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Date March 6, 1986

THE "BLISS" OF READING

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

David J. Tulis

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ABSTRACT

Bertha, heroine of Katherine Mansfield's story, "Bliss," today feels extravagant felicity—hilarious and bright bliss. A reader who receives the work of art (rather than studying it, exploiting it for the exercise of his own genius) feels it too. How intoxicating! Bliss manipulates the reading, in fact. Serious-minded critics who labor over this work, however, who explain Bertha's "psychology," too often end up scorning the bliss; they give the impression of having never felt it. They work underneath the surface impression, or sensation, of the story, and often against it. For them, intricate fabrications and analyses fill what is, to a reader of "Bliss" engrossed in his "negative capability," only a void, one occupied by the indirect light of suggestion and unexamined assumption. The critics analyze Bertha as if she were a real person who can be known and discussed apart from the refractory narratoral glass of the story through which each reader conceives her. The result: criticism which often fails entirely to bring to the "Bliss" reader's mind the Bertha that he or she conceived in an open reading of the tale itself. To read criticism that does not deal in some way with reading can distort art,

flatten the "Bliss" reader's memory of his reception. Criticism absorbs Bertha into its own—new—fiction, reincarnating her as part of the unavoidable hazard of critical composition.

This thesis is an experiment. It mates the critic's writing to the artist's in a kind of fluid plagiarism, rendering the reader-critic's immediate and superficial sensation of his own reading experience as it develops from line to line. The thesis's decentralized form impinges on the critic's content and conclusions. The construction of "Bliss" in the reader's receptive mind can be seen by the reader to neatly evade the constricting clasp of "objective" criticism and leave the work of art (as it exists for that reader) safely inside the realm of the un-nameable. As Barthes says, art unexpresses the expressible. Criticism, then, as shown here, expresses the inexpressible, and so suffers from the error which is its justification for its pursuit of itself.

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BLISS

By Katherine Mansfield (1948)

Although Bertha Young was thirty she still had moments like this when she wanted to run instead of walk, to take dancing steps on and off the pavement, to bowl a hoop, to throw something up in the air and catch it again, or to stand still and laugh <2 at—nothing—at nothing, simply.

<3 What can you do if you are thirty and, turning the corner of your own street, you are overcome, suddenly, by a feeling of bliss—absolute bliss!—as though you'd suddenly swallowed a bright piece of that late afternoon sun and it burned in your bosom, <4 sending out a little shower of sparks into every particle, into every finger and toe? . . .

<5 Oh, is there no way you can express it without being "drunk and disorderly"? How idiotic civilization is! <6 Why be given a body if you have to keep it shut up in a case like a rare, rare fiddle?

<7 "No, that about the fiddle is not quite what I mean," she thought, <8 running up the steps and feeling in her bag for the key—she'd forgotten it, as usual—and rattling the letter-box. "It's not what I mean, because—Thank you, Mary"—she went into the hall. "Is nurse back?"

<9 "Yes, M'm."

"And has the fruit come?"

"Yes, M'm. Everything's come."

<10 "Bring the fruit up to the dining-room, will you? I'll arrange it before I go upstairs."

<11 It was dusky in the dining-room and quite chilly. But all the same Bertha threw off her coat; she could not bear the tight clasp of it another moment, and the cold air fell on her arms.

<12 But in her bosom there was still that bright glowing place—that shower of little sparks coming from it. <13 It was almost unbearable. She hardly dared to breathe for fear of fanning it higher, and yet she breathed deeply, deeply. <14 She hardly dared to look into the cold mirror—but she did look, <15 and it gave her back a woman, radiant, with smiling, trembling lips, with big, dark eyes <16 and an air of listening, waiting for something . . . divine to happen . . . that she knew must happen . . . infallibly.

<17 Mary brought in the fruit on a tray and with it a glass bowl, and a blue dish, very lovely, with a strange sheen on it as though it had been dipped in milk.

"Shall I turn on the light, M'm?"

<18 "No, thank you. I can see quite well."

<19 There were tangerines and apples stained with strawberry pink. Some yellow pears, smooth as silk, some white grapes covered with a silver bloom and a big cluster of purple ones. These last she had bought <20 to tone in with the new dining-room carpet. Yes, that did sound rather far-fetched and absurd, but it was really why she had bought them.

She had thought in the shop: "I must have some purple ones to bring the carpet up to the table." And it had seemed quite sense at the time.

<21 When she had finished with them and had made two pyramids of these bright round shapes, she stood away from the table to get the effect—and it really was most curious. <22 For the dark table seemed to melt into the dusky light and the glass dish and the blue bowl to float in the air. <23 This, of course in her present mood, was so incredibly beautiful. . . . She began to laugh.

"No, no. I'm getting hysterical." And she seized her bag and coat and ran upstairs to the nursery.

[Section Two]

<24 Nurse sat at the low table giving Little B her supper after her bath. The baby had on a white flannel gown and a blue woollen jacket, and her dark, fine hair was brushed up into a funny little peak. She looked up when she saw her mother and began to jump.

<25 "Now, my lovey, eat it up like a good girl," said Nurse, setting her lips in a way that Bertha knew, and that meant she had come into the nursery at another wrong moment.

"Has she been good, Nanny?"

"She's been a little sweet all afternoon," whispered Nanny. "We went to the park and I sat down on a chair and took her out of the pram and a big dog came along and put its head on my knee and she clutched its ear, tugged it. Oh, you should have seen her."

Bertha wanted to ask if it wasn't rather dangerous to let her clutch at a strange dog's ear. <26 But she did not dare to. She stood watching them, her hands by her side, like the poor little girl in front of the rich little girl with the doll.

The baby looked up at her again, stared, and then smiled so charmingly that Bertha couldn't help crying:

"Oh, Nanny, do let me finish giving her her supper while you put the bath things away."

"Well, M'm, she oughtn't to be changed hands while she's eating," said Nanny, still whispering. "It unsettles her; it's very likely to upset her."

How absurd it was. Why have a baby if it has to be kept—not in a case like a rare, rare fiddle—but in another woman's arms?

"Oh, I must!" said she.

<27 Very offended, Nanny handed her over.

<28 "Now, don't excite her after her supper. You know you do, M'm. And I have such a time with her after!"

<29 Thank heaven! Nanny went out of the room with the bath towels.

"Now I've got you to myself, my little precious," said Bertha, as the baby leaned against her.

She ate delightfully, holding up her lips for the spoon and then waving her hands. Sometimes she wouldn't let the spoon go; and sometimes, just as Bertha had filled it, she waved it away to the four winds.

When the soup was finished Bertha turned round to the fire.

"You're nice—you're very nice!" said she, kissing her warm baby. "I'm fond of you. I like you."

<30 And, indeed, she loved Little B so much—her neck as she bent forward, her exquisite toes as they shone transparent in the firelight—that all her feeling of bliss came back again, <31 and again she didn't know how to express it—what to do with it.

<32 "You're wanted on the telephone," said Nanny, coming back in triumph and seizing her Little B.

[Section Three]

<33 Down she flew. It was Harry.

"Oh, is that you, Ber? Look here. I'll be late. I'll take a taxi and come along as quickly as I can, but get dinner put back ten minutes—will you? All right?"

"Yes, perfectly. Oh, Harry!"

"Yes?"

What had she to say? She'd nothing to say. She only wanted to get in touch with him for a moment. She couldn't absurdly cry: "Hasn't it been a divine day!"

<34 "What is it?" rapped out the little voice.

>35 "Nothing. Entendu," said Bertha, and hung up the receiver, thinking how more than idiotic civilization was.

[Section Four]

<36 They had people coming to dinner. <37 The Norman Knights—a very sound couple—he was about to start a theatre, and she was awfully keen on interior

decoration, a young man, Eddie Warren, who had just published a little book of poems and whom everybody was asking to dine, and a "find" of Bertha's called Pearl Fulton. <38 What Miss Fulton did, Bertha didn't know. <39 They had met at the club and Bertha had fallen in love with her, as she always did fall in love with beautiful women who had something strange about them.

<40 The provoking thing was that, though they had been about together and met a number of times and really talked, Bertha couldn't yet make her out. Up to a certain point Miss Fulton was rarely, wonderfully frank, but the certain point was there, and beyond that she would not go.

Was there anything beyond it? <41 Harry said "No." Voted her dullish, and "cold like all blond women, with a touch, perhaps, of anemia of the brain." But Bertha wouldn't agree with him; not yet at any rate.

<42 "No, the way she has of sitting with her head a little on one side, and smiling, has something behind it, Harry, and I must find out what that something is."

"Most likely it's a good stomach," answered Harry.

He made a point of catching Bertha's heels with replies of that kind . . . "liver frozen, my dear girl," or "pure flatulence," or "kidney disease," . . . and so on. For some strange reason Bertha liked this, and almost admired it in him very much.

<43 She went into the drawing-room and lighted the fire; then, picking up the cushions, one by one, that Mary had disposed so carefully, she threw them back on to the chairs and the couches. That made

all the difference; the room came alive at once. As she was about to throw the last one she surprised herself by suddenly hugging it to her, passionately, passionately. But it did not put out the fire in her bosom. Oh, on the contrary!

<44 The windows of the drawing-room opened on to a balcony overlooking the garden. At the far end, against the wall, there was a tall, slender pear tree in fullest, richest bloom; it stood perfect, as though becalmed against the jade-green sky. Bertha couldn't help feeling, even from this distance, that it had not a single bud or faded petal. Down below, in the garden beds, the red and yellow tulips, heavy with flowers, seemed to lean upon the dusk. <45 A grey cat, dragging its belly, crept across the lawn, and a black one, its shadow, trailed after. The sight of them, so intent and so quick, gave Bertha a curious shiver.

"What creepy things cats are!" she stammered, and she turned away from the window and began walking up and down. . . .

<46 How strong the jonquils smelled in the warm room. Too strong? Oh, no. And yet, as though overcome, she flung down on a couch and pressed her hands to her eyes.

"I'm too happy—too happy!" she murmered.

And she seemed to see on her eyelids the lovely pear tree with its wide open blossoms as a symbol of her own life.

<47 Really—really—she had everything. She was young. Harry and she were as much in love as ever, and they got on together splendidly and were really good pals. She had an adorable baby. They

didn't have to worry about money. They had this absolutely satisfactory house and garden. And friends —modern, thrilling friends, writers and painters and poets or people keen on social questions—just the kind of friends they wanted. And then there were books, and there was music, and she had found a wonderful little dressmaker, and they were going abroad in the summer, and their new cook made the most superb omelettes. . . .

"I'm absurd. Absurd!" She sat up; but she felt quite dizzy, quite drunk. It must have been the spring.

Yes, it was the spring. Now she was so tired she could not drag herself upstairs to dress.

[Section Five]

<48 A white dress, a string of jade beads, green shoes and stockings. It wasn't intentional. She had thought of this scheme hours before she stood at the drawing-room window.

Her petals rustled softly into the hall, and she kissed Mrs. Norman Knight, who was taking off the most amusing orange coat with a procession of black monkeys round the hem and up the fronts.

". . . Why! Why! Why is the middle-class so stodgy—so utterly without a sense of humour! My dear, it's only by a fluke that I am here at all —Norman being the protective fluke. For my darling monkeys so upset the train that it rose to a man and simply ate me with its eyes. Didn't laugh—wasn't amused—that I should have loved. No, just stared—and bored me through and through."

"But the cream of it was," said Norman, pressing a large tortoiseshell-rimmed monocle into his eye, "you don't mind me telling this, Face, do you?" (In their home and among their friends they called each other Face and Mug.) "The cream of it was when she,being full fed, turned to the woman beside her and said: 'Haven't you ever seen a monkey before?'"

"Oh, yes!" Mrs. Norman Knight joined in the laughter. "Wasn't that too absolutely creamy?"

And a funnier thing still was that now her coat was off she did look like a very intelligent monkey—who had even made that yellow silk dress out of scraped banana skins. And her amber ear-rings; they were like little dangling nuts.

"This is a sad, sad fall!" said Mug, pausing in front of Little B's perambulator. "When the perambulator comes into the hall—" and he waved the rest of the quotation away.

The bell rang. It was lean, pale Eddie Warren (as usual) in a state of acute distress.

"It is the right house, isn't it?" he pleaded.

"Oh, I think so—I hope so," said Bertha brightly.

"I have had such a dreadful experience with a taxi-man; he was most sinister. I couldn't get him to stop. The more I knocked and called the faster he went. And in the moonlight this bizarre figure with the flattened head crouching over the lit-tle wheel. . . ."

He shuddered, taking off an immense white scarf. Bertha noticed that his socks were white, too —most charming.

"But how dreadful!" she cried.

"Yes, it really was," said Eddie, following her into the drawing-room. "I saw myself driving through Eternity in a timeless taxi."

He knew the Norman Knights. In fact, he was going to write a play for N.K. when the theatre scheme came off.

"Well, Warren, how's the play?" said Norman Knight, dropping his monocle and giving his eye a moment in which to rise to the surface before it was screwed down again.

And Mrs. Norman Knight: "Oh, Mr. Warren, what happy socks!"

"I am so glad you like them," said he, staring at his feet. "They seem to have got so much whiter since the moon rose." And he turned his lean sorrowful young face to Bertha. "There is a moon, you know."

She wanted to cry: "I am sure there is—often—often!"

He really was a most attractive person. But so was Face, crouched before the fire in her banana skins, and so was Mug, smoking a cigarette and saying as he flicked the ash: "Why doth the bridegroom tarry?"

"There he is, now."

<49 Bang went the front door open and shut. Harry shouted: "Hullo, you people. Down in five minutes." And they heard him swarm up the stairs. Bertha couldn't help smiling; she knew how he loved doing things at high pressure. What, after all, did an extra five minutes matter? But he would pretend to himself that they mattered beyond measure. And

then he would make a great point of coming into the drawing-room, extravagantly cool and collected.

<50 Harry had such a zest for life. <51 Oh, how she appreciated it in him. And his passion for fighting—for seeking in everything that came up against him another test of his power and of his courage—that, too, she understood. Even when it made him just occasionally, to other people, who didn't know him well, a little ridiculous perhaps . . . . For there were moments when he rushed into battle where no battle was. . . . <52 She talked and laughed and positively forgot until he had come in (just as she had imagined) that Pearl Fulton had not turned up.

"I wonder if Miss Fulton has forgotten?"

"I expect so," said Harry. "Is she on the 'phone?"

"Ah! There's a taxi, now." And Bertha smiled with that little air of proprietorship that she always assumed while her women finds were new and mysterious. "She lives in taxis."

<53 "She'll run to fat if she does," said Harry coolly, ringing the bell for dinner. "Frightful danger for blond women."

<54 "Harry—don't," warned Bertha, laughing up at him.

Came another tiny moment, while they waited, laughing and talking, just a trifle too much at their ease, a trifle too unaware. And then Miss Fulton, all in silver, with a silver fillet binding her pale blond hair, came in smiling, her head a little to one side.

>55 "Am I late?"

"No, not at all," said Bertha. "Come along."

And she took her arm and they moved into the dining-room.

What was there in the touch of that cool arm that could fan—fan—start blazing—the fire of bliss that Bertha did not know what to do with?

Miss Fulton did not look at her; but then she seldom did look at people directly. Her heavy eyelids lay upon her eyes and the strange half smile came and went upon her lips as though she lived by listening rather than seeing. >56 But Bertha knew, suddenly, as if the longest, most intimate look had passed between them—as if they had said to each other: "You, too?"—that Pearl Fulton, stirring the beautiful red soup in the grey plate, was feeling just what she was feeling.

<57 And the others? Face and Mug, Eddie and Harry, their spoons rising and falling—dabbing their lips with their napkins, crumbling bread, fiddling with the forks and glasses and talking.

"I met her at the Alpha show—the weirdest little person. She'd not only cut off her hair, but she seemed to have taken a dreadfully good snip off her legs and arms and her neck and her poor little nose as well."

"Isn't she very liée with Michael Oat?"

"The man who wrote Love in False Teeth?"

"He wants to write a play for me. One act. One man. Decides to commit suicide. Gives all the reasons why he should and why he shouldn't. And just as he has made up his mind either to do it or not to do it —curtain. Not half a bad idea."

"What's he going to call it—'Stomach Trouble'?"

"I think I've come across the same idea in a lit-tle French review, quite unknown in England."

<58 No, they didn't share it. They were dears —dears—and she loved having them there, at her table, and giving them delicious food and wine. In fact, she longed to tell them how delightful they were, and what a decorative group they made, how they seemed to set one another off and how they reminded her of a play by Tchekof!

<59 Harry was enjoying his dinner. It was part of his—well, not his nature, exactly, and certainly not his pose—his—something or other—to talk about food and to glory in his "shameless passion for the white flesh of the lobster" and "the green of pistachio ices—green and cold like the eyelids of Egyptian dancers."

<60 When he looked up at her and said: "Bertha, this is a very admirable soufflée!" she almost could have wept with child-like pleasure.

<61 Oh, why did she feel so tender towards the whole world tonight? Everything was good—was right. All that happened seemed to fill again her brimming cup of bliss.

<62 And still, in the back of her mind, there was the pear tree. It would be silver now, in the light of poor dear Eddie's moon, silver as Miss Fulton, who sat there turning a tangerine in her slender fingers that were so pale a light seemed to come from them.

<63 What she simply couldn't make out—what was miraculous—was how she should have guessed Miss Fulton's mood so exactly and so instantly. <64 For she never doubted for a moment that she was right, and yet what had she to go on? Less than nothing.

"I believe this does happen very, very rarely between women. Never between men," thought Bertha. "But while I am making the coffee in the drawing-room perhaps she will 'give a sign.'"

What she meant by that she did not know, and what would happen after that she could not imagine.

While she thought like this <65 she saw herself talking and laughing. She had to talk because of her desire to laugh.

"I must laugh or die."

But when she noticed Face's funny little habit of tucking something down the front of her bodice —as if she kept a tiny, secret hoard of nuts there, too—Bertha had to dig her nails into her hands—so as not to laugh too much.

[Section Six]

<66 It was over at last. And: "Come and see my new coffee machine," said Bertha.

"We only have a new coffee machine once a fortnight," said Harry. Face took her arm this time; Miss Fulton bent her head and followed after.

<67 The fire had died down in the drawing-room to a red, flickering "nest of baby phoenixes," said Face.

"Don't turn up the light for a moment. It is so lovely." And down she crouched by the fire again. She was always cold . . . "without her little red flannel jacket, of course," thought Bertha.

<68 At that moment Miss Fulton "gave the sign."

<69 "Have you a garden?" said the cool, sleepy voice.

<70 This was so exquisite on her part that all Bertha could do was to obey. She crossed the room, pulled the curtains apart, and opened those long windows.

<71 "There!" she breathed.

<72 And the two women stood side by side looking at the slender, flowering tree. Although it was so still it seemed, like the flame of a candle, to stretch up, to point, to quiver in the bright air, to grow taller and taller as they gazed—almost to touch the rim of the round, silver moon.

<73 How long did they stand there? Both, as it were, caught in that circle of unearthly light, understanding each other perfectly, creatures of another world, and wondering what they were to do in this one with all this blissful treasure that burned in their bosoms and dropped, in silver flowers, from their hair and hands?

<74 For ever—for a moment? And did Miss Fulton murmur: "Yes. Just <u>that</u>." Or did Bertha dream it?

<75 Then the light was snapped on and Face made the coffee and Harry said: "My dear Mrs. Knight, don't ask me about my baby. I never see her. I shan't feel the slightest interest in her until she has a lover," and <76 Mug took his eye out of the conservatory for a moment and then put it under glass again and Eddie Warren drank his coffee and set down the cup with a face of anguish as though he had drunk and seen the spider.

"What I want to do is to give the young men a show. I believe London is simply teeming with first-chop, unwritten plays. What I want to say to 'em is: 'Here's the theatre. Fire ahead.'"

"You know, my dear, I am going to decorate a room for the Jacob Nathans. Oh, I am so tempted to do a fried-fish scheme, with the backs of the chairs shaped like frying pans and the lovely chip potatoes embroidered all over the curtains."

"The trouble with our young writing men is that they are still too romantic. You can't put out to sea without being seasick and wanting a basin. Well, why don't they have the courage of those basins?"

"A dreadful poem about a girl who was violated by a beggar without a nose in a lit-tle wood. . . ."

<77 Miss Fulton sank into the lowest, deepest chair and Harry handed round the cigarettes.

<78 From the way he stood in front of her shaking the silver box and saying abruptly: "Egyptian? Turkish? Virginian? They're all mixed up," Bertha realized that she not only bored him; he really disliked her. And she decided from the way Miss Fulton said; "No, thank you, I won't smoke," that she felt it, too, and was hurt.

<79 "Oh, Harry, don't dislike her. You are quite wrong about her. <80 She's wonderful, wonderful. And, besides, how can you feel so differently about someone who means so much to me. I shall try to tell you when we are in bed tonight what has been happening. What she and I have shared."

[Section Seven]

<81 At those last words something strange and almost terrifying darted into Bertha's mind. And this something blind and smiling whispered to her:

"Soon these people will go. The house will be quiet —quiet. The lights will be out. And you and he will <82 be alone together in the dark room—the warm bed. . . ."

<83 She jumped up from her chair and ran over to the piano.

"What a pity someone does not play!" she cried. "What a pity somebody does not play."

<84 For the first time in her life Bertha Young desired her husband.

<85 Oh, she'd loved him—she'd been in love with him, of course, in every other way, but just not in that way. <86 And, equally, of course, she'd understood that he was different. <87 They'd discussed it so often. It had worried her dreadfully at first to find that she was so cold, but after a time it had not seemed to matter. <88 They were so frank with each other—such good pals. That was the best of being modern.

<89 But now—ardently! ardently! The word ached in her ardent body! Was this what that feeling of bliss had been leading up to? <90 But then, then—

<91 "My dear," said Mrs. Norman Knight, "you know our shame. We are the victims of time and train. We live in Hampstead. It's been so nice."

"I'll come with you into the hall," said Bertha. "I loved having you. But you must not miss the last train. That's so awful, isn't it?"

"Have a whisky, Knight, before you go?" called Harry.

"No, thanks, old chap."

<92 Bertha squeezed his hand for that as she shook it.

<93 "Good night, good-bye," she cried from the top step, feeling that this self of hers was taking leave of them forever.

<94 When she got back into the drawing-room the others were on the move.

<95 ". . . Then you can come part of the way in my taxi."

"I shall be so thankful not to have to face another drive alone after my dreadful experience."

"You can get a taxi at the rank just at the end of the street. You won't have to walk more than a few yards."

"That's a comfort. I'll go and put on my coat."

<96 Miss Fulton moved towards the hall and Bertha was following when Harry almost pushed past.

"Let me help you."

<97 Bertha knew that he was repenting his rudeness—she let him go. What a boy he was in some ways—so impulsive—so—simple.

And Eddie and she were left by the fire.

<98 I wonder if you have seen Bilks' new poem called Table d'Hôte," said Eddie softly. "It's so wonderful. In the last Anthology. Have you got a copy? I'd so like to show it to you. It begins with an incredibly beautiful line: 'Why Must it Always be Tomato Soup?'"

"Yes," said Bertha. And she moved noiselessly <99 to a table opposite the drawing-room door and Eddie glided noiselessly after her. She picked up a little book and gave it to him; they had not made a sound.

<100 While he looked it up she turned her head towards the hall. And she saw . . . Harry with Miss Fulton's coat in his arms and Miss Fulton with

her back turned to him and her head bent. He tossed the coat away, put his hands on her shoulders and turned her violently to him. His lips said: "I adore you," and Miss Fulton laid her moonbeam fingers on his cheeks and smiled her sleepy smile. Harry's nostrils quivered; his lips curled back in a hideous grin <101 while he whispered: "Tomorrow," and with her eyelids Miss Fulton said: "Yes."

<102 "Here it is," said Eddie. "'Why Must it Always be Tomato Soup?' It's so deeply true, don't you feel? Tomato soup is so dreadfully eternal."

<103 "If you prefer," said Harry's voice, very loud, from the hall, "I can phone you a cab to come to the door."

<104 "Oh, no. It's not necessary," said Miss Fulton, and she came up to Bertha and gave her the slender fingers to hold.

<105 "Good-bye. Thank you so much."

"Good-bye," said Bertha.

Miss Fulton held her hand a moment longer.

<106 "Your lovely pear tree!" she murmured.

And then she was gone, <107 with Eddie following, like the black cat following the grey cat.

<108 "I'll shut up shop," said Harry, extravagantly cool and collected.

<109 "Your lovely pear tree—pear tree—pear tree!"

<110 Bertha simply ran over to the long windows.

<111 "Oh, what is going to happen now?" she cried.

But the pear tree was as lovely as ever and as full of flower and as still.

I find my great difficulty in writing is to learn to submit. Not that one ought to be without resistance—of course I don't mean that. But when I am writing of another I want so to lose myself in the soul of the other that I am not.

Delicate perception is not enough; one must find the exact way to convey the delicate perception. One must inhabit the other mind and know more of the other mind and your secret knowledge is the light in which all is steeped.

May I be found worthy to do it! Lord, make my crystal clear for thy light to shine through.

Anything that I write in this mood will be no good; it will be full of sediment. If I were well, I would go off by myself somewhere and sit under a tree. One must learn, one must practice, to forget oneself. I can't tell the truth about Aunt Anne unless I am free to look into her life without self-consciousness. Oh God! I am divided still. I am bad. I fail in my personal life. I lapse into impatience, temper, vanity, and so I fail as thy priest.

—Katherine Mansfield on writing.

CHAPTER I

READING AND ITS ASSUMPTIONS

Step back in time a moment with me. This is far enough. Here I sit in my favorite porch chair, opening my hard-bound volume. I have turned the pages to "Bliss" and I am going to read it. No pen lies near for me to mark margins. No notebook awaits my thoughts. I am under no obligation to comment on the work of art after I read it, to make anything of it.

Question: must I prepare myself beforehand?

I confess that such a question generally does not occur to me when I sit down to enjoy a book. This volume is mine, you understand. These stories are all mine. I am going to read them, starting with "Bliss."

What can I do this hour to make myself read aright —to read, shall we say, as Mansfield would read if she could stalk out of her coffin in Fontainbleau-en-Avon and sit next to me and I could, like an angel, read through her eyes and think through her mind? To read according to this ideal, but inaccessible, standard, am I going to be advised to consult Modern Fiction Studies first? Should I hurry ahead and check out Antony Alpers' biography of Katherine Mansfield? Or Jeffrey Meyers'? Maybe I should

give up reading "Bliss" at all, should wait years until Oxford Press publishes its complete editions of Mansfield letters.

The only assurance anyone can have that I will read in the best way I possibly can today seems, on the face of it, fragile and whimsical compared to the stodgy advice that I "conduct a searching study of current literature" or study post-World War I history. Given that I am myself and not Mansfield, my assurance is that I will try to "read well. Receive the work." I can either receive or use "Bliss." In reading a story the best way, we "exert our senses and imagination and various other powers according to a pattern invented by the author," observes C.S. Lewis, a bit obviously perhaps. But "when we 'use' it we treat it as assistance to our own activities. . . . 'Using' is inferior to 'reception' because art, if used rather than received, merely facilitates, brightens, relieves or palliates our life, but does not add to it" (Lewis 1979, 88). Using art, then, is misusing it.

So the answer to the question, "Must I prepare first?", might here be answered, "No!" Rather than read the tale and try to make it fit into assertions made about its plot, characterization or tone, I must keep my inner silence and provide room for the total reception of the work (Lewis 1979, 93).

A question still bumping my elbow is one that those who search for Katherine Mansfield in her creations are right in persisting to ask. Is receiving the work going to do her intent justice? "Can she possibly have intended this reaction of yours?" A story, they assume, can be a solid, verifiable "it" aside from consideration of any given interaction it establishes with an individual reader. The words on the page are the "given" and they can be settled upon. I am a particular man, they are eager to point out, enjoying eccentricities, peculiarities and faults. I have history and, significantly, youth. I have read thousands of fewer books than another reader of the same story. "Certainly," the argument goes, "your reading today is prone to variations and distortions which would make Mansfield, whom you admit to love dearly as if you really knew her, weep in pity or grit her teeth in fury. Your mistakes in reading, as we call them, should indeed be called 'mistakes' by you in your own terms. What you experienced is not what Mansfield intended." Do I not find myself impressed that this comes from an "accepted authority"—my professor, or essayist Helen Nebeker, or someone who has lived sixty years compared to my twenty-six? The argument that my reading experience was, in its description, frivolous here, stupid there, fantastic yonder might seem to overwhelm me.

To silence such voices I must decide whether reading "Bliss," and later writings about the story, requires me to acknowledge Katherine Mansfield. In an act of reading good enough to be called a reception of the work, does it matter whether the author intended a given event or experience in reading that the reader took the text to intend?

Writing a story, Mansfield observes, asks that the writer efface herself for the sake of the world she creates. Reading is much like that. It is an escape from myself into that same world that she created in her mind. Do we say that Mansfield's best stories are so thrilling to read because she succeeded in doing what she said she must—losing herself in the thing-to-be-made? Or do we love them because she failed to efface herself? We cherish her works either because they are an expression of her personality or because, when she wrote, she escaped from her personality and her many problems and wishes now for us to attend something better and more interesting.

Without question it can be said Mansfield is deeply and genuinely present in her work. I imagine I know her all too well by reading her stories. But in reading, in receiving the work, I give no thought to the historical

figure, the fascinating identity of the author whose consciousness I now inhabit. It's as if I were drinking a liquid so wonderful that I scarcely pay any attention to the cup, with its rim and handle, that I lift to my lips. I do not search for or look at the author, but look with the author.

In reading, the words on the page are all I have and all I care about. It is on the page, in language, that the writer and reader meet. They do not meet for the purpose of being themselves as they were before they wrote and read. Mansfield cannot reach through the back of the page with a "what I meant was . . ." nor can I reach beyond the typeface to say, "Oh, sorry! I saw it differently." Any given reading of the story, or a given rereading of it, is what it is.

How funny to say it that way. I sound as if I were refuting someone whose argument was so childish that I scarcely feel I must explain why he is wrong. The observation seems obvious, but let me remind you why it bears repeating. If in my first reading of "Bliss," for example, I picture the house in which Bertha Young lives, and I picture it in a certain way, and then try to describe to an Englishman what my picture seems to consist of, that man might well hoot. "An architectural monstrosity born in ignorance!" he cries. Certainly if I were older and

wiser, my picture would be more "correct." But my earlier "incorrect" creation, the one that occurred before I visited England, was incontrovertible—not because it was "correct"—but because it actually occurred. It was a real, transitory, fact of the literary terrain in one reader's engagement with the work. And as "Bliss" is not about architecture nor the particular nature of London townhouses, my error, if it can be called one, is insignificant; my peculiar creation violates neither the spirit, nor the letter, of the text.

How is that? When Mansfield wrote, sat in one of those awful continental hotel chairs and pondered, she had a picture too in her mind of what Bertha's house looks like. She sustained her own picture when she read words mentioning various locations of the house —the dining-room, for example. At least I can say her words, as she wrote them on paper, did not refute, deny, cancel for her any picture her mind held. To the words she finally chose for her readers she committed herself and her story. And that was that. Now, silence. Not because she is dead, but because as I sit here reading I have only her book and no other article or scrap. Only the book with the story in it, my openness, and some iced tea.

As an event which may occur once in a given form

or along a given perspective, my reading today cannot be revised or changed or improved as I have it. It is personal, and thus by the author's standard (if we imagine the author standing beside her story rather than in and behind it), potentially faulty. In a given sitting, I read the story and play my part as co-creator as if the intent of the author could not conceivably be separated by me from what I take, in any instant, the text to intend. A reading that "is what it is" or "was what it was" is an irrefutable fact no less than the eruption of a volcano or the click of a pen.

Too few critics think about this. Their analyses, explications, summaries and paraphrases of a short story exist without the slightest reference to the critic's enmeshment in the sequence of created events that make up reception. They fail to think that their own experience in unfolding the story was intended by the author. And so they turn to the author herself. These critics do not equate the story with the author, and so shove the story experience out of their way and reach around behind for the historical figment of Katherine Mansfield as we know her through journals, letters and literary analogues. Wishing to convince his readers to "view Bertha Young in such-and-such a way," the critic bound to traditional explication ignores the authority the

story gives him over his own experience as a reader. He asserts that the author intended, or must have intended x, y, and z. He attributes backwards upon the author an assertion that may or may not be a direct effect of reading. An essayist ends up convincing you of a reading because he is a better historian rather than a better reader. The text that the modern Mansfield would have us give ourselves wholly to as moderns is discredited by the corrupting references to authorship. Historical "proofs" range from the off-hand obeisance to the heavy duty-digression, from:

> Certainly we may suppose that Mansfield felt her own essential freedom when lost in the soul of Bertha Young and her short-lived bliss (Eisinger 1949, 28)

to:

> [To] strip Bertha of her human dignity [as does essayist Marvin Magalaner] and to make the story into an unpleasant little expose of a social group and of a child-woman is to fail to recognize the author's state of mind during the writing of the story and her hopes for her art (Zorn 1980, 281).

Marilyn Zorn, writer of this last remark, is arguing that we should view Bertha favorably. I sympathize with her view. But if Zorn loves Bertha when she reads, why does she not say so? If she objects to Magalaner's characterization of Bertha because she never once felt tempted to make it herself when she read or reflected on Bertha Young, why not talk about her

perspective as a reader? Why not offer me notes on how she read, and suggest that these experiences of hers are enough for her in her own mind to deny Magalaner's harsh description? Zorn and other "objective" critics claim to have the authority of the historical author behind their assertions. I claim the authority of the living text, having stepped beyond the question that matters to them—"Did the author intend this perception" —to claiming that his or her literary text intended it and thus (though it seems impudent to say so) that he or she automatically did. I am discussing reading here, and thus see no distinction between text and author: and so I might be thought to argue that I do indeed have the author's intention to back whatever happens in my reading, to back whatever I <u>say</u> happened in a given reading. In fact, the author has dropped out of my consideration entirely. I am concerned with reading today, and as I regard an interaction between "Bliss" and myself I claim that perceptions, sensations, moods and ideas as they occurred to me were, indeed, intended to be part of "Bliss." The text is the actor, making me play my part. The text, designed by the author, provides a system of codes, signals, suggestions and possibilities, which selectively and according to a pattern into which I fall create a particular version of the circumstance

of "Bliss." The author is in the midst of the text, not behind it, like a deux ex machina (Barthes 1975, 27); as Barthes has said, "the author never produces anything but presumptions of meaning, forms, and it is the world which fills them" (Barthes 1972, xi). And so I do not wish to be heard arguing that my reading today, as I relate it, would be identical to a reading by Katherine Mansfield if she could read at my elbow. Her reading too would follow only some of the possibilities her text creates, ones that are no less and no more authentic than those I pursue.

Now another corrective. Perhaps I give the mistaken impression that I believe the readings of two people can be so different as to bear no resemblance. Just the opposite, I believe, can be shown to be true. I argue that Zorn should report on her reading for no other reason than that reading is the common point for Zorn and everyone else. If Zorn's perception of the text has anything in common with mine, reading will be the circumstance where such coincidence can be discerned—reading of reception rather than a critical reading, which is the kind she describes in her essay. A reader's perception of "Bliss," as we each reshape and distort it in our attempts to explain it, resembles the other's perception less and less. To begin measuring differences, one should consider the genetic

model, the source, the prototype. "What happens to one informed reader of a work will happen, within a range of nonessential variation, to another," one critic observes (Fish 1980, 52).

The word "nonessential" makes me fidget, but I venture to agree. Freudian and symbolist critics have most in common when they read. A feminist like Zorn has most in common with a phenomenologist like me when she reads. "It is only when readers become literary critics and the passing of judgment takes precedence over the reading experience that opinions begin to diverge" (Fish 1980, 52). Literary machinery comes into play, our assumptions about how to talk about art and literature, our ambitions for our place within the institution. Reading is first among all interpretations; words are not "pointable to" apart from some or other interpretive perspective. No category of a text's "given" exists before some sort of interpretation begins (Fish 1981, 9). If Zorn were willing to describe for me her reception at its first instance, her first interpretation, if you will, she could lead me from there to see how her academically-learnt and developed methods and preferences construe one kind of interpretation of the more removed kind over another—say, a feminist version over a Marxist.

As I see it, Zorn's mistake as a writer is that

she chokes me on meat when she should start with milk. I leap from her experience of the text (which she doesn't describe) to her explanation of character (offered in great and ingenious detail). A lawyer in court will make a similar error if he relates to witnesses his theories and conclusions and then asks them please to step down; no, he appeals to them for their version of events and then tries to convince all his listeners—judge, jury, the witnesses themselves—that his explanation is plausible, possibly irrefutable. As a witness of one instance of "Bliss"'s coming-into-being, I would like to hear first the basic testimony when I read a critical article if that can be brought to bear. That first, and then I will swallow more. After all, I read criticism now for a particular reason: to find out what happened to me when I read.

A reader who is more intelligent, human, articulate and well-read than I might enjoy "Bliss" in a way that makes my own insight and pleasure seem fainthearted by comparison. By the same token, another reader who is not as informed or privileged as I might receive "Bliss" in a way that might seem less beautiful than my own (if, of course, this reader could communicate his experience). Such comparisons, interesting though they may be to speculation, cannot of course be made in any practical

sense. But we must realize that "Bliss" has been entrusted to people like me—and people like you—for better or worse. We should not be shy to see how we treat or mistreat it. Any given reading of the story, as I take it up for pleasure, is a legitimate event for critical inquiry.

Yes, an event for critical inquiry. But how can one inquire into—and report on—an event which occurs in one's own mind without finding that the inquiry, or the report coming from it, disturbs the event being inquired into? A "study" of a reading can be as disruptive and distorting of that event as many studies in the social sciences (sociology, for example) are meddlesome to the matters they seek to study. Events can retreat before the method. However much I speak to you of "a given reading," I remain to be convinced that a reading experience can be recorded or transcribed, like a voice can be recorded on magnetic tape or a scene captured by a photographic negative.

A given sitting in which I fill a new life as Bertha Young in her hour of peril and felicity is beyond the reach of accurate description. And the very instinct that must exist behind a production such as mine (one that attempts such a description) is spurned, starved out,

taunted by the high-flying instinct that rises upon the desire to read for no reason but pleasure. Reading distracts me from my desire to name (dada-ism, romantic, homosexual) and forbids me from naming it as I am reading, even though all the while, as Barthes observes, it drives me unceasingly toward a name, a final point ending my "thralldom." Such a point is never reached, I believe, in receiving the work "Bliss," though its explicators see their task as closing it off, as frequently I find my own reflections having me do once I lay the book down (Barthes 1975).

So consider the following narration of the reading experience as fiction. Realizing this, you can believe as far as you will that it is "true" and indeed a "record" of my prototypical encounter. Arbitrarily I have broken down the story into fragments, 111 of them as it turns out. I use the same artifices employed by storytellers to relate my tale. I pretend to be able to enjoy the illusion of reading yet watch myself have that illusion, which is impossible; one cannot do both at once (Gombrich 1956, 5). I pretend to write about a given reading when really my narration is built from many readings. I pretend to offer an account of a "reading of reception" and not one of exploitation and intellectual activity; yet writing such an essay as mine is a task—labor; so how can

I possibly write about reading for pleasure if pleasure is something one enjoys without pencil in hand? I pretend to have no idea as I write about "what happens at the end" so that I can give you an idea of what it is like to be a naive first-time reader of the story, a hopeful ignoramus. I pretend to have avoided critical articles in the course of my reading for the purpose of presenting a reading that does not look for anything but its own moment in time. I let you think I speak for myself and my experience as a reader and too few times do I make you realize that you read not the conceptions of my mind when engaged in reading, but language itself as one writes in it; too often I keep back the queer phrase, "it can be said," which disavows any firm relationship between the image my words create in your mind and the original conception created in my mind as reader of "Bliss." I pretend to speak "objectively" of events when often I manufacture my narration of a response and stop revising my prose when the story "seems right."

To pretend this work is "true" without claiming that it is fiction is a dishonesty I will not permit myself. This admission, in spite of my best efforts to provide a "transcript," attests to the main characteristic of art as noted by the words "aesthetic effect." The aesthetic effect of a sentence like <u>For the first time in</u>

her life Bertha Young desired her husband "cannot be pinned to something existing." The words "aesthetic effect" in fact witness the humiliation of referential language as used by critics. As I hope to show, they uncloak a "gap" in the defining qualities of critical language rather than a defintion (Iser 1978, 23).

How dangerous is it for me that my work is a representation rather than in its totality a record? I attack critics for writing articles that have no basis in reading, after all, and here I arrive calling my own article a fiction, a fabrication, as if this were something to be proud of. Does this mean that my project is worthless?

My defense rests in a number of assurances, beginning with this: that according to the terms I lay out, my work is less a lie to my claims about the nature of "Bliss" than other kinds of criticism are to my claims. I hope my fiction about a fiction to be no less valuable to other readers of "Bliss" than I.A. Richards' poetry reader protocols were to him. His students were given a week to "comment freely" on their total response to the poems and "express their genuine opinions" (Richards 1929, 5). If Richards' student commentaries seem so disheartening as examples of reader response, the blame falls on his undergraduates' inability to write

about poetry, not necessarily upon their reading abilities. The same with my work; it is disheartening to read because I am a writer who thinks more highly of his writing skill than he should, my art being so paltry. I suspect the demand that Richards made upon his students, that they write on the poems, however anonymously, impaired their reception. Thus I feel that a protocol submitted to Dr. Richards is no more a representation (or misrepresentation) of reading reception than this one submitted first to a graduate committee and then to a reading public. My professor's student uses his feeble composition skill as wisely in the time he takes as Richards' did in the time he gave to them.

A protocol that in its first writing took two months to complete, as mine did, is perhaps no good as "evidence of a reading" as it cannot be said to have come from a real, single reading. But consider this: the difference between one week and one reading is even more damning of that protocol that took merely a week to write. On either side of the Atlantic, writing about an act of reading produces a divergence from that reading experience—a split in the writer's mind that is his justification for writing more (de Man 1971, 108). The amount of work I need to do in a "description" easily increases in proportion to the amount of writing I already feel

committed to. The nearer I seem to closing off my impression of an event, the more repelled my prose is—like a metal object pressed to a magnet is thrust away. In the physical world, you take three steps and touch a wall. In criticism, reach as long and as far as you want and never touch the far side of the aesthetic instant. More on this later.

The point is clear enough, though. This little book comes skidding into existence not as an act of reading, but of writing. Its artifices and errors generated by my attempts at composition generate my attempts to end them, creating new ones.

The reading which produced my notes for the 111 fragments was paced by the writing of those rough notes. Only twenty minutes or so (I'm not sure, since I never thought once to take an exact time by stopwatch) is needed to read the story. In my two-month "reading" I might reread up to the point in the tale which at the moment confronted me with the task of describing it. Generally I did not read ahead. When I did, however, it was for the sake of hindsight. If I were stuck on <90, having no words to write, I might read another two lines to see then if I could say what happened in <90. My narrative here, then, includes a mix of "true reportage" and decisions about the story's implied reader as it

seems to imply me and my perspective. What you are about to read I today believe is accurate of my past reading.

Tomorrow, because I will by then have reread the story (for pleasure, not because I am wanting to say anything about it), I may feel this work to be shallow, outdated, obscure, that it tells only a small part of my past reading, and a smaller part of my present reading. I will want to tinker with this, "fill out" that, cut material that seems to describe an event but without using that description for some larger point or theme. The work, I certainly will feel, needs "streamlining." But today I believe this is an adequate record of a series of engagements with the work, a prototype.

Finally, before you reject my record for not being about a single, actual reading that took only twenty minutes on a certain day in, say, February or July, consider the unlikely notion of a work of art spoiling after a first reading, like a piece of stinking meat. A single reading does not use up the work. There will be some difference between the feeling created by the first reading and the tenth. In a later one I know the plot, I know what words I might use to describe—pigeonhole—Bertha. Yet I read with the same kind of foolish excitement and hope, as if all were new, familiar to me yet so powerfully

creative of the instant that I am fascinated by its strangeness. Bliss is mine again, joy, anticipation. In the many months in which I have dealt with "Bliss," there is a consistency of experience and excitement which survives the ardor and dreariness of my labor.

CHAPTER II

THE "BLISS" EXPERIENCE

[SECTION ONE]

BLISS

> <1 Although Bertha Young was thirty she still had moments like this when she wanted to run instead of walk, to take dancing steps on and off the pavement, to bowl a hoop, to throw something into the air and catch it again, or to stand still and laugh

Who believes, before the sentence ends, that Bertha Young is still walking? She is said to <u>want</u> to skip and dance, but the words that follow this lonely word rub it out. For her sake alone do I dash the bond of the restraining word. I see her having what she <u>wants</u>. I have no fear that someone will stop me and ask, "Now is she really doing these wild things?" If I were asked, I'd have to say no. But no one asks.

<2 at—nothing—at nothing, simply.

Suddenly, as if the voice thinks itself caught in an enumeration forbidden it, silence—as when someone is looking in the mirror and, caught, looks off, blushing.

The two nothings are not nothing. Whatever it is that is worth laughing at certainly must be something. But it has no name. Why is the effect in the reader one of suspicion? Rather than proving the innocuousness of having no reason to laugh and jump, the second nothing heightens it, decorates it. The reader's bliss, bright, positive, seems slurred by this sudden catch. Yet I go over it: an expanse of pages called "Bliss" await me.

> <3 What can you do if you are thirty and, turning the corner of your own street, you are overcome, suddenly, by a feeling of bliss—absolute bliss!—as though you'd suddenly swallowed a bright piece of that late afternoon sun and it burned in your bosom,

My picture of Bertha dancing a jig and hollering herself happy in the street rushes on right through this sentence. I have no impulse to question my fantasy: this sentence encourages my irresponsibility of not paying attention to every word on the page, namely wanted in <1.

Fine—my fantasy runs on. But what is the signifi-

cant event here? What is the reader's perception now of his own identity? The word you occurs four times, your twice. To what effect?

First, for awhile, I read it as if I, the reader, were being addressed, as might one who is thought likely to confirm the speaker's words.

Then more strongly it comes to mean me—Bertha. Automatically, I take all the facts ascribed to the you as being true to myself: I am thirty, I am turning the corner of my own street, I feel overcome by bliss. We already saw in <1 that I gave myself over to it. By the time my reading reaches burned in your bosom, I am a woman—even better, the woman being created in my imagination, Bertha Young.

The "speaker" of these words is expressing exasperation and helplessness, as if it wanted me to help it justify Bertha's absurdity. It is confidential, like between girlfriends, though it cannot be said to be suggesting that Bertha is "talking to herself." It places me in the position of being a girlfriend to that voice. As the voice continues, your own street, you are overcome and so on with those yous, I start assuming it was me the reader who swallowed the sun and found it burning in my bosom.

Reading is a matter of responding, and in respond-

ing, creating in such a way that you might think I had become a woman, Bertha Young. I misread the text, replace the you (colloquial, referring to the reader) with you (meaning me, the me Bertha uses on herself when she says things like, "Is it possible for me to do that again? Heaven's sakes, I hope not!")

In short, the more the word you pops up, the more my reading makes me think its referring to me, and the more I find myself claiming for myself the characteristics of Bertha (overcome, thirty, absolute bliss, bosom) I am already attributing them to Bertha. I claim for myself the characteristics that Bertha claims (even though her act of claiming is not done with the voice of thought). Rather than feel I am struggling and fighting against her for possession of these claims, I simply merge into her.

> <4 sending out a little shower of sparks into every particle, into every finger and toe? . . .

Here ends the sentence begun in <3, with a picture of the sun sending sparks of bliss into every part of me (sorry, every part of Bertha, I should say), into bosom, toes and fingertips. The voice speaking is my own.

I speak to myself. It is Bertha's, as if she were speaking to herself.

Do I really mean it when I say I believe I am Bertha? For I can use similar words, with the same feeling, to say things like, "I believe I am standing in your office," or "I believe I am an American." Do I speak with the same kind of sincerity? Yes, even though I have never been a woman, nor thirty, nor Bertha Young.

What about my own thoughts as an individual, as the person who, just now, is reading a story? Inside the individual is the jumble of greased machinery, squeaks, rumblings, hums, the personality pressing ahead into time, human nature with its nonsense, error and hopes. Very much of it fades into quietness in face of the rising beat of lines which order and arrange the voices and sounds, taps them into silence or symphony. The text's lines require my attention, and so requiring it make me want to give them more. "The more 'present' the text is to us, the more our habitual selves—at least for the duration of the reading—recede into the 'past,'" one writer observes (Iser 1978, 131). The voice of the text, crisp, near, precise but not necessarily clear (to borrow words from W.C. Brownell), pushes into silence, or into the past, my commonness. The further I read and the deeper I go into the circumstances being

created around me, the further I move from the grind of the streets into the great hall of illusion. If I cannot find the nitterings and preoccupations subsiding into silence, I will not be able to attend the very thing I came here for.

> <5 Oh, is there no way you can express it without being "drunk and disorderly"? How idiotic civilization is!

My reading runs smoothly over what I will describe here in contradictory terms. It pursues the course that my past experience lights up as my way, so I do not feel I am being forced into a choice of how to feel or to see the unfolding events. It will be important to see how in terms of one reading a second reading seems like a "misreading."

My bliss is now bigger, brighter and more thrilling than before. My fantasy in seeing Bertha do what she wants to do speeds on faster, like a racing sail swung up by new gusts. I feel joy, an astonishing wildness. Whatever my reading might be said to acknowledge as having Bertha really do (a normal walk down the street), my fantasy (her fantasy) prefers to—and does indeed—see her doing what she (we) want to. See <1.

Yet my reading also denies, blurs over, the

restraint these sentences also have me feel at the same time that I feel extravagance. What constitutes this "restraint"? The impossibility of finding the freedom for which I hope and fantasize, the realization that my stunning belief in happiness is ludicrous.

This restraint is acknowledged in the effects of no way you can express it and the word idiotic. The phrase drunk and disorderly and, also, idiotic, make me picture her in the ferocity of her happy disorder and misconduct in the street. Happiness, not pure frustration (anger, grimacing, pain, weeping), has the high hand. The text, in the main, has me acknowledge the frustration of being too crippled to express herself (myself) in the certainty that this happiness is for something real. But the bliss is real, so real that it boasts having something rigid and stuffy against which, gleeful and red-faced, it can strain.

You might say that these sentences, by not openly —smugly—ending that fantasy of mine within the fantasy of reading, justify my seeing it race ahead. Drunk and disorderly—that is how I have been seeing her, leaping and dancing. So true is my bliss, so right, so uninhibited in feeling, that the futility of it—meaning all those reasons which make it impossible to express, those reasons which lie oppressed under it—is here acknowledged

and so relieved. The restraints against bliss do not stomp the brake on the bliss of reading, but pump high-octane feeling into it.

I fear I should apologize to you for having gone on so. But this worry is a mistake. My desire to create for you an impression of what my reading was like is legitimate; that is what I agreed to do. I do not feel bad about offering my perspective from this point in "Bliss" because I readily admit that some other reader might do differently, might take <5 as obviously sad, because it can be seen as revealing discomfort, agony, oppression of a woman who has instincts to behave against the norm but no power to act on that instinct in a tangible way. Another reading might bring to the front the possible effect of irony, taking the happy tones to suggest that Bertha is covering up "real" circumstances by wishful thinking or "unfounded ecstasy." My fantasy as I have described it, is unforgiveable to the strict letter of "Bliss" as a formalist might argue, one who pretends to read objectively. I can hear a stern voice allege, "You are not a critical reader, sir." True enough. My creations leap happily one over the back of the other like boys at leapfrog. My reading seems created by, and to create, the spirit of "Bliss"'s bliss.

<6 Why be given a body if you have to keep it shut up in a case like a rare, rare fiddle?

Again, restraint versus bliss. What a horror, really, to think that anyone with a body should be made to feel guilty (by the words idiotic civilization) about enjoying it as fully as Bertha enjoys her body today. Hand, leg, smile, all are handy for the expression of happiness —one's own hand, leg and grin. You cannot hire someone else to feel good for you.

<7 "No, that about the fiddle is not quite what I mean," she thought,

Bertha realizes that she is so enjoying herself, that now is not the time for complaint or lament. The earlier phrase, Why be given a body if. . ., is simply a lie! Her body today is glowing. She loves being in it.

<7 is a repeat of <6, but with quotation marks putting the fiddle-phrase directly in Bertha's head and attributing it retroactively to her mind. The effect of Bertha's usurpation of the phrase makes me concede that Bertha's way of perception has been in charge all along. It empowers me now to assume that objective-sounding phrases in the future will really be hers.

Whether or not this occurs remains to be seen. I may do just the opposite: think "her" phrases are objective.

> <8 running up the steps and feeling her bag
> for the key—she'd forgotten it, as usual
> —and rattling the letter-box. "It's not
> what I mean, because—Thank you, Mary"—
> she went into the hall. "Is nurse back?"

Running, yes, I'd forseen it. This is part of bliss—a haste. By routine, habit, responsibility, bliss is not refuted nor withdrawn, but pre-empted: Bertha is too busy to finish her thought. The keys, the mail, Mary at the door—the baby? Her thought remains unfinished but then I do not feel anxious about it. Nothing surprising will fill the gap necessarily. The inertia of reading throws me across the incompleted thought with bright cheer, with the feeling that would be equated by a positive expression (if words had to be used) like, "It's not what I mean, because my body, at any rate, feels such a wonder all over today!" I am ready to assume the fiddle notion is wrong, perhaps because it is an idea rather than a feeling, and as such cannot stand equal to happiness. She feels far more than she can express, and this would be true even if civilization went to the birds and nobody would care to stare at a woman

whooping and laughing in the street. My reading is so certain of the kind of expression Bertha might use to refute the initial comparison that I do not bother to imagine what this expression might be.

And besides, I am busy learning concrete facts about Bertha's social standing. I do not feel I am being duly informed of pertinent facts that reflect on her place in society, but that I am long acquainted with them. That Bertha indulges herself (no key, again!) and can count on a rescue indicates she is wealthy and unusual, cheerily spoiled, playful.

Bertha's domestic, Mary, opens the door. Such people are common in big houses with great front doors such as this one. I see this Mary as, well, quiet . . . maternal. I fear it is misleading to say I "see" her. In coming across her name on the page I do not stop for a moment to picture her this way or that. I create her in such a way that, as this is an event of routine, I do not have to give her a thought. My reading gives Mary only face and familiarity enough so I will not notice her, just as Bertha probably does not. If my imagination failed to provide me with her face and appearance (perhaps of "understanding," "patience" or even "impatience," it matters little here) I would probably stop the whole show to ask what was the matter with her and why does

her mistress seem so cruel as not to notice. (No, I would not ask why Bertha was cruel, simply would assume she was.)

<9 "Yes, M'm."
"And has the fruit come?"
"Yes, M'm. Everything's come."

<10 "Bring the fruit up to the dining-room, will you? I'll arrange it before I go upstairs."

Everything has come. Bertha, wealthy, has a freedom in which both she and I are confident. There is a felicity in having to spare no cost, in being certain enough of oneself to wait to create "just the right touch." The coming event must be terribly important.

If I attempt to describe my picture of her house, the image melts away before my pen. But I can say that it includes an upstairs, knowledge of servant's quarters, a rear door where the goods were delivered, different wings.

> <11 It was dusky in the dining-room and quite chilly. But all the same Bertha threw off her coat; she could not bear the tight clasp of it another moment, and the cold air fell on her arms.

The room is dusky and quite chilly, or bliss-creating. Just as I supply a chair to catch her coat, I supply Bertha with her feelings and emotions of bliss. In <8, remember, bliss was pre-empted. Nothing worse than the reader's (and Bertha's) momentary distraction at her arrival home forced it to drop away. And once again it springs into my reading as if it had a will of its own. The following account starts with sentence two and reveals what might be called bliss's tenuous, ephemeral nature.

1) But all the same Bertha threw off her coat, as if to spite what we poops might think as to how unpleasant quite chilly might be. With But all the same Bertha is heedless, made to appear unmindful either of gloom or chill. The phrase suggests that while to some people, maybe people like me, quite chilly is a circumstance best avoided, Bertha will relish it, feel it, not miss her chance to enjoy it. Notice that she does not merely take off her coat, but rashly throws it off, as if she wants to feel the cold air.

2) [B]ear the tight clasp of it another moment.

My earlier motivation ("love of cold") is here bumped aside by the stronger reason behind her removal of the coat, its odious clasp.

But with 3), and the cold air fell on her arms, my original reading-creative motive ("love of cold") is reinstated. The cold is enjoyable for its own sake because it makes her glow; she has a crisp ability to feel it strongly on her arms. What a beautiful person! How few people really live life as fully as she seems to. Not the slightest pleasure today escapes her.

I have Bertha enjoy the room very much because I, the reader, enjoy it very much. The effect of "good writing" and "vivid prose" make me attribute powers and qualities to her, enabled already as she is by the bliss I have helped create. She is a romantic. She stands near an object and suddenly it seems, for me, to have life. She breathes beauty into simple and otherwise overlooked circumstances.

> <12 But in her bosom was still
> that bright glowing place—that shower
> of little sparks coming from it.

My reading might be said to acknowledge again the fragility of the reader and Bertha to keep bliss constant and flying, free of its motivation or cause. My experience

of <11 held that the cold falling on Bertha's arms was enjoyable, sensual, part of the hour's magic. But <12 pretends that in <11 I had experienced not bliss, but pain and menace. Here, that pleasure is discredited, denied, as if it had never happened. With the cannibalism of <11 by <12 complete in the first part of <12, the sentence turns on itself and restores happiness and joy with that shower of little sparks coming from it. I am soothed into assuming that bliss really should never be doubted.

> <13 It was almost unbearable. She hardly dared breathe for fear of fanning it higher, and yet she breathed deeply, deeply.

What tremendous danger! The flames—fan them! Bertha must breathe deeply, so that if she were sniffing a flower the petals would positively shiver though her nose does not even touch them. The reader feels that something tremendous must happen, and that Bertha is deeply satisfied in knowing it.

> <14 She hardly dared look into the cold mirror—but she did look,

> <15 and it gave her back a woman, radiant, with smiling, trembling lips, with big, dark eyes

The mirror jumps to life because Bertha stands in it. As it gave her back her image, it can be said that she "gave herself" to it, as if it were without question alive. Her mood is so certain of its infallibility and resilience that both she and I can question it, doubt it entirely, refuse to take it seriously. The reader's emotion here goes considerably beyond what might be guessed at if this sentence were removed from its context.

Looking into the mirror is a fearful prospect at first for Bertha. Mirrors do not have us convinced beforehand that they can give us back a picture of our feelings as clearly as they give us eyelashes or our nose. Many people, I imagine, when they weep shun the mirror; it makes tears no more than theatrical drops of water on cheeks that seem redder than usual. When a woman is happy, though, and she looks into the glass, she can see how beautiful she is, how accomplished, how talented, exceptional and striking.

Bertha does not know how she feels. She hesitates, then gives herself to the mirror, surrenders herself to it as if she were willing to submit to whatever it

might have in store for her. She'd perish if it wished it. She knows bliss: she sees it in her face just as I do, looking through her eyes. She is a beautiful and stunning woman.

> <16 and an air of listening, waiting for something . . . divine to happen . . . that she knew must happen . . . infallibly.

I too am waiting. The pleasure will be of great, if of yet unknown, magnitude. I am fated to it, I feel as I read. How the experience will come I do not know, but the events are already determined on by the text, they are already fixed. The book lies in my hand. However much my own excitement is like Bertha's, if both sets of feelings could be described and compared, I cannot change whatever will happen to me. Nor can Bertha be said to be able to change the fate set for her. So my pleasure at any given moment of reading is heightened, as if only the present instant mattered. A reader's homage is to the now, as if everything of significance were happening at this moment. Reading, like watching the production of a play, is an experience of "continuous presentness," its demands as "rigorous as those of any spiritual exercise—to let the past go and to let the future take its time; so that we not

allow the past to determine the meaning of what is now happening (something else may come of it) and that we not anticipate what will come of what has come. Not that anything is possible (though it is) but that we do not know what is, and what is not, next" (Iser 1978, 156). The feeling that the text has me assume are Bertha's can be all the stronger and more compelling because I am led by the text to understand my own feeling of excitement as that of a reader reading a fixed, unchangeable text.

> <17 Mary brought in the fruit on a tray and with it a glass bowl, and a blue dish, very lovely, with a strange sheen on it as though it had been dipped in milk.
> "Shall I turn on the light, M'm?"

The blue dish is exquisite. Or rather the description of it. Or, yet again, rather the experience created for the reader by the words he reads. The text does not say that Bertha "looked at" or was "impressed by" this dish. So my reading gives me the impression that it is my own power which discerns the dish in this lovely way, <u>dipped in milk</u>. I seize the words as mine rather than assume they belong to "the narrator," who in reading does not take on an identity as he or she does

in convention and criticism. Elevated, perfect, I am becoming better than myself. To see beauty, I must be beautiful. Things do not have beauty inherently "in" them; an object must be perceived as having it. The text, like a sluice, seems to pour beauty into me; full in the instant, I gush from the brim into Bertha. She perceives the beauty as I do, as my reading continually molds me into her.

My reading of dipped in milk draws some of its effect from two previous words. Very lovely and strange make me feel what I call feminine. The main metaphor which follows them creates a feeling in me that I imagine is womanly; the associations borrow from a domestic sphere, culinary and experimental in an expensive way.

The reader's experience of his own activity and the activity he attributes to Bertha's presence and mind is created by the heat and centrifugal force of a circle that is so speedy and narrow that neither reader, nor the character, escape. I see the dish in Bertha's special way, and she in mine. The bowl is exquisite to me, on the other hand, because Bertha is present and looking at it. Once again on the other hand, it is lovely to her because I find it lovely. And, back again, my attribution of perception to Bertha's

perception is automatic, total. Her presence in the room brings objects to life. Mirrors, fruit bowls—what next?—are bounteous in their power to make me see and feel them, as if they were objects I should attend now because I have never before noticed them. I excitedly long for more, wait for more, pine for it. I hastily read on. This way of seeing is new to me. I want to be Bertha (or like her) because I expect that if I am, my powers of seeing will be rewarded by being heightened. To be like Bertha Young makes reading "Bliss" all the more exciting. Will the text continue this encouragement?

> <18 "No, thank you. I can see quite well."

> <19 There were tangerines and apples stained with strawberry pink. Some yellow pears, smooth as silk, some white grapes covered with silver bloom and a big cluster of purple ones. The last she had bought

The two sentences of <19 are <u>not</u> objective description. I am seeing the <u>silk</u> and the <u>silver bloom</u> either from Bertha's eye or at least in the same way she does. The

fruit is alive because it is invested with human presence and feeling.

> <20 to tone in with the new dining-room carpet. Yes, that did sound rather far-fetched and absurd, but it was really why she had bought them. She had thought in the shop: "I must have some purple ones to bring the carpet up to the table." And it had seemed quite sense at the time.

I am put into the position of having to accept an explanation, an excuse for this absurdity, this far-fetched example of Bertha's character. I am her common-sense; I am the civil, predictable and unamazing part of Bertha being addressed by the other part, that which is whimsical, impulsive, free. To me, like to a father or a stern husband, this voice appeals. It pleads, as if to wipe from my expression a look of impatience. I am asked to make allowance for Bertha, to understand her, forgive her foibles, her curious ideas and badly explained impulses, as it were, to be good enough even to cherish them.

> <21 When she had finished with them and made two pyramids of these bright round shapes, she stood away from the table to get the effect—and it really was most curious.

> <22 For the dark table seemed to melt into the dusky light and the glass dish and the blue bowl to float in the air.

Bertha here "reacts" to what she sees, my reading has me automatically assume. The text says: and it really was most curious [to her] and that the dark table seemed [to her] to melt. But the "to her" is not written. This reader, then, feels he is having the reactions directly for himself. There seems only pure perception, a pure unity between the reader and the character he creates in his mind.

The "artistic" in Bertha ceases to apologize to the "civil" as it did in <20.

> <23 This, of course, in her present mood, was so incredibly beautiful . . . she began to laugh.
> "No, no, I'm getting hysterical."
> And she seized her bag and coat and ran upstairs to the nursery.

By the time Bertha utters (nearly aloud) her "No, no, I'm [. . .] bliss has died at the hand of its nemesis: definition. Beauty meets a discussion of beauty, and the effect in the reader is a disheartened feeling.

Bertha's reaction to beauty, as it coincides with her vision of the objects which contain it, acts to kill

the beauty. She falls into a different mode. And the reader too. The power of seeing without being conscious of the perceiver in Bertha, the drifting, the floating—are gone. Bliss is defined as a mood, yes, but more precisely as a present mood, one that Bertha is said to be in. Named, concluded on, the dining-room scene becomes so incredibly beautiful.

The proposition that the scene is so incredibly beautiful is true. I readily assent to say so. But here lies the problem. The phrase so incredibly true is a statement, a proposal. Its effect is cognitive rather than intuitive. It defines bliss as having a limit, a frontier, beyond which one can stand to best define it; it pretends that beauty and bliss can have aspects which can be enumerated, adjectivized, proportioned and analyzed. It replaces bliss. Bliss was, before now, total, entire; it made every future prospect for Bertha and me favorable, perfect, and every past experience shining.

If the dining-room can be "beautiful" it can be given other terms of description too: "interesting," "colorful," "a graphic example of psychic encroachment on visual perception." A miracle is explained away as a natural phenomenon. Bertha gives up the artistic side for the ruly, civilized common sense side, one might say.

And she seems to know it. The words, "I'm getting hysterical" seem grim and impatient. They are not playful as might be something like, "I really must stop this at once." Had she said something like this, I would perceive her as being less certain, at this moment, of the termination of happiness.

My reading conveys a sense of irritation to me. I act as if this sort of downswing had never occurred before, and that I am momentarily intolerant. My description suggests that my feeling in reading reaches highs and lows which are, to themselves, total. Such feelings are not uncommon in everyday life. An uplifted mood sees everything brightly; a downcast one cannot draw cheer from even the likeliest good prospect.

The final jump of action in this first section—Bertha's seizing her bag and running upstairs—throws me back the other way, from irritation to excitement. She is not fleeing so much as racing to something. The section ends with one feeling a sense of expectation.

[SECTION ONE continued]

A CRITIC'S "BLISS"

How can I escape my reading well enough to fix the story of my reading in place, to speak coolly, impersonally, without the "I," to say not what it is, but what it does? I refer to this reading of pleasure which I have entered, where I run along the surface, the crisp, vibrant appearance of the story and do not study it, do not inquire of it. All my feeling and thinking about this experience and those similar to it are governed at points of my reception just as those I have been describing.

The text, this series of lines on a page, has an end. Its words will cease after <111. But does this necessarily mean also that reading itself, or this power that reading exerts beyond a given act of it (this sitting here on my porch today, book in hand), indeed also does cease, stop, fall out of favor? "A given reading" always ceases at one instant or another. But "reading" in this general sense I wish to define does not. It lasts beyond the moment when the longest sigh of criticism has fallen away from me. The measure of this trajectory and the distance it covers is, in fact, all the clearer as it passes through the smoke and light of critical readings and commentary. If we seek a reaction to this peculiar

and still half-made distinction between "reading" and "a given reading," the unity-school commentators like Frye would have us believe that the magical and general "reading" does end. They either assume that it ends, or by an unfair inference they might be thought of as believing that it has never begun. The eye of their lumbering curiosity does not turn to it. Frye, not attempting to have me consider the distinction I am raising, says reading does end, whereupon there begins a second mental operation in which we "look at the work as a simultaneous unity and study its structure." This second act: "the critical response properly speaking," something that the "ordinary reader" need not bother with (Frye 1971, 23). As if they took this as a rule, the extraordinary "readers" of this Mansfield story, critics like Marvin Magalaner, Marilyn Zorn and Helen Nebeker, do not bother with it. Reading, which for me as a reader both of art and criticism stretches out into time, for them is not a source from which to draw power for their writings, as I do for mine. They are "active" readers rather than receivers, I strongly suspect. My writing reveals how my reading is like holding an open palm against the heat and vibration of the work of art; theirs indicate that they shake and rattle the story, bang it on exterior objects, grasp it firmly in hand. I am patient, they are not.

The following passage from Magalaner's book Katherine Mansfield is interesting because it seems typical of "standard" literary essays. It strikes me, when I consider myself as a reader of "Bliss" rather than a writer about it, as constantly premature. Perhaps in another sense it is premature as well—for our project today. We have not read all of "Bliss" yet, and he seems to be making remarks that draw from "knowledge" acquired later in the story. He speaks as someone who has read the whole work. I will have you use this latter kind of prematurity to better see the first kind as I will then go on to describe it.

THE LEGACY OF FICTION

Chapter 5

> "Bliss" is a story that illustrates Mansfield's mature ability to work simultaneously on several levels so that the finished product exhibits a richness of texture not ordinarily found in the English short story. At its most obvious, it is a psychological case study of an hysterical woman, Bertha Young, the kind of character sketch that the younger Mansfield experimented with in some of the stories of the German Pension volume. But by 1918 Katherine Mansfield had grown beyond the mere delineation of character as the primary objective of fiction. To complicate the picture and to ensure that her task as artist will not be "too easy," she restricts the point of view to Bertha's consciousness—a highly unreliable guide for the reader, who must evaluate all Bertha's impressions as to their basis in external reality or in the confused internal chaos of the woman's mind. Mansfield's ability through choice words to have Bertha expose her psyche so

> that what is positive would seem to predominate while, at the same time, showing the negative aspects lurking beneath has been analyzed at length by Saralyn Daly. . . .
>
> The title itself offers a hint of the ambivalences the story will encompass. Though at thirty, Bertha "Young" would seem to have very little to rejoice over, as the reader inspects the pattern of her life . . . , yet Bertha identifies the state that grips her as "bliss," a state of heightened reaction to people and things. The mood calls for running, for bowling hoops, for throwing things into the air, for laughing uncontrollably, for trying to involve another human being in one's ecstasy —or at least for seeking to communicate one's mood to another. Yet the unconvinced reader feels that Bertha is closer to the point when she fears she is "getting hysterical." Obviously, (though not to Bertha) there is little to justify the bliss she insists she feels (75).

Such writing might be called, by some, "referential prose." It quotes from the story, refers to identifiable events and characters, describes bliss. It refers to the story, one could say. Good enough. But which form of the story? The form with which, in one sitting, it created itself within me and made me a different person with a different life? Or the form I give it when I reflect on the work, on the statement it seems to make? I wish here on these pages to show how, like a pronoun without an antecedent, this passage and those written in the same way are drifting and lost because they refer me to an "object" which they do not inspire me to pinpoint for myself and with which I, as a reader, do not wish to identify.

Even as I conclude a reading of "Bliss," this passage seems premature. It would have me feel that I am able to step back from the story and the people in it and formulate a critical response. But a response to what? This is my big question. To "the text?" To "the experience of the text?" To the text "without the reading experience?" Such a writing style as this, imperially objective, pressing its thumbs to its ears so as not to hear the cries of those it oppresses, would have me believe that a thing that is known can be separated from the knower by that knower (the critic) himself. Is Magalaner a writer of such magnificence that he can make me see "Bliss" without having to get himself out of the way of my "pre-critical response" and creation? An undesirable effect of such would-be referential prose is that it does not empower its reader to know whether it is about itself and its inability to have me escape its own artifice, about a given sort of "active" reading, or about Magalaner's experience as a reader who receives the work and lets it exert himself on him rather than himself on it.

For me to fathom the passage I must commit a violence upon my reception of "Bliss" as I remember it. The appropriate imagery for this encounter includes verbs like flatten, distort, neglect, disintegrate, castrate. I

see all these things occur so that I can understand Magalaner, so that I can believe that he is right and that what he says is valuable to me. The alternative to stabbing my reception is to find Magalaner incomprehensible and so worth pursuing because he and I both think he is writing about "Bliss." What will happen?

The phrase "highly unreliable guide" intends itself to refer me to Bertha's consciousness, the one through which I experience the story. At what point in "Bliss"'s relationship with this reader can such a phrase become believable and relevant to that relationship? Every individual—you, me, the man in the next office, the person whose hand served you coffee—can be said to have a relationship with the story if he or she reads it (present tense) or read it (past). This relationship begins, for my purposes, when the eye crosses the title and ranges through reading and time—twenty minutes and twenty years—to that vanishing point when the reader says, "Yes, I read 'Bliss' once, but so long ago I've forgotten it altogether." Particularly for me this afternoon as I sit in the sunlight and read "Bliss," this phrase of Magalaner's has little relevance. I cannot conceive of Bertha's consciousness as being "reliable" in some sense other than the one I take it to be. How more reliably could I experience Bertha's life and "consciousness" than through

this very consciousness? Through it I experience the woman's thrilling walk home, I experience her dining-room as she does—I feel bliss as I imagine that she does. Her consciousness makes me live her life all the more richly, which is my desire.

For me to believe this phrase and its relevance to my reading, I must assume that I can finish my reading, escape its draw, snap myself from its hypnotic might and turn about and disinterestedly study Bertha Young like an astronomer trains a scope on a faraway star.

Another way to explain why such terms are terminally premature is to consider their status as nouns. Phrases like "psychological case study of an hysterical woman" in a single circling define both the critical work and the artistic work as it will be reshaped by the commentary. Essayists, like psychiatrists, transform their subjects into the shape of an answer, using the question —the interrogative sentence—as a means to reach it. They pretend that Bertha Young is a real person and that the story is a cryptograph disguising her or a piece of glass distorting her appearance as an actual human being. Magalaner would have me take his essay as a record of what lies beneath the superficial, sensual appearance of the text which is the result of oblique rather than "direct" representation by the artist.

Rather than having me find a "void" beneath the appearances, which is what Henry James warns lies underneath (Iser 1978, 6), Magalaner wants me to believe that through my reading of him I will discover that the Bertha of my reading experience is a woman "with emotional difficulties" and worse, and that I will discover her in the way he describes her.

A second distinction, "unreliable guide," is amazing in the same way. Again, my reaction is the same. Where the matter of "external reality" and the "internal chaos of the woman's mind" seem to matter most in incisive critical writing, it seems to be of little concern to reading, and in writing about reading in the way that I am, as if my production were itself a story. Clearly not in dispute here are those common items in "Bliss" that are exterior reality. That Bertha is walking home, that her house has front stairs, that the maid's name is Mary—these exterior facts are not in dispute as being "exterior." But when reading comes to junctures where the reader contributes to the effects of his experience—effects much greater than those created by many kinds of active reading—it cannot really be known which is internal chaos and which is external reality. In my narration of <17 my reading brought the fruit to life and gave it great beauty, which made Bertha beautiful too and quite

conscious of it. Precisely at such points as these can these distinctions not be made comfortably. A reader reading doesn't want them. But critics, who all must write, often feel obligated to decide simply so they can get up steam for their own production. Where to an outsider of reading such issues as "internal" and "external" would matter most, my reception would permit me here to say: "The only external reality is internal 'chaos.'" In reading I am permitted to reach toward such distinctions as Magalaner's, but not reach them.

And now to bring home the matter of such distinctions' prematurity. The critical text does not have me decide when—at what opportunity—such a conception as "unreliable guide" becomes known within a given act of reading or a given subsequent act of speaking or writing about a given kind of reading or an existing prototype. Was there a moment in my very first reading of this story in 1983, maybe as I read the fourth section—the fifth?—where I began to act consistently as if I knew (or should I write "knew"?") this fact of her unreliability? The effect of Magalaner's writing is dizzying: his nouns cannot be read as things that are becoming rather than are. His phrases are premature now and will always be premature because they never show themselves as becoming phrases, only offer themselves as phrases. To the kind of

reading I call receptive, such phrases will never cease to be overpowering and exhausting.

The effect of writing that has me assume that it is written from some objective place is very often this: I feel slow, tardy, scolded, nearly stupid. I remember often feeling this in my undergraduate days when I read criticism with the sense of being deeply impressed by it and yet stupid for not having seen what it made out as obvious, a given. I remember saying, "I wish I'd read the commentaries first—what a dumbo! I would have known what to look for! Why did I not see this when I was reading?" On one hand this should be seen as my admitting I have not always been an adult and as fit a reader as I am now in many ways. On the other, I see it as a mangling of an intuitive understanding of what reading is and why reading fiction always has been for me and so many people a pleasure and a compulsion. One doesn't have to work on a conceptual level; it's not very often like reading criticism or an article in Foreign Affairs.

My reaction to criticism such as Magalaner's has been, and still is, this mixture of exhaustion and a fear of my own stupidity. This state of mind, long puzzling to me, I can trace down another path, one on which I lay a few footprints in Chapter I. Look below at the false trajectory between what supposedly falls as

an aesthetic effect upon "the reader" but begins in the ensnarlment of history—on . . . well, who cares about the date of composition!

> [Mansfield] restricts the point of view to Bertha's consciousness—a highly unreliable guide to the reader.

Whatever is said about the reader must be sayable, and must be true: the reader reads what the writer wrote, right? History's logic in this quotation carries beyond the verb "restricts." It renders the part about "unreliable guide" a monolith outside the realm of purely literary dispute, a fortress unassailable. Historical reference, undeniable in its own right, corrupts the reference to the wholly ahistorical matter of narrative viewpoint. It interferes with my consideration of what, in my own case of reading, happened between me and the voice speaking in my head (the narrator, conventionally called). I feel cut off from my own evidence about reception by the demand that I trust words about what Mansfield did, words that are true but not related to a given act of reading.

The reading of "Bliss" I seek to describe is, as I have said, the one of the miraculous surface, the naive first arrival. Against this surface one can easily press as a critical essayist, and it gives—gives more. To ideas, notions, sentences, claims, the surface can

always be seen as giving way. If Magalaner offers his essay as a claim of the way he received "Bliss" (its surface) he should explain how his re-narration breaks through to the surface of a receptive reading. Or if he offers instead an argument as to how he (or I) should read and receive "Bliss," he should explain how his naive reception, being inadequate, needs to be replaced. His essay should, in other words, clarify its relationship to his reading. "Such-and-such occurs to me when I read, but out of that I make x, y and z—which are different."

Magalaner's writing, like much of its kind, leaves me unconscious of its effects when preferrably it should encourage me to see them and include them as part of my consideration and judgment. I tend to read such "coldly self-regarding" (Nelson 1976, 812) essays as ends rather than a means. They make themselves out to be not a means for me to return to the fiction as I experience it in the immediacy of reading, but an end in themselves. The objective voice serves on one hand to create the feeling of overwhelming certainty that I am indeed being referred "back to the art object." Yet this voice serves to destroy the possibility that the essay reader will continue to want to draw himself or herself, in a new way, through his "old" relationship with the work. The magisterial

voice of objectivity makes the critical work opaque rather than transparent. The assumption in critical language that a work can be "gotten away from" so that it can be described as a character's "case history" creates the objective tone, which in turn creates the lack of a meaningful antecedent.

Not that I want you to fume over my own use of the objective voice. I speak objectively of my subjective experience. It is mine, and as it will bear traces of personal peculiarity I am the only one who can report it (or what I think "it" is). Since I cannot assume that your response to a given passage in "Bliss" will be identical to mine, I speak objectively only for what I call my own local version. Of course even the refined use of the "objective" voice in my writing leads me to think I can reach the end of my project, to say, "That's it for now —finis!" My writing creates for you, most likely, the impresssion that I cruelly, narrowly, create a border to "Bliss" for you, my reader, a barricade or fence beyond which it seems I cannot conceive of you going. The impression seems to have me say something like: "If this is all I happen to say about a given instance of reading, this must be all I can say, period! and truly all that can be said by anyone about any individual occurrence of reception." This may seem something you grate against, even

though I do not impose on the flux of reading and description of reading an outside system or structure such as speech act theory, sociology, linguistics or psychoanalysis. I confine my narrative only to the "facts" of reception, or what I believe are the facts. And so you are likely to swing free of the fear that I seek to confine you in claims about "Bliss" that I cannot myself verify by experience (rather than intellect and composition). Yes, I do seek to confine my readers in my narrow description of the reading process's immediate essentials. If the limit of my narrative is clear, you will have the best means to consider your own reading experience, weigh the similarities and differences as they stand with what I say about mine.

Critical texts and expositions like Magalaner's create the effect of having me take them as ends rather than means because they do not refer me to a form of "Bliss" I can recognize (or could have recognized) as a reader. But the discomfort of reading criticism is fascinating. I read on, waiting to acclimate the assertions to my perception of the entire event. No graft seems possible, so I plant a new tree. My manila folder containing "Bliss" criticism is now a small forest. The consciousness Magalaner refers to as being "unreliable" is unreliable to a reader of Magalaner as he reads Magal-

aner, but not necessarily—and here's my main point—to a reader of "Bliss" reading "Bliss." The most I can believe about the "narrator" of a story is that this voice is <u>able to be said</u> to be unreliable by readers of the critical work, but not by readers of "Bliss" who, being readers, remain "in" the story because they cannot get "out" of it, beyond its reach.

Magalaner would have me name his essay the point where finally I break down and admit that all my bliss, as you have seen me relish it, is unanalytical, uncritical, naive, forgetful of an earlier reading of the story perhaps that I am being misled. (It's true.) The essayist would liberate me from my bondage as a slave of imagination. The critic offers me his own Bertha, a new fictional being, personal in her own way, one I attend because she creates her own "feel." Kidnapped and flown to foreign territory where demands are made on her, Bertha is violated, disintegrated and reincarnated. Every critic does so, me no less. But my violence is less. I tic does so, me no less. But my violence is less. I tailor my writing to the unfolding of the story, to her rather than to my own ends. Magalaner would write the same kind of essay, in the same style or tone, whether he were writing about Ginsburg, Solomon or Chekov. I write about reading, so I will make myself

sound like I am reading. I have no introduction to the story or character proper, no systematic proofs, no conclusion. My last section, indeed, is about criticism and its error, not "Bliss." Magalaner's Bertha is a fool every minute, one who is said to feel in ways that are "stilted and unreal," whose language "demonstrates the emtiness of the claims" of bliss (Magalaner 1971, 75-76). Her every characteristic is exposed as though it were a vice or weakness. He wants me to meet Bertha, but without any of the temperament I assumed of (and for) her as I read. Like a bureaucratic maneuver to save man-hours, his essay would have me think "Bliss" is less ungraspable and inconvenient than it is. He reassures me too, too much.

I shudder to think that as the prose of his chapter alienates me from Bertha as I knew her, alters her, that it may do the same to Magalaner. I hope not. I am willing to believe that at some point in time he read "Bliss" for pleasure and received the work because he had no intention of doing anything with it. He may have been in high school at the time. And yet as I try to read through his writing back to his state of reading, I see a reading that seems dark, twisted and sinister—I would never wish it on myself. He says "Bertha identifies" her feeling as bliss, that her mood "calls for" certain deeds. I get the impression that he takes bliss (the one he exper-

ienced) to be an embarrassing peccadillo. He wants to hide it. My own reading is quite different. I am not dragged along behind the mood as it calls for this or that. I race ahead of it. I anticipate it. You can see why I say I am surprised to hear Magalaner say that I am "unconvinced." Gosh! Something must be wrong with me.

[SECTION TWO]

<24 Nurse sat at the low table giving little B her supper after her bath. The baby had on a white flannel gown and a blue woollen jacket, and her dark, fine hair was brushed up into a funny little peak. She looked up when she saw her mother and began to jump.

The reader notices details of the baby as a mother might. The funny peak of hair, for example, finds its significance in Bertha noticing it and seeing it as funny. Through the same mind, the reader and the story character take the scene in.

<25 "Now, my lovey, eat it up like a good girl," said Nurse, setting her lips in a way that Bertha knew, and that meant she had come into the nursery at another wrong moment.

"Has she been good, Nanny?"

"She's been a little sweet all afternoon," whispered Nanny. "We went to the park and I sat down on a chair and took her out of her pram and a big dog came along and put its head on my knee and she clutched its ear, tugged it. Oh, you should have seen her."

Bertha wanted to ask if it wasn't rather dangerous to let her clutch at a strange dog's ear.

That Bertha asks a question and wants to ask a follow-up, and then meets with such a reaction as Nanny's set

lips, makes me think that Bertha is exceptionally innocent, good, because she is so dominated. That I associate Bertha with the twice-used phrase about the child's clutching the strange dog's ear makes Bertha seem nearly like a child, one who suffers without knowing why. Bertha is dominated (passive voice) rather than dominated by any individual. The nurse is not her heartless foe.

For the child I feel tenderness. The endearing terms lovey, good girl and a little sweet create both the reader's feeling of affection and the sense that this affection is frustrated and anxious (that Bertha's affections are frustrated too). These terms are social words, the kind used in public. That Bertha and the maid use them suggest to me that the child is scarcely noticed by its mother in a general way, and loved inconsistently. These loving words carry with them a context too big, cold and worldly for the personal feelings they seem here intended to express to find relief and satisfaction. Bertha's baby is one I feel a great deal for, but it seems provoking of my love because I (and, presumably, its mother) don't know how to reach it, meet it.

<26 But she did not dare to. She stood watching them, her hands by her side, like the poor little girl in front of the rich little girl with the doll.

The baby looked up at her again, stared, and then smiled so charmingly that Bertha couldn't help crying:

"Oh, Nanny, do let me finish giving her her supper while you put the bath things away."

"Well, M'm, she oughtn't to be changed hands while she's eating," said Nanny, still whispering. "It unsettles her; it's very likely to upset her."

How absurd it was. Why have a baby if it has to be kept—not in a case like a rare, rare fiddle—but in another woman's arms?"

"Oh, I must," said she.

<27 Very offended, Nanny handed her over.

Bertha is more than just a victim: she is Nanny's victim. And she always has been! Poor Bertha. Must she plead to hold her baby? What an oppressor this nurse is, so thick and grim. Bertha overcomes her deference to the older matron because she is excited, helpless in her feeling of happiness to see the little one. That she feels she must cross a great distance to reach her child makes me think she usually is unable to extend herself far enough to love it and express her love.

<28 "Now, don't excite her after her supper. You know you do, M'm. And I have such a time with her after!"

<29 Thank heaven! Nanny went out of the room with the bath towels.

"Now I've got you to myself, my little precious," said Bertha, as the baby leaned against her.

She ate delightfully, holding up her lips for the spoon and then waving her hands. Sometimes she wouldn't let the spoon go; and sometimes, just as Bertha had filled it, she waved it away to the four winds.

When the soup was finished Bertha turned round to the fire.

"You're nice—you're very nice!" said she, kissing her warm baby. "I'm fond of you. I like you."

Bertha's feeling of love cannot be questioned, laughed at for its inadequacy, made any greater than it now is, nor any less. She feels intensely, sweetly, no less than any other worthy mother might feel who absolutely is delighted to see her baby. I believe without doubt that her feeling of love is absolute. Mind you, this is different than saying she is a "good mother," which my reading here does not take as its business to affirm or deny. This love is absolute because she uses such otherwise indifferent words like nice, fond, and like.

The feelings one suspects of her—in looking her in the face and hearing her tones—all overwhelm the

paltry words she uses and which, like charmingly in <26, are used on her behalf by me. I sense that the words are overwhelmed by the feeling behind them, that they stick up and frustrate those who use them. Such words reveal Bertha's positive feeling and betray and curtail the expression of that feeling. They act to suggest a burden of emotion that they pretend themselves too frivolous and light to carry.

The feeling in this reader is both joy and sadness —one making the other possible. The greater my joy at seeing a loving child cuddle its mother, the greater my sense of the joy being frustrated and needing thus to be even more joyful. Bertha expresses herself as best as right now she is able to, but seems unable to convince herself that she making herself understood.

> <30 And, indeed, she loved Little B so much—her neck as she bent forward, her exquisite toes as they shone transparent in the firelight—that all her feeling of bliss came back again,
>
> <31 and again she did not know how to express it—what to do with it.

The first sentence in <30, And, indeed, she loved Little B

so much, sounds as if an argument had been made that Bertha hates her child. In these two fragments I come to see the child fully in a new way, a way that Bertha, in spite of her deep love for it, cannot be assumed by me to in the same way that I love and account for it. This effect of reading acknowledges Bertha's strong feelings of love and the pale satisfaction she derives from attempting to express them.

The extraordinary beauty of this and earlier passages in Section Two has steadily compelled me to assume, as if it were proven and proveable, that Bertha's feelings of love are extraordinary too—in the sense of "strong, mighty," but also, I now see, in the sense of "uncommon, rarely felt by her." Bertha feels such great love for her child today because she has never felt such love before, as if such moments were startlingly rare.

> <32 "You're wanted on the telephone," said Nanny, coming back in triumph and seizing her Little B.

I find myself liking the Nanny because I take it she is attached to the child, and I find the child has become a rounder figure partly because of this.

Slowly through Section Two the tiny girl has taken on for me a greater and greater sense of specific-

ity, a kind which makes me feel responsible for her, like a father (or mother) his (or her) daughter. This seems significant because it occurs in such a way that I might be said to see Bertha's limitation without having to acknowledge it to myself (because I am reading). The effect of this child seeming more of an individual (and less a mere representative of childhood) is that it coincides with what I would call a shrinking-down of Bertha's consciousness. Her vision seems narrower, like blinders fixed at the temples of a horse, as if her breadth of field were curtailed. Rather than confidently saying that her field of vision shrinks, I more wisely would say that my vision has grown bigger, outgrown hers. I still remain her tenant, as it were, the inhabitant and sharer of her perception as my reading creates her for me in my imagination. But my being extends beyond the limit. My vision sees what hers does, yet I see beyond her periphery. I see around its edges. The child is less an "it" than before. It seems about to burst the constraint of namelessness like a child might burst a pinafore she has outgrown.

I find it hard to say that the "point" of this section is for me to see anything about Bertha that I could put mere words to, such as, "her general lack of love" or "her inarticulateness." These may not be

at all false. The "point" never reaches a head in the section. There is no explosion of recognition for me. Had the section been longer, I might feel, in the middle of reading, more certain about the significance of my witnessing this meeting between mother and daughter. But my certainty is averted, as if it were a disaster. I am unable to make a final decision about whether Bertha is a "good" or "weak" mother, I do not even want to decide this before moving on. I simply take Bertha as being "different" and "peculiar," and I accept her behavior in this moment without judging her nor it.

The child, in this last sentence, receives its greatest value because I take it that the Nanny loves the baby directly. I really believe this, though one might certainly argue that she is merely playing her part as a servant paid to tend a child. Nanny swoops back in triumph and siezes HER Little B because she is a victim of her feeling. She fusses at Bertha not because she is an enemy of Bertha, an oppressor of the young woman, but because she loves the child. Her love seems more certain than Bertha's, less frustrated. In seeing the Nanny's "love" I am able to sense the remoteness that Bertha feels and, with her ecstatic name-calling and cooing of before, tries to overcome.

[SECTION THREE]

<33 Down she flew. It was Harry.
"Oh, is that you, Ber? Look here. I'll be late. I'll take a taxi and come along as quickly as I can, but get dinner put back ten minutes—will you? All right?"
"Yes, perfectly. Oh, Harry!"
"Yes?"
"What had she to say? She'd nothing to say. She only wanted to get in touch with him for a moment. She couldn't absurdly cry: "Hasn't it been a divine day!"

<34 "What is it?" rapped out the little voice.

Harry must be generally an understanding man, as today Bertha wanted to get in touch with him. This impression of mine is a favorable one. But it is undercut even as it is being formed. I am not sure whether Bertha hesitates to speak because Harry is too negligible or because the things she wishes to express are gargantuan or simply inexpressible however big a man Harry may be. <33 opens two perspectives, then, on her husband. In <34 when his voice raps out, I am propelled along the first perspective: Harry is small, pernicious, impatient.

> <35 "Nothing. Entendu," said Bertha, and hung up the receiver, thinking how more than idiotic civilization was.

No, Harry is not narrow and tiny. Rather, too much was expected of him. Harry doesn't fail Bertha, language does. Her feelings are too perfect and uncompromisable, too far above common expression. In comparison to bliss Harry is puny, yes. But so too is Bertha. Civilization dwarfs everyone and everything, yet itself is dwarfed, dusty and constipated when compared by Bertha to her incomparable bliss. The section ends with my feeling of Bertha's isolation, one imposed on her today (and at other times too, perhaps?) because of her joy rather than her characteristics that those people who do not understand might describe with words like superficiality and weakness.

My impression of bliss's authenticity is reinforced by Bertha's inability to express herself satisfactorily.

[SECTION FOUR]

<36 They had people coming to dinner.

An unidentified voice speaks. The fact that guests are coming is so clearly stated, so unprejudiced by anyone, so unbiased, that I almost feel remiss for earlier not having foreseen the party. It is set out as if I should have been expecting it but have let myself—or forced myself—to become preoccupied by other matters so that when I realize a party is being given I am somehow amazed.

<37 The Norman Knights—a very sound couple —he was about the start a theatre, and she was awfully keen on interior decoration, a young man, Eddie Warren, who had just published a little book of poems and whom everybody was asking to dine, and a "find" of Bertha's called Pearl Fulton.

<38 What Miss Fulton did, Bertha didn't know.

Whose word is "find"? Bertha's? Pearl's? That of the "unidentified voice" that I claimed exists above? To my reading it sounds from several sources. It suits

Bertha because it suggests a way she might see her friend, as someone mysterious whom Bertha is privileged to know. The word find sounds into Pearl Fulton too, carrying for me a sense of her character: she intends to be perceived as a mystery, an enigma. She is called Pearl Fulton, as if her real name might indeed be some other. I get the sense of her being a mysterious quality and yet already (through the word find) fully and unhesitantly appraised both by Bertha and me.

> <39 They had met at the club and Bertha had fallen in love with her, as she always did fall in love with beautiful women who had something strange about them.

The effect of the twice-used phrase fall in love can be explained by observing the prior context. The repetition of the important words either renders the meaning superficial or profound. In my case, the meaning of the word is cheapened because I consider the loose, casual usage of the phrase fall in love, as it might be used by these guests that we are in the middle (presumably) of learning about. I already have a picture of the type of people who are her guests. Judging by their interests in theatre, literature and interior decoration, and that Pearl Fulton and Bertha attend a club together, I

create individuals who are agile with language, clever, literate, and thus prone to hyperbole and exaggeration. They love danger in conversation, enjoy quibbles. They would use the words fall in love when they mean to say, "like extremely much." They use such expressions to reveal the intensity of their feeling in a kind of short-hand. Bertha, as I am imagining her, is happy, blissful and extravagant as I hear this voice telling me about her guests (for she is not speaking to me). And so I would expect that my understanding of her relations with Pearl Fulton are best described and understood in the mood of the hour. I do not assume, then, that she fell in love with Miss Fulton in the same way she fell in love with Harry Young (whom I assume she fell in love with in a "standard" way). I see less in these words rather than more here in <39. The repetition certifies that "only an expression is being used here; don't think this really means what for a moment you nearly thought it meant."

> <40 The provoking thing was that, though they had been about together and met a number of times and really talked, Bertha couldn't yet make her out. Up to a certain point Miss Fulton was rarely, wonderfully frank, but that certain point was there, and beyond that she would not go.
> Was there anything beyond it?

<41 Harry said "No." Voted her dullish, and "cold like all blond women, with a touch, perhaps, of anemia of the brain." But Bertha wouldn't agree with him; not yet at any rate.

<40. A switch: I make more of the phrase fall in love than I did before. I find myself involved in an operation of feeling much like that of someone who is truly in love in the serious sense. Is the "love" Bertha feels for Pearl Fulton steeled by her curiosity to go beyond the certain point of candor that pleasurably, for Bertha, inhibits and temporarily restrains the success of love? Or is it just the other way around: that Bertha's curiosity about Pearl and her desire to know what lies beyond the certain point is taken, or mistaken, for love? A third possibility: Bertha's love is impelled by curiosity, roused up by it, as if for her, love exists overwhelmingly when she feels she knows everything about her friend, yet, really, absolutely nothing. Love feelings, in a general way, I wish to compare here to the natural state of stars which, if they are imploded, draw to themselves other stars, space and light. The love that I give to Bertha here for Pearl can be described in much the same way. Bertha must know she is loved. But not only that, she must know she is not unloved, not hated, not loathed or despised.

My reading imputes great emotional commitment to Bertha's feeling for her artsy friend, feelings of the most dangerous kind, of the most ecstatically lurid and delightful variety. I seem, in coming to this passage, to be wildly ungoverned by bliss, which is impulsive and excessive, and by the feeling of Section Two of wanting to "get across" a feeling, or take in a feeling which I cannot do. And so I see this concern about Pearl's limitation of candor as something which must be overcome, jumped across if at all possible—I see this for myself, and imagine it is true for Bertha as well. I imagine Bertha wanting to break down a strong fence that she discerns between herself and this lady friend. I attribute to Bertha an urgency of will. Bertha is fraught by Pearl's curious barrier because she deeply loves and fully cares for Miss Fulton, or finds curiosity and affection heightening each other into a kind of sweet frenzy. She wants, like a lover might want, to assure herself not only that Miss Fulton loves her back and wants to know everything about her, but that she does not <u>not</u> love her, as I said. Bertha wants Miss Fulton to have not a single reservation about her nor about their love, which is, without doubt, total, uninhibited and which may or may not exist. Bertha, it might be said, is imagined here as wishing to be able

to tell her friend everything she ever did, thought, said, or feared, and to have Miss Fulton reciprocate. She wants to be frank with Miss Fulton and for honesty to make no bit of difference to her, as she will love Bertha anyway. I am not saying I discern this as I read, only that I have a feeling in myself, on behalf of Bertha, which renders itself in the impression of it I have offered.

But now a new paragraph: Was there anything beyond it? This makes Pearl even more mysterious because it does not have me assume that there is anything beyond the fence. It does not ask, What was beyond it? Miss Fulton, for all practical purposes, exists thus far as a set of expectations. I do not know anything about her. But with this question, followed in <41 by an answer, I take to feeling that I am only pretending to be modest, that I am only pretending to not be assuming that anything could lie beyond it. I feel that I am pretending that she is so unknown to me that this question, Was there anything beyond it?, can be a serious one. I feel, as a result of this artifice which I feel myself a participant in, that she's not at all inaccessible to me, that I know her. My reading, then, might be said to have me assume that "of course something lies beyond this Fulton fence!"

<41. I adopt Harry's perspective because it is

so clear. His answer satisfies my own desire to have an answer. He seems to have little knowledge of Pearl Fulton: he voted her dullish, as if he were dealing with someone at a great remove, like a voter knows about a politician but only to a limited degree. His language indicates he has superficial impressions only, and that he is willing to articulate these. His insistence draws me away from the complacency I temporarily assumed at having a clear answer. Rather than taking this as "a view of Pearl Fulton," I am made conscious that this is "Harry's view." My attention draws backward from the object viewed to the viewer. His view is the one that I and Bertha are to make our views either agree or disagree with.

> <42 "No, the way she has of sitting with her head a little on one side, and smiling, has something behind it, Harry, and I must find out what that something is."
>
> "Most likely it's a good stomach," answered Harry.
>
> He made a point of catching Bertha's heels with replies of that kind . . . "liver frozen, my dear girl," or "pure flatulence," or "kidney disease," . . . and so on. For some strange reason Bertha liked this, and almost admired it in him very much.

Like a genial little girl, Bertha makes much of appearances. She is one of those delightful people who finds significance where indeed none may be, for she makes much

of gestures (sitting with her head a little to one side), like someone who is certain that the best discoveries are those which are most delicately hooded and wrapped away behind the telling superficialities discerned by the intent eye. Bertha is privileged, wealthy, moving with the smart set, and so peculiarly suited to uncovering truth under subtlety. Who among us has not been this way? I remember how in my late teens I would take great pleasure in opportunities to discern what I might have called "hidden qualities" in people. I often "read between the lines" of their words. Why? How better could I know myself as clever, as extremely discerning of human nature?

Bertha enjoys Harry's barrage, my reading makes me assume, because if she can be confident of his error she will allow herself certainty that her own views of Pearl are not wrong. (I don't say "right," just "not wrong.") Harry's confidence assures me (and Bertha, as I imagine her) that at the very least Pearl cannot be as bad as he would have people think—probably much better, since his own view and knowledge are so prejudiced. The tendency of my reading of <41 is to give Pearl credibility by default.

> <43 She went into the drawing-room and lighted the fire; then, picking up the cushions, one by one, that Mary had disposed so carefully, she threw them back on to the chairs and the couches. That made all the difference; the room came alive at once. As she was about to throw the last one she surprised herself by suddenly hugging it to her, passionately, passionately. But it did not put out the fire in her bosom. Oh, on the contrary!

To call Bertha's passionate crumpling of a pillow against herself a sexual event makes too little of what to her it must be. I want to describe how this is sexual, but I fear that to call it "sexual" will draw the whole of what I might offer as a description into the vortex of the named part of her experience. It is sexual, but not sexual.

Bliss is an emotion I can feel as well as I imagine her, Bertha, feeling it. The same kind of excitement, as I see it, dominates the reader and the character he beholds in his mind. I know and feel bliss because I have known such feelings in my own life. I do not give Bertha unalloyed sexual desire in this instant because I do not feel it directly myself. I am not aroused in such a way as to imagine that she too feels that way. My understanding and creation of her sexual excitement, if she can be said to feel it here, is thus less than perfect. It is less harmonious with my feeling than

her other feelings are with my own. If Bertha were a real person, and I were Bertha Young, I would be able to say, "I have the hots." But Bertha is not flesh and blood; she is a figment of my imagination. She does not have real feelings, she can only be thought to have them, and only as I give them, or feel in such a way as to feel it suggested that she has these feelings or sensations. The passion I give to her is not passion as I might feel it; it is more chaste, less perfect in a way, and thus necessarily broader. It is sexual because it is sensual, provoked, not of such a nature as to merit my saying, "She's ready for sex."

So instead of accommodating myself to describing the effect of this passage as sexual for the reader and for the character, I will be coy and say that flame licks and tingles her every part, but no part especially. Loins is as much a partial truth as the word bosom, where the fires of bliss lick. Her instinct, though, seems very much of the kind that governs sexual love. She seems to feel a desire to overpower, to astonish—to merge with some other person or being. That's why she squeezes the pillow against herself. It carries the impulse of self-annihilation and self-restoration that creates sex.

> <44 The windows of the drawing-room opened on to a balcony overlooking the garden. At the far end, against the wall, there was a tall, slender pear tree in fullest, richest bloom; it stood perfect, as though becalmed against the jade-green sky. Bertha couldn't help feeling, even from this distance, that it had not a single bud or faded petal. Down below, in the garden beds, the red and yellow tulips, heavy with flowers, seemed to lean upon the dusk.

Each object the reader sees is significant in its turn; the tulips heavy with flowers no less so than the tree. I imagine the tulips, diplopic in their presence, as clearly as the tree which, though it towers over them, is relatively more significant but not exponentially so. At this point in reading, any of these objects could be something meriting special attention. I do not find myself working below the surface of my own experience, undermining it in such a way as to find that the tree is a symbol. For example, if I may protest too much, I do not find the tree is a symbol for the penis: a reader who is going along too critically might read into his experience something to the effect that when Bertha grabbed the pillow and pressed it to herself, she was really grabbing the tree. If the tree gives my image of Bertha a calm look on her face, it is because the tree is beautiful, not because it allayed some disembodied desire which she exerted upon it.

My reading does not have me understand the sentence, Bertha couldn't help feeling . . . that it had not a single bud or faded petal. But I pretend to understand this. I confess that my reading of an article about the botanical nature of pear trees failed to help me. Much is made of the pear tree by the story's expositors. One can easily "pursue . . . the sexual implications inherent in the tree" (Nebeker 1972, 546). Any object can be turned into a symbol and held to other parts of the text to see if it picks up vibration, association or dissonance. Let me simply say here that a reader, reading as I do here, who sees a Freudian symbol instead of a tree is not really reading the story. He is working. He is simply not seeing for himself "what is there."

> <45 A grey cat, dragging its belly, crept across the lawn, and a black one, its shadow, trailed after. The sight of them, so intent and so quick, gave Bertha a curious shiver.
>
> "What creepy things cats are!" she stammered, and she turned away from the window and began walking up and down. . . .

Bertha's shiver and stammer may truly be said to have their origin in some long-held trait or hangup which I do not yet know about, and which these reactions do not adequately put me in touch with. My reading attends to

immediate cause, however, or what it assumes is the immediately justifiable reason. The word curious mystifies the deeper reason.

The context for this reaction to the cats is, remember, Bertha's heightened sensibility. The cats are momentarily shuddered over as much because of her terrific excitement as because of a standard dislike for them which at some other time Bertha might hold to. Her reaction is excessive.

First of all, what does the reader see of the cats? The phrase, dragged its belly, suggests a pregnant cat, a bulging belly. But the word crept seems to perform plastic surgery on my image of the belly: when a cat creeps, stealthily hunts, its belly presses the ground. It drags its belly. The sentence gives, then takes away, the notion of pregnancy.

The shuddering seems caused by Bertha's sense that a cat cannot rightly be attributed human characteristics. I do not mean to suggest that my reading makes me assume cats are a regular part of her life. But if you know about cats, you know how easily they can be made to assume attributes, feelings and moods. Depending on one's mood or a cat's actions, one might suddenly feel that the cat is falsifying the humanity imputed to it. Shockingly, I might feel that a cat is unfathomable, uncomprehending,

I might feel horror at its lack of humanity as, secretly, it hides behind the skin of its eye, closed off from me in a way unlike Pearl Fulton, who is entirely frank and open up to that certain point.

My reading then provides me with an immediate sense of the reason for Bertha's shudder, though I am not to be thought as saying that this might be said to be the entire or final explanation. It's just the one I take up at the moment of reading.

> <46 How strong the jonquils smelled in the warm room. Too strong? Oh, no. And yet, as though overcome, she flung down on a couch and pressed her hands to her eyes.
>
> "I'm too happy—too happy!" she murmured.
>
> And she seemed to see on her eyelids the lovely pear tree with its wide open blossoms as a symbol of her own life.

> <47 Really—really—she had everything. She was young. Harry and she were as much in love as ever, and they got along together splendidly and were really good pals. She had an adorable baby. They didn't have to worry about money. They had this absolutely satisfactory house and garden. And friends—modern, thrilling friends, writers and painters and poets and people keen on social questions—just the kind of friends they wanted. And then there were books, and there was music, and she had found a wonderful little dressmaker, and they were going abroad in the summer, and their cook made the most superb omelettes . . . .
>
> "I'm absurd. Absurd!" She sat up; but she felt quite dizzy, quite drunk. It must have been the spring.
>
> Yes, it was the spring. Now she was so tired she could not drag herself upstairs to dress.

Bertha in <46 seemed to see the tree as a symbol of her own life, a lovely life, as <47 goes on to prove. She does not think consciously about the tree being a symbol, what constitutes the symbol. I do not match up given aspects of the tree with given aspects of her life. The correspondence is simple: the tree is lovely, Bertha and her life as she sees it are lovely, and so the tree is like a symbol. The symbolism, for the reader and for his conception of character, is a given; one does not analyze or explain the correspondence. <47 goes to prove not that the tree is a symbol, but that her life is lovely. I find that as <47 proceeds the notion of a symbol loses importance. As the reader enumerates the

beauties of her life, he needs the beautiful symbol less because it is shorthand when longhand, in the list of details of her life, is being proudly offered. The tree is not the "center" of the story, just as it is not the center of Bertha's life, even symbolically. There isn't any center to her life; it's spread out over many things. Her life lends itself to fruit, as we saw in Section One.

And now to Bertha's list of everything. I am highly satisfied for her sake. Bertha is so ardent, lovely, passionate. She has more than most women. She enjoys youth and charm, and she can be pals with her husband in addition to being in love with him as much as ever. That they are pals does not diminish the effect of the prior statement that they are still in love as they used to be. They are lovers and best friends, which is the ideal. That the list of plusses diminishes finally to the cook's omelettes does not cast doubt on the praise merited by the more important things like feelings between spouses. Rather, my entrance into small details such as the cook's dish assures me that tonight Bertha is blissful and that the virtue and advantage of her life enjoy considerable breadth. Her life is so good that she can enjoy eating no less than an afternoon's walk home.

That Bertha next calls herself absurd and feels dizzy, quite drunk is to her advantage: she is too

mature, too smart, to miss seeing how her bliss has made a fool out of her. It favors her power of observation for her to say she is being silly; I credit her objectivity. That she attributes her bliss to the spring season also reaffirms my feeling that bliss has no cause, and doesn't need to be opened up so that the cause can be found. Is bliss caused by spring? Of course it is, but not <u>just</u> that. She catches herself outrunning all restraint and decency; I am assured of her good sense, particularly because she attacks herself playfully, sweetly.

[SECTION FIVE]

<48 A white dress, a string of jade beads, green shoes and stockings. It wasn't intentional. She had thought of this scheme hours before she stood at the drawing room window.

Her petals rustled softly into the hall, and she kissed Mrs. Norman Knight, who was taking off the most amusing orange coat with a procession of black monkeys around the hem and up the fronts.

". . . Why! Why! Why is the middle-class so stodgy—so utterly without a sense of humour! My dear, it's only by a fluke that I am here at all—Norman being the protective fluke. For my darling monkeys so upset the train that it rose to a man and simply ate me with its eyes. Didn't laugh—wasn't amused—that I should have loved. No, just stared—and bored me through and through."

"But the cream of it was," said Norman, pressing a large tortoiseshell-rimmed monocle into his eye, "you don't mind me telling this, Face, do you?" (In their home and among their friends they called each other Face and Mug.) "The cream of it was when she, being full fed, turned to the woman beside her and said: 'Haven't you ever seen a monkey before?'"

"Oh, yes!" Mrs. Norman Knight joined in the laughter. "Wasn't that too absolutely creamy?"

And a funnier thing still was that now her coat was off she did look like a very intelligent monkey—who had even made that yellow silk dress out of scraped banana skins. And her amber ear-rings; they were like little dangling nuts.

"This is a sad, sad fall!" said Mug, pausing in front of Little B's peramulator. "When the perambulator comes into the hall—" and he waved the rest of the quotation away.

The bell rang. It was lean, pale Eddie Warren (as usual) in a state of acute distress.

"It <u>is</u> the right house, <u>isn't</u> it?" he

pleaded.

"Oh, I think so—I hope so," said Bertha brightly.

"I have had such a dreadful experience with a taxi-man; he was most sinister. I couldn't get him to stop. The more I knocked and called the faster he went. And in the moonlight this bizarre figure with the flattened head crouching over the lit-tle wheel. . . ."

He shuddered, taking off an immense white scarf. Bertha noticed that his socks were white, too—most charming.

"But how dreadful!" she cried.

"Yes, it really was," said Eddie, following her into the drawing-room. "I saw myself driving through Eternity in a timeless taxi."

He knew the Norman Knights. In fact, he was going to write a play for N.K. when the theatre scheme came off.

"Well, Warren, how's the play?" said Norman Knight, dropping his monocle and giving his eye a moment in which to rise to the surface before it was screwed down again.

And Mrs. Norman Knight: "Oh, Mr. Warren, what happy socks!"

"I am so glad you like them," said he, staring at his feet. "They seem to have got so much whiter since the moon rose." And he turned his lean sorrowful young face to Bertha. "There is a moon, you know."

She wanted to cry: "I am sure there is—often—often!"

He really was a most attractive person. But so was Face, crouched before the fire in her banana skins, and so was Mug, smoking a cigarette and saying as he flicked the ash: "Why doth the bridegroom tarry?"

"There he is, now."

<49 Bang went the front door open and shut. Harry shouted: "Hullo, you people. Down in five minutes." And they heard him swarm up the stairs. Bertha couldn't help smiling; she knew how he loved doing things at high pressure. What, after all, did an extra five minutes matter? But he would pretend to himself that they mattered beyond measure. And then he would make a great point of coming into the drawing-room, extravagantly cool and collected.

<50 Harry had such a zest for life.

To see Harry understood is to feel I understand him, that I have no illusions about him, that there is nothing about him I do not know. His boyishness and playfulness assures me he is open and wouldn't menace a mouse.

<51 Oh, how she appreciated it in him. And his passion for fighting—for seeking in everything that came up against him another test of his power and of his courage—that, too, she understood. Even when it made him just occasionally, to other people, who didn't know him well, a little ridiculous perhaps . . . . For there were moments when he rushed into battle where no battle was. . . .

This reader provides a reservoir of goodwill for Harry. I have too big a heart to be peevish at him; Bertha is

compassionate rather than patronizing: the man is not immature, but zesty.

> <52 She talked and laughed and positively forgot until he had come in (just as she had imagined) that Pearl Fulton had not turned up.
> "I wonder if Miss Fulton has forgotten?"
> "I expect so," said Harry. "Is she on the 'phone?"
> "Ah, there's a taxi, now." And Bertha smiled with that little air of proprietorship that she always assumed while her women finds were new and mysterious. "She lives in taxis."

Bertha really has forgotten that Pearl would be coming. But she forgot because she wanted to, so that when she sees Pearl coming she would be delighted by the surprise. People in courtship play such games.

Cheerful and meddlesome Bertha smiles in her particular way because proprietorship, with all its attendant responsibilities, seems just what she kindly and warmly has taken upon herself as regards Pearl. The newness and exquisiteness of their relationship exercises her bliss and characteristic warmth. The look on her face makes me think she knows Pearl very well, and that really I do too. I <u>feel</u> extremely familiar with Pearl Fulton. That Bertha Young assumes her role of joyful patronage, at least in this case, makes me assume that such patronages are graciously sought and willingly

given. Bertha has assumed the role of mentor to a brilliant and awkward neophyte. Truly this is a society of artists, moderns and upper-crust specialists in favor-giving. I am here not wary of Bertha's self-importance; I am not alarmed for her sake, nor do I think that she is creating perceptions rather than having them.

Pearl, after all, should be given this sort of patronage that Bertha's smile suggests she has bestowed. Pearl is truly special. "She lives in taxis." Instead of taking this as pure hyperbole, I perceive in reading the truth that I assume lies under the exaggeration. Pearl Fulton strikes me here as someone who is widely demanded, and thus desirable. Amazed by her, the upper-crust circuit has extended so many invitations to her that she has long been one of those women whose phone is never picked up because she is rarely at home. Out to the club she has gone, or to an invitation, a rendevous, waiting for a taxi.

To consider the phrase lives in taxis, I might be expected to think that Bertha is quite mistaken about her relationship with Pearl, and that the proprietorship over which she smiles is foolish. If, as Bertha says, Pearl Fulton lives in taxis, that means it is preposterous to assume at the same time that Bertha in a way owns this young woman, has control over

her success and happiness. If Pearl is shared by so many different groups, cliques and wealthy individuals, which I am willing to claim is likely, then she cannot be owned by Bertha in a way to justify that little smile of hers. Pearl Fulton's life must probably be quite independent of the way Bertha (and I) see it, that is—as belonging to someone who is important and valuable because Bertha fell in love with her.

Instead of making me recognize that Bertha should not perhaps feel so responsible for Pearl, the lives in taxis phrase does for me just the opposite. It assures me that Bertha has a great hand in Pearl's future, a stake in it far greater than I'd yet realized. Pearl lives in taxis, yes, but because Bertha permits it, overlooks it. Bertha possesses Pearl Fulton to such a degree that Bertha can graciously concede to sharing Miss Fulton. Bertha is proud that her Miss Fulton has a wide circle of friends. She uses her knowledge of Pearl's wide contacts to assure herself, in her own mind, that their friendship is really the only one that matters to Pearl. Bertha is that certain of their intimacy and deepening friendship (whatever might be true about her perception of that fence that Miss Fulton hesitates to cross).

The smile has been smiled in the past. Bertha has

had other women finds, and for a time they remained new and mysterious. But, considering her new relationship with Pearl, these other women are new and mysterious no more. They were never as interesting as Pearl. Bertha has forgotten about them. Pearl is the only real find to me because this is the first time I am a direct witness of Bertha and her circumstances. My being here means for me that Pearl is the one who truly matters.

> <53 "She'll run to fat if she does," said Harry, coolly ringing the bell for dinner. "Frightful danger for blond women."

I close up the protective circle created by the friendship of these two women. Like wagons in a circle I see them, fending off Harry's attack. Other people simply cannot understand what Bertha and Pearl share. Their love must be profound and enviable. Harry's slanders are not even personal; rather than seeing in this that such attacks are off-the-cuff rather than envious as perhaps I should, I assure myself that the evidence of their unique relationship, being as Bertha and I want it, grows even more.

> <54 "Harry—don't," warned Bertha, laughing up at him.
>
> Came another tiny moment, while they waited, laughing and talking, just a trifle too much at their ease, a trifle too unaware. And then Miss Fulton, all in silver, with a silver fillet binding her pale blond hair, came in smiling, her head a little to one side.

The sequence of events are as follows: Harry slanders Pearl Fulton. b) Bertha, whose face is bent down the whole time, speaks, raises her eyes and laughs up at him as if he were cruelly looming over her as he damned Pearl, and Bertha, innocently, waited him out. c) A moment of talk and laughter.

There is an excess of talk and laughter, I sense, when I read they are a trifle too much at their ease and a trifle too unaware. The first paragraph of <54 gives me a sense of what it must be like to NOT LOOK into Harry's face. The second gives me the same impression, but with the other people, as if one could look but one does not want to because there waits something that one does not want to see. I have Bertha sense a moment of awkwardness; when the group is said to be too much at their ease, Bertha is included.

I see the Knights looking down, glancing off to the side, laughing too hard at a remark that merits a weak chuckle and, in some other circumstances, would

never have been uttered. Bertha speaks too loudly, appears too engaged in talk, she is too busy being hostess, handing just now a tray to the person next to her. Bertha might be thought of as looking down because she fears that her own game, her own excitement, will be discovered by her guests. What the other people may be "unconscious" of may be different from what Bertha is "unconscious" of. I do not weigh them separately. If I am alarmed it seems mostly due to Bertha's serenity as it bulges under the excitement she suppresses underneath.

> <55 "Am I late?"
> "No, not at all," said Bertha. "Come along. And she took her arm and they moved into the dining-room.
> What was there in the touch of that cool arm that could fan—fan—start blazing —the fire of bliss that Bertha did not know what to do with?
> Miss Fulton did not look at her; but then she seldom did look at people directly. Her heavy eyelids lay upon her eyes and the strange half smile came and went upon her lips as though she lived by listening rather than seeing.

> <56 But Bertha knew, suddenly, as if the longest, most intimate look had passed between them—as if they had said to each other: "You, too?"—that Pearl Fulton, stirring the beautiful red soup in the grey plate, was feeling just what she was feeling.

This is the first time in my reading that I identify bliss with a specific cause. Up until now the feeling has seemed to prefer not having its origin investigated or questioned; it seemed nameless, untraceable and yet traceable into every object and from every object, from all beings and good sensations.

Here, Pearl Fulton is looking down, but we ourselves look at her. Bertha looks at her. My reading makes a mistake that very often we commit in our own lives. I mistake a perception of reality for reality itself. The same for Bertha. She knew suddenly that Pearl felt the same way she did. I am left caring not so much what they might have comparably felt, but that they felt the same.

My perspective as a reader is the same as Bertha's. I cannot find any objectivity greater than that given to me as a participant of these events. I have no remote perch from which to look askance at this sudden knowing and question it, either for validity or cause. Why should I doubt the "reality" of this knowing, anyhow? Bertha has such good sense. She knows she is excited,

full of expectation.

I share Bertha's excitement. I employ the tremulous as if—twice!—to create something better than an act of seeing: an act of knowing. I overlook the syntactical message that tells me that details following each as if are for the sake of comparison, and are not witness-able acts that really occurred. So instead of perceiving this "knowing" to be LIKE the longest, most intimate look [that] had passed between them, I SEE such a look.

Rather than saying I ignore the two as if's, I would be described as having misused them. I take the act of knowing to be so true and stunning that it is only right that it not be identified directly. The two as if's seal the moment safely away in a sanctum reached only by the mirror of analogy. I also use the colors to help establish for my imagination the temporal action of Bertha and Pearl each knowing the other. I read beautiful red soup and gray plate as if they place me in time; I make use of colors when perhaps, in another context, I would not, knowing that these might be described as false evidence.

<57 And the others? Face and Mug, Eddie and Harry, their spoons rising and falling—dabbing their lips with their napkins, crumbling bread, fiddling with the forks and glasses and talking.

"I met her at the Alpha show—the weirdest little person. She'd not only cut off her hair, but she seemed to have taken a dreadfully good snip off her legs and arms and her neck and her poor little nose as well."

"Isn't she very liée with Michael Oat?"

"The man who wrote Love in False Teeth?"

"He wants to write a play for me. One act. One man. Decides to commit suicide. Gives all the reasons why he should and why he shouldn't. And just as he has made up his mind either to do it or not to do it —curtain. Not half a bad idea."

"What's he going to call it—'Stomach Trouble'?"

"I think I've come across the same idea in a lit-tle French review, quite unknown in England."

<58 No, they didn't share it. They were dears—dears—and she loved having them there, at her table, and giving them delicious food and wine. In fact, she longed to tell them how delightful they were, and what a decorative group they made, how they seemed to set one another off and how they reminded her of a play by Tchekof!

I too feel very kindly toward these guests. No, they don't share the gift that Bertha shares with Pearl. But I do not find myself, as I look at them as I think Bertha does, disliking them or scoffing at them. They lack the gift that I do, and that Bertha so enjoys. Social

creatures almost entirely, the possibilities of the inner world of the soul are to them unreachable, it seems. I pity them rather than dislike them.

In the appraisal of <58, Bertha loves her guests, but no more than they deserve. She glances at them with all possible favor, but acknowledges their limitations by having me overlook them in <57, where I listen to their conversation and feel a vague dissatisfaction.

Bertha loves the Knights, Eddie and Pearl—as a group, mind you—not because they are special, but because they are her guests. She loves to give people pleasure. Her use of the word dears is hearty, but the word is dreary nonetheless. They are a decorative group because they have no inside, only an outside; for her purposes tonight, in her bliss, they are inessential. They do not know Bertha, nor does she know them a single bit, according to this feeling. One cannot know these people as one can know Pearl Fulton, in a way unmediated and instantaneous.

The guests are exciting for other reasons, however. The comparison between her guests and a Tchekov play does little to suggest Bertha is pretentious or shallow, but suggests that they are exciting and interesting to see in action. They are at their best, and are so modern. Fail to listen for a moment, and you are lost!

<59 Harry was enjoying his dinner. It was part of his—well, not his nature exactly, and certainly not his pose—his —something or other—to talk about food and to glory in his "shameless passion for the white flesh of the lobster" and "the green pistachio ices—green and cold like the eyelids of Egyptian dancers."

<60 When he looked up at her and said: "Bertha, this is very admirable soufflé!" she almost could have wept with child-like pleasure.

In studying the story one might be tempted to draw connections between Harry's salivations of speech and Pearl Fulton, whom the reader visualizes earlier (in <54 and <55) through a series of words similar to those Harry utters now. I draw your attention to the reader's circumstance in each of these two contexts to show that reading rightly "misses" the connections that are claimed to exist in critical analysis.

Harry's lip lickings, as a class of words, are similar or identical to those used by the reader to picture Pearl on her arrival. He refers to white flesh and ices which are cold like the eyelids of Egyptian dancers: the man refers to his shameless passion for these attributes in food. On her arrival, Pearl is shown wearing a silver fillet binding her pale blond hair; she

has a cool arm and heavy eyelids. Should the reader not be immediately suspicious of a dangerous relationship existing between the married man and his wife's friend? Shorn of their contexts, the words are strikingly suggestive. But the reader reading attends each set differently. Harry speaks the words; and though this is true, we do not hear them being spoken directly, but we hear them muffled. They are being quoted, as it were, by Bertha. The stutterings of <59 suggest Bertha's mental action, though not necessarily at a given instant in the party. His words are being used in a context that is filled by Bertha's characterization of him. Earlier, the words are being used exclusively to see with, and I do not "hear" them. I am not denying that at this point in the story Harry can be thought as being related to Pearl by gustatory language, in which she seems to fit the description of the food he relishes. But reading of the kind I am narrating is terrifically full of attending to the given moment an event occurs, and so cannot be occupied by connections which, to a student and his cognitive efforts, seem obvious.

> <61 Oh, why did she feel so tender towards the whole world tonight? Everything was good—was right. All that happened seemed to fill again her brimming cup of bliss.

> <62 And still, in the back of her mind, there was the pear tree. It would be silver now, in the light of poor dear Eddie's moon, silver as Miss Fulton, who sat there turning a tangerine in her slender fingers that were so pale a light seemed to come from them.

Bertha is not thinking about the pear tree. Its image appears to her because, like everything else tonight, the food, the guests, it is beautiful and rich. For me to render an impression of how I, the reader, deal with this tree is difficult. I do not wish to make more of it in my description than I seem to make in reading. If my exposition is long and involved, I give the wrong idea and do too much. If I wait until some possible point later in the story to describe it—if indeed the tree does reappear—it may be all too late; by that time the tree may mean something different, or nothing at all.

She may have, but my reading does not have me assume that Bertha has worked out in her own mind exactly what the tree symbolizes. I do not connect with any mental activity that might be supposed she has given to the tree. I connect, as a reader, with this individual's instinctive relationship with the tree and the image of it she holds in the back of her mind, like a whisper or a a dream. I do not "work through" the significance I give to the tree, nor that she might be thought to give it.

My understanding and comprehension do not go far, perhaps because my reading does not make me go far in them. The tree is her symbol, quite simply, because it is love, because it is silver, because she can see it and admire it; it's really there. These are things I need not turn over in my mind, nor feel that I must analyze them or understand them before proceeding on. If I happen to stop reading, I do not think about the tree, I merely contemplate its beauty—I hear it, see it, smell it. Rather than enter into one of the hundreds of threads that might be traced between the various aspects of tree and Bertha its admirer, I only acknowledge its potential but do not myself follow up with a study of each strand. Reading the critical articles that discuss the tree at great length, you would scarcely know that to a reader the tree is something that one understands, but then does not understand because "understanding" seems like an inappropriate way to behold it.

Bertha has granted the tree a visual power over her. But she has done this, without giving alarm to anyone, to other objects. She lives in the tree just as she lives in those tulips, or the deep odor of the jonquils, or the fruit on the table. They are all intoxicating to her and to the reader. The reader develops—or assumes as part of his creative activity—a power to become the

things he sees in his imagination. The tree stands as a series of possibilities which are recombined in the same instant they are conceived of as being separate one from the other.

> <63 What she simply couldn't make out —what was miraculous—was how she should have guessed Miss Fulton's mood so exactly and so instantly.

To guess so exactly and so instantly is not to guess, but to know. I read the word guess but assume know. My certainty at the correctness of her "perception" increases as the sentence nears its end, with exactly and instantly. Already, though, I was convinced of this moment of knowing, and <63 I use as proof as much as I use it as assertion.

> <64 For she never doubted for a moment that she was right, and yet what had she to go on? Less than nothing.
>
> "I believe this does happen very, very rarely between women. Never between men," thought Bertha. "But while I am making the coffee in the drawing-room perhaps she will 'give a sign.'"
>
> What she meant by that she did not know, and what would happen after that she could not imagine.
>
> While she thought like this

Bertha is wise to admit that the sudden, intimate knowing occurred against all odds and without evidence. The admission makes me feel all the more certain that the original perception is true. She feels it is true, and I make it true. Bertha is far from being absurd and hysterical this evening. She's perfectly reasonable.

When she says to herself that such events must occur rarely between women I feel that the issue is settled. Also settled (by virtue of not being brought up) is a third possibility: that such things occur between men and women. No, Pearl could never enjoy such an experience with a man. I do not in reading admit this possibility and then reject it, and I do not squarely reject it and so admit the possibility. My reading does not have me enter the matter at all.

Bertha is modest in her desires. She wants little because she demands so much and knows she has received

infinitudes and so realizes she will never "get" as much as she wants. All she needs right now from the sign is to feel she has shared her bliss with Pearl. Bertha knows that love cannot be proven in a logical way. The deeper and more stupendous the understanding (some would call this love), the less likely is it to be manifested in any way but the most oblique. I envision the sign as being slight, not a long conversation, a rapturous kiss or holding hands. It will not break into the decorum of the evening.

I have quite forgotten about the recollection of Bertha's habit of falling in love with beautiful young women who have something strange about them. But my reception of this new event between her and Pearl Fulton gives rise to a series of assumptions about the nature of the earlier relationships, ones which do not enter my consciousness but which I feel I should briefly mention. Did these other relationships end with a bang? Did Bertha in some way overwhelm these other women? Did they overwhelm Bertha, did they terrify her with some fearful demonstration of their feeling or character? My assumptions in reading about this friendship make me assume that these other, former friends vanished quietly from Bertha's life, without anger, tears or noise. I cannot imagine, in a way consistent with my reading, that

Bertha remembers them having startled or offended her. She did not "have affairs" with them. She asked little of them, just as she asks little of Miss Fulton, though really at the same time she expects worlds—whatever that may be she probably would be unable to say, just as I am unable to comfortably articulate what it is she wants. To anyone else, the sign would not even be noticeable as a sign. Because any sign is going to be ephemeral, she is justified in herself in making it extremely significant because it is so ephemeral and impossible to discern if she were not who she is: Bertha Young, who knows bliss.

> <65 she saw herself talking and laughing. She had to talk because of her desire to laugh.
>
> "I must laugh or die."
>
> But when she noticed Face's funny little habit of tucking something down the front of her bodice—as if she kept a tiny, secret hoard of nuts there, too—Bertha had to dig her nails into her hands—so as not to laugh too much.

Bertha seems to outrun the reader with her actions. I am unable to understand why her pitch is rising ever higher. Is Bertha really enjoying herself? Is she feeling bliss, still, as in Section One? She seems out of control because it seems that my reading also is not well

controlled. I am at a loss to attribute motives and I feel at a loss. When she digs her nails into her hands, is it because she finds Face's tucking-away habit so terrifically funny? I feel thrown about, uncertain.

As a reader I must assume that my "uneven reading" is "intended." If I feel hysterical, crooked, amazed and uncomfortable with the character, as if I did not really know her as well as I thought I did, then this will better make me feel what Bertha must feel, Bertha who exists in my imagination and does not do or feel anything unless the words created by reading within my head serve and reach her. If my reading seems "unconnected," "loose," I am all the more authorized to assume that Bertha feels the same.

[SECTION SIX]

<66 It was over at last. And: "Come and see my new coffee machine," said Bertha.
"We only have a new coffee machine once a fortnight," said Harry. Face took her arm this time; Miss Fulton bent her head and followed after.

<67 The fire had died down in the drawing-room to a red, flickering "nest of baby phoenixes," said Face.
"Don't turn up the light for a moment. It is so lovely." And down she crouched by the fire again. She was always cold . . . "without her little red flannel jacket, of course," thought Bertha.

<68 At that moment Miss Fulton "gave the sign."

<69 "Have you a garden?" said the cool, sleepy voice.

I read <68 as if it were the sign; when I read <69 I think that the question is—to Bertha, for Pearl, for me—the sign. I take it that there <u>is</u> a real sign that both women are conscious of. The text does not read: "At that moment Bertha saw Miss Fulton 'give the sign.'"

<70 This was so exquisite on her part that all Bertha could do was to obey. She crossed the room, pulled the curtains apart, and opened those long windows.

The reader defines his comprehension of the sign very much in accordance to the way Bertha takes it. Her reaction impels me to see it myself as a command. The assumption behind this, then, is that Pearl Fulton has an active part of the events. What they share is more than just in Bertha's mind. To report on the events of these moments, I would be more accurate, however, in saying, "Bertha shared a deep, intimate moment with Pearl," rather than saying, "the two women shared a striking moment." The first more accurately reflects the way I am reading, though I take it to mean the more authoritative second explanation.

<71 "There!" she breathed.

The tree is not named, but here I see them looking at it. Bertha seems to hold it up for Pearl to admire. "See how beautiful?" As if Bertha, too, were beautiful in the same way. Bertha is giving the tree to her friend. If it is not to be described here as a gift, it can be felt to be a measure, an acknowledgement, that some

other gift has been offered, unwrapped and received. That gift: the feeling that Bertha enjoys of having a profound if inarticulated understanding with Pearl. Her "There!" is fierce enough to commit her.

> <72 And the two women stood side by side looking at the slender, flowering tree. Although it was so still it seemed, like the flame of a candle, to stretch up, to point, to quiver in the bright air, to grow taller and taller as they gazed—almost to touch the rim of the round, silver moon.

The words that follow the limiter although in the third line overwhelm it. The tree is still, but I see it as it seemed—that is, full of movement. Now that Pearl admires the tree, as I have her do, it is taller, more exciting and alive than before. And so is Bertha.

> <73 How long did they stand there? Both, as it were, caught in that circle of unearthly light, understanding each other perfectly, creatures of another world, and wondering what they were to do in this one with all this blissful treasure that burned in their bosoms and dropped, in silver flowers, from their hair and hands?

I do not heed the cautionary as it were, and so read on as if I myself have chosen to divine the "truth" about the two women, a truth that bursts the dyke of syntax

like a great sea topples a dam. I actually take it that they do [understand] each other perfectly. I actually have them wondering what they were to do with all this blissful treasure. My irresponsibility should perhaps come as little surprise. After all, I want this to be true. I am so afraid that it might not be true that I think that it is true. I have behind me the sum of my reading. It includes Bertha's joy, her frustration, her child, her inability to reach anyone. My desire is her desire. I am all along moving in a kind of breathless rapture. Everything seems possible from this perspective; goodness, knowledge. I seem to fall plummeting like a stone, yet am being thrown up. The experience is exciting because, like the both moving and still tree, the moment bursts with conflict and seeming contradiction.

> <74 For ever—for a moment? And did Miss Fulton murmur: "Yes. Just that." Or did Bertha dream it?

I find Bertha's moment of doubt (is it my doubt?) increasing my belief that these events are "real" as opposed to only "perceived" or imagined. By their very nature indeed they are of uncertain appearance; such knowing as that

thrust upon Bertha can only be ephemeral and subtle. Only a person as sharp and sensible as Bertha is able to so precisely question what she feels and hears and yet continue to believe what she believes.

> <75 Then the light was snapped on and Face made the coffee and Harry said: "My dear Mrs. Knight, don't ask me about my baby. I never see her. I shan't feel the slightest interest in her until she has a lover," and

This long drag of a sentence snaps the reader away from the flimsy, dreamy pleasure of Bertha's intimate moment with Pearl; I must attend a sequence of things which are imprecisely described and overly massive when compared to the nuance of moments before (the coffee being made), which are anxious (the light snapped on) and cruel (Harry's remark). The long snarl of the sentence forces me and forces Bertha, as it were, to deal with that which is mundane, avoidable and common.

Personally I find Harry's thinking loathesome. But in reading I do not find it objectionable. It fits the moment so well, it fits the mood of the company; with he he seems incomparably modern, busy, complicated. He is no softie. My hearing him drives me to feel that he

doesn't really mean it, and that I must take more of an interest to understand him sympathetically.

> <76 Mug took his eye out of the conservatory for a moment and then put it under glass again and Eddie Warren drank his coffee and set down the cup with a face of anguish as though he had drunk and seen the spider.
>
> "What I want to do is to give the young men a show. I believe London is simply teeming with first-chop, unwritten plays. What I want to say to 'em is: 'Here's the theatre. Fire ahead.'"
>
> "You know, my dear, I am going to decorate a room for the Jacob Nathans. Oh, I am so tempted to do a fried-fish scheme, with the backs of the chairs shaped like frying pans and the lovely chip potatoes embroidered all over the curtains."
>
> "The trouble with our young writing men is that they are still too romantic. You can't put out to sea without being seasick and wanting a basin. Well, why don't they have the courage of those basins?"
>
> "A dreadful poem about a girl who was violated by a beggar without a nose in a lit-tle wood. . . ."

> <77 Miss Fulton sank into the lowest, deepest chair and Harry handed round the cigarettes.

> <78 From the way he stood in front of her shaking the silver box and saying abruptly, "Egyptian? Turkish? Virginian? They're all mixed up," Bertha realized that she not only bored him; he really disliked her. And she decided from the way Miss Fulton said: "No, thank you, I won't smoke," that she felt it, too, and was hurt.

To read that Bertha realized that Harry dislikes Pearl and is bored by her fuses, again, reality with perception of reality. I do not read that Bertha heard hurt in Miss Fulton's tone, but that she decided from her tone that she was hurt. Bertha is interpreting what she hears, yes, but I utilize her reaction to judge for myself what has occurred. My reading can be said to acknowledge that I am being made to assume that Bertha's perceptions are the ones she wants, and the ones I want. I am scarcely conscious that her perspective is a "tyranny." If such a word is to be used to describe the reader's docility, I say that the tyranny is what I have been made to want.

> <79 "Oh, Harry, don't dislike her. You are quite wrong about her."

> <80 She's wonderful, wonderful. And, besides, how can you feel so differently about someone who means so much to me? I shall try to tell you when we are in bed tonight what has been happening. What she and I have shared.

In <79 I was startled to think that she is saying all of this in front of everyone. She is only rehearsing words she will have with Harry later, while they are still downstairs, overlooking a servant's final chores.

Bertha is dying to tell Harry about Pearl and what happened at the window. How does she see herself communicating to him? With words, phrases, unhesitating remarks. On her face will be unspeakable expressions, no doubt. To share! This is Bertha's impulse, not unfamiliar by now. She wants to make Harry a part of her feeling, to share Pearl Fulton with him. She is so sure of her relationship with Pearl that to her it seems inevitable that she <u>can</u> express herself.

This reader here creates considerable good-will toward Harry. Out of the future moment's absolute necessity, he must be made to know how Bertha understands her friend—loves her, if you will. Once he finds out, he too will find himself happy, wonderful, good, perfect. This is my feeling of what Bertha expects tonight. I feel the excitement and hope as much as I have her feel it

That this communication will occur in bed has on one hand no particular significance, and considerable power on the other. Bed, after all, is where regular people go at the end of the day when the guests have gone, unless they sleep on couches or in nail bins. And yet: that all this talk will occur in bed gives to me a warm, intimate picture of Bertha and Harry, a cozy picture, one in which both husband and wife feel considerably big emotions.

[SECTION SEVEN]

<81 At those last words something strange and almost terrifying darted into Bertha's mind. And this something blind and smiling whispered to her: "Soon these people will go. The house will be quiet—quiet. The lights will be out. And you and he will

<82 be alone together in the dark room—the warm bed. . . ."

When in <82 I come to the dark room and the warm bed I realize that I have been recoiling from an envisioned event that might occur on the bed. My supply of a reason is immediate. Harry, as she tells him about her lovely friend, Pearl Fulton, will think that she is lovely. I have been listening to her argue about Pearl, and I think she is splendid. Harry will desire her.

Innocently, Bertha has pictured herself speaking to her husband on the bed, where presumably they sleep together as marrieds. It's less the bed that frightens her, but that Harry will misunderstand. She will want to draw him into the luminescent circle she and her friend have found drawn around them. Harry is

a man. While she wants him to become excited about Pearl, he will become excited about her, which very easily I can see happening. So Bertha cuts herself off: no, she will have to hold her peace.

> <83 She jumped up from her chair and ran over to the piano.
> "What a pity someone does not play!" she cried. "What a pity someone does not play."

I see Bertha nearly shrieking. She jumps and jerks. I also see the other people paying this outburst not the slightest attention. No mouth drops open in mid-sentence, everyone breathes normally. I scarcely think that this indifference of theirs may be inconsistent with the violence of the hostess's outburst as I conceive it. I'm seeing Bertha retreat in terror and advance with airs of high excitement, which is to attribute to the story character the reader's contradictory emotion and uncertainty.

> <84 For the first time in her life Bertha Young desired her husband.

I take this statement as "objective fact," standing on the same level of factuality as the fact that "Harry

is Bertha's husband" or that "this couple has guests tonight." I wish to explain why this is so, and how my reading, though it draws no conclusions that I can state, might be best described as appearing to doubt this fact.

If <84 had read, instead, that Bertha desired her husband, the effect would not boom as loudly as it now does. The "objectivity" resides in the boom. The sentence as it stands in "Bliss" speaks, as it were, from a high place like from heaven where all is known and knowable and guarded with condescending reserve. Three parts of the sentence make me stand remote from Bertha and consider her desire as being true and genuine: For the first time, in her life and the use of her last name. The authority of this sentence stands outside of Bertha rather than inside: I feel I am being directed to consider her rather than be her. <84 does not pull me well enough inside her for the feeling of desire to seem like a familiar part of "the way Bertha sees things." I say this even though I observed earlier that sensuality is very much a part of her nature. I take <84 as fact: I believe it because my own sense of subjectivity cannot immediately validate the claim. I believe she feels desire because I am forced to. (Indeed, the text can be seen as intentionally making the reader feel what Bertha herself can be argued to feel. If desire seems somehow alien to me

it must be too for Bertha. Desire strikes her from the outside, like an invasion she cannot resist. Maybe Bertha can be thought to feel desire greater than any she has felt before.)

Though I believe Bertha feels desire, I simultaneously balk. I refuse this desire. All through my reading of "Bliss" I have felt a kind of bliss, really a delightful feeling under any circumstance. I have read blissfully, romantically. And here now I play the victim by saying, "I believe the sentence because I am forced to." I would say now that my reading has me separate bliss from sexual desire. Up until this point I have drawn a tentative connection between bliss and desire by acknowledging desire without either naming it or denying it. But no more here. A division is created rather than a fusion in which bliss and sexual expectation and excitement draw together indistinguishably.

This is not a "problematic" event in reading, only in writing, it seems to me. This dichotomy simply occurs. There's no struggle. I do not believe in the desire because I have been excluded from the creation of the desire that Bertha is alleged to feel. The creation of bliss, as you recall, was considerably different. I had a hand in creating it, for myself and for the story character. I felt bliss and imputed it to the character.

These transactions became a habit. My reading was trained to a kind of wildness, looseness. Remember the first lines of the story; recall "the sign" between Bertha and Pearl. This <84 is a change because it constrains me, coerces me. I feel grim, narrow. I feel I am censoring the very thing—desire—that it would have me create and impart to the story character.

> <85 Oh, she'd loved him—she'd been in love with him, of course, in every other way, but just not in that way.

> <86 And, equally, of course, she'd understood that he was different.

> <87 They'd discussed it so often. It had worried her dreadfully at first to find out that she was so cold, but after a time it had not seemed to matter.

> <88 They were so frank with each other—such good pals. That was the best of being modern.

This paragraph reveals Bertha's coldness and, at the same time, validates for me the claim of <84 that she desired her husband for the first time in her life. This

paragraph, which I have broken into four parts, offers me truths about Bertha's marriage that I take to be whole (objective) rather than partial (subjective). I assume they are whole even though, from the start, I am finding myself placed inside Bertha's consciousness as it stands in its general tendency as regards her marriage. This paragraph is outside the immediate dramatic stream, so I cannot say I hear her thinking these things at one instant or another in the hour of the party.

<85, <86. Am I to assume that because love is referred to in the past tense (she'd loved him—she'd been in love with him) that they no longer love each other, that they are enemies? No. The reference is to an earlier time, and I do not take it to mean that their love is finished. They are comfortably and familiarily married, not at all unhappy. A quid pro quo exists between them. The phrase and equally suggests that Harry, too, understood that SHE was different just as she understands that he is. Her coldness is not frustrating to him, cruel or abnormal—it just makes her different. He does not mind one iota that Bertha loves him (and loved him) in all ways but that way.

<87. One reason Harry is different: they had discussed it so often, meaning sex. They have put an

end to her dreadful worries. I make well of Harry, I find him admirable; sex has never really been a concern of his because he still finds her (I take it) lovely and wonderful, worth cherishing. Gently excluded by my reading of this passage is the possibility that Bertha's coldness might really, to Harry, in secret, still matter. In which case he might take his passions elsewhere, if he has any.

<88. As I consider how truly frank and modern these two are, I might be said to actually disbelieve that Bertha was or is cold. My perception of Harry, as my mind holds him, leads me to assume that Bertha's coldness is a matter of indifference to him. The reader lacks sympathy for anyone who might, like the wife's husband, be hurt by this coldness, left lonely because of it, left hungry. Her coldness is not an issue for me, and so I assume that it is not one for Harry. Her coldness seems victimless.

My reading this passage has a positive impetus as well as a "non-negative" one. Bertha emerges, indirectly here (because the paragraph is about Harry), as being exceptionally warm and good. Her virtue is evident: She discussed it so often with her husband, worried dreadfully about her lack of wifely sexual interest. But she has the strength of character to remain calm about the whole thing. She feels no hatred and guilt whatsoever (maybe

just fear, as she thinks now about being in bed with Harry and raving about Pearl). She understands Harry; Bertha has made a good life; good society, parties, excitement, a darling baby. What a great virtue for her to be able to love her husband in spite of his problem of wanting to . . . well (she won't name it). She can accept, if not love, him in spite of her own fragility, can love him in spite of him being a man who can be overcome by his desires.

> <89 But now—ardently! ardently! The word ached in her ardent body! Was this what that feeling of bliss had been leading up to?
>
> <90 But then, then—

Bertha is overwhelmed by desire. Or by something else. The agitation is so mighty and so unexpected she's not sure about anything at all. All right then: desire. She is amazed that bliss had been leading up to desire. My reading leaves me uncertain momentarily of the object of this desire. But as I am in the midst of considering the praiseworthy Harry in <85 through <88, I assume it is him for whom she feels desire.

The terror that overcomes her in <90 seems to

fathom the likelihood that if she is aroused (by Harry, yes) then he will be aroused by her. That means he will want to . . . (here, a chill runs down her spine).

I wish to be understood as saying that this assumption is one I provide myself indirectly as part of reading. Someone looking at Bertha Young (if she were a real person) in a different context might draw a different conclusion.

<91 "My dear," said Mrs. Norman Knight, "you know our shame. We are the victims of time and train. We live in Hampstead. It's been so nice."
"I'll come with you into the hall," said Bertha. "I loved having you. But you must not miss the last train. That's so awful, isn't it?"
"Have a whisky, Knight, before you go?" called Harry.
"No, thanks, old chap."

<92 Bertha squeezed his hand for that as she shook it.

<93 "Good night, good-bye," she cried from the top step, feeling that this self of hers was taking leave of them for ever.

<94 When she got back into the drawing-room the others were on the move.

In <92 Bertha squeezes Knight's hand as if she were glad he refused Harry's offer for whisky—she wants them gone! But phrases like on the move in <94 make me feel the inevitability of their departure, the impersonality of it. I do not wish them to leave, and I think that Bertha must long for them to remain near.

<95 ". . . Then you can come part of the way in my taxi."

"I shall be so thankful not to have to face another drive alone after my dreadful experience."

"You can get a taxi at the rank just at the end of the street. You won't have to walk more than a few yards."

"That's a comfort. I'll go and put on my coat."

All this is thrilling because it delays whatever is coming next. It contains nothing important, but as I do not know this except by reading it, I am excited and bored.

<96 Miss Fulton moved towards the hall and Bertha was following when Harry almost pushed past.
"Let me help you."

<97 Bertha knew that he was repenting of his rudeness—she let him go. What a boy he was in some ways—so impulsive—so—simple.
And Eddie and she were left by the fire.

Presumably Harry rushes past Bertha to say good-bye, to make amends. How well she knows Harry! I hear admiration in impulsive and what a boy. One of his greatest virtues is that he is unsophisticated (though he pretends to be, like with the remark about his little girl) and simple. His attempt to make amends makes me place Pearl Fulton on the same level of favor as Harry's other guests. Whatever might empower me to assume or fear that Harry and Pearl have a special relationship unknown to me is cancelled. Simply, he had been shooting off at the mouth, fighting battles were no battles need be fought —that's all!

<98 "I wonder if you have seen Bilks' new poem called Table d'Hôte," said Eddie softly. "It's so wonderful. In the last Anthology. Have you got a copy? I'd so like to show it to you. It begins with an incredibly beautiful line: 'Why Must it Always be Tomato Soup?'"

"Yes," said Bertha. And she moved noiselessly

<99 to a table opposite the drawing-room door and Eddie glided noiselessly after her. She picked up the little book and gave it to him; they had not made a sound.

That I am made conscious of the silence leads me to assume that Bertha is conscious of it too, and that she either is being deliberately quiet, or is listening through the sound of Eddie's speech and footfalls for a sound or the murmer of voices. Something is happening!

<100 While he looked it up she turned her head towards the hall. And she saw . . . Harry with Miss Fulton's coat in his arms and her back turned to him and her head bent. He tossed the coat away, put his hands on her shoulders and turned her violently to him. His lips said; "I adore you," and Miss Fulton laid her moonbeam fingers on his cheeks and smiled her sleepy smile. Harry's nostrils quivered; his lips curled back in a hideous grin.

By the end of this passage I am unsure whether Bertha's being betrayed by her husband causes more pain than her

being betrayed by her friend Pearl. If a woman discovers her girlfriend having an affair with her dear husband, the wife will most usually feel betrayed by her friend. But the greater anguish, I would say, is usually caused by the action of the spouse. Here, just the opposite takes place. Bertha's reaction to Pearl's violation of their mutual feeling stands at least at the same bewildered level of her reaction to Harry's, nearly as though Pearl were her familiar and beloved spouse, not Harry.

> <100a While he looked it up she turned her head towards the hall. And she saw . . . Harry with Miss Fulton's coat in his arms and her back turned to him and her head bent.

Bertha's attention seems equally divided between the two.

> <100b He tossed the coat away, put his hand on her shoulder and turned her violently to him.

They are having an affair: this is supposed to be secret. A violent action by Harry.

> <100c His lips said; "I adore you,"

That his lips, rather than Harry or he, speak suggests the way that Bertha perceives this instant. For one, she stands at a distance and cannot quite hear. Secondly, Harry is denied—seems to deny himself—an identity. Had I read, He said; "I adore you," I would think that Harry

deserves human sympathy. But here he is alien, and utters words which are foreign, seemingly without meaning. I am stunned because I do not know which reaction I am in the middle of following, not certain what Bertha feels and what I should feel on her behalf.

> <100d and Miss Fulton laid her moonbeam fingers on his cheeks and smiled her sleepy smile.

I perceive moonbeam fingers because this is how I am to suppose that Bertha sees them. Bertha's tenderness to Pearl comes out here, her ability to see how Pearl is like no one else on earth, how her fingers are magical of themselves. This perception acknowledges Bertha's former regard for the woman, or her continuing (though pained) regard now. The smile furthers the impression. Bertha does not perceive a sleepy smile, or another sleepy smile, but her sleepy smile. The smile is familiar to Bertha, has in the past smiled at Bertha, smiled for her sake, communicated unknown secrets to Bertha. Such smiles, in the past, have been treasured, my feeling leads me here to assume. Now they are pandered: to Harry one goes, and so violates symbolically every trust Miss Fulton has with Bertha. Really I should say: "—violates every trust Bertha thinks Pearl has with her." This is a truer version because it reveals the bias of the reader seeing as Bertha does. But I prefer my original words because,

more total and entire, speaking for both women instead of only one, it feels like a truer representation of the reader's experience.

> <100e Harry's nostrils quivered; his lips curled back in a hideous grin

That Bertha and I see this grin in this way suggests that our feeling is one of revulsion. I feel suddenly partial to Pearl Fulton because Harry is hideous, an attacker, like a dog. Pearl is the victim, eaten, ravaged. I attribute to Bertha an anguish for Pearl: what seems so stupefying is not that Harry <u>has</u> Pearl in adultery, but that Pearl <u>is had by Harry</u>.

> <101 while he whispered: "Tomorrow," and with her eyelids Miss Fulton said: "Yes."

I conceive of Pearl Fulton as helpless, a victim, as if she were involved with Harry against her will. She seems so soft and delicate because she answers <u>with her eyelids</u>. My perception of her makes out that Bertha is still held and fascinated by this woman.

<102 "Here it is," said Eddie. "'Why Must it Always be Tomato Soup?' It's so deeply true, don't you feel? Tomato soup is so dreadfully eternal."

<103 "If you prefer," said Harry's voice, very loud, from the hall, "I can phone you a cab to come to the door."

Apparently Bertha is looking away from them. Harry keeps up his pretense of apologizing to Miss Fulton, submerging any lapse of security—of which he is often suspicious to avoid but this time not aware of—into the duties of host.

<104 "Oh, no. It's not necessary," said Miss Fulton, as she came up to Bertha and gave her the slender fingers to hold.

<105 "Good-bye. Thank you so much."
"Good-bye," said Bertha.
Miss Fulton held her hand a moment longer.

Pearl Fulton is unfathomable, which is to say I feel I have an impression of her rather than the lack of one. I conceive of her visually in a full frontal view. I look at her, almost thinking that the scene which I just witnessed never really happened, that she is

still what fascinating friend. She has such exteriority in my imagination that it seems impossible to wonder what or who waits in the interior. She stares directly at Bertha: I see her peering directly at me. Yet her eyes are half-closed, not because she is absent, sleepy or inattentive, but because she retains the power to confirm any suggetion that seems to rise from her to Bertha, who beholds her. She is utterly absorbing, feverishly present yet absent somehow, like a goddess whose source of power is far, far away and certainly not needed here. She seems dull, passive, heatless.

Miss Fulton does not extend her slender fingers for Bertha to hold, but the slender fingers. I feel that I know these fingers intimately, as if I had dreamt about them, thought deeply about them, their place in nature. They are cool, like those of some staring statue of silky marble. They radiate a kind of light to my mind's eye and like neon are bright without comfort or heat.

Bertha is so numbed that for her a civil handshake is impossible. Pearl first gives her the fingers to hold as if it were Bertha's job to do the clasping and the shaking. But Miss Fulton ends up executing the shake: Miss Fulton held her hand a moment longer. Bertha's hand must have been senseless and limp.

<106 "Your lovely pear tree," she murmured. And then she was gone

If I felt less numb and bewildered, I might take this remark and with it assume that Pearl Fulton were being frivolous and shrewd. But this is not the case. Still I do not conceive of Pearl Fulton as Bertha's clear-cut foe. I still feel, as it were, that really—to Pearl Fulton—the moment shared at the pear tree was real for her in the same way that it was real for Bertha. I still believe that the events (as Bertha saw them) occurred. Bertha could not have been entirely wrong. There must have been something to the "sign." I conceive of Pearl Fulton here as being unable—or unwilling—to deny that a precious union and experience of spiritual feeling occurred there at the window. Even at scissor point, Pearl would refuse ever to say: "Yes, a sham—that's what it was, Bertha. I never really liked you."

I do not believe that Pearl Fulton speaks from the position of realizing her affair has been discovered. So rather than finding the remark calculated, I find it frivolous, but still with a touch of shrewdness. She has guessed the value of the pear tree to Mrs. Young. She murmurs because she knows that if she does so Mrs. Young will take her remark to be ambiguous and significant. She is so vague that it can indeed affirm for Bertha

Young whatever it may be that Mrs. Young thinks they have in common.

And at the same time I want to believe that Pearl Fulton really means it, that she must mean to remind Bertha that "their moment" was truly unique.

In <106 I believe it is fair to say that I do not feel I am visually connected with these events. I don't see much. I am not sure what I am to feel, and what I am to have Bertha feel. Reading seems pictureless on the whole, and might be best described as being disturbed.

> <107 with Eddie following, like the black cat following the grey cat.

This comparison might be expected, on the face of it, to hark the reader back to the cats Bertha viewed earlier from her window and shuddered over as being creepy things. It might be thought that I would identify Pearl with the grey cat with the bulging (pregnant?) belly.

Instead, Bertha seems here lost to her senses. The comparison is silly, the kind that someone might make in the midst of a trauma when one titters rather than laughs—so awful is the disaster. The main effect of this comparison is to make me feel how detached I

am from Bertha and, by extension, how detached she is from herself. I do not take it that she remembers the cats (heavens no, not at this moment) nor that to her mind Eddie has become the stalking male; Eddie is pretty, profound and queer, so the comparison with cats is absolutely goofy, nothing to shudder over at all. The irrelevance of the phrase justifies its place in the reader's experience, it seems, for its effect is as unpleasant as Bertha's own bewilderment is to her.

<108 "I'll shut up shop," said Harry, extravantly cool and collected.

<109 "Your lovely pear tree—pear tree—pear tree!"

Bertha is stunned, numb: she has no feeling. As I hear them, these words in <109 echo in her mind in a dreary and deaf monotone, as if she were trying to wring from them a significance. I cannot hear these words uttering themselves with feeling, as if Bertha were trying them out for size: "Your lovely pear tree? Pear tree? Pear tree?" I am torn from the story character I have identified with such an extent that I have mistaken her for myself, and myself for her. Rather than feeling I am

looking at myself as Bertha, I feel I am looking at her, as if she were someone else, and that I am straining to get back inside, to understand her and once again think for her.

<110 Bertha simply ran over to the long windows.

The simply makes me assume that she runs to the long windows because she believes all will be settled when she dashes over to them, that the view of this lovely tree will relieve her just as someone with a headache simply goes to the cupboard for an aspirin.

Yet simply works in the opposite direction as well. There could not possibly be a reason that she would dash to the window; she rushes to it for no reason at all, because she hasn't any reason, any emotion—any presence of mind at all. Her moment is too awful to expect that one so easily can find relief and clarity simply by running to the windows and, presumably, looking at that lovely tree.

The tree, for this reader at any rate, is neither pictured clearly nor assuming any power. My senses and imagination are swollen up trying to account for the strictly human, as opposed to the symbolic and literary,

element of the latest events. I want to know what Bertha feels, or rather what I should feel as Bertha.

To say that I feel frustrated in my imaginative relationship with Bertha is to point to an effect of this part of the story that I can only assume is intended. I am not willing, in reading, to say that "I don't like the story" or "the story seems badly written here." If Bertha's reaction is muffled, or if the reader who nearly misses the entire moment of discovery there in the hallway feels lost, it may well be premature to call the story a failure. If I am a good reader I will always trust that whatever troubles me as a matter of reading will later be proven justified or in some way compensated for. So if my frustration now seems like a failure to create well enough, I must continue assuming that the peculiarity is intended.

> <111 "Oh, what is going to happen now?" she cried.
>
> But the pear tree was as lovely as ever and as full of flower and as still.

Bertha apparently does expect some consolation from the tree. The <u>But</u> at the start of the last paragraph makes out that both she and I expected some kind of answer or truth from the tree.

The answer—if one deigns to call it that—is that there is no possible answer. Once, seemingly eons ago, the tree conveniently meant a great deal to Bertha because in it she saw the beauty and richness of her own life. She made it mean something, and it lent itself to her conceptions.

Judging by my conception, the tree which earlier created such a striking visual sensation now has little visual power. I do not see it roundly, fully, as I did earlier. Maybe that means that Bertha, as I conceive her, is not looking at the tree. The tree seems so big because I am not visualizing it well enough to take it in to a periphery. On one hand, the tree looks vaguely defined, flat and uninteresting, given my circumstances as a reader who is involved within the mind of the story character. How irrelevant it seems! I read that the tree is lovely but this matters nothing. On the other hand, I would say that my conception makes the tree "more real" than it was before when Bertha admired and thought about it. No longer am I assuming that I see the tree through Bertha's eyes and mind. It stands as a "real" object because it is shorn of any former associations, stripped of the powers earlier bestowed upon it which it then exerted on the viewer (Bertha seems to receive from the tree that which she gives it). The tree seems irrelevant

and boring to me (presumably to Bertha as well) because it becomes less a beautiful, lovely tree than it used to be, and more just a tree than before. It is detached from human feeling now, and must be accounted for anew.

I have yet to take into account the phrase was lovely as ever which bespeaks a human reaction to what a human eye sees in the garden. A lovely tree, yes, but I do not conceive of it being lovely to Bertha. It is lovely outside of her, independently of her. I believe I take it (or must take it) as being lovely to myself, the reader. Bertha does not figure in the last lines. I do not see her, nor am I convinced now that I see from her. By implication, then, though I do not conceive of her in one sense, in another sense I find my attention being focused on the tree to indicate that she is so stunned, beaten and numb that she still can be thought of as looking at the tree and at least noticing it. She has no feelings, no thoughts, no sensation whatsoever, which permit her to look at the tree nearly as if it were a curiosity, a distraction from those considerations which to her are more real. Her incredulity at being betrayed, and still thinking that Pearl Fulton understands her, separate her from her feelings at this moment. The tree ends by being fascinating because it is boring and trifling.

CHAPTER III

THE CRITICS

I lay my book down. Now you have it. That's it. It's over. Whether I get up and go inside, or stay here and look out over the trees, the "sitting" is over. I belong to the story, it to me. The contact in reading the story is broken off; it drifts into silence, the reader into his thoughts.

If I think directly about the character Bertha, I feel very much taken up by the ending of her tale—this numbness, this maddening sense of separation from her and from the story, this "not knowing what to feel." I feel unattached. My impression of "the story as a whole" does not seem to penetrate back very far to the bliss; I cannot remember my happiness.

Intellectually, I admit that this final impression is afforded me because I have read the entire work, from the "Although" to the "still." This final impression, I know, ranges from start to finish. But the sum, the tally, the emotional sense of the work as "a whole" is weighted heavily by the end. If the sum of "Bliss" were one million, it feels like I reached it by adding fractions for most of the story until I reach the last paragraphs,

whereupon the numbers came adding in—huge numbers like 900,000 and 10,000, all thundering at me.

My impression of the story as a "sum" is much different than the actual experience of reading it, which I remember in refracted bits. When I am in the middle of the story rather than a step beyond its end, the events and impressions run past like a stream of integers, hurrying by, constituting at any given moment a preliminary sum. In reading, one finds that the adding machine keeps hitting numbers and the "add" button but repeatedly avoiding the "sum total" button—drawing the final line and making the final tally.

Two perspectives, then, exist for one who wants to talk about the story. The one used by Magalaner and by the two other critics I will discuss, Zorn and Nebeker, is that which resembles the perspective from the end of the story. Mine works from each point within the story as it creates its own and soon-to-be replaced perspective. Mine attests to the creation that the text and the reader create—a world that neither the story unread nor the reader not reading could independently create.

I have finished a reading of "Bliss," and though I do not feel connected with the feeling of bliss and suffer a kind of emptiness, I can recall my earlier state by rereading or encountering statements "about" the

story which are, when compared to reading, misrepresentations. I will remember my reading of pleasure when I consider the readings implied in the accounts of essay writers who describe "active" readings rather than "passive," initial or naive readings.

For example, when I read that the references to cold in Section One refer to Bertha's lack of sexual desire for Harry (her "frigidity," we might say), I as a reader of "Bliss" deny it. Yes, if I stand in the territory of critical statement, I agree. I agree it can be said so; I fully understand the mental activity involved that easily permits such statements to be understood (Nebeker 1972, 545). But in my reading, and perhaps in the reading of essayist Nebeker, these statements about cold worked quite differently. I remember quite chilly from the dining room, the tight clasp of Bertha's coat and, upon its removal, the cold air that fell on her arms <11. I remember Bertha's radiant image in the cold mirror. Now, even in rereading "Bliss" after having considered Nebeker, I do not seem to find myself shifting the level of operation of these bits of description: when I operate under their power, as a reader, I do not find them putting me in mind of Bertha's relations with her husband. These sensations in reading are "about" the immediate sensual moment being given by the reading,

not about sex. I observed in my description that the falling cold air was enjoyable to Bertha because she is passionate and warm. Her pleasure suggests her power, from this point in the text, for pleasure and abandon, for enjoying small events that most people haven't a good enough nature to relish. She knows how to relish every moment of life, particularly today as the story unfolds. The matter of her sexual nature, I know as I will reread, will be dealt with more directly in its own time. This surface of the experience of being there with Bertha—and as Bertha—in the cold dining room owes its power to the suggestiveness of the words the reader takes into himself. The wild, clean and pure surface renders the claims of what lie underneath uninteresting but cannot be thought to entirely contradict them. Mind you, the connection between centigrade cold and sexual cold are not boring to criticism, just to this instance of reading. In this sense, then, I might say again that reading for me does not end: the effect reaches beyond any given engagement with the text to my reactions to analyses of "Bliss." The effect may change with a given reading, or slowly shift according to changes in the reader's life.

I realize the impression I give to some extent of myself as a reader, and then as a writer about reading.

I am trying to narrow for you the notions represented by the terms "active" reading and "passive" reading, both of which are misleading to some extent. I seem to grant too little to and to wish less of human intellect rather than more when I seem to argue for "passive" reading or reception as the most interesting form of reading. I seem to be placing limits on the great power that words have. It's as if I were to make an argument that "Jesus does not work miracles among men as he did when he stood bodily on the earth," someone would surely say, with a fearful look, "You're limiting the power of God." I seem to prefer describing the mental activities of the reader which are in an embryonic stage rather than fully born. I seem to wish to curtail the activities that words compel bright people to do with them. I appear deliberately ox-brained when I observe in a given instance I "don't see" something or other. How dull I sound when I say, as regards cold, that even after reading criticism I do not see what it claims is obvious.

Do not forget my task in representing "Bliss" as an activity. I am trying to report on a given reading in a given time. I do not find it so much my task to test out every critical assertion by a new reading, nor to direct my prose to dealing with points raised by other essayists. Do you really think if I read "Bliss" again

so that I can weigh a critical assertion that I am reading the story in the most receptive way? It seems unlikely. A new reading in which I attempt to prove or disprove an assertion for myself will not be passive in the way I am claiming is possible. I am not silent, not quiet inside. I throw up voices in my mind and try to match the voices to that of the artistic work. I am on my guard. I am forcing the issue, putting pressure on the work.

Active readings come in so many grades and shades that when I describe the gift encompassed by the term "passive reading" I must sound dictatorial and narrow. Some active readings probably are so active that they do not follow my definition of reading at all. One can easily exploit a text to illustrate proofs, to permit one to use one's method, to show that psychoanalytic theory has its place in literary study. One can press hard any paragraph, aspect, line or character in a story like "Bliss" and it will give way. One can "find" or "create" new possibilities, new connections, poetry, irony, dissonance, allusions, clues and examples. The beauty of literature is exactly this. It always gives. It always recedes in front of one, or at least it can be seen to being made to recede. A critic who is an active reader can so exert his or her intellect, curio-

sity and brilliance upon "Bliss" that he can write an intriguing essay about what Bertha is "really doing" in regards to Miss Fulton. But reports of active reading shear context away from a given passage or image. A discussion of symbols and imagery often does not ask if our perception of that symbol is . . .

> affected by the intensity of our response or to something which precedes or follows it or by the general condition of consciousness generated by one or another of larger contexts in which it appears (Slatoff 1970, 19).

The advantage of describing a naive reading is clear: it gives each line of "Bliss" its proper context (history and future). If indeed a single reading could be accurately recorded, it would be shown as setting the perspective of a given moment in a direction "similar" to that which follows. The real talent for me as a reader is to know how to read well, receptively; the real talent for me as critic is to learn how to see the surface and not undermine it. How easy--how tempting!--to turn criticism into intellect's revenge on art (Sontag 1969, 17).

Before I turn to Nebeker and Zorn's versions of "Bliss," I wish to consider the differences between the pear tree as a reader such as I might experience it and the pear tree as it is fashioned by criticism. Remember how in my account of the tree in <46 and <47 I said Bertha does not consciously match up which particular

aspect or detail of the tree coincides with which aspect or detail of her life. She does not do it because I do not make her do it. The tree, both by the reader and by the character, is taken for granted. At the end of the story the tree presents itself again but means nothing. It is boring. I have difficulty in seeing it, in taking an interest in it because my preoccupations are in the human element of the events rather than in the symbolic. My reception seems like nonreception. This experience in which the tree is disenfranchised is finally the "meaning" of the tree.

When Bertha simply ran over to the long windows and saw the pear tree was as lovely as ever and as full of flower and as still, the critics say, the tree becomes a symbol of her error. Among other things, the tree is said to represent "the terrible indifference with which nature views human affairs—a naturalistic notion," to quote Chester Eisinger. "It is," says he, "an embodiment of the pathetic fallacy—the sentimentalization of nature [that] is fruitless if not ruinous" (Eisinger 1949). A more hopeful Saralyn Daly says the attention to the tree assures us that Bertha is "deluded by no pathetic fallacy" (Daly 1965, 79). These writer, along with those I will discuss, acknowledge the end of the tale reveals disenchantment and is disenchanting, an emptying

of the tree of the associations that Bertha, and necessarily the reader, gave it. It is in the end a tree merely, no longer a symbol. They do not say so, but I wring it from them by saying they imply it. They admit it is only a tree. Yet they discuss the tree as if it were a symbol.

Eisinger in his next breath says the tree is a "phallic symbol." Nebeker says the tree is a symbol for infertility and bi-sexuality and so is appealing to Bertha, though it is not alleged that Bertha knows anything about botany and arborial reproduction cycles. These writers acknowledge the tree, to use my words, is emptied of significance at the end of the tale. Yet they all build significance into it, atop it, or around it. And they do so even though they are "objective" writers who write from the position of "full knowledge" of all its events. And yet they ignore what the end of the story does to the tree. My own experience of numbness seems, when I consider the story in the frame of mind that would permit me to write about it as they do, to forbid them, to counter-intuit them on the grounds they themselves have chosen to occupy as essayists.

The tree of reading is one that stands inaccessible to words other than the words of the "Bliss" text itself. My method of presenting "Bliss" leads me to silence: I have nothing to say about it. Others are led to speech.

The tree of reading cannot be reached. Rather than my saying something about it—that it is something, a "symbol of desymbolization" (which I readily assent to), an "embodiment" of the pathetic fallacy—I prefer, next to preferring silence, to say that it isn't something. I feel compelled to describe for you what nothing is not. For nothing, if really it is "nothing," can never be something.

Reading does not have a center. It is a temporal affair, a series of events in time based upon fixed orders of signs. The tree of reading cannot be "stood on" by the reader. There's no place in reading to say fully, completely, for every point in the text and from every point —that the tree means so-and-so. When I read,

> And she seemed to see on her eyelids
> the lovely pear tree with its wide-open
> blossoms as a symbol of her own life <46,

I conceive of the tree as a possibility. It can represent Bertha in so many ways. The tree is beautiful: Bertha is beautiful. I take the tree for granted, and so does she. This conception in the reader's mind cannot remain intact when one starts naming, on Bertha's behalf or for oneself, what the tree is: "penis symbol." The more I read such things, the more I should consider that the tree of my reading is beautiful because it escapes such dreary labor.

Critical language is too weak and stiff to be able

to turn the sharp corner where, as if it were in a holy sanctum, the tree of reading remains the possibility of a possibility (rather than the "thing" of possibility). Language of the critic will never become so nubile as to describe not it, but its potential for being what it could be (or might have been), but is not.

Helen Nebeker's article, "The Pear Tree: Sexual Implications in Katherine Mansfield's 'Bliss,'" opens with a discussion of the botanical significance of the pear tree and in its most interesting assertion claims that Bertha is somewhat like a bawd, procuring females for her husband's sexual digestion. Marilyn Zorn's work, "Visionary Flowers: Another Study of Katherine Mansfield's 'Bliss,'" says that Bertha's woman's language is responsible for her isolation.

Nebeker writes that critics have failed to "grasp" the significance of the pear tree and have "overlooked the covert sexual nuances" of the tale. She hastens through a list of "overt" sexual images, which for her include cold versus frigidity. The overt sexual images include the cat dragging its belly in <45 and Harry's lush eating talk. These nuances are said to "escape no one." The kind of reading she describe are active either in prescription or recollection—she does not say which.

> And even the phallic overtones of the pear tree, as Bertha and Pearl view it together, have been pointed out. However, the full sexual implications inherent in the pear tree image have never been pursued.

Observe that the implications are said to reside inside the work of art and that one must "pursue" them.

> For it is not until one understands the significance of the pear tree that they can be perceived (Nebeker 1972, 546).

Nebeker's reader remembers the tree as tall, slender in Bertha's garden, in fullest, richest bloom, perfect, as though becalmed <44. Bertha sees in her mind the lovely pear tree with its wide-open blossoms and takes it as a symbol of her own life <46. These blossoms contain male and female sex organs, Nebeker says. Pear trees are bisexual. If it so happens that the fertility cycles of each gender's "parts" are out of sync, the tree stands infertile. The tree's infertility rather than its blossoming beauty "is what Mansfield had in mind" (Nebeker 1970, 546). What is so interesting about her proofs is that uses data from the text much differently than does a reader. That Mansfield had sterility in mind rather than the beauty of blossoms "seems obvious" in light of the way the description of the tree is juxtaposed by "an immediate contrast with fertility" in <44, <45 and <46. The tulips, she says, are fertile because they are heavy with flowers. The gray cat is "fecund . . . obviously

heavy with life" as it drags its belly. "Drawn to the virginal quality of the tree," Nebeker writes, Bertha "turns away from these evidences of bursting life with a shiver, only to be overcome by the cloying smell of the jonquils."

My reading as I have described it does not find itself in these assertions. I can agree that one can make these claims as a part of criticism. But my reading does not make me assume that Bertha at all shudders at fertility. I'll take Nebeker's points one by one: Tulips. Bertha does not "turn away" from them; for if she turns away from the tulips, she at the same time turns away from the pear tree, which is in the proximity, overshadowing them. Cats. I reported in <45 about the dragging belly being caused by the stalking of the cat more so than a pregnancy. Jonquils. Read <46. Bertha revels in the heady smell rather than being in some way upset by their powerful odor.

The juxtaposition that allegedly shows that infertility is intended (rather than blossoms or beauty) is, then, quite a construction. I can see it Nebeker's way for the sake of understanding what she wishes to argue.

The evidence in "Bliss" that contradicts the bisexual and infertile tree "idea" lies not, as I have suggested above, in a reading of the story, but elsewhere

for Nebeker. She points to Bertha's motherhood as a possible objection to the claim that Bertha prefers infertility, but then refutes the objection. Bertha indeed is a mother. Bodily she is not infertile. But the child is said to be like a "doll," an art treasure, more like a flower than a fruit. "This analogy extends itself," Nebeker writes, "to the pear tree, for only the mature slow-growing tree bears fruit; the immature tree yields only blossoms (Nebeker 1972, 546).

Nebeker goes further to connect Bertha with the tree. Items of her fruit plate are offered as proof of "the consecutive development of various womb-phallus symbols" which, when described, will "clarify" the "intriguing question of the bi-sexuality of the tree image and its image to Bertha." Pears, for example, are ovate-shaped, and so like the other fruits "assume sexual significance." Connections are then drawn between the colors of the fruit, the tree and Miss Fulton.

Next the essayist says how the tale establishes Bertha's love for Pearl as "latent homosexuality" (Nebeker 1972, 547). These overtones are described as "inescapable" (Nebeker 1972, 548). And, suddenly, this: "The reader knows, moreover, that Bertha has literally thrust Pearl upon Harry." The reader is said to know this, but instead of explaining how, Nebeker only

provides conjectures for Bertha's "motivation" for such procurations. Bertha "subconsciously" finds girlfriends whom Harry describes for her in such remarks as those he makes tonight about food: strange, cool, passionate women of white flesh with veiled eyelids like those of Egyptian dancers. Bertha provides these for her husband, I am told by the essayist, and derives "vicarious, sensual experience such as she fears in reality." Is this possible? Nebeker asks. Bertha has played bawd before: the most solid proof of this that Nebeker offers is the line from Face when he asks in <48, "Why doth the bridegroom tarry?" The most I can make from this is that Face knows Harry is having an affair with Pearl, and is her bridegroom. By no stretch of my imagination can I agree, even on the terms Nebeker lays out, that Bertha is playing the part of bawd. On the grounds of my own experience, I reject the explanation because it is not about a Bertha that I experienced, and it is not what I can experience in a new reading. The explanation is too contrived and tenuous for it to affect reading and exposition.

The dwindling-away of the argument after its initial assertion about how I "know" about Bertha literally thrusting Pearl upon Harry is completed, and the whole idea rendered innocuous by the remark that

> Bertha herself is, of course, totally unaware of these undercurrents within and, at least for a time, honestly believes that her growing desire is for Harry. But the facts of the story deny this. Bertha sees Pearl not as one woman usually sees another but as a lover sees his lover (Nebeker 1972, 548).

There is in this writing a kind of semantic slippage, a smudging which I am uncomfortable with. Bertha is unaware of these undercurrents, the argument reads by implication, "and thus you are too as you read. But listen up! My exposition will show you what you missed and what Bertha didn't know." It's all too smug. Bertha is forgotten to exist only insofar as she is imagined in a certain set of contexts and by certain minds. She's not real.

Nebeker is right, though, in saying that Bertha sees Pearl as she might a lover. Nebeker says that Bertha is so full of her illusions of love that only later when she and Miss Fulton look at the tree together a final time does she realize that "what they have shared has been only Harry, nothing more." This is true only as it is said; reading is quite another matter, if I take my own as an example. In my reading I do not find myself voiding their past intimacy (one, granted, perceived through Bertha's mind). Rather, I wonder how this new event, this betrayal, can occur if that past intimacy also occurred. At no point in my reading do I feel that the past intimacy was not real when it was taken to be real by Bertha.

I still believe that Pearl partook in the moment of the "sign" with the full interest and feeling that Bertha perceives (or thinks she perceives). In other words, I take as "true" what Bertha perceived at the time as true. "In Bertha's eyes no longer 'new and mysterious' but, by implication, like all the others who have preceded her," Pearl Fulton leaves the party like the "grey cat being followed by the black." Nebeker describes Pearl as a common female, no different to Bertha now than Bertha's other former girlfriends, who all must have been discovered by her as having had affairs with Harry and thus not "different" as Bertha is (Nebeker 1972, 549).

Nebeker makes assertions about Bertha's perceptions of her own "homosexual urges" which assume that Bertha becomes conscious of them at a given moment in the story, and hence terribly embarrassed and horrified at herself. My reading does not support this claim that Bertha is startled by her desires and repulsed by them. The following comes from the end of Section Six:

> "Oh, Harry, don't dislike her. You are quite wrong about her. She's wonderful, wonderful. And, besides, how can you feel so different about someone who means so much to me. I shall try to tell you when we are in bed to-night what has been happening. What she and I have shared." <80.

And you remember how in <81 something <u>strange and almost terrifying darted into Bertha's mind</u>. Nebeker first points

to the phrases what has been happening and what she and I have shared. Bertha is afraid not only of being in bed with an admiring Harry, but having to say what she feels about Pearl. "But Bertha cannot admit the nature of these thoughts . . ." (Nebeker 1972, 550). I should perhaps have seen two reasons for her terror—first that of the bed (which I did), secondly the terror of having to articulate her feelings about her "find." After all, in <80 and <81 I found that Bertha was imagining herself alone with Harry, speaking to him excitedly about Pearl and why he should be stunned by her. Reading this, I should perhaps realize that if Bertha hears herself (in her imagination) using words to praise Pearl that she will also imagine herself having to make fine distinctions between what her feelings are and what they are not. At which point she would have to realize how close she is to sounding like a homosexual.

But my reading does not open this out for me even as an explorable avenue of assumption, if I judge correctly. Bertha has never once been embarrassed or shameful about her excitement or feeling, as I conceive of her in reading. She is thrilled at her feelings rather than embarrassed at having them or describing them. My conception of Bertha cannot comprehend her feeling guilty, partly because the story does not empower me to create

a sense of my own guilt. True, Bertha cannot express her bliss to anyone or articulate to herself why she feels as she does. But just because she cannot express herself does not mean, to me, that she is fearful of confronting homosexual urges.

"But Bertha cannot admit the nature of these thoughts," Nebeker says, "and quickly reassures herself,

> with the same sense of desperation in which she has insisted on her love for her baby and her intense state of happiness and the perfection of her life, that for the first time in her life Bertha Young desired her husband.

My own notes confirm what might be said more explicitly about Bertha's desire for her husband. Nebeker asks if we are to take these words as "the truth from a suddenly omniscient narrator" or must we sense it "another almost hysterical attempt on the part of Bertha to avoid recognition of an untenable truth" (Nebeker 1972, 550). Desire is what Bertha feels, but this reader believes himself under coercion to believe it. I balk at undesiring desire. My reading does not undermine the sentence, but rides atop it, believing that Bertha does desire her husband but undermining this belief when the reading detects the coercive factor involved. My reading runs between the two explanations offered by Nebeker, ones that seem very much a part of critical discourse and its need to propel itself on. Her feeling is not real desire, but hysteria,

Nebeker says. To prove it she refers to the four sentences which follow—<85 to <88. In light of their cold sex life, Nebeker says, it is "reasonable" to say that this instance of desire is not genuinely for Harry and is not genuinely felt, but is part of Bertha's "hysteria." My own reading of <85 to <88 makes me see just the opposite. I see Bertha's marriage to Harry in a good light. No, they do not have sexual love, but they are pals, and they are in love. I assume a positive view of this brave couple. This desire that Bertha suddenly feels seems likely, and it seems likely that she finds it directed at and created by Harry. When in <90 Bertha veers away from desire with But then, then— she realizes that she has made a mistake to desire Harry. It's fine to desire someone like Harry. But it's not fine that he will desire her back. She can see herself wanting him, but not him wanting her.

Of the three essays I discuss in any detail, Marilyn Zorn's is the least coldly self-regarding. I say this because it lets me see my own reading—or rather lets me see Zorn's. It accounts for the experience of reading the tale—to some extent, at any rate. I admit that when I say I am pleased to be able to say "I see my own reading" in another writer's prose I seem a little obsessive

about my own experience. This is only natural. If I were involved in an accident with fifteen other autos, I would hope the news account would be written in such a way, from such an angle, that I could place myself in the narrative. That's why I would read the news account in the first place, to see how an event I experience is described and explained by someone else. Truly, any account would probably be interesting. But one is not amiss in being selfish, in coming to criticism to "find" something. I will explain where Zorn's essay has its moments of transparency, and where it stands as a solid object which seems deeper and deeper the more one peers at it, ever more filled with ramifications and inferences, as if it were a work of artistic fiction itself.

The following is the first line of Zorn's essay. Her division from the act of reading begins here, and the transparency that always I hope for seems to vanish like a fog covering the landscape so that it's impossible to see one's own house.

> It is perhaps inevitable, given our cultural bias, that Bertha Young, who yearned to share her feelings of "bliss" with her husband and friends and failed to find a language to communicate it, has been misunderstood and misrepresented by the critics (Zorn 1980, 141).

The problem with this statement, from the vantage point of reading: there is no language Bertha Young <u>could</u> have

used to express herself, a language more poetic, expressive or articulate than the one she uses in the story. If Bertha is to remain Bertha as she is perceivable and perceived by a reader (who conceives rather than perceives her), there can be no other language. Her entire nature is defined by her language—by the stutters, questions, hesitations, cries, laughs that I know her by. Her whole nature is defined by what she feels on the day the story occurs (today) and by what she says, by what she wants to say or doesn't try to say (words unsaid, unsayable). The mistake I fall into in reading Zorn is to think that Bertha is only "using" a given form of speech. If Bertha suffers from the realization that she cannot share her feelings and express herself satisfactorily, we cannot say that she realizes her "language" is to blame, unless of course we wish to talk about language anyway and the "way she speaks" and thus impute her problem to "language" and her understanding of it as we, for her, define it.

Zorn begins her essay on Bertha's speech patterns by having me consider the arguments of Sylvia Berkman, who calls Bertha an example of a "modern metropolitan woman" who is "callous, temperamental,selfish and unreasonable." Then Zorn would have me reject Eisinger's remark that Bertha's identification with the pear tree

is "nothing short of myopic sentimentalization" (Eisinger 1949). Regrettably, everyone sees Bertha as a stereotype, as "timid, sentimental, childish, frigid, naive and self-deluding" (Zorn 1980, 141). From Magalaner Zorn quotes the statement that earlier received such attention from me—the one about "unreliable guide" and "internal chaos."

> [To Magalaner] even her bliss is suspect: ". . . in the very words which the author frames her insistence, she demonstrates the emptiness of the claims." Katherine Mansfield is thus brought forward as a witness against her character. And what seems to be primarily a critic's reaction against the character is attributed to the author (Zorn 1980, 141).

Magalaner's slip—bringing Mansfield into his essay—is convenient to Zorn. She intends to do the same, except to draw the opposite conclusion. The next paragraph begins:

> But to strip Bertha of her human dignity and to make the story into an unpleasant little expose of a social group and of a child-woman is to fail to recognize the author's state of mind during the writing of the story and her hopes and intentions for her art.

Mansfield's apparent source of inspiration (a Shelly poem which offers the line, "Oh to whom?") and Mansfield's love of nature are next discussed. The author is brought forward as a witness <u>for</u> her character; what seems primarily the artist's alleged reaction is attributed

to the reader. From this exposition of history and source study comes the conclusion that the "major assumption about the story" is that "Bertha's state of mind and her need to share it with her friends and husband are seen a perfectly valid by the author" (Zorn 1980, 144).

I agree that the assumption of the story is valid to one reader—to me. And probably to other readers, too. Zorn's prose coerces my reception of the work because it forces me into the false position of needing a long historical argument to convince me to perceive the validity of Bertha's desire when I perceived for myself that it must be conceived of as valid rather than ridiculous. I am not displeased to read that Mansfield gives a nod to this general state of my reception. But because Zorn has me ignore my own reading, and probably her own, the confirmation is a matter of indifference to me, being informative rather than vital. Zorn neglects her own best evidence as a reader to say that if Bertha's need to share her feeling is valid to Mansfield, it must necessarily be valid to Zorn. She never confirms her historical argument with a discussion of her reception, which to me is what criticism should always be about if it is to be literary criticism

Before Zorn can discuss women's language and why, as its victim, Bertha cannot communicate, Zorn must

describe what Bertha's vision is. Bertha's "state of mind" is called an "awareness," a state from which might grow her "intuition of the new life" which comes from the awareness itself. (Zorn has difficulty saying what bliss is, what is in it, and what its cause is precisely because she feels it incumbent on her to explain it.) This intuition, her "brief glimpse of ideal womanhood" and her "awakened sexual desire . . . are genuine in the story—not fraudulent and not sentimental" (Zorn 1980, 144). The vision also includes "the potential for love and beauty in human relationships, which can be glimpsed but not realized." Her vision is part of her "openness to bliss" (Zorn 1980, 147).

In Zorn's account, society is at fault for Bertha's inarticulateness on two counts. The people she knows are cruel—the "lack of awareness on the part of those close to her is seen [by Mansfield, again] as their incapacity, not Bertha's"—and Bertha is trapped by women's language, which means that because she speaks as women often do, people will not pay attention. Zorn says Bertha is an "artist manquée," a phrase used by Mansfield.

> It is obviously not enough for the artist to have the vision; there must be a language to communicate it and a community of listeners who speak the language to understand it when it is spoken (Zorn 1980, 144).

This puts Bertha in the curious position of being objective enough to listen to her own speech and then decide whether she will be able to "communicate her vision." The sentence posits Bertha's language as a capability outside herself, something which acts on her, creating an "effect" which she measures and then decides whether she will ever share her bliss with anyone. Bertha's language, I say, is not the cause of her being such a person as to inspire the words "artiste manquee." Her language is as much a part of her as her hands, eyes or tone of voice. Language is only a symptom of who she is. Zorn need only say this: "Bertha senses the obvious, that she is herself at this time in her life, and that because she is who she is and her husband and friends are who they are, she cannot communicate whatever she needs to." An even simpler version of this, which is captured by the reader's silence as he reads, is this: "She is who she is," which is hardly worth saying. Why write critical essays if one is limited to solipsism?

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