child or the eternity James has glimpsed. The mythic continuity they seek, in this reading, is achieved by virtue of their success in playing the right roles at the right time and seizing the mythic destiny latent within themselves—exceeding their finite presence on the ground. As was true of Kip's frustrated effort to grasp the glory, however, that utopian vision cannot be accounted for except in corporeal terms: to be the inheritor of this mythic continuity is to have one's body imprinted upon and to feel the weight of its burden in one's slumping shoulders. Utopian as this image of a community gathered around a contemporary iteration of the nativity scene might initially appear, then, it is also rendered parodic by this corporeal language of sloping bodies, this troubled knowledge of how the passage of time and accumulation of age-related illnesses will inevitably bend even the straightest back. If participating in this ritual of caring for James and Lenchen's child brings the community into its closest proximity to glory yet, it is thus a vexed kind of glory—a deferral rather than an escape from aging.

Whether that reimposition of physical weight with the suggestion of aging on to the momentarily weightless, ageless James subverts the narrative's modernist housecleaning is the question I want to address in closing. Glenn Wilmott has remarked that the novel is postmodern in its "sheering away of realist depth and history," its spare style defined by the "stripping away from realist description of the temporal backgrounds, spatial contexts, and causal relations that would ordinarily interpret the represented phenomenal succession of the present."²⁵ Putting aside the question of whether the antirealism Wilmott describes is necessarily a tenet of postmodern writing or is in fact the height of modernist aesthetics, we would do well to consider the extent to which temporal backgrounds and spatial contexts are finally stripped away in Watson's text. Indeed, despite its apocalyptic finale, *The Double Hook's* final pages chart a decided return both to the present and to the valley that James has forsaken—associated from the first page with the body of his mother. As such, the novel renders problematic modernist conceptions of textual autonomy and antireferentiality as much as it draws upon them; it lends credence to Ato Quayson's claim that the literary representation of nonstandard bodies tends to result in a mimetic crisis he calls "aesthetic nervousness."²⁶ Such representations, Quayson argues, unleash a host of anxieties about the transience of life and the degree to which all its ordered structures and systems might collapse "in a moment of intense vulnerability."²⁷ Indeed here, the ordered system on the verge of collapse is arguably the autonomous world Salter championed—the vulnerable myth of Watson's disaccommodated man.

What complicates *The Double Hook's* ostensible modernism is thus precisely what makes it a modernist text privy to the same formal anxieties and errancy of international modernists like Eliot and Joyce. In her survey of the novel's reception history, Donna Palmateer Pennee argues that it has long been amenable to modernist interpretations because its closing action "thematizes the redemption of a culture through ritual, myth, and the W(w)ord."²⁸ Critics, she notes, have read James's return and Felix's instatement as an effective patriarch as the culmination of a formal quest for the redemption of modern experience, where the matriarchal body must be ex-

²⁵ Glenn Wilmott, "Postmodern Tragedy: Family in Native Literature," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 71, no. 4 (2002): 901.

²⁶ Ato Quayson, *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 2.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁸ Pennee, "Canadian Letters, Dead Referents," 237.

pelled so that a patriarchal mythic community may be grounded in its place. Modernism is therefore eugenic, purging unruly bodies that would complicate the formal coherence afforded by ritual and myth.²⁹ The result is a series of discursive murders, "instances of cultural violence (sacrifice) for sacred (canonical) and communal (national literary identity) purposes."³⁰ Pennee is recalling a tradition that treats the modernist literary text as autotelic—the notion, drawn from Bradbury and McFarlane, as well as others, that literary modernism is engaged in the work of "redeeming the formless universe of contingency."³¹ The text, according to this reading, responds to the crises of modernity by offering its own coherent aesthetic system, which in this case is predicated on the expulsion of undesirables: among them, women, indigenous cultures, and the elderly, subgroups that neatly converge in the undead presence of the old lady. Modernist writers thus respond to the numerous crises of modernity by offering their own coherent aesthetic systems as prosthetic forms for a world that lacks form. Both formally and thematically, Watson's novel depicts this aesthetic move to textual autonomy, at once displacing its overt geographic specificity but for ghostly traces and narrating the efforts of various characters similarly to displace their bodies and all the inhibiting particularity that they signify.

But this purge is incomplete. To extend the analogy I have drawn between the novel's formal and thematic displacements, although it is precisely this autonomous formal world of myth that characters like Felix, Heinrich, Kip, and, most of all, James wish to inhabit, it remains at the novel's end thoroughly uninhabitable. Its desired settlement is undercut at last by the unruly body at the center of both its narrative and its textual history, paradoxically most present when it has been marked as dead and formally set outside the community it once dominated. What *The Double Hook* offers as an example of deviant modernism is, not so much a coherent aesthetic system whereby a creased body can be traded up for angel wings with ease, but a consideration of what must be and ultimately cannot be sacrificed in order to achieve the mythic coherence that such systems offer. A

²⁹ The eugenic impulse within some strands of literary modernism has been treated at length by Laura Doyle. See Laura Doyle, *Bordering on the Body: The Racial Matrix of Modern Fiction and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). Particularly germane to Watson's novel is Doyle's consideration of arguments for eugenic motherhood, where the task of ensuring Western culture's "larger inheritance of the future" (11) and staving off racial degeneration was seen as entrusted to the responsibly procreative mother figure. At the heart of Watson's text, by contrast, are the procreative failures of the old lady and her unmarried daughter, Greta.

³⁰ Pennee, "Canadian Letters, Dead Referents," 235.

³¹ Bradbury and McFarlane, *Modernism*, 54.