

**Modernist Aesthetics and Familial Textuality:
*Gide's Strait is the Gate***

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I take a woman other than my sister in order to constitute the differentiated base of a new triangle whose inverted vertex will be my child—which is called surmounting Oedipus, but reproducing it as well, transmitting it rather than dying all alone, incestuous, homosexual, and a zombie.

Deleuze and Guattari

Some critics have variously defined Gide's *Strait Is the Gate* as a withering critique of Protestant discourse's puritanism, as a particularly rich example of a novel's construction through intertextual play with literary predecessors, and as a striking thematization of the Gidean preoccupation with the constitution of the self through the vexed, contradictory process of writing and reading.¹ Still others have focused on the deconstructive problematic of rhetorical structures in a searching analysis of the novel's semiotic and cognitive organization.² Finally, Gide's novel figures prominently in Lacan's admiring assessment of Jean Delay's biography of Gide; for Lacan, *Strait is the Gate* is an allegory of desire's implication and structuration in language.³ In the essay that follows, I will re-articulate some of these earlier critical appraisals of *Strait Is the Gate* in terms of the novel's place within the aesthetic project of modernism and in terms of the way this project in turn is overdetermined and partially constituted by what has come to be called familial discourse. That is to say, I wish to shift the focus away from what seems to me to be ultimately ahistorical analyses of the reading, writing, language, and intertextuality in the novel towards a historicizing evaluation of Gide's text.

The most fruitful view of modernism is that which traces its rise in the interstices of realist and naturalist fiction. Modernist prose contested the latter's slow fall into the realm of mass or popular literature, which was characterized by reified plots and simplified characters. These developments, which were part and parcel of late nineteenth-century capitalism's reorganization of daily life and cultural production, provoked counter-strategies by authors who sought to preserve their writing from what they perceived to be the onslaught of middle-class and popular commercial culture and its degraded objects and languages.⁴ While many critics have enumerated the aesthetic consequences of modernism's critical and negative stance—the collapse of traditional narrative and hermeneutics in favor of a more narrow investment in private languages, personal style, and sheer sentence making—few have commented on this process's relationship to familial discourse.

Familial Discourse and Bachelor Writers

We can define familial discourse briefly by saying that it was actually a configuration of discourses that first coalesced between 1750 and 1850 and that exalted the private, familial sphere as the site of reproductive sexuality, motherhood, femininity and *grosso modo* bourgeois cultural values. Familial discourse consciously tied issues of sexuality, domesticity and gender to questions of public order and military and economic power. This ideology constituted a mode both of experiencing and theorizing conflicts in social and gender relations.⁵ Realist novels in what Balzac termed their *dramas privés*, in their obsession with the blurring of distinctions between the public and private spheres, between what is masculine and what is feminine, elaborated many of the anxieties of familial discourse as they imaginatively explored the new world of capitalist, post-revolutionary France. In this light, it is perhaps easy to see how a modernist French author's anti-bourgeois position was one with a broadly anti-familial stance and a rejection of realism's old referential project of social and psychological representation.

According to Edward Said, with the rise of modernism there ensued "a general loss of faith in the ability of novelistic representation directly to reflect anything other than the author's dilemmas."⁶ This entailed a rejection of the classical novel's unconscious model for fiction writing, which was one of paternity, reproduction, and

succession. These natural, biological metaphors for the practice of novel writing proved unsuitable to writers who saw their work as *sterile* artifice and contrivance par excellence, or as Sartre put it, as *anti-physis*.⁷ The jettisoning of the familial "analogy" (to use Said's term), however, meant more than the simple abandonment of an outdated thematics of artistic self-reflexivity by writers faced with an increasingly commodified world; rather, as Jean Borie would certainly insist, it involved an entire discursive formation of which the old model of novelistic practice was an essential component.⁸ Said and Borie remind us that modernist fiction's revolt against the realist novel and familial discourse found its discursive colors in the banner of "bachelor" writers and their novels. This peculiarly *familialist* thematization of modernist writing (as that of the "bachelor") underscores how difficult it must have been for male novelists to distance themselves from official discourse. The space of their rebellion had already been mapped out in advance on familial terrain.

For in the minds of politicians, jurists, philosophers, and public health officers the figure of the marginal writer and that of the bachelor merged in such a way that the two were virtually indistinguishable and were attributed the same socio-medical pathology, particularly by the champions of natalism. This figural convergence resulted in the discursive identification of social or cultural marginality with a familial one.⁹ Inevitably, the marginal male writer-bachelor, "a by-product of bourgeois morality," had only one response to this, not always conscious, which was to ironize his position with respect to family, marriage and the dominant discourses.¹⁰ It therefore should not be surprising to find that divided, fissured *récits* of broken, scattered families are the common staple of modernist or "bachelor" fiction.

The relationship between modernist or bachelor literature and familial discourse is a complex one. Indeed, the new literature rarely makes a clean break with the discursive past. No text better demonstrates the intricacies of the problem than *Strait Is the Gate*. Gide's novel warrants our attention on several accounts. First, the narrative of the failed courtship of two first cousins, Jerome and Alissa, has as its setting bourgeois family life in a stage of dissolution. Moreover, as if to testify to the scope and power of familial ideologies in late nineteenth-century France, the extended family of Jerome's mother literally fills up the text's discursive horizon, outside of which no character other than Miss Ashburton exists. The crisis of the bourgeois family, sign and symptom of realist authors' worrying over

the legitimacy and authority of bourgeois culture and of their own novelistic enterprise, reaches a hyperbolic state here within one single family. To begin with, Jerome and Alissa's marriage would at best signify a very restricted case of exogamy; their failed engagement signals nothing less than the implosion of atrophied familial relations that collapse in upon themselves. The stereotypes of crisis are common ones: dead or weak fathers abound (Jerome's father [indeed, the entire paternal side of the family is absent], Uncle Bucolin, and Pastor Vautier), orphans proliferate (Lucile Bucolin, Jerome, and in a sense, Alissa), widows and spinsters cross and re-cross the novel's pages (Aunt Plantier, Jerome's mother, and Miss Ashburton), mothers and daughters fall victim to fits of hysteria (Lucile, Alissa, and Juliette) while the novel, in its growing obsession with the subjectivity of unmarried Alissa, slowly and relentlessly suppresses all female characters but one.

Second, out of the cramped confines of the overwrought family drama there emerges an aesthetic problematic: Jerome's tale is a fragmented narrative that echews the traditional orderings of the *récit*. For example, the opening page warns us not to expect a *book* but rather scraps of the exhausted narrator's past, a story whose beginning lies in the death of Jerome's father. The lack of the putative organizing paternal principle has seemingly had two concomitant effects: the radical destabilizing both of the narrator's self and of the novel. While this may be true, one can claim that such a straightforward psychoanalytic interpretation with its Oedipal infrastructure can obfuscate the radical import of what follows: the successive *récits* about Aunt Lucile and her daughter Alissa and the incorporation of Alissa's diary into the novel's fictional structure. The narrative of the genesis of the male modernist writer is decisively mediated by stories about women and by feminine writing.

As I hope to show, the two framing shocks of Jerome's narrative—his erotic encounters with Aunt Lucile and the death of Alissa and reception of her diary—amount to different presentations of female desire, the mother's and the daughter's. They are the two poles of the novel's trajectory that traverses Jerome and constitutes him as a complexly gendered writing subject. Similarly, the novel's own fitful generic identity is strikingly complicated by the text it transcribes, Alissa's diary. The dead woman's journal uncannily mimics and questions Jerome's discourse from the grave. Moving beyond the stable oppositions of gender and literary genres, feminine writing's

disturbing alterity makes a posthumous return that recasts the issue of the modernist project in terms of gendered writing.

Like Jerome, the novel is divided against itself on the question of the feminine. Indeed, the narrative's simultaneous, contradictory appropriation and negation of the feminine defines its fundamental structure as *hysterical*. This structure is the vehicle for the deployment of a complex fictional strategy by Gide, whereby he constructs a presentation of familialism's radical other: the bachelor writer whose possible homosexuality—his familial otherness—is approached asymptotically and negatively by the text (by means of Jerome's specular relationship to what are ultimately paranoiac figurations of other familial outcasts—spinsters, emancipated women, and the Third World—and through the absence in the young writer of any genital heterosexuality).

Strait Is the Gate may be read as the tale of the production of the modernist text and its author. While this process involves here the evocation and subsequent dismissal of realist figures and their plots, matters are quite different with respect to the figurative elements of familial discourse. Both questioned and reinscribed, familialist narrative figuration continues to overdetermine the anti-familial, modernist novel. The modernist fragmentation of narrative predicated on the parodic exaggeration of traditional realist figures nonetheless restores here discursive unity at another level, that of familial discourse.

The Geography of Modernist Desire: Colonialism and the Family

The novel's title introduces a key set of spatial metaphors for what is essentially (domestic) feminine territory: from the bedrooms, salons, and garden of the eighteenth-century provincial bourgeois house at Fongueusemare belonging to the maternal uncle Bucolin to Alissa's body and her *journal intime*. Outside of these lies Paris to be sure, largely the world of masculine ambition (where Jerome and Abel both study and pursue their careers), but also the French colonial empire whence comes Lucile Bucolin, the female character whose example and actions cast such a long but indeterminate shadow over Jerome's narrative.

With respect to the question of space, it is noteworthy that in *Strait Is the Gate* many characters feel *out of place*—due to the whence and whither of their desire—not least of all Jerome's Aunt Lucile. She has an unusual narrative existence; for though seemingly

a major cause of the failure of Jerome and Alissa's courtship, once she has left husband and family the novel consigns her to total novelistic oblivion, an oblivion that critics have faithfully respected. An orphaned Creole from Martinique, Lucile Bucolin had been brought up in France by Pastor Vautier and his wife, who, once they realized that the Good Word was completely lost on the precociously mature Lucile, allowed her to marry Bucolin at the age of 16 in hopes that she would settle down, but to no effect. An orphan cut free from the imperatives of the traditional limits assigned to women in the family, she is seemingly infected by those untamed forces—social and sexual—that familial discourse projected onto Nature and the Third World and that were colonialism's post-hoc justification of its entire enterprise. The character of such a "charming child" had begun to develop "oddly" and she had embarrassed her stepparents "terribly," leaving poor Pastor Vautier "quite defenseless."¹¹

Indeed, she is a disturbing replica of the Creole lady, the Baudelairean avatar of what Christopher Miller terms Africanist discourse. In the nineteenth century, French usage of the word Creole was applied to both the colonized population (indigenous or slave) and the white colonizers, but ambiguously: for what at first was a *geographical* distinction—the inhabitants of a colony—became a racial one; that is, writers from Baudelaire to Gobineau ascribed to colonizers attributes commonly associated by Africanist discourse with the colonized populations of color: in this case Aunt Lucile's "woolly hair" (*cheveux crépelés* [7/498]; translation modified) and her langorous posing.¹² Lucile Bucolin carries what was perceived to be the corruption of colonial experience (here in the form of disruptive feminine desire) back to metropolitan France to the inner reaches of the Bucolin household. She scandalously subverts the very sphere designated by contemporary discourse as the realm of domesticity and legitimate family life, one of whose functions was to reproduce patriarchal culture. This is the source of Jerome's horror when he surprises his aunt, stretched out on her chaise longue, surrounded by her lover, Robert, and Juliette (14/503). The perversion of the family portrait is the occasion for mocking the name of the father and marital *impuissance*:

They were laughing and looking at the stranger, who was saying in a piping voice: "Bucolin! Bucolin! . . . If I had a pet lamb I should certainly call it Bucolin."

My aunt herself burst out laughing. I saw her hold out a cigarette for the young man to light, smoke a few whiffs of it, and then let it fall to the floor. (14/503)

In a sense, this woman so out of place in the middle-class family is a figure left over from the repository of stock characters belonging to realist authors, who were endlessly fascinated by the fearful prospect that women's confinement to the chores and duties of domesticity would lead to the violent return of feminine desire: that of the hysterical woman.¹³ The modernist novel reworks the traditional discursive construct, taking it beyond the bounds of realist cliché and transforming it into a newer, more contemporary figure, that of the emancipated woman (which the cigarette serves to signify), a latter-day follower of George Sand. Lucile is a force to be reckoned with indeed, for her fits of hysteria—her “attacks” (10-12/500-01)—are not the euphemistic recoding of repressed feminine desire; she literally uses them to create opportunities for secretly receiving her lovers' visits. Her “perversion” of domestic space deals a blow to the middle classes' “cult of the family, the irrefutable alibi of its imperialism.”¹⁴

Jerome's narrative performs two operations here. It both transforms the realist character and mobilizes colonial and familial paranoia in an attempt to thematize the threat posed by the overt expression of female heterosexuality. It is noteworthy that in the novel's figuration of Lucile, there are also overtones of eugenicist discourse that had traced the transmission of “weak” or “degenerate” traits from one generation to another among indigenous, colonized peoples, the metropolitan “dangerous classes” and the best of bourgeois families.¹⁵ A familial outsider who will eventually abandon her own family, Lucile passes on to her children her own malaise and her presumably congenital “weaknesses”: both daughters Alissa and Juliette are prone to bouts of hysteria, Alissa will die single, and her son will remain a bachelor. It may be true that Alissa dies of a severe dose of Calvinist doctrine, but among the causes of her death—left vague by the text—must be counted *anorexia nervosa*. As for Juliette, her most violent fit of hysteria strikes her appropriately enough upon the announcement of her engagement with Tessière, and leaves her unconscious (539). Notwithstanding later assurances she makes to Jerome that marriage and motherhood have “cured” her

(82/552), the book closes with Juliette, mother of six children, weeping and swooning before Jerome (148/598).

However familialist the textual representation of Lucile may ultimately be, Jerome's aunt instigates in her nephew a radical departure from both the teleologies of familial discourse and the conventions of realist narrative. Jerome's brush with his seductive aunt is linked to his literary and sexual destiny, for the other fateful encounter in which she provocatively caresses her nephew transpires while he is looking for a *book*; instead of a text he comes across a desiring woman. For this new generation, writing contains hidden, disruptive negativities of a nature that Jerome cannot begin to fathom and that we as readers are given to read. Her alterity foreshadows Jerome's own, which is none other than the literary modernism of his narrative and his possible homosexuality.

The latter is suggested in the "family portrait." The exchange of a cigarette between Lucile and her lover implies an alterity that has as much to do with the permutability of gender characteristics—a woman becoming a "man" (and conversely in that play of mirrors called voyeurism, a man becoming a "woman")—as with the radical otherness of female sexuality. The *mise en scène* of gender permutability in the context of mocking the absent father's name moves toward the construction of the late nineteenth-century homosexual type—something of a subset of the "bachelor"—that of the effeminate, sickly, male intellectual, thought to be the result of maternal domination in the domestic sphere. In the eyes of familial ideologues this prospect came alarmingly close to realization with the curtailing of *puissance paternelle* and the re-establishment of divorce in the 1880s.¹⁶ Moreover, homosexuals together with emancipated women were the *bêtes noires* of familial discourse and signified in the literature of the day the irreversible decline of French civilization and empire; in short they were "calamitous emblems of a civilization on the verge of disappearing."¹⁷ The figural face-off between "flasque" (Gide's term) Jerome and his Creole aunt is nothing less than first, a mute allegory of alternate sexualities and gender constructions and second, a natalist, end-of-the-empire narrative, both the common products of the pessimism of disenchanting Republicanism and liberalism in France. The universalizing impulse of bourgeois culture whose horizon was both the family and metropolitan France here founders and breaks up on the rocks of sexual and geographical otherness, and this radical difference will constitute the privileged

preoccupations of modernist fiction. Tellingly, the fullest exploration of homosexuality in Gide's work is repeatedly relegated to the area outside maternal, familial Normandy—to Paris and the Mediterranean basin.

Bodies and Books: The Daughter's Text

The episode in which Jerome surprises his aunt surrounded by her lover and two of her children throws Jerome in the arms of religious discourse. This can be interpreted as his attempt to shore up hierarchies and distinctions of patriarchal and familial structures fast collapsing around him. As the crisis grew, Jerome had already initiated a paternalistic, protective relationship with Alissa, who, much like a child in his eyes, was "an expression of inquiry at once anxious and confident—yes of passionate enquiry. She was all question and expectation" (12/501). The play of absence and presence (first initiated by Jerome and then answered by Alissa), the dynamics of a quasi-feudal discourse of courtly love and religious devotion, will soon escape Jerome's control, and as their correspondence evolves, Jerome's paternalism will be more than matched by Alissa's maternalism, at which point Jerome's attempts to interpret Alissa's questioning look will begin in earnest as the prospects for their engagement fade. His inquiry, however, is doomed to failure for, as most critics agree, his relationship with Alissa is largely a circular, specular one, with Alissa repeating back to him the same rhetoric of deferral and denial he first used with her and underscoring her reasons with passages drawn from literary works he had her read.¹⁸ Jerome's hermeneutic efforts will lead him nowhere and therefore will lead us back to the question of his equally baffling subjectivity and the production of his fragmented narrative.

The female mediation of Jerome's writerly subjectivity, then, switches from that of the mother to that of the daughter, passing from the mother's body to the daughter's book. If Lucile is something of a mirror of Jerome's sexual otherness, Alissa is nothing less than a confirming reflection of his modernist hyper-intellectuality; both place him on the margins of the bourgeois family and its discourses: the writer as cerebral bachelor/spinster.

The novel's appropriation of Alissa's body and text as imaginary means with which to deal with dilemmas of modernism is, however, a male literary gesture *par excellence*. "When the metaphors of literary

creativity are filtered through a sexual lens," comments Susan Gubar, "female sexuality is often identified with textuality."¹⁹ The ideological ambiguities involved in such a process are clearly visible in the fact that as the novel progresses it exerts subtle violence against women. In a manoeuvre, as it were, of psychic projection and introjection, the text both eliminates women (first Lucile, then Jerome's widowed mother and Miss Ashburton, and finally Alissa) and incorporates feminine writing. For while the women pass away, the narrator's effort is increasingly spent quoting and re-copying fragments of Alissa's correspondence. The gradual superposition of Alissa's writing on Jerome's signifies Jerome's relegation to a "feminine" position with respect to writing itself. He is reduced to writerly silence. His modernist narrative is troped as feminine and doubly so: his discourse is dependent on one which he has no choice but to repeat and which is authored by a woman. Her words fragment and replace his own. The progressive, suicidal substitution of Alissa's writing for her body (she withers away as the ink flows from her pen) and for the body of Jerome's narrative reaches its grim conclusion in her death and the subsequent transmission of her diary to Jerome. This is the second of the two shocks that frame Jerome's narrative (the first being, the reader will remember, his encounters with his Aunt Lucile). The introduction of Alissa's diary crowns a textual movement that both suspends the generic identity of *Strait is the Gate* somewhere between the novel and the journal and hysterically positions Jerome between the masculine and the feminine.

The secondary, dependent "feminine" position with respect to writing is likewise shared by Alissa. Her words are not entirely her own either; for *her* text is replete with quotations drawn from the classics of the French canon and from the Bible—other men's words and writings. Indeed her bedroom, that space of presumable female desire and feminine interiority, has been transformed into a veritable library of (male-penned) books.²⁰ Alissa's writing reveals itself as colonized by dominant male discourse. As such, Alissa prefigures the modernist literary fate that awaits Jerome. It is in this sense that her writerly existence is a mimicry of her cousin's. To extend Said's remarks, quoted earlier, on the thematics of sterility, we can say that Alissa designates a literary impasse, the paralyzing negativity of sedimented past literary practices that were constitutive of modernism's peculiar historical situation. Alissa offers the spectacle of

modernism's dilemma: the impotence of those who had tried to "make new" when faced with a crushing cultural tradition.

Not only does *Alissa* connote the ideological and aesthetic problem—familial discourse and the literary canon—but also its radical, deadly solution in the "comforting," if gruesome form of "female" masochism. The latent contradictions in Gide's position with respect to familial discourse make a forceful return here. In this case the destabilizing force of radical new subjectivities and forms of writing is mastered and controlled, as it were, by textual paternalism.

A second example of the fear of cultural sterility that haunts modernist writing is the disturbing transformation that Christian discourse undergoes in Jerome and *Alissa*'s hands. Doubtlessly, Pastor Vautier has been no more successful in transmitting the Gospel to Jerome and *Alissa* than to his adoptive daughter Lucile. But then again, *Alissa* is Lucile's daughter and Jerome his aunt's unwitting protégé. Shortly after Aunt Lucile's flight with her lover, Vautier delivers a sermon whose structuring theological and sexual metaphor—*strait* is the gate (*la porte étroite*)—exhorts the young listeners to practice moral discipline and follow the dictates of heterosexual marriage. In their hands, however, the words of Saint Luke will be turned against the finalities of marriage in favor of a celibate, ascetic discourse.

Another such case is that of the amythyst cross belonging to Jerome's mother. Kevin Newmark has observed that the cross is torn from the semiotic context in which it enjoyed a signifying function (the promise of the Cross and the Word, that of Easter) and now operates arbitrarily and negatively to designate—and significantly so—Jerome's immediate departure from Fongueusemare and the deferral of the young couple's physical union.²¹ Privatized, modernist language, in its attempt to resist the pressures of official discourse, has turned against the family, in favor of the "sterile" individual; for inasmuch as the family and its attendant discourses are constitutive of the real—both the domestic and the public spheres—it seems that any individual reworking of public discourse disrupts the chain of familial signification whose circulating signifiers are both discourses *and* bodies. The non-reproduction of bourgeois discourse and the family are inseparable in the modernist text.

Heterosexuality, Commodified Literature, and Bourgeois Delights

One character tries to intervene in order to cut short Jerome and Alissa's sterile game of written deferral and to get the business of reproduction underway—Abel Vautier. His methods are as direct and straightforward as his heterosexuality:

During the last year he had acquired some experience of women, and, in consequence, put on a conceited and patronizing manner, which however, did not offend me. He laughed at me for not having finally clinched the matter, as he expressed it, giving forth as an axiom that a woman should never be given time to go back on herself. (40/522)

For an experienced young man like him, dilly-dallying, so to speak, with women won't do: "If you begin arguing with women you're lost" (41/522). He advises Jerome not to answer Alissa's second letter in writing but rather to make a surprise visit to her in order to win her hand. Interestingly, Abel's tactic will fail and Jerome is mocked by Alissa for being so "romantic" (*romanesque*; 47/527). Indeed, there is something both literary (*romanesque*) and superannuated about Abel's ideas—they smack of the bygone era of the conquering heroes of early realism. Moreover, Abel has got the plot all wrong, for in his viril assurance of sweeping Juliette away, he doesn't realize that Alissa's sister is in love with Jerome. His peculiar, masculine behavior signifies not only past literary practices but contemporary ones as well, namely commodified fiction that perpetuates realist conventions in vulgarized form. Abel is a writer of popular literature. Not surprisingly, his own best-selling book *Wantonness (Privautés)* later draws Alissa's disdain for its "folly," "indecenty," and "incurable futility" (80/551), and *The New Abelard*, a play destined for a Boulevard theater, elicits her pity (81/551).

After this literary episode, Abel drops out of the picture never to be seen again, much like Lucile, who literally vanishes from both her family and the novel. One has the impression that the novel teases bourgeois readers by offering them tantalizingly realist figures and their traditional heterosexual plots for imaginary investment and gratification only to withdraw them abruptly, thereby deferring, as it were, realist narrative pleasure, and deferring it, not till the end of the novel, but forever. Gide's novel sketches out commonplace narrative

trajectories that never reach completion: the *récit* of female adultery, the outcome of which is often the birth of illegitimate children followed by the humiliation, repentance and the punishment (usually by death) of the guilty woman, and the triangles of unrequited love in which all the parties are separated in unhappy marriages. Here, the fate of the interested parties remains obscure (does Lucile fall outside of the bourgeoisie and become a *courtisane*? does Abel ever marry?) or improbable (once Juliette is married off, Jerome and Alissa still don't become engaged). Rather, the novel produces for the reader's consumption the frustrating, repetitious narrative of missed opportunities, reticent desire, and Alissa's painful religious asceticism. The latter is transmitted by Jerome primarily through her letters and private diary. Alissa and her story emerge as both realism's and popular literature's negation, modernist high literature defined as non-pleasure.

The novel's double movement of rejecting and reproducing familial discourse resurfaces with Alissa's journal. The reception of Alissa's diary takes on the trappings of an illumination that is seemingly predicated on the silencing of Jerome:

The sealed packet that the lawyer sent me contained Alissa's journal. I here transcribe a considerable number of pages. I transcribe them without commentary. You will imagine well enough the reflections I made as I read, and the commotion of my heart, of which I could only give a too imperfect idea. (122/580)

The generic form itself seems to promise to yield much with respect to the dead woman's subjectivity. Béatrice Didier reminds us that diaries have always offered a generic "refuge of peace and interiority" and that along with letter writing private diaries have historically represented one of the few literary avenues open to women excluded and cut off from power.²²

Alissa's gesture has other strong literary resonances, however, which complicate matters. They go back to Rousseau's *Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse*, down to Balzac's *Le Lys dans la vallée* and look forward to Proust's *Albertine disparue*.²³ An unanswerable utterance from beyond the grave in all its performative facticity, Alissa's journal, as novelistic tradition would have it, speaks the contradictions of feminine desire that otherwise found expression only in the *anorexia nervosa* that finally consumed Alissa's body. Death is

seemingly both the literary pre-condition and consequence of the scriptural venting of feminine desire.²⁴ Alissa's private diary shakes up Jerome, presumably in the same manner that Julie's and Mme de Mortsau's letters did their addressees. But what startles should also prove to be reassuring, for the expression of female desire, at first glance disruptive of familial discourse's model of women, upon close inspection really amounts to a "virilization of female desire" that secretly flatters the male addressee. Alissa's journal, then, is perhaps more a reaffirmation of male fantasy than an illumination of her subjectivity insofar as it resorts to clichés concerning desiring women.²⁵ The text's hermeneutic project with respect to Alissa once again collapses in on itself and disintegrates under the pressures of masculine discourse.

Nonetheless, the fact that Alissa dies single, loverless, and childless constitutes a modernist transformation of the familialist plot, and in my view transforms the signification of her diary. For her struggles with her desires are also struggles with language (as evidenced by the fact that she burns parts of her journal) and gendered writing; together they produce a fragmented divided text that descends her and Jerome's asceticism. In one of her entries Alissa writes: "I should like to keep myself from the intolerable fault which is common to so many women—that of writing too much" (126/583). Beyond the simple opposition of familialism and its negation, the novel posits a "feminine" excess that is a modernist concept of language as uncontrollably metaphoric, emptied of its traditional referential ambitions, and powered by heretofore marginalized desire.

The modernist irony here is that Jerome is beyond the pale of "real" heterosexual response. Outside the parameters of genital heterosexuality, yet still within those of patriarchy and familialism, the only position of power Jerome can manoeuvre himself is not that of father and husband but that of the passive object of feminine desire. This is the manner in which, moreover, the concluding scene of the novel must be read: protected by social barriers of Juliette's marriage and motherhood, Jerome can safely be the object of her hysterical tears.²⁶

If Borie is correct in claiming that female characters are the privileged mediators of "reality" in bachelor literature, the fragmentation of Alissa's textual body surely proclaims modernism's radical questioning of the bourgeois body and the discursive real.²⁷ At one point Jerome exclaims, "How should I, by a simple recital, make

clear at once what I myself understood at first so ill?" (103/566). Roland Barthes, echoing Lacan, breezily claimed that what was so scandalous about fragmenting language was that such writing styles amounted to exerting violence against the mother, breaking both her discourse, that of naturalized language, and her body, that of Nature.²⁸ I would add that what is subverted must also include ideological constructions of gender. Yet the real—the legacy of familial discourse—however distanced and subverted it may be in modernist prose, can return in the very act that seemingly destabilizes it. Whence the ambiguity of this type of discursive violence. As I stated above, modernist textual fragmentation remains very much indebted to traditional familial figuration that restores a discursive continuity at another level. For Jerome's tale is predicated on the displacement from one stereotype of female hysteria—the "nymphomaniac"/emancipated woman—to another—the *dévoté*—in between which falls threatening but discursively ungraspable female sexuality (Conversely, *his* non-heterosexuality remains equally out of reach). Hélène Cixous' opening question in "Sorties" bears repeating here: "Where is she?"²⁹ The mirroring power of the two clichés bespeaks the text's discursive containment of women's desire. For Alissa ultimately continues the mother's story in a precise but inverted way: she finished the narrative of the "fallen," adulterous mother and wife who, her penance done, dies in a hospital ward or an unfurnished garret. To the very extent that the mother mocked the paternal name and the imperatives of patriarchy, the daughter attempts to respect and adhere to them, however imperfectly. Finally, although Alissa has radically withdrawn from the circulation of women, Jerome exercises his discursive power over her textual body by sending it out into circulation in an edited, mutilated form to be consumed by readers as a modernist "totem" in an act of what could be termed homosocial communality.³⁰

The narrative shifts from the (mother's) body to its fitful denial in the (daughter's) book, from explosive (colonized) "nature" to atrophied (bourgeois) culture. Alissa, in her religious "fanaticism," takes the very late nineteenth-century bourgeois ideology of *distinction*—the repression of the body as class marker—and its literary ideals of "l'Art pour l'Art," art as Negation and Anti-Physis to their limit.³¹ Ironically, her "frightful obliteration of all poetry" (112/568) will lead her straight out of the high literature that Jerome has provided her with into its dialectical opposite: vulgar devotional

works. It would seem that somewhere between literary registers, between body and discourse, lies a new structure of gender, a new aesthetics. Perhaps Alissa's death at some level amounts to killing the "angel of the house," which for Virginia Woolf was the precondition for the destruction of the aesthetic and gender ideal that has discursively imprisoned women—and men—in the nineteenth century and out of which, Sartre claims, Gide was making his tortuous way.³² And this will entail, among other things, a more coherent stance on Gide's part in which he will align an overtly *anti-colonial* position with an anti-familial one.

In this modernist text the deterritorialization of the male bachelor is partial at best. Occupying successively masculine and feminine positionalities, Jerome, our male hysteric, remains within the orbit of the familial. He does so by virtue of his narrative figuration of female sexuality and as both the continuing object of Juliette's hysterical desire and his dead cousin's literary executor. The novel draws our attention to the fact that women frequently exit from the male-penned modernist novel at the very moment feminist movements announce their re-entry into the public sphere. In step with modernism's evolution, the "free" bachelor will renew the picaresque tradition of male friendships and adventures while wandering through Europe and on to the colonies. There, he will play out the unending crisis of the isolated individual and bourgeois subjectivity as he toys with new collective identities and ideologies.

NOTES

1. Loring D. Knecht, "A New Reading of Gide's *La Porte étroite*", *PMLA*, 82 (1967), 64–648; Doris Y. Kadish, "'Alissa dans la vallée': Intertextual Echoes of Balzac in Two Novels by Gide," *French Forum*, 10, No. 1 (1985), 67–83; Albert Sonnenfeld, "On Readers and Reading in *La Porte étroite* and *L'Immoraliste*," *Romanic Review*, 67 (May 1976), 172–86.
2. Kevin Newmark, "Love's Cross in *La Porte étroite*", *MLN*, 99, No. 5 (1984), 1094–1115.
3. Jacques Lacan, "Jeunesse de Gide ou la lettre et le désir," in *Ecrits* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1966), 739–64.

4. Fredric Jameson, *Fables of Aggression. Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1979), 6–9.
5. See Michel Foucault, *La Volonté de savoir*, Vol. I of *Histoire de la sexualité* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 35–37, 40, 152–53; Jean-Louis Flandrin, *Families in Former Times: Kinship, Household and Sexuality*, trans. Richard Southern (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1979), 226–27; Yvonne Knibielher and Catherine Fouquet, *Histoire des mères du moyen âge jusqu'à nos jours* (Paris: Montalba, 1977), 135; Jacques Donzelot, *The Policing of Families*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1979), 12–14.
6. Edward Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1975), 136–37.
7. Said, *Beginnings*, 162–63.
8. Jean Borie, *Le Célibataire français* (Paris: Le Sagittaire, 1976), *passim*.
9. Borie, *Le Célibataire*, pp. 9, 19, 68–70; see also his *Le Tyran timide. Le naturalisme de la femme au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1973), 17. If I make numerous references to Jean Borie's work, it is simply because he is the only critic who deals at length with the issues that lie at the heart of the present essay.
10. Borie, *Le Célibataire*, 20; translation mine. All subsequent citations of French language texts in English are my translations unless otherwise stated.
11. André Gide, *Straight Is the Gate*, trans., Dorothy Bussy (New York: Vintage, 1952), 8, translation modified; *Romans, récits et soties*, ed. Maurice Nadeau (Paris: Gallimard, Pléiade edition, 1951), 498. All subsequent references to the novel to these editions will appear in the text, first to the English translation, then to the French (8/498).
12. Christopher L. Miller, *Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1985), 93–107. My suspicions about the overdetermined nature of Lucile's presentation were first confirmed by *Le Petit Robert*; the entry for *crêpelé, ée* reads as follows: "frisé à très petites ondulations (cheveux). Cf. crépu. 'Tes cheveux crespelés (sic), ta peau de mulâtresse' (Baudelaire)." It is a striking example of the circularity of literary discursive closure.
13. Erna Olafson Hellerstein, "French Women and the Orderly Household," in *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Western Society for French History*, No. 3 (1975), 383.
14. Borie, *Le Célibataire*, 144.
15. Jean Borie, *Mythologies de l'hérédité au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Galilée, 1981), 15–17.
16. Donzelot, *Policing*, 90–92; James F. McMillan, *Housewife or Harlot: The Place of Women in French Society 1870–1920* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981), 25–28; Elisabeth Badinter, *L'Amour en plus: histoire de l'amour maternel, XVIIe-XXe siècle* (Paris: Flammarion, 1980), 264–94.

17. Borie, *Mythologies*, 159.
18. Newmark, "Love's Cross," 1100-01
19. Susan Gubar, "'The Blank Page' and Issues of Female Creativity," in *The New Feminist Criticism* ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon, 1985), 294.
20. Sonnenfeld, "On Readers," 177-78.
21. Newmark, "Love's Cross," 1102-04.
22. Béatrice Didier, *Le Journal intime* (Paris: PUF, 1976), 91, 40-41, 106-07; "Pour une sociologie du journal intime," in *Le Journal intime et ses formes littéraires. Actes du Colloque de septembre 1975*. ed., V. Del Litto (Geneva: Droz, 1978), 256-57.
23. Kadish, "'Alissa dans la vallée': Intertextual Echoes".
24. Naomi Schor, *Breaking the Chain* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1985), 19-20.
25. Nancy K. Miller, "'Tristes triangles': *Le Lys dans la vallée* and Its Intertext," in *Pre-text/Text/Context: Essays in 19th-Century French Literature*, ed. Robert L. Mitchell (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1980), 69-70.
26. In this regard, our analysis is consonant with Gide's decision to excise a long passage from the beginning of chapter eight which recounts Jerome's life of debauchery after Alissa's death. A stereotypical episode of male grief would have diminished the unsettling quality of Jerome's sexuality.
27. Borie, *Le Tyran*, 15
28. Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du Texte* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1972), 60-61.
29. Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clement, *La Jeune née* (Paris: Union Générale d'Editions, 1975), 123.
30. For a definition of the "homosocial" as a system of male social relations see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: Homosocial Desire and English Literature* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1986), 3, 25.
31. On *distinction* see Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Idiot de la famille* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972) III, 245-48, 283-89, 304.
32. As quoted by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1979), 17; Sartre, *L'Idiot*, III, 289-91.