

“I HAVE SOMETHING VITAL TO DO HERE”:
THE MODERNIST MODE IN THE
WRITINGS OF MARY BORDEN

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ABSTRACT

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Doctor of Letters Dissertation by

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This dissertation explores the modernist mode in the writings of Mary Borden.

Borden was an early twentieth-century Anglo-American writer. Her best-known work is *The Forbidden Zone*, a collection of modernist World War I prose and poetry drawn from her experiences running field hospitals in France and Belgium during the war.

Borden came of age as a writer concurrent with the rise of literary modernism. Possessing personal wealth, an elite education, social connections, artistic interests, and an ambitious personality, she cultivated relationships with a group of influential artists, writers, and thinkers living in Europe in the early twentieth century. Modernist techniques emerged in her writing in the 1910s, expanding and developing through the following decade, and reaching their zenith in *The Forbidden Zone* in 1929. The rapid evolution of Borden’s modernist technique, particularly during World War I, places her at the forefront of this literary movement. A chronological review of Borden’s vast, though largely unknown, catalog of writing—stories, poems, book-length narratives, essays, and published letters—offers a window into the changes in poetic and narrative style and technique occurring during the era of literary disruption later identified as modernism.

Borden's contributions to the modernist canon diminish following publication of *The Forbidden Zone*. After losing her fortune during the 1929 market crash, she became attuned to the necessity of earning an income from her writing. Although she continued to experiment with content and technique, a focus on producing popular and income-generating works moderated her literary innovation during the latter half of her career. Borden's adaptive mode of writing demonstrates a keen understanding of her audience; her most popularly successful works were those in which she restrained her use of modernist techniques in favor of a more accessible, realist style of writing intended to appeal to middlebrow readers.

Borden left a large literary legacy that defies easy categorization and frustrates any attempt to affix any single label to her writing. Her expansive oeuvre, which spans nearly half a century across multiple continents, offers an unparalleled opportunity to explore the major alterations in the literary landscape through the works of one writer, tracing the rise of modernism and the emergence of the middlebrow. Borden expressed reservations about the entanglement of art and personal experience, but never let these sentiments interfere with her early determination to make her "life tell for eternity."

DEDICATION

For Joe, Nick, and Christian

“One must have a . . . very uncompromising, critical attitude toward your own work, never doing anything except the thing which is as perfect as you can make it.”

— *Mary Borden*

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INTRODUCTION

In April 1956, just shy of her seventieth birthday, Mary Borden addressed the Royal Society of Literature of the United Kingdom, of which she was a Fellow. Her lecture explored “Personal Experience and the Art of Fiction.” To the august audience gathered at Somerset House her appearance was disconcerting; her diminutive stature, dyed hair, brightly painted nails, and exquisite wardrobe once prompted English literary critic Cyril Connolly to compare her to an “exotic bird” (qtd. in Pryce-Jones 265). From behind the podium, she steadied her trembling hands and fixed deep, colorful eyes in a stern gaze upon the assemblage. Then, in a voice mellowed by a lifetime of incessant smoking and with “charming and intimate” manner, Borden shared the secrets of her inspiration with the gathering (Rieu x).

The Royal Society could scarcely have chosen a more appropriate lecturer to consider the role of experience in fiction; Borden’s life story is as fascinating as any best-selling novel. Bequeathed a family fortune as a young woman, Borden lived, travelled, and entertained lavishly across four continents, displaying an unconventional penchant for adventure and risk-taking. Before she was thirty, Borden had travelled from Chicago’s opulent Gold Coast and the ivied walls of Vassar College to a frugal missionary outpost in Lahore, India, and on to the ghastly trenches of the Great War’s Western Front. She was jailed in London for suffragette activities, decorated for heroism in World War I, and narrowly eluded the encircling German army in a harrowing cross-country flight after the Battle of France during World War II. Her personal life was equally dramatic, replete with multiple lovers, mysterious illnesses, an acrimonious divorce and scandalous remarriage, political intrigues, and calamitous financial reversal.

She had an affair with Percy Wyndham Lewis, collaborated with Alexander Korda, discussed religion with Albert Einstein, and campaigned for Adlai Stevenson. “She has the casual manner of the sophisticated woman of the world and a quite irresistible charm,” Katharan McCommon wrote after interviewing Borden: “Her life is simply overflowing with interests, with domesticity, with society, with sport and politics, and yet nothing seems to deter her from a literary career. We think her strength of character and tenacity of purpose quite wonderful.” Throughout this storied and eclectic career, Borden’s preferred occupational label remained consistent: she was always an author.

Borden launched her literary career from her Park Lane house in London’s fashionable Mayfair neighborhood, where she cultivated a bohemian circle of writers and artists at the close of the Edwardian era. Over the next half-century, she produced an impressive portfolio of literature and popular writing across a wide variety of forms and genres, including poetry, short stories, plays, radio and film scripts, essays, correspondence, and novels. Her work appeared in *The English Review*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper’s Magazine*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, and *Vogue*. Her plays were staged in London and New York. Her novels were Book-of-the-Month Club selections and national best sellers: *Action for Slander* was released as a major motion picture. To say that her writing style was widely diverse is an understatement: reviewers and literary critics likened her writing to that of Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, Frederick Buechner, Fanny Burney, Willa Cather, Stephen Crane, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, William Faulkner, Graham Greene, Henry James, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Herman Melville, George Moore, Anne Douglas Sedgewick, H. G. Wells, Edith Wharton, and Walt Whitman.

Borden considered writing more than just an art; it was a public platform and a livelihood, too. Her books demonstrate intellectual curiosity and stylistic luminosity, yet many are potboilers; it is not surprising that in the interwar period Borden released novels at the rate of nearly one a year. She infused her literature with social causes, feminist concerns, and political convictions. Over time, her fiction shifted from literary realism to modernism, and then toward a middlebrow sensibility, but her most successful works were those in which the art of fiction most closely resembled people, places, and events from her own life. The literature Borden produced during World War I, reflecting her experiences under daily threat of bombardment during a period of extreme physical and emotional stress, continues to be lauded and cited as among the finest of the period.¹

Writing gave her life direction, a focus for her restless energy, an outlet for expressing herself, and a self-definition she would embrace for the rest of her life. It fulfilled her fervent belief that she had “something vital to do . . . to make my life tell for eternity” (Letter to Mrs. William Borden). At the core of her writing is a woman struggling to understand herself and her personal relationship to a world undergoing tremendous social, economic, and political upheaval. These struggles manifest in her writing as romantic, realistic, fantastic, modernist, or futuristic renditions of her own experiences which question how her personal existence was altered or affected by them. Her broad choice of styles and genres represent the lines of inquiry into self-discovery that her writing explores. She was sensitive to issues surrounding literary creation, and was aware of the ongoing tension between experience and art in her own life.

¹ See Das; Freedman; Hallett, “Nurse Writers”; Higonnet, *Nurses*; H. Hutchinson, “War”; McGowan, ““Have I No Sanctuary to Defend?””; Smith; Tylee, *Great War*.

Borden's best writing is unquestionably that which was the most personal and was produced during a period of extreme stress in her life. More than one hundred years after their first publication, Borden's World War I poetry and sketches published in *The Forbidden Zone*, composed within artillery range of the Western Front, retain the power to convey the raw horror of the battlefield. Borden's collection is a groundbreaking work of modernist literature, notable for her use of experimental narrative technique in chronicling the ways in which women experienced and reacted to the trauma of the war.

Modernism, like many -isms, is an imprecise label. Historically, it is used to define the era spanning the late nineteenth century through World War II. This period witnessed large social, economic, and political changes driven by rapid technology innovation, industrialization and assembly line production, the emergence of the New Woman, the erosion of the British Empire, and the carnage of warfare. Culturally, modernism refers to the revolutionary movement in music, art, and literature which flourished during this period in which traditional artistic, religious, and social interpretations were no longer viewed as relevant or sufficient representational modes. Modernist artists and writers rejected the assumptions and aesthetic values of their predecessors, including romanticism and realism, repudiating conventional forms in favor of new experimental modes of representation. The earliest artistic forays into this new mode of representation were labelled "avant-garde," reflecting the perception that these artistic innovators were seeking to overthrow tradition or the status quo. Their disregard for conventional expectations often resulted in unpredictable, startling, and alienating creative outcomes, such surrealism in art, atonality in music, and stream-of-consciousness in literature.

The first wave of modernism appeared at the opening of the twentieth century; prior to World War I few writers and artists were experimenting with new forms. The First World War had a profound effect on culture and literature. As well as providing an outlet for conveying the horror of modern warfare by those experiencing it, literature reflected the shocking experience of the war in form as well as content. Aspects of literary modernism include a skeptical or nihilistic outlook, radical aesthetics, spatial and temporal discontinuity, self-conscious reflectiveness, and technical experimentation (Childs 19). In poetry, modernism is characterized by the abandonment of traditional meter, rhyme, and stanza form, inclusion of symbolism and imagery, and substitution of mythological allusions for history. Modernist prose is distinguished by unreliable, first person, stream-of-consciousness narration; the use of irony, ambiguity, and juxtaposition; the critique of industrialization and the dehumanization of society; and fragmentary or non-linear construction of characters, settings, and plot.²

Borden came of age as a writer concurrent with the rise of literary modernism. Owing to a confluence of fortunate circumstances attributable to her family's wealth, including an elite education, global travel, high-society contacts, and an interest in the arts, along with a high level of self-confidence and ambition, she found herself at the epicenter of a privileged and influential group of artists, writers, and thinkers living in Europe in the years preceding and during World War I. Most of her pre-World War I works may best be described as literary realism: she constructed linear plots about realistic characters in actual, contemporary settings and situations.

² For a longer discussion of modernist styles and features see Whitworth's Introduction in *Modernism*.

Modernist techniques emerged in Borden's writing in the 1910s, expanding and developing through the following decade, reaching their zenith in *The Forbidden Zone*, her collection of World War I sketches and poetry published in 1929. A prolific author, Borden left a vast publication catalog with few gaps during this period. Reviewing her writing—stories, poems, book-length narratives, and published letters—chronologically offers a window into the changes in poetic and narrative style and technique occurring during the era of literary disruption later identified as Modernism. With each subsequent publication in the 1910s and 1920s, Borden mixed in more experimental elements of the evolving modernist mode. The rapid evolution of her technique, particularly during World War I, places her at the forefront of this literary movement.

Borden's contributions to the modernist canon are less interesting following publication of *The Forbidden Zone* for several reasons. Most of the fundamental characteristics of modernist poetry and prose are on display in this collection, leaving few aspects of this mode for Borden to reveal in future work. The horrific and shocking nature of World War I provided Borden with a subject matter so intimately associated with modernism as to preclude any other from offering a similarly intense effect. After losing her fortune during the 1929 market crash, Borden became attuned to the necessity of earning an income from her writing. While it would be a mistake to classify financial matters as a constraint, they became a point of consideration that had not existed before.

Although Borden continued to experiment with content and technique after 1930, a focus on producing income-generating works moderated her literary innovation during the latter half of her career. It did not, however, limit her exploration of other literary modes, which she undertook with relish in the 1930s. In quick succession, Borden

produced a wartime romance, two religious novels, a marriage manual, a courtroom melodrama, a domestic drama, and an anti-Nazi novel, publishing seven books in eight years. Concurrently, she wrote travel literature and social essays for newspapers and popular magazines, and collaborated to get her books produced for the cinema. She engaged directly with the reading public, giving speeches, literary lectures, and interviews. In her quest for remuneration as an author, Borden embraced a middlebrow aesthetic.

Unlike realism or modernism, literary movements identifiable by characteristics of a work, such as the use of actual locales or fragmented linearity, middlebrow writing is defined externally, by the reader. The term first appears in *Punch* in 1925: “The BBC claim to have discovered a new type, the ‘middlebrow’. It consists of people who are hoping that someday they will get used to the stuff they ought to like” (“Charivaria”). Virginia Woolf famously describes middlebrow as “betwixt and between” high and low culture: “The middlebrow is the man, or woman, of middlebred intelligence who ambles and saunters now on this side of the hedge, now on that, in pursuit of no single object, neither art nor life itself, but both mixed indistinguishably, and rather nastily, with money, fame, power, or prestige” (“Middlebrow” 180). From the first, the term was loaded with condescension and aspiration, yet lacking in precision. In general, it is described as having limited intellectual or cultural value, and valuing commercial success over intellectual quality and literary innovation.³

³ For a longer history and discussion of middlebrow features see “Recognizing the Literary Middlebrow” in Driscoll’s *The New Literary Middlebrow*, and Rubin’s *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*.

In 1932, Q. D. Leavis published *Fiction and the Reading Public*, an examination of public taste in reading. In it, Leavis claims that literary culture is under attack by an organized middlebrow, and calls for “resistance by an armed and conscious minority” of the cultural elite (270). The so-called ‘battle of the brows’ provoked consternation, conflict, and confusion over the mingling of taste, art, and economics during the interwar years of the twentieth century. In this context, modernism and middlebrow were often posited as adversarial modes of artistic expression. Joan Shelley Rubin offered the first comprehensive analysis of the emergence of the middlebrow as area of academic interest in *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* in 1992. Deeper scholarly inquiries followed. Many focused on the role of gender in the production and consumption of middlebrow culture, as well as the relationship between modernism and middlebrow.⁴ Today, a more nuanced critical approach recognizes middlebrow literature as a “hybrid form” of “strategic, experimental and entertaining variability” that crosses paths and blurs boundaries alongside “experimental and intellectually demanding modernism” (Humble 4, Sullivan and Blanch 4, 15).

Borden’s writing illustrates the complexities inherent in trying to distinguish or separate the elements of these literary modes. Although her disdain for self-described highbrows is well-documented—a “detestable word for detestable people”—her contempt did not extend to the works they produced. Her compositions exemplify the modernist literary mode identified as highbrow, yet she never considered herself in this category. As well, she was clearly affronted when the label “middle-class novelist” was

⁴ See Beuman, *A Very Great Profession*; Botshon and Goldsmith; Bracco, *Betwixt and Between* and *Merchants of Hope*; Brown and Grover; Driscoll; Hammil; Humble; Jaillet; Light; Macdonald; Macdonald and Singer; Sullivan and Blanch.

applied to her (“London Letter” 9 Apr. 1927, 16 July 1927). Yet it is undeniable that, particularly after 1930, Borden sought out middlebrow outlets and audiences for her publications, and adapted the form, content, and style of her writing to appeal to a broad readership rather than a narrow, elite niche.

Contemporary critics acknowledged Borden’s blend of conventional literary realism and modernist features, and the appeal of these modes to middlebrow readers and literary highbrows. Reviewing her short story collection, *Four O’clock and Other Stories*, Grace Frank asserts that Borden’s works “meet the requirements both of Academe and Grub Street . . . the former will acclaim them with enthusiasm, the latter will accept them with an air of self-conscious righteousness” (753). Although Borden’s emphasis shifted between realism and modernism, and spanned highbrow and middlebrow, rather than bifurcating her approach, she chose to unify these various features.

Borden was an experiential writer. In her life-long literary career, she took the people, places, and events that she knew and witnessed and applied a veneer of style over these real-life experiences. History—global, national, local, and personal—informed and influenced the content, style, format, and structure of her works. It is appropriate, therefore, that the examination of the Borden’s writing which follows is shaped by chronology. This organizational structure reflects the changing nature of Borden’s works as influenced by and closely intertwined with historical events and personal experiences. Chapters integrate period history, biographical information, selections from Borden’s works, and secondary source materials. This comprehensive approach allows for a thorough assessment of the shifts in Borden’s writing style over the course of her

lifetime. The result is the development of a historically and biographically grounded, nuanced explanation of how and why these changes occurred.

Borden's childhood and young adulthood, from her birth in 1886 through the beginning of World War I, are the subject of Chapter 1. Her wealth, parents, religion, and education were important influences in her life which are revealed in her writing from an early age. Borden embraced the Vassar English Department's emphasis on experiential writing, and the mode continued to influence her works throughout her entire career. After graduation in 1908, Borden married a British missionary and moved to Lahore, India. During the early years of her marriage she had three daughters. The family travelled continuously among India, the United States, and Europe before settling in London. There, she became involved with an avant-garde group of artists and writers. Principally works of literary realism, her first published stories and novels are imbued with her experiences in India and provide early indications of her modernist interests.

Chapter 2 spans the years of the First World War, when Borden ran a mobile surgical hospital behind the front lines of battlefields in Belgium and France. Borden was an extraordinary nursing director, earning multiple awards for her heroic actions during the war. Here, she met and began an affair with Edward Spears, a British officer. Borden's wartime writings, including personal letters, poems, and prose, composed during this period of constant exposure to trauma, stress, and extreme emotions, comprise her most experimental and innovative writing. These works, remarkable for their stylistic originality and feminine perspective, show Borden's development of the modernist mode in a short period of time. Few of these pieces were published during the war.

Borden's life and writing after World War I through 1925 are covered in Chapter 3. After marrying in Paris, she and Spears moved to London where the combination of her money and his political connections drew a wide social circle. Borden wrote prolifically during this period, publishing nearly a book a year. Concurrent with her increasing literary popularity, she became a more active participant in publicizing her work, particularly in the United States where she was in demand for her views on English and American social practices. Her novels and stories written during this period, while still fundamentally grounded in literary realism and experientialism, show Borden's growing engagement with experimental writing.

Chapter 4 focuses on the latter half of the 1920s. In her nonfiction works, Borden shares her political, social, and literary beliefs and prejudices. A collection of character sketches and her most modernist novels, *Flamingo* and *Jehovah's Day* were written in these years. In them, she experiments with stream of consciousness and fluidity of time; displays a distrust of technology and modern urban life; subverts traditional religious principles; and expresses a deepening belief in the fragility and futility of modern civilization. These are complex works, in which the resulting tension and conflict is represented through the fragmentation of time, space, and people, producing an overwhelming sense of hopelessness and futility.

In 1929, Borden published *The Forbidden Zone*, her collection of World War I writings, the subject of Chapter 5. To pieces written during the war, she added five new stories. The collection, a hybrid of fiction and memoir, conveys the war's trauma from the unusual perspective of a field hospital nurse. Borden's first-person, front-line, feminine viewpoint and graphic imagery, combined with innovative modernist

techniques, distinguish her work from other published wartime fiction or memoirs. The collection is remarkable for its ability to convey the horrifying effects of the war, not just through the grotesque injuries to the landscape and combatants, but tangentially, through the reactions of women who experienced the war from their unusual position as nurses. As such, Chapter 5 contains the most detailed close reading of Borden's works.

Chapter 6 looks at Borden's life and literary works in the aftermath of the Wall Street Crash of 1929, which wiped out her substantial inheritance. Forced to reconsider her literary vocation as an income-producing profession instead of an artistic expression, Borden displays a remarkable ability to adapt her writing. In producing works that she believed would be more popular and profitable, she assumes a middlebrow approach, trying on and discarding numerous genres, themes, and forms. She does not, however, entirely abandon the modernist mode; features of it continue in her published works throughout this period. While more popularly successful, Borden's writing during the 1930s was less innovative and interesting from a modernist perspective.

Chapter 7 encompasses the remainder of Borden's life. Her literary career was interrupted during the early 1940s by World War II, during which she and Spears again had active roles. In addition to running a field hospital, Borden also functioned as a diplomatic hostess for her husband. Unlike in World War I, she did not continue to write during the war. Afterwards, Borden resumed her literary career with a wartime autobiography before returning to novel writing, continuing to publish books, with varying success, until 1956. In her later years, Borden often reflected on the choice she faced between living life and creating art, denying an unassailable connection that is explored in this section.

Borden's life was long and adventurous. Her large literary legacy defies easy categorization and demonstrates the futility of attempting to affix any single label to her writing. She expressed reservations and perplexity at the entanglement of art and experience in her own life, never reaching a satisfactory conclusion. Her expansive oeuvre, which spans nearly half a century across multiple continents, offers an unparalleled opportunity to explore the significant alterations in the literary landscape through the works of one writer, tracing the rise of modernism and the emergence of middlebrow. Beyond the scope of this project, there are numerous areas of inquiry into her life and works that remain unexplored and which are certain to be of interest to scholars across disciplines. I raise these issues in the concluding section.

Chapter 1

“I BEGAN WRITING WHEN A CHILD”⁵:

EARLY YEARS AND JUVENILIA

Chapter 1 describes Borden’s childhood and early adult life, from 1886 to 1914. Her family’s affluence, the guidance of her parents, religious experiences, and her education at Vassar College shaped Borden’s personality and influenced the development of her literary career. Some of the ideas she expressed in college essays would continue to be issues of discontent throughout her life. Marriage, motherhood, travel, and interactions with diverse groups of people inform her early publications, which draw on the experiential training she received at Vassar, new domestic experiences, and time spent living on multiple continents. Her earliest writing relies heavily on conventional plot, setting, character, syntax, and style, but shows an interest in alternative characterizations and an openness to progressive moral boundaries.

Mary Borden was born May 15, 1886, in Chicago, Illinois. In the United States, it was the zenith of the Gilded Age; the modern industrial era had come of age, and many of the period’s distinguishing characteristics were manifest in the Borden family. Borden’s mother, Mary De Garne Whiting, descended from “a long line of prominent magistrates, preachers and physicians” who proudly traced their ancestry to *Mayflower* passengers and Compact signatories (Mrs. H. Taylor 14). Her father, William Borden, an independently wealthy mining industrialist and real estate investor, retired as a multi-millionaire before he was thirty years old (Conway 7). Together, the couple made their home in a beaux-arts mansion built by Robert Morris Hunt on Lake Shore Drive facing

⁵ Borden, qtd. in McCommon.

Lake Michigan in the Gold Coast neighborhood that had become destination of choice for Chicago's elite after Potter Palmer built his fanciful castle there in 1885. The Bordens enjoyed an opulent upper-class life. Mr. Borden indulged his wife with expensive jewelry; they frequented the opera and the symphony, dined and entertained within an active social circle, and supported numerous cultural philanthropies.

In addition to Mary, the family included an older son, John (1884-1944), and two younger children, William (1887-1913) and Joyce (1897-1971). The Borden children experienced a near idyllic upbringing in a "close and loving family," having the material benefits of wealth and status as well as attentive and caring parents (Conway 13). "With longing," Borden later recalled "the high ceilings, the view out towards Lake Michigan and the memory of her exotically dressed parents coming up to her room to say goodnight before a party" (Egremont 18).

Education was important. Mr. Borden encouraged his children to develop an interest in knowledge and learning, providing them with tutors, enrolling them at prestigious private secondary schools and colleges, and sending them on grand world tours. Borden was tutored at home by German and French governesses, then, at the age of fifteen, was sent to Rye Female Seminary, a prestigious boarding school on Long Island, New York. Established in 1869, the Seminary was at the forefront of a national trend that was introducing college preparatory programs for women at the turn of the century. Borden's coursework at the school included Latin, geometry, French, English, Greek and history (Conway 16).

The Borden children were encouraged by their father to participate in sports and games; he took them on fishing and sailing trips, to baseball games and played golf with

them (Conway 10). They also enjoyed the freedom of the outdoors. In Chicago, they could be found roaming the vacant lots between the mansions on Lake Shore Drive and playing on the shore or, more dangerously, the frozen waters of Lake Michigan (Conway 12). Summers, spent at the family vacation home on the coast of Maine, their grandparents' estate on the Mississippi in Indiana, or vacationing at grand hunting lodges out West, included baseball games, swimming, sailing, and horseback riding. (Conway 13; Mrs. H. Taylor 10). As an adult, Borden characterized her childhood as a "happy, wholesome life" (Mrs. H. Taylor 11).

Borden's father was one of the strongest influences in her life. He had a "profound philosophical outlook . . . and quiet dignity," and was a "constant inspiration" to Borden: "He was a reserved man who moved through life erect and square-set, making about him a definite silence that it took all of a little girl's courage to break, but when he smiled, she startled on with the warmth and directness of his gaze" (Cooper 147).⁶ In a childhood poem, Borden describes how "[H]e / Would sit with us – and talk from his great store / Of beauty – poetry – and of great men" ("Mary's Poem").

A rift emerged in the family around the time of Joyce's birth. Mrs. Borden converted to fundamental Christianity and became an active congregant of the Chicago Avenue Church, one of the nation's first megachurches. Chicago was an epicenter of the late nineteenth-century Third Great Awakening, which turned religious attitudes toward social progress. The Chicago Avenue Church, later renamed the Moody Church after its founder Dwight L. Moody, could hold 10,000 people, although overflow crowds of up to 6,000 more were recorded ("Brief History"). As her religious convictions deepened, Mrs.

⁶ Anice Page Cooper became one of Borden's editors at Doubleday, Doran in the 1930s.

Borden devoted more time to prayer meetings, gradually withdrawing from her former acquaintances and pastimes. She sold her jewels and exchanged her custom-made couture dresses for a stark black and white wardrobe (Conway 14). It is likely that she “experienced some sort of breakdown or post-natal depression” that either triggered or resulted from her conversion (Conway 13).

Borden’s father neither understood nor embraced his wife’s newfound religious beliefs and refused to either join in her spiritual activities or abandon his customary social and cultural pursuits (Conway 15). “He loved the world,” Borden wrote, “to him it was a treasure house; while to her it carried the threat of eternal damnation and she feared and hated it” (qtd. in Egremont 18). The estrangement between Borden’s parents soon spread to their children. William enthusiastically joined his mother in worship and dedicated himself to a life of Christian evangelism at the age of seven (Mrs. H. Taylor 6). Borden found her mother’s dogmatic opinions hard to accept and regarded the emotional atmosphere of prayer meetings as “abhorrent” (“What” 131). She never hid her antagonism toward the evangelical church, which produced a “distaste amounting to horror for any form of emotionalism in religion” (Cooper 149).

In an essay contributed to a series titled “What Religion Means to Me,” published in *The Forum* in 1934, Borden describes her earliest religious experiences as benign and nearly idyllic: “Born, baptized, and brought up a Christian, in a nursery pervaded by medieval magic, lovely and awful. . . .” Then, at the age of twelve, her “vague acquiescence in ancient legend” was abruptly shaken by immersion in the Moody Church: “[I was] brought literally to my knees in a revival meeting.” Borden relates spending the next five years “seriously disturbed by my own sinful nature, not a little

oppressed by visions of eternal punishment . . . mightily distressed by a guilty conscience and driven at last in a confused desperation to vow I would give up the gay, frivolous, delicious world and go as a foreign missionary to the heathen of China. . . .” (131).

Borden was eventually driven from the organized Church by a “peculiarly unfortunate experience, a peculiarly crude and outrageous type of Christian minister.” While the details of this encounter are vague— “It was a long time ago”—the outcome remains clear in her memory; a “grotesque dialog” in which the theologian asserted that the millions of people living in India and China would “burn in hell forever.” In reply, Borden announced: “Very well . . . then I’m through. I’m not going to have anything more to do with Christianity; I’ve no use for it.” It was, Borden admits, “with zest and a sense of immense relief” that she turned away from the boring and “endless talks about the fact that He had died to atone for my sins, with men who believed they were led to save my soul,” and set out “in search of truth and reality” (131).

Borden’s literary interests were apparent from early childhood. She was a “precocious reader,” with a “natural instinct for composition and a self-identity as a reader” (Conway 11). In a newspaper interview in 1925, Borden discusses her early interest in writing: “I began writing when a child, and from the first I was determined that I was going to learn to write. . . . I feel that writing is something that must be learned just as music, painting or any other art.” The Mary Borden Collection at Boston University contains numerous handwritten notes from Borden reaching back to her early childhood, written to her parents, brother John, and extended family, often daily, during vacations or parental absences. Borden attributes her literary interests to her upbringing; “My father was a very cultivated man and encouraged me in every way,” she noted: “I have always

been an omnivorous reader, simply devouring the classics as a child. I read all of Dickens, Thackeray and Trollope when I was quite small” (qtd. in McCommon).

In the fall of 1903, following a European summer holiday, Borden matriculated at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York, to study English and philosophy (Conway 19). At the opening of the century this educational path remained unusual, even for a young woman of Borden’s social class and financial means. Although this was a period of gender parity in college enrollments, most women who were enrolled in higher education institutions attended two-year teacher colleges; as late as 1925 fewer than 2,500 women attended the exclusive Seven Sister schools (Goldin et al. 134-35). Vassar College, the oldest of the Seven Sister colleges, was traditionally associated with the social elite of the Protestant establishment.

Borden was successful, involved, and popular at Vassar. She was reportedly a hardworking student, determined to excel in the college’s challenging environment (Conway 20). Her years at Vassar were a period of rebellion and violent reaction against conventional thought: “It was a sign of intelligence to be an atheist, and there was much talk about free love, trial marriage by five-year contracts, and many another similar panacea for the ills of the social system” (Cooper 149). Although Borden never recorded any thoughts about these subjects while at Vassar, she later took progressive stands on social and domestic issues as a philanthropist, activist, and author.

Borden participated enthusiastically in several extra-curricular activities. She became involved with the Philalethean Society, Vassar’s drama club, and held successive offices each year culminating in election as president in 1906 (“Class Officers”). In this role, Borden urged her classmates to write and submit original dramas to the chapter for

staging and, as further encouragement, established an annual competition for one-act plays in 1906 (Borden, “Ambition”).

As a member of one of Vassar’s debating societies, Borden honed her speaking skills while participating in one of the College’s most popular extracurricular activities. At the turn of the century, debate “reigned supreme” at northeastern colleges, as academic interest in forensics, the study of the theory and practice of argumentation, peaked (“Debate Enthusiasm” 1). Debate science was a required subject at Vassar during this period, and secret debating societies were a prominent part of collegiate life, “arousing more interest and enthusiasm than any other college activity” (H. West 149, 144). Borden represented her club in intra-collegiate debates in her junior and senior years, securing wins on both occasions (“College News: The Interclass Debate”; “College News: Clubs” 191). Her experiences likely helped sharpen the expressive and forthright manner of address found in her public speeches, social commentary, and literary works.

Borden’s matriculation in the English Department at Vassar occurred during Laura Johnson Wylie’s tenure as department head. Wylie joined the English department in 1895 after graduating as a member of the first group of women to receive a Ph.D. from Yale University. Forward thinking and modern, Wylie redefined the concept of English as an individual and expressive art form, revolutionizing the goals of work in English at Vassar. She fundamentally believed that the old model of requiring a supposedly objective education in rules-based reading and writing was inappropriate and destructive to the true intellectual growth that Vassar could provide for its students (Edelman 12, 14).

Wylie’s goal was to move the English department from its original focus of providing a college entrance-level base of knowledge toward delving deeper into analysis

and the experience of literature. She thought of English as “a single territory of art and scholarship, the ‘branches’ of which were not separate, but were merely different aspects or approaches, emphasizing one or another element without detaching it from the rest” (Warner 2). Rather than offering her students a detached uniformity of knowledge through set readings, weekly themes, and grammar drills, Wylie strove to educate on an individual level with the goal of inspiring her students to new heights, which were “revolutionary for young women to imagine” (Edelman 13-14).

Wylie’s approach emphasized the personal aspect of a student’s experience throughout her education as essential to the study of English. She reoriented the English department’s focus toward experience in all senses: from improving the individual’s experience in the classroom to encouraging writing that sprang from and reading that spoke to individual experience (Edelman 14). Subsequently, the curriculum shifted from literature-based classes to coursework that emphasized writing and developing a cohesive style of expression. First-year coursework was primarily creative instead of logical and mechanical, to “foster a living sense of literature and writing” (Warner 3). Her view of English as a highly personal discipline demanded work on an individual level. Department meetings, increased under her leadership, became forums for free discussion and collaboration. Many students later related that they had undergone “groundbreaking experiences” during individual meetings with Wylie (Edelman 13).

Borden’s contributions to the college’s monthly literary magazine, *The Vassar Miscellany*, reflect the experiential emphasis promoted by Wylie. They include poems, sketches, short stories, non-fiction essays, and a two-part serialized detective story. In these pieces, Borden explores the boundaries of realism and romanticism, and

experiments with literary techniques, signaling her penchant for experiential and innovative writing that would come to be expressed as literary modernism. These early writings prefigure her future body of work in three manners. They demonstrate the remarkable diversity of form, genre, and style of Borden's writing, comprising poetry, narrative fiction, and essays. They reflect her personal experiences and history, drawing on places she visited and people she met, retold with a dramatic and creative flair. They also reveal Borden's nascent awareness of—and frustration with—the conflicts arising among women's passions, ambitions, and social expectations. Her struggle to achieve a balance among these competing pressures in her own life and mitigate the friction caused by her inability to do so successfully would play out in her writing throughout her life.

Borden's first piece in *The Vassar Miscellany*, a brief sketch of contemporary collegiate life, "Neither a Borrower—," ironically borrows a theme from *Hamlet* to draw attention to the risk of replacing academics with the social rituals surrounding eating, dressing, and gossiping. She draws on familiar devices, including light imagery, character anonymity, and female hysteria to create a gothic atmosphere. The story is interesting for her feminine interpretation of Shakespeare's cautionary tale, unstable narrator, and narrative ambiguity. All three women speak at times in the first person and queries and replies are non-sequentially interwoven. Because the story unfolds conversationally, this technique prevents clear development of any characters and leaves the reader uncertain about who is speaking. The narrative discontinuity is complicated by the narrator's insertion of her thoughts into the flow of discourse: "I didn't like the smile, and I didn't understand it" (205). The chaotic and unsteady effect supports the sketch's gothic atmosphere, but also shows Borden's early engagement with new modes of writing.

A short story, “Through the Fog,” was featured in *The Vassar Miscellany* in March 1905. Set on a foggy evening in London, the narrative describes the last, desperate actions of a terminally ill petty criminal, Sal, as she maneuvers to deflect a detective’s suspicions away from her husband and accomplice, Bill. Dickensian in style, “Through the Fog” reflects the influence of the Victorian novel as well as elements of the picaresque, most notably in allusions to the rougher neighbors of London and the low criminal characters of Sal and Jim. The story also hints at some of the features that will come to characterize modernist fiction, including ambiguity, fragmented narration, symbolism, and the destabilization of social and gender roles.

Ambiguities in character development and plot progression occur throughout the story. Although populated by stock characters, the narrative never clearly explains their relationships. Repeatedly described as a “girl,” Sal is later revealed to be Bill’s wife of five years. Unanswered questions surround the plot: What crime did Bill, Sal, and Mike commit? Why does Sal live with Jim? What is in the package that Sal takes from Bill? Borden’s intermittent use of an omniscient third person narrator provides answers to some of these questions by giving the reader access to Sal’s internal thoughts.

“Through the Fog” is most notable for Borden’s use of London’s dampening fog as both a plot device and a symbol of visual impairment and moral weakness. London’s damp, foggy night helps to convey the story’s tone of darkness and despair, and plays an important role by obscuring and revealing places, characters, and actions. At times it takes on a life of its own. The fog is suffocating and menacing; it has “swallowed up” the light of the street lamps, dulls their luminosity to “a sickly yellow,” and makes ghosts of

the characters who move about in it (288-89). The murk is tricky, too, as the concealment it offers in one situation inhibits visual clarity in others.

Sal is the beneficiary of the fog's protection as well as its most prominent victim. The fog's dense murkiness conceals her from her pursuers, allows her to overhear important information, and facilitates her late-night activities. At the end of the story, the fog enables Sal's capture. Most significantly, the fog prevents Sal from seeing Bill's flaws, an interruption of her sight that is both literal and metaphoric. While Sal's lack of a strong internal moral struggle is disappointing, Borden shows maturity for a young writer by creating a female protagonist who clearly controls her own decision making and effectively executes her chosen plan. The story also offers an early glimpse of Borden's lifelong fascination with and exploration of blindness as a literary conceit.

"As Seen by the Princess," Borden's next short story, is a morality tale set in a fictional kingdom: it appeared in the October 1905 issue of *The Vassar Miscellany*. A young, world-weary royal daughter leaves the protection of her castle, inquiring about "that struggle going on that the poets talk about? . . . They call it life" (36). This may refer to evolving questions about the role of the individual in a society that was undergoing rapid transformations, or it may reflect Borden's nascent explorations of how she will experience life. Later in her life, Borden would repeatedly address the conflict between creating art and experiencing life, expressing doubts about how well she balanced these pursuits, which she viewed in opposition.

In the story, the Princess surreptitiously takes a position as a shopkeeper's assistant in town. She happily toils at labors she finds gratifying; though her "body ached," her "heart was rested" (37). The story is a study in contrasts and opposing

tensions. In just a few pages Borden's narrative interweaves conflicts between light and dark, men and women, youth and maturity, wealth and poverty, labor and leisure, tradition and progress, appearance and reality, and ignorance and knowledge. The Princess rebels against the constraints imposed on her because of her birthright and gender, and expresses a desire to "live and work and suffer with living" (36). When she recognizes that her arranged employment has deprived a poor girl of her livelihood she reluctantly returns to the castle. Her failure to find or identify any meaningful existence for herself reinforces the nihilistic outlook intimated at the outset of the story, and is an early precursor of the direction that modernism would take in Borden's mature writing.

Sight, appearances, and light feature prominently in the story. The Princess's awareness that the life she desires lies outside of the castle walls comes from looking "far away over the gardens" (35). She is described as bright and illuminated; she is "sunny," her eyes "blaze" when she argues, and the moon shines on her through the nighttime shadows (36). In contrast, the countenance of the poor working girl is "quite colorless . . . blue and veined," and she has "sunken . . . dazed eyes" (38). The stasis and status orientation of these descriptions belie the attitude change that the Princess purports to have undergone and minimize the value of her actions.

A brief vignette, "The Owl and the Pussy Cat: A Dream," appeared in *The Vassar Miscellany*, in December 1905. The sketch, in which a college coed relates a dream about an owl and a kitten debating student study habits, has little tension, plot, or character development. Borden borrows her characters from Edward Lear's nonsensical Victorian poem "The Owl and the Pussy-Cat" and uses the dream vision literary technique popularized by Lewis Carroll in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. In contrast with these

fantastical sources, in Borden's dream sequence the imaginary characters frame a realistic scene between two young women in a college dormitory and offer a concluding lesson about the necessity of balancing work and play. It is a lighthearted and imaginative treatment of a subject that might have been a serious subject for Borden's peers.

Borden's last publication in *The Vassar Miscellany* was a 5,000-word story serialized in the February and March 1906 issues. Set in present-day London, "In the Course of Events" is sensation fiction, a sub-genre of Victorian detective fiction in which the mystery concerns an undefined secret. Borden was a life-long fan of detective fiction (Millet 15), and would turn to the genre several times during her literary career. The crime, concisely and melodramatically described by the president of a gentlemen's amateur detective club, is "a first-class murder . . . an old man strangled in his study, a daughter left alone with an enormous fortune, the whole thing so simply done, that it baffles our friends, the professionals" (213). Borden uses the first installment to establish the setting, introduce characters, and build dramatic tension; the second part reveals the identity of the perpetrator and exposes secret relationships between the characters.

In the mode of her famous contemporary, Arthur Conan Doyle, Borden relates the story through a Watson-type sidekick, Bert. His friend, Lord Robert Fitz Hawaden, "artist, philosopher, poet, gentleman and the most interesting character in London," presides over the crime-solving club (213). Fitz Hawaden's challenge to solve the murder is accepted by Bert's visiting American friend, Timothy Schuyler. In a Dickensian coincidence, Schuyler is the secret fiancé of Joan, the heiress orphaned by the murder. The story concludes neatly: Schuyler marries Joan and reveals Fitz Hawaden as the murderer, after which the protagonist melodramatically consumes a dose of poison.

Set among the mansions and clubs of London and featuring a cadre of well-educated, socially connected, cosmopolitan men and women, “In the Course of Events” presages the social and domestic drama of Borden’s early novels. These were people and places with which Borden was familiar, imbuing the fiction with a sense of realism, albeit of a singularly privileged class. The sole aspect of modernist sensibility in “In the Course of Events” may be found in Fitz Hawaden’s confession and explanation for his criminal actions at the end of the story. “I was tired, tired to death of it all. . . . And I, lazy enough myself to believe there was nothing else, that the end of life was amusement. . . . [T]he game has been amusing, even exciting at times” (278-79). In this final speech Fitz Hawaden offers neither remorse nor apology for his crime. Instead, he calls the club members “cowards as well as fools” for failing to discover his “game” (279). His view that “there was nothing else” and that life lacked meaning, purpose, or value reflects the essence of the nihilistic outlook which is a characteristic of modernist literature.

Borden also authored several essays for *The Vassar Miscellany*. Most were short editorials, soliciting participants for Philalethean Society activities and encouraging literary contributions to the college paper. In “The College Attitude,” Borden insists on the importance of writing experientially: “[W]hen, in or out of college, we for a moment get a sudden grip on the real things of experience and when perchance that bit of reality so takes hold of us . . . we write something real and therefore worth while [*sic*] . . .” (187). Borden determinedly equates “real” experiences with “real” writing, asserting that only such “real” writing is “worth” publishing and reading. She makes no mention of imagination or inspiration beyond that of “reality.” Borden touches on reality, or the “real,” again in her final collegiate essay, “Optimism and Other-Worldliness,” redefining

optimism and pessimism experientially. She describes the idealist as a pessimist “shutting one’s self off from all but a narrow experience. . . . [H]e takes refuge in an abstraction, in the vision of a perfect life that he determines to believe in” (268). Contrarily, Borden argues: “In spite of . . . the reality of life, [optimists] all instinctively feel that no matter what may happen in the way of misfortune, we will miss something tremendously worth while [*sic*], if we miss living to the last drop the life that is given us” (267).

The predisposition to experience “real” life that Borden developed at Vassar would compel her seemingly boundless energy and enthusiasm for innumerable projects and campaigns. Many of these experiences would find their way into her writing. Borden’s conception of a literary career was vastly different as a college student than it would be in her eightieth decade when she advocates a “spartan, meagre, and restricted” life for women writers, declaring: “[I]t is to the power of her imagination that we owe the breadth of her understanding, not to the variety of her experience” (“Personal Experience” 95).

In April 1906, during Borden’s junior year at Vassar, Mr. Borden died unexpectedly. Borden had considered him “her greatest friend” and mourned his death deeply (Conway 21). She wrote several elegies for her father, one of which, “Sonnet,” was published in *The Vassar Miscellany* the following November. Additional unpublished poems include a sonnet, “Written on My Father’s Birthday”; a lament that recalls time spent together at the Borden summer home in Camden, Maine; and “Mary’s Poem Written at Her Father’s Death,” an elegy composed in heroic verse. Borden’s poems reflect the mutual affection between father and daughter, and reveal her spiritual belief that his love and care for her transcended death.

Mr. Borden left his daughter a portfolio of investments that generated an annual after-tax income of £10,000, the equivalent of \$1.5 million today (“William Borden’s Will”). Upon receiving her inheritance, Borden endowed a scholarship at Vassar in her father’s name, providing funds for one student to travel to Europe each year to study economics and social conditions (“William Borden Memorial”). This action conveys the values and motivations that formed an essential part of Borden’s character. Throughout her life she would continue to demonstrate a generous nature, an appreciation for education and culture, deep paternal admiration, and a raised social consciousness.

In a U.S. newspaper interview in 1925, Borden recalls her studies at Vassar favorably: “I studied as much English there as I possibly could and went in a good deal for dramatics, too. As I look back I find I got a tremendous stimulous [sic] from college” (qtd. in McCommon). In a British newspaper article in 1927 Borden struck a different tone, referring to her education as “a slapdash American affair,” and claiming: “[A]ll that remains to me of my schooldays is an enthusiasm for the things of the mind, and a conviction that the exercise of one’s mind is, of all the pleasures, the one I would least like to relinquish” (“London Letter” 26 Feb. 1927). This is an early example of how Borden presented her public self differently in the United Kingdom and the United States.

As Borden neared graduation, she remained undecided about her future. In a letter to her mother written from Vassar on her twentieth birthday, Borden relates her doubts about her post-graduation plans. She tells her mother that she had been advised to “spend until I was twenty-five writing – in serious preparation. Then I should know whether it was in me to do a really great work that way.” Borden was ambivalent about this advice. Above all, she wanted to accomplish something meaningful: “I have . . . the convictions

that I have something vital to do here—to make my life tell for eternity” (Letter to Mrs. William Borden). Mrs. Borden wanted her daughter to become a foreign missionary, like her son William. Borden acquiesced to her mother’s wishes, although her reasons for doing so are unexplained; one may reasonably speculate that, lacking a clear direction for her literary ambitions, she simply found it easier to give in to her mother’s pressure.

Following graduation, Borden embarked on a world tour accompanied by Moody Church chaperones, Mr. and Mrs. Bausher. They travelled by rail to Vancouver, Canada, then sailed to Japan. In Tokyo, Borden again expended her largess, founding a hostel for Japanese women students (Conway 23). The group spent the next few months touring Christian missions in the Far East that were supported by the Borden family.

A few months into her tour, in March 1908, Borden met George Douglas Turner (1880-1946), a Scots missionary working with the Young Men’s Christian Association in Lahore, India. Turner was born to the missionary life. His grandfather, the Rev. Dr. George Turner (1818-1891), spent over forty years in the Samoan Islands with the London Missionary Service (LMS), publishing the first Samoan Bible as well as volumes of Samoa/English dictionaries and histories of Samoa. Turner’s father, the Rev. Dr. William Young Turner, was a medical doctor who served as a missionary with the LMS in Samoa, Papua New Guinea, Jamaica, and British Guiana. Turner earned an M.A. in theology from Glasgow University in 1899 and then embarked on his own missionary career, arriving in Lahore, India, in 1903 (“University of Glasgow Story”).

Borden “took the Lahore social scene by storm,” and was popular with the missionaries. “We all love her, and she loved us,” writes Elizabeth Cole Fleming, who was responsible for introducing the couple (Kittle 299-302). Borden was drawn to Turner

by his “sincerity and altruism” and, with the encouragement of her chaperones, became engaged to him within two weeks of their first meeting (Conway 24; Kittle 299). The following day Borden’s group left Lahore, travelling first to Bombay and then on to Egypt. Almost immediately, Borden began to question her hasty decision, only keeping her promise to Turner at the insistence of Mrs. Bausher (Conway 24). Borden would never return from her world tour. In August of 1908, at the age of twenty-two, with her mother and a few friends in attendance, she married Turner in Lausanne, Switzerland.

The newlyweds spent the first years of their marriage travelling extensively among India, Europe, and the United States, using Borden’s inheritance for support. After their wedding, Turner took Borden back to his mission in Lahore, where she worked hard to integrate, studying Hindustani, teaching in local schools, and hosting students and missionaries in their home (Conway 25). Despite these attempts, Borden remained more comfortable with the British expatriates; upon her return to England she published an impassioned appeal for donations to an education fund for Christian Europeans in India (*Alien*). Among the female missionaries in Lahore, Borden was known for “representing the British view on missionary and YWCA concerns” after accusing an American of over-enthusiasm and emotion in prayer meetings (Kittle 284). In 1909, the couple traveled to her family’s summer home in Maine for the birth of their first child, a daughter named Joyce, in August. They returned to India in October and moved to Kashmir, where a second daughter, Catherine, was born in August 1910.

Despite the attentions of her husband, a growing family, and her role as a missionary’s wife, Borden was lonely and unhappy in India. She felt isolated and removed from familiar intellectual and cultural pursuits, and did not share Turner’s

religious fervor or interests. Turner, for his part, could be egotistical—he claimed that his marriage proposal “offered the greatest life possible to any girl”—as well as intolerant and demanding (Kittle 303). Once, when Borden was suffering from a malarial fever, he threatened to send her back to England if she “weren’t well enough” (Kittle 305). Borden feared the marriage was a mistake (Conway 26).

Perhaps as a remedy, Borden began writing in earnest during this period. Her experiences in Lahore, India, prompted her first professionally published pieces of literature, two religion-themed short stories set in India, and informed her early novels. Primarily pieces of literary realism, these works display Borden’s experiential writing and the beginnings of her experimentation with the modernist mode.

“The Gift of Forgiving Gods” appeared in the February 1910 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*. Set in the city of Benares, on the banks of the River Ganges, the story relates the final stages of a pilgrimage undertaken by an elderly lower-caste mother, Bhagwati, and her adult son. The pair has journeyed to Benares from their rural village to appease the gods following the deaths of the son’s wife and baby daughter, a tragedy that the old woman claims is her fault: “[H]er heart was fevered with a sickening sense of undefined sin” (256). The day is unbearably hot, and the son patiently settles his mother to rest in the shade during the afternoon heat while he finishes his circuit of worship at the city’s temples and shrines. In the corner of a market-place square, Bhagwati finds an abandoned baby girl whom she confuses with her dead granddaughter. Upon her son’s return, Bhagwati shows him the baby, insisting: “She is a sign from the gods, of forgiveness” (259). Her son accepts the child and the trio departs the city.

Borden's modernist innovation lays in crafting the sacred city of Benares as a principal character in her sketch and giving it an omniscient and supernatural role. The sacred Hindu temples and Islamic mosques provide no solace to the pair; Bhagwati is battered by the crowds, then insulted and abused by the priests. Ultimately, it is the city that produces the gift in answer to their prayers, not the gods to whom they pray in the temples. In the place of traditional religion, Borden offers the redemptive power of the deified and beneficent city: "mysterious . . . smiling, mystic, wonderful" Benares (255).

Benares's beneficence is transmitted through the power and intensity of light. Sunlight shines on the pilgrims with godlike brilliance; it illuminates, enriches and ennobles. It "poured down, deepened, and spread in a visible golden wash. . . . It flooded a molten stream of bronze bodies and . . . turned to fire a thousand brass vessels that glinted through the throng" (255). The "life-giving Sun-God" usurps the role of formal deities (255). "Pure and kind and innocent," Benares' sunlight is also virtuously Marian, bestowing favors and answering prayers (255). Like the star that leads the Magi to the stable in Bethlehem, the "blazing sunlight" sends Bhagwati to her resting spot where she finds the baby girl (258). Borden's apotheosis of Benares prefigures modernist depictions of the city and urban living as a source of unconventional beauty.

The following month, Borden had a second piece of short fiction published in *The Atlantic Monthly*. Told from the point of view of a young American tourist visiting India with her aunt and uncle, "Mr. John's Miss Best" is a colonialist character sketch of two opposite personalities. Miss Helen Best, an American religious student and writer, lives in a Zenana mission in southern India, attended by her Indian manservant, Mr. John.

Miss Best is an enigma. Although of mature years, she appears as an innocent, timid, and helpless girl; she speaks in the voice of a “happy child” and wears “a white dress . . . like a nightgown” (399, 397). In India because she believes it to be “a nice place to write a book on the Universal Religion,” Miss Best nonetheless avoids the temples because she dislikes encounters with the “heathen life” (400). She possesses a great number of books, but has not read them: “I just look through them . . . and find out what’s in them by handling them.” She proudly shows her guests the manuscript she has been working on for five years: “I am really beginning,” she tells the confused company looking at a table covered with neat stacks of pages (401). Miss Best is a caricature of Westerners in India: simple-minded, lacking self-sufficiency, and engaged in a never-ending ideological pursuit that appears devoid of substantive value.

Mr. John’s character perpetuates colonial stereotypes; the native Indian is depicted as a nineteenth-century noble savage. He presents a “magnificent” physical specimen: “[T]he uncovered parts of his compact, well-formed body shone like burnished bronze.” The visitors patronizingly note his “spotless white muslin,” “control and self-respect,” and “straight and immaculate [posture] beside the ragged driver” in the carriage. Borden portrays his relationship with Miss Best as that of a Mammy figure in the American slave-owning tradition, with a gendered slant: “He guarded his little mistress as jealously as if she were his own child, and he revered her solitude as only an Indian can reverence the mute inactivity of the ascetic.” His combination of awesome respect, “disinterested faithfulness,” and protective servitude exaggerate his differences from his mistress’s pale, slight form, practical helplessness, and “unbalanced” mind (401).

Publication of these stories was a watershed event for Borden. Writing gave her life direction, a focus for her restless energy, an outlet for expressing herself, and a self-definition she would embrace for the rest of her life. It fulfilled her belief that she had “something vital to do here—to make my life tell for eternity.” From the young woman who flippantly reported her occupation as “Society” on her passport application in 1907, to the wife who listed “none” in response to the same question when accompanying her husband in 1909, by 1911 Borden consistently gave her occupation as “Author” (“Passport Application”; “G D Mary Bouden Turner”; “Mary Bowen Turner”). For the next five decades, excepting World War II, Borden never stopped writing and publishing.

Over the next few years the young family remained rootless, dividing their time among Europe, India, and the United States. They rented houses for a few months at a time in the fashionable London neighborhood of Mayfair and the English countryside, took long vacations in France, and spent months visiting Borden’s family in Maine and Turner’s family in Scotland, between trips back to Lahore. While Turner’s various missionary assignments contributed to their roving existence, the couple’s delay in settling down may also be attributed to Borden’s resistance to “put down roots and deny her wish for adventure” (Egremont 20).

During this peripatetic period Borden began writing her first full-length novel, “working on it for five or six hours everyday [*sic*] even though she was eight months pregnant” (qtd. in Kittle 304). She finished it in July 1910, just a month before the birth of her daughter Catherine. When her friend Elizabeth Cole Fleming visited that year, Borden let her read the manuscript. “She says I will recognize most of the characters and part of it is her own experience of course,” [Fleming] writes. “She feels a bit nervous

about having it made known. Of course that is awkward, but one cannot write *real* things unless part of the tale be *real*” (qtd. in Kittle 305). It is unclear from Fleming’s letter how closely she is quoting Borden in the last sentence above. The writer’s italicized emphasis echoes Borden’s collegiate insistence on pursuing “the real things of experience” to “write something real and therefore worth while [*sic*]” (“The College Attitude” 187).

The Mistress of Kingdoms; or Smoking Flax, written under the pseudonym Bridget Maclagan, was published in 1912 by Duckworth. This relatively young firm, founded by Gerald Duckworth in 1898, also published novels by John Galsworthy, D.H. Lawrence, Evelyn Waugh, and Virginia Woolf. *The Mistress of Kingdoms* was published in Canada by Bell and Cockburn in 1913. It was never published in the United States.

The Mistress of Kingdoms is a female bildungsroman that traces the psychological and moral development of a young American heiress, Barbara Witherow, during the opening decade of the twentieth century. The narrative commences with the death of Barbara’s father while she is a student at a boarding school outside of New York City and follows her as she attends college, travels the globe, marries, and becomes a mother. As Fleming notes, many of the characters and events described in Borden’s novel mirror events and people from the author’s life. Like her heroine, Borden experienced the death of her father while attending boarding school in New York, developed a contentious relationship with her mother owing to religious differences, graduated from a prestigious women’s college, embarked on a post-graduation world tour during which she met and married a Scottish missionary, and lived in India as a missionary’s wife.

The book is notable for Borden’s characterization of place and the colonialist attitude embodied in the narrative. India, the setting for the middle third of the novel, is

described as a sweltering, squalid, impoverished country in which swirling dust, shimmering heat, and teeming multitudes create a relentless cacophony of sensual bombardment. The poverty, filth, famine, and disease obscure the country's exotic and sensual beauty, leaving Barbara longing for Western society. "I need the world, and I am shut away from the world. I need beauty, and there is no beauty here," she cries to her husband (228). Barbara finds what she is seeking when she returns to France: "Paris smiled through a million lights; smiled lightly, alluring to a hundred pleasures; smiled indulgently, to soothe one's bruised self-respect; smiled mysteriously, promising the renewal of old, intoxicating relationships . . ." (231). Barbara's decision to return to India with her husband marks the completion of her transition from girl to woman.

The Mistress of Kingdoms received scant and mixed reviews. A cautious endorsement in *The Pall Mall Gazette* calls it "an agreeably written novel, deserving if not clamouring to be read" (Pendennis). A review in *Truth* calls it "a very unusual book," "brilliantly written," and notes Borden's "keen, original observation" (Advertisement 27 Nov. 1912). Another reviewer, acknowledging the book's "purple patches," and guessing at Borden's inexperience as a writer,⁷ nonetheless recommends it as an "exceptionally clever attempt" that will "gratify the most all-exacting class of reader" ("Short Notices").

Later in life, Borden admitted that she was embarrassed by the book:

I have a dim recollection of my first novel. It was published under a different name, and I remember it because the publisher asked permission to republish it under the name of Mary Borden after the appearance of *Jane Our Stranger*. I reread it and refused. It was, as I recall, in some sense autobiographical. I refused to acknowledge it because it was a very bad novel. ("Personal Experience" 89)

⁷ See also G. Robertson, Review of *The Mistress of Kingdoms*; "Some Recent Fiction: The Dangers of Culture" in *The Dominion*.

Regrets about her first novel would later lead Borden to prohibit her daughter Joyce from publishing her own writing at a young age (Conway 27).

In 1912, Borden was introduced to E. M. Forster when he visited Lahore at the invitation of Malcolm Darling, a British civil servant in India. Forster was much taken with Borden's husband Turner, writing to his mother, Alice Clara Forster: "The missionary was so nice: quite the most charming man I have met there. He knows Indian life much better than the civilians, and was most sympathetic, and full of fun" (qtd. in Lago and Furbank 150). Borden must not have made much of an impression on Forster at the time, as he repeatedly refers to her only as the "American heiress" (qtd. in Lago and Furbank 156). Yet the two had much in common. Like Borden, Forster was the recipient of a large inheritance that provided an income which supported his education, extensive travel, and early literary career. Borden was likely familiar with Forster's early novels, *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905), *A Room with a View* (1908), and *Howard's End* (1910), which combine romance and domestic conflicts with critiques of English society. These themes, and Forster's use of foreign settings to provide a foil for the United Kingdom, would be features of Borden's writing well into the 1920s.

Borden followed her debut novel a year later with *Collision*, a narrative that explores the clash of British and Indian cultures in the Punjab Province of the Indian Empire during the British Raj. This book was also published by Duckworth in the United Kingdom under the name Bridget Maclagan. *Collision* was one of a growing sub-genre of colonial fiction popular at the beginning of the twentieth century. Engagement with the imperial theme aimed to familiarize readers with colonial life and naturalize colonial rule. Novelization of sensitive topics, such as interracial contact or imperial legitimization,

allowed for the exploration of unsettling issues within a context of narrative stability and security. *Collision* describes settings, customs, and characters unfamiliar to most of Borden's audience, but would have resonated with readers eager to experience exotic locales and encounter native characters from the safety of their sitting rooms.

Although Borden takes some risks in her presentation of racial, cultural, and gender issues, many of the characters and scenic descriptions perpetuate colonial stereotypes that were widely accepted at the time. A heterogeneous cast of characters, British and Indian men and women from across the social strata, portray the rising tensions between these cultures. Her narrative challenges conventional western attitudes about the superiority of Anglo-American culture, women's roles, and racial inequality. These progressive ideals are moderated through plot contrivances or character developments that adhere to Anglo cultural norms, preventing any radical interpretation of her novel.

In the book, antagonism between the British representatives and the Indians erupts into violence at the Mela, a combination of fair, festival, and pilgrimage. The Provincial British Commissioner, Colonel Digby, is the target of an assassination attempt by a group of Indian nationalists; the bullet kills his Indian servant, Samuel, instead. The players in the drama diverge from conventional colonial roles: Benjamin Trotter, a former British MP with a vague administrative position in India, is revealed as an anti-government conspirator in league with the nationalists, while Trotter's Indian manservant, Gopi Chand, emerges as a spy employed by the British secret service. Two members of Digby's social circle, Bobbie Concannon, a British canal builder, and Imogen Daunt, a wealthy American socialite and suffragette, are unwittingly manipulated into assisting the

collaborators with their plans. A prominent Indian women's advocate, Mrs. Badri Nath, is imprisoned for her role in the scheme, along with her husband, a well-respected newspaper editor. Borden's narrative assigns guilt without regard to race, finding fault with westerners and easterners alike; neither women nor the innocent remains untouched.

The narrative offers little hope for reconciliation or even compromise between the races. At the end, women and men are relegated to their separate spheres of influence, and dark-skinned natives continue to languish in subjugation to the white colonialists. Imogen's marriage proposal to Dr. Choula tests these boundaries, but the Indian's rejection reinforces the rigid roles that each must inhabit. "You are English and I am Indian. . . . Your blood is white, mine black, the mixture would be coffee colour—just a disgusting misstatement to make you writhe" (272). Middlebrow readers provoked or titillated by the Englishwoman's progressive suggestion would have been relieved that the status quo remained fixedly in place.

Like Borden's previous novel, *Collision* contains startling descriptions of impoverished, famine-stricken India and its inhabitants, juxtaposed with passages of nearly-suffocating sensory vibrancy. In Borden's India, "there is always a crowd, and a riot of colour, and the vague mingled uproar of voices and wheels, and temple bells and sheep . . ." (50-51). Glimpses of life and vitality are overshadowed by unrelenting and oppressive heat, dust, filth, odors, and flies that emphasize the barrenness of life. One American character concludes: "Nothing had any point. There was no life in it at all, no purpose. The bazaar just ended in a ditch. Emaciated whitish dogs lay there covered with flies" (252-53). This Western point of view extends to descriptions of the native population as "desultory beggars . . . dirty, sticky babies," "miserable beings crouched

upon the floor,” “shrivelled [*sic*], deformed little scrap[s] of humanity,” “as dry and hard and unknowable as the earthen field outside the village, that . . . turned a withered but expressionless face to the sky” (52, 54, 56, 253).

A malevolent miasma infects the subcontinent in *Collision*. An “eternal, vicious weariness. It lies like a pall over the children of India. . . . No creed, no ambition is any good. Buddhism and Hinduism and Christianity . . . they wouldn’t last. They can’t last in India. They all become depraved” (61-62). Colonel Digby sees in the “oriental soul . . . weird passions and slippery meaningless sins like stingless snakes . . . a great tangled snarl of men and powers and uncontrollable happenings; and . . . dust and heat and dark sweating faces and some blood and more dust and more heat” (160). In Borden’s depiction of India, physical filth and want become entwined with a bleak, pervasive spiritual corruption that crosses all divides and from which there is no salvation.

As did her first novel, *Collision* received mixed reviews. A critic for *The Times Literary Supplement* lists it “among the best novels about India” for Borden’s storytelling virtuosity (qtd. in Advertisement for Duckworth 24 July 1913).⁸ An enthusiastic review in *The Sketch* calls the book an “arresting” page-turner, citing Borden’s “delightful” characters, particularly the “remarkable study of feminine modernity” in the character of Imogen (Review of *Collision*). *The Spectator* reviewer criticizes the novel’s “modern trick of giving no explanations and merely making allusions” as “carried to excess,” but admits that “the story is decidedly original, and only just misses being very well handled” (Review of *Collision*).⁹ Borden was not happier with her second novel any more than her

⁸ See also “Quality of Current Fiction” in *The Nation*.

⁹ See also George Robertson.

first. “My first two novels were published under another name,” she confided in an interview in 1925, “and were so bad that they have been lost in limbo and will never be resurrected” (qtd. in McCommon).

1913 was a year of challenges and changes for Borden. In March, her younger brother William, a graduate of Yale and Princeton Theological Seminary, contracted cerebral meningitis in Cairo, Egypt, while en route to a missionary posting in China. Borden was at his side when he died just a few weeks later (Mrs. H. Taylor 258). William’s death may have been another factor in Borden’s increasing disenchantment with missionary work. The Turner family left India for the last time in late 1913 and settled in the Mayfair district of London, where Borden energetically pursued the extravagant entertaining and avant-garde interests that would become a feature of her life. Although she was a young wife, the mother of two toddlers, and busy launching her literary career, in rapid succession she also adopted the personae of Park Lane hostess, activist, patroness of the arts, and philanthropist. Despite her husband’s frequent absences for travel to religious missions across Europe, Borden maintained an active social life in London, entertaining frequently and associating with socialites, writers, and artists.

This was also a period of awakening political awareness for Borden. In the autumn, she joined a gathering of several hundred suffragettes outside the House of Commons. According to Borden, the women were armed with stones they intended to throw at the windows of His Majesty’s Government Offices. As they moved in small groups down Whitehall, Borden successfully targeted the window of Lloyd George, then Chancellor of the Exchequer. She was arrested and held at the Bow Street Police Station for five days until her husband paid her fine of twenty-five shillings, at which point she

returned home “in disgrace.” Reflecting on the episode later, Borden admits to “half-hearted” participation: “I was not a genuinely militant suffragette. Had I believed with passionate ardour in the cause of women’s rights, I would have scorned the protective masculine arm and loathed myself for accepting it” (*Technique* 126, 127, 125).¹⁰ Borden would likely agree that she was a “reluctant feminist,” exhibiting a pattern of moderate action in support of progressive causes throughout her life. (H. Hutchinson, *War* 97).

Borden was far more interested in the arts than in politics at this time, and used her considerable wealth to underwrite a variety of artistic and literary projects. A series of plays which she financed for Norman McKinnel at the Vaudeville Theater, a successful and well-known West End theatre on the Strand in the City of Westminster, included a theatrical version of her second novel, *Collision*.

Collision opened on October 1, 1913, with McKinnel in the lead role. Borden received writing credit under her pseudonym, Bridget Maclagan. The play was not a success and closed on October 17, 1913, after only four performances (“End”). Reviews praise the actors for their “excellently acted,” “brilliant,” and “eloquent” performances (“Theatres”), but criticize Borden’s writing. “Miss Maclagan seems to have no notion of form, and the emotional content of her play—sandwiched between slabs of ideas about India—is merely silly,” one critic writes, while another describes the drama as “difficult to comprehend” (“Play”; “Theatres”).¹¹ In an interview after the play closed, Borden blamed the English audiences for their lack of education:

It was said that I showed impertinence in writing on Anglo-Indian conditions. For five years I lived in Punjab, where my husband was an educator, and I feel privileged to write as I did. At Vassar I studied the drama technically and I have

¹⁰ References to *The Technique of Marriage* are to the Heinemann edition unless noted otherwise.

¹¹ See also “Incoherent Play” in *The Standard*; “New Plays” in *The Times*.

good groundwork for play construction. America is foremost, in matters of education . . . nothing here approaches it. (qtd. in “Girl’s Play”)

Borden would return repeatedly to the mode of international comparison, contrasting American, British, and French society and culture in her fiction and non-fiction writing. In a newspaper interview years later, Borden alludes to the production of *Collision* when explaining the difference between writing a play and writing a novel:

I had a play produced in London several years ago. I think writing a play is great fun. There is something exciting about it, for the mere writing is only the beginning. With a novel it is so different; that is your very own; but with a play so many different things have to be done to it before it goes public. The producer, the stage manager and the actors all have an influence on it. (qtd. in McCommon)

Borden cultivated a literary circle of friendships with influential and modernist writers and artists that included E. M. Forster, Ford Madox Hueffer,¹² Violet Hunt, George Bernard Shaw, Ezra Pound, and T.S. Eliot. Even so, her connections to the Modernists are difficult to trace with any certitude, for although she appears briefly in numerous memoirs and letters, in none of them does she emerge as a fully developed literary presence. Snippets of recollections portray Borden as a bold, intense, sociable, generous, and ambitious woman with boundless energy and money.

In *Return to Yesterday*, Ford Madox Ford, who considered Borden “a novelist of really great gifts and authenticity” (417), relates a charming story about Borden’s approach to London society in the spring of 1914:

Earlier in the season London had been startled by an invitation running: YOU ARE INVITED TO DINNER AT THE PALL MALL RESTAURANT TO CELEBRATE ONE OF THE WEDDINGS OF MARY QUEEN OF SCOTS. No one knew who had issued the invitation. But a great many people went and we met every one that we knew and a great many people that we were glad to know. The dinner was admirable, the wines exceedingly well selected. Still we had no

¹² Ford Madox Ford was christened Ford Hermann Hueffer, and called himself Ford Madox Hueffer until changing his name by deed poll in 1919.

idea who were our hosts and hostesses. Suddenly a delightfully dainty little blonde lady escorted by an extraordinarily humorous looking red-headed Scotsman was on a little dais making a little speech with a strong Chicagoan intonation. She said:

“Friends. Today is my birthday. I was in London and lonely. I wanted you all to dine with me. But I knew you would none of you dine with me if I said ‘Please come and dine with Mary Borden Turner on her birthday.’ So I looked in the calendar and found it was the wedding anniversary of another Mary.”

The gentleman who had escorted her burst into laughter. He was the husband of that delightful person. Mrs. Turner immediately became an extremely popular London hostess. (413-14)

E. M. Forster, who met the Turners during a trip to India in 1912, held a very different opinion, describing Borden as “most languid and peevish” upon meeting her again in London. In his letters, he is critical of both Borden’s social ambitions and her literary prowess pursued at the cost of Turner’s career:

He was a most ardent missionary, and has given up all that his wife may have a literary & social career in England, and it is evident she cannot rise high in either. She is an American millionairess, who tries to buy her way. Her novel *The Mistress of Kingdoms* is rather good, and contains an unvarnished portrait of herself. (qtd. in Lago and Furbank 211)

Through this literary circle, Borden met the modernist artist and poet Percy Wyndham Lewis in the spring of 1914. During the century’s second decade, Lewis was becoming well known as a visual artist, writer, and leading art politician of the avant-garde, as well as for a coterie of women who patronized the arts. In his memoir, *Blasting and Bombardiering*, Lewis describes meeting Borden:

Amongst the people I came across immediately before the War, who were not of Mayfair, or in any case not the standard fashionable articles, was a very attractive American, of the name of Mrs. Turner. . . . [She] is best known as Mary Borden, which was her maiden name. The attractive freshness of the New World, and of a classless community, cut her out in that bogus Eighteenth Century Mayfair décor, as a vivid silhouette. (60)

Although pregnant with her third child, Borden was captivated by Lewis and commissioned him to paint to a series of wall panels for her Park Lane house, giving him

a free hand with the design and the overall “decorative scheme” (O’Keeffe 167-68).

Lewis later exhibited two of the six pictures, *Two Shafts—Man and Woman*, at the Vorticist Exhibition at the Doré Gallery on June 10, 1915. At the same time, they began an intense, short-lived, affair. Borden was infatuated, and writes to him:

You make everyone else seem flat, just as your pictures make other pictures look dull. . . . It doesn’t matter does it, whether I understand your technique or not as long as I adore you, not too stupidly? . . . I am happy with that delicious “malaise” that comes when one is obsessed by another personality. . . . (qtd. in O’Keeffe 158-59)

Lewis felt Borden “was not ‘primitive’ enough,” and “accused her of vanity, of having an absurd fascination for bohemia while living a life of luxury in Mayfair” (Egremont 20).

By July, Borden and Lewis were quarreling: “You hurt me. I can’t go on like this. You must be considerate and human,” she complained after he invited her to a party in London where he got drunk and left before seeing her: “I could love you madly and give you pleasure if you’d take just a little trouble to be courteous.” Borden broke off their intimacy in a letter sent from her London hotel:

Something ugly, unpleasant has grown up suddenly out of our intercourse. Two odourless acids mixed, may make a bad smell. We get on each other’s nerves. We are bored with each other. We offend each other. . . . Let us abandon this attempted intimacy and take refuge in a more gentle formality. . . . (qtd. in O’Keeffe 159)

In August 1914, the last weekend before the United Kingdom’s declaration of war, the Turners hosted a house party at Charterhall, their summer country house in the Scotland Borders just south of the Berwickshire county town of Duns. The party included Ford Madox Hueffer, Violet Hunt, E. M. Forster, and Wyndham Lewis (Ford 416). Years later, Ford recalled these last days of peace before the outbreak of war in Europe as a “paradise soon to be lost” (qtd. in O’Keeffe 161). “Duns Manor was delightful,” he

writes in *Return to Yesterday*, “the turf of the Scottish lawns was like close, fine carpeting and the soft Scottish sunshine and the soft Scottish showers did the heart good. . . . We sat on the lawns in the sunlight and people read aloud” (416).

Eventually politics intruded on the idyllic scene. As the group discussed the impending war in Europe, Ford recalls Borden’s assertion that the United Kingdom would not enter the conflict. “Mrs. Turner was emphatic: she seemed very sure of her ground. I remember admiring her political sagacity. . . . ‘England has a Liberal Government. A Liberal Government cannot declare war . . . ’” (qtd. in Lewis 62). Lewis joined the conversation on Borden’s side: “Of course it can’t. Liberal governments can’t go to war. That would not be liberal. That would be conservative” (Lewis 63). Lewis fictionalized this episode in “The Countryhouse Party, Scotland,” one of his “Cattleman” stories which remained unpublished in his lifetime, before recording it in *Blasting and Bombardiering* (Saunders, *Ford* 605). Both Borden and Lewis would be proved wrong within hours. The days of leisure and languor rapidly ended for all of them.

This milestone would alter Borden’s life and writing. She never abandoned the intellectual curiosity instilled in her during her youth; her Midwestern roots, distrust of organized religion, close relationship with her father, and immersion in experiential writing informed her works for decades. As shown, Borden’s first published pieces rely on traditional literary modes, probe boundaries of moral convention, and indicate her early exploration of modern literary techniques. Mostly, they draw directly from the author’s own experiences. This aspect of her writing would remain a fixture throughout her life: as these experiences changed in the future, so would her writing.

Chapter 2

“SOME SORT OF EFFECT”¹³: CREATING MODERNISM IN WORLD WAR I

The United Kingdom's entry into the war against Germany in August 1914 precipitated sweeping changes for Borden. Her personal life was upturned by events as she dedicated herself to establishing and running a front line-hospital, and her encounters in the war zone led to rapid and startling changes to her writing. These shifts first became evident in her personal letters, and then intensified in poems and prose pieces that she composed at the front, some of which were published in *The English Review*. Chapter 2 explores Borden's experiences during the war and shows how her written reactions resulted in the creation of a unique, modernist voice.

The family reacted quickly at the outset of the war. Turner enlisted in the London Scottish Territorial Regiment and was sent to France as an interpreter. Borden had her third daughter, Mary, on November 29, 1914, in London. Shortly afterwards, she signed up with the London committee of the French Red Cross, agreeing to go to Dunkirk, Belgium, where nurses were urgently needed to assist with a typhoid epidemic. She extricated herself from any remaining attachment to Lewis, informing him that she could no longer afford to stage the artwork she had commissioned because “every penny I’ve got is going into my hospital” (O’Keeffe 168, qtd. in O’Keeffe 170). Although Borden honored her promise to pay for the paintings, their relationship ended acrimoniously.

Leaving her daughters and new infant in the care of nannies and household staff in London, in January 1915, Borden travelled to the hospital in Dunkirk, bringing two nurses at her own expense. The French health service was overwhelmed by casualties

¹³ Forster, qtd. in Lago and Furbank 239.

already numbering over half a million. Borden found herself in “a place of nightmare” at the makeshift hospital, set up in a rundown casino. Her description, preserved in her World War II autobiography, *Journey Down a Blind Alley*, indicates the modernist technique she would develop in the course of her wartime writing:

The sick lay helpless under the great tarnished chandeliers of the gaming rooms, the rows of dingy beds were reflected to infinity in the vast gilded mirrors. There were no nurses until we arrived and nothing to nurse with; no feeding cups, no urinals, no bedpans. Even the dying must crawl out of bed and sit on open pails. The wind howled up the beach beyond the great windows but the stench in the rooms made one vomit. I would run every so often behind my screen to be sick, go for a moment to one of the broken panes in the glass veranda to breathe the fresh salt air from the sea, then hurry back to that dim purgatory of gaunt heads, imploring eyes, and clutching hands. (7)

Thus “almost by accident” did Borden find herself embarking on an “adventure” that would indelibly alter her personal life and reorient her writing from domestic novels of literary realism into experimental modernist poetry and prose pieces (*Journey* 4).

Moved by her nursing experiences in Dunkirk, Borden wrote to Marshal Joseph Joffre, the French Commander-in-Chief, offering to equip and manage a mobile surgical field hospital of a hundred beds (*Journey* 8). Borden’s proposal included unusual conditions: the hospital would be a cooperative Anglo-French unit under command of the Eighth French Army, but she demanded recognition as *directrice* “with absolute authority over all women employed in the hospital,” including recruiting British and American nurses (*Journey* 8). At the outset, Borden viewed her hospital as “a glorious opportunity to make the connection between some of those of my own country who are willing to help and those of this stricken land who are so sorely in need” (“Vassar Alumna” 6). The unique multi-national configuration of her hospital, operating under combined military

and civilian oversight was made more remarkable in that a woman was in charge of day-to-day operations.

Borden's plans, as reported in *The New York Times*, were for a military field hospital that would "move with the army," comprising portable wooden huts accommodating 120 beds, "sterilizing apparatus, X-ray apparatus, operating table, and surgical instruments" ("American Girl"). In addition to spending her own money, she appealed to friends across the Atlantic in the United States: "I have now become so familiar with the great need that I cannot rest from the effort to meet it, not only through my own exertions, but through the interest that I hope to arouse from this appeal." Borden estimated that the hospital installation would cost \$20,000 with \$10,000 required for monthly operating expenses. "The army is to pay the running expenses and I myself have pledged 100 pounds per month towards the installation. This amount is but a small part of the sum needed" ("Vassar Alumna" 6).¹⁴ During the fundraising campaign, Borden temporarily operated her hospital out of an old building in Dunkirk about three miles behind the front, recruiting her visiting younger brother, John, as an ambulance driver ("British and French").

In the spring of 1915, Borden and Turner relocated their permanent home and their daughters from London to Paris. The move benefitted them financially by allowing them to take advantage of France's favorable tax treatment of Borden's American investments and enabling her to raise funds for her hospital by relinquishing the lease on the house in Mayfair and selling off those furnishings (Conway 43). While preparing her hospital, Borden continued to entertain at their residence on Bois de Boulogne. More

¹⁴ See also "American Nurse" in *Detroit Free Press*.

modest than her London soirees, her evenings nonetheless were worth mentioning. In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Gertrude Stein records that “it was very pleasant going to dinner” at the Borden-Turner residence as it was one of the few with sufficient coal to keep the house heated. Passages in Stein’s book indicate that the women were close, and that Borden visited her rue de Fleurs salon on multiple occasions: “Mary Borden was very Chicago and Gertrude Stein was immensely interested in her . . .” (170).

After Turner, now an officer in the British Intelligence Department, was deployed and Borden left for Belgium with her hospital, their daughters Joyce and Catherine, aged 5 and 4, and infant Mary, were left in the care of Mrs. Harrison, a long-time Borden family employee, and household staff (Conway 60). Turner and Borden would arrange to meet at their Paris home and he visited her at her hospital when possible (Egremont 60).

In July 1915, Borden’s unit, l’Hôpital Chirurgical Mobile No. 1, commenced operations as a mobile surgery in a field near Rousbrugge, in Flanders, Belgium (Borden, “Hôpital Mobile No. 1”). The unit was initially staffed with twelve nurses from Britain, Australia, New Zealand, and America; it would end the war with fifty, almost half of whom were French (Borden, *Journey* 8). The unit would operate in various locations on the Western Front until the end of the war in 1918. Throughout 1915, it remained behind the line between Dunkirk and Ypres, treating British and French soldiers too seriously wounded to make the six-hour trip from the trenches to Dunkirk (Conway 42). Later, Borden established two larger hospitals, both identified as l’Hôpital d’Evacuation. The first of these, five kilometers behind the trenches of the front lines, at Bray-sur-Somme, France, opened in the autumn of 1916, and the second, at Chemin des Dames during the Nivelle offensive, began operating in the spring of 1917 (Borden, “Hôpital Mobile No.

1”]; Borden, *Journey* 8-9). The unit was forced to relocate twice after sustaining direct hits from enemy shells (Borden, “Hôpital Mobile No. 1”]; Hallet, *Nurse Writers* 55). In recognition of her heroic service during World War I, Borden was awarded the French Legion of Honor and Croix de Guerre with palm, the latter personally presented to her at her hospital by Charles de Gaulle (“Chicago Woman”; Egremont 62).

Several years after the war, during an interview to promote her latest novel in Chicago, Borden summed up her World War I experience modestly:

I was living in Paris when the war came and I equipped a field hospital with the French Army. I worked there myself and it was the most marvelous experience, for I was at the front the whole time. Several times the hospital was damaged by shell fire, and once one of my nurses was badly wounded. (qtd. in McCommon)

The reality of Borden’s experience was much more dramatic and traumatic than conveyed in these few sentences. Untrained, Borden had to quickly learn how to run a hospital as well as nursing basics, such as giving injections and assisting at operations: “My nurses told me what to do and I did it to the best of my ability” (*Journey* 7).

Operating so close to the front lines, the hospital environment often mirrored that experienced by the troops. “[S]urrounded by seas of yellow mud,” Borden recalls, “I can still hear the thunder of the guns, the endless rumble of the trucks passing our flimsy hospital gate, and smell the smell of gas gangrene. . . .” This multi-sensual assault did not stop at the hospital walls. It presented itself directly to her in the form of dying men, which took a heavy toll. “I see myself sitting in my cubicle with sodden feet on my iron stove. My apron is stained with mud and blood; I am too tired to take it off. My feet are burning lumps,” Borden writes in her autobiography: “I have been on duty thirty-six hours and am become a sleepwalker, an automaton . . . (*Journey* 8, 8, 9). Later, she will

use these experiences when composing a series of prose pieces and poems published in *The English Review*, and collected in her book, *The Forbidden Zone*.

Borden became an increasingly prolific correspondent during the war. She embarked upon a steady stream of letter writing from her locations behind the front lines in Belgium, particularly targeted toward readers in her home country, the United States. War-related reports of her experiences with her surgical unit behind the front lines in Belgium were published in *Brooklyn Life* and *The Vassar Miscellany* in 1915 and 1916. She had a two-fold purpose in providing first-hand accounts of the war theater: to raise awareness of the war in the United States and to secure additional funds for her hospital.

Borden began her correspondence shortly after arriving in Dunkirk in 1915 with the intention of appealing for the sympathy of readers in the United States, a country which had not yet entered the war. Her letters are unsparing:

The brilliance and beauty of Dunkirk is a sham. The forests of ships locked in the deep still harbours mean starvation for fishermen. Those splendid hurrying figures in the Place Jean Bart are bent upon the business of killing, and the imposing Hotels along the Place are houses, not of pleasure, but of death and disease. ("Vassar Alumna" 5)¹⁵

Borden provides specifics about the work she is doing in Dunkirk, but devotes most of her letter to updating her correspondent on her hospital's progress and outstanding needs for money, supplies, and support.

After her hospital was established and had begun treating casualties, Borden's letters, framed in social niceties and superficially optimistic in tone, grew increasingly graphic. They began to exhibit qualities of what would come to be recognized as modernist literature. "Our first patient arrived two days ago," Borden writes to the Vassar

¹⁵ See also "American Nurse" in *Detroit Free Press*.

War Relief Committee in July 1915: “Until that moment the hospital seemed unreal, a toy village, and exposition, a dream—, but all at once it began to function, the machinery began to move, the doctors, nurses and orderlies took up their appointed work” (“News”). Her contradictory depictions of the hospital as an innocent, illusory site and the team members as insensate mechanical gears are ways she characterized the deeply disturbing and destabilizing aspects of modern warfare in her published wartime writings.

Later in the letter, Borden describes how the war has altered her perception of reality in a long passage prescient of her fictive war accounts to follow:

Last night was a beautiful moonlight night. . . . An infinite peace seemed to surround our little village of huts. The air was soft and the lights in the wards gave one that feeling of homeliness [*sic*] that lighted windows of the night always give. The sound of cannon seemed unreal, and even the flares that lit up the sky, flares from the French and German trenches, seemed more like pleasant fireworks than signs of battle. An ambulance came in at the gate. Three exhausted men covered with mud were carried in. Their clothes were torn and stained with blood, they groaned and looked at one strangely and writhed on the beds where the “brancardiers” laid them. Only a few yards away this business of killing and mutilating was going on. All the world became incredible, the moonlight and the silvery meadows a silly mockery. The agony of the men was the only reality and the sound of cannonading was the growling reminder that this would go on and on and on. (“News”)

This passage shows the beginnings of the modernist mode that would saturate Borden’s wartime writing. She would refine the use of impressionistic imagery, language of commerce to describe war and soldiers, ironic collusion of beauty and trauma, and an emerging sense of futility and despair in her poems and prose pieces about the war.

Concurrent with establishing her hospital, Borden continued her literary career. She completed an original play, *The Faulconbridge Scandal*, in 1915, and was also working on finishing her third novel. *The Romantic Woman*, was published by Constable in the United Kingdom in 1916. The novel, which opens in Chicago in 1915, relates the

tangled relationships amongst the novel's protagonist, Joan Fairfax, a Chicago heiress who marries into the British aristocracy, her husband, and a set of childhood friends.

In the novel, Borden uses the war as a means of resolving the protagonist's marital problems. Joan credits the war with changing her life because it has reconciled her to her philandering husband, who has returned from the war deeply damaged. "I am ashamed to say it, . . ." Joan confesses, "I am ashamed of being in debt to the greatest horror of all time for my own peace of mind. I am ashamed to admit that the war has done something good for us. . . . It's an awful thing to think that the tragedy of millions has been a blessing to me, but it is true" (16). Ambivalence about the war, and its effects on both soldiers and noncombatants, is a prominent modernist fixture of Borden's writing.

In content and form, *The Romantic Woman* closely parallels *The Mistress of Kingdoms* and *Collision*. The book's action, spread across the United Kingdom, the United States, and India, focuses on domestic, social, and cultural conflicts. As in Borden's previous novels, it is hard to discern the line between autobiography and fiction. In a front-page review in the *Chicago Sunday Tribune* critic Burton Roscoe claims that *The Romantic Woman* is a "thinly disguised" critique of Chicago society "so intimate in its revelations, and so trenchantly critical of Chicago society that it will probably cause a vast amount of discussion" (1). An early biographer of Borden, Anice Page Cooper, claims that much of the material in *The Romantic Woman* was drawn from the author's own experiences, identifying the heroine's father as "an excellent picture" of Borden's father, and asserting that the childhood scenes in the book are "largely biographical" (148). The most interesting character in the novel is the vorticist poet

Joseph, whose quasi-romantic, quasi-patronage relationship with the heroine hints at the pre-war dalliance that Borden carried on with Lewis.

In *The Romantic Woman*, Borden shifts attention from the East-West tension that plays a prominent role in her first two novels, to the clash of American and Anglo cultures. Emergent themes, which will become staples of her fiction, include conflicts among different communities, the role of the outsider, and the struggle of individuals trapped in conventional social and domestic arrangements. In *The Romantic Woman*, Borden is equally critical of the Chicago upper-classes for pretensions, the “new world” for its elevation of consumerism and showy behavior, and the traditions of the staid upper British class society. A critic writing in *The Nation* reads the tensions in the novel as a reflection of modern disillusionment with romance and convention arising out of the cultural and social differences between generations and nations (“The Great Adventure”). Although Borden appears intent on contrasting idealistic American notions of self-reliant success with the blasé sophistication of the British, by confining her subject to the realm of the indolent and self-absorbed upper classes on both shores her attempt deteriorates into maudlin sentimentalism bordering on cynicism.

The Romantic Woman displays the beginnings of Borden’s shift from literary realism toward experimentation with modernism. Michael Sadler, the eminent British historian, educationalist, and founder of the avant-garde modernist cultural organization, the Leeds Art Club, praises Borden’s innovative writing in *The Romantic Woman*:

[It is] the first piece of genuine Cubism in writing I have yet encountered. Across that dinner table at Saracens’ the uneasy spirits of the men and women present blend into a haze of flickering conflict. But analyse the texture closely and it is composed of myriad intersecting touches, hard, nervous, brightly coloured. The style glitters. . . .

The constant jar of personalities the effect of sudden noise, the ache of mutual misunderstanding—it is these vividly-felt antagonisms that the story of the Romantic Woman is composed. (“Young Novel” 79-80)

Sadler evaluates Borden’s novel against other recent books, including James Joyce’s *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*, and finds them all wanting in comparison: “The author is mistress of her style and tempers language and syntax to the changes in her plot. She never cubes for cubings sake” (“Young Novel” 79).

The most evident modernist features in the book are Borden’s manipulation of time and use of stream of consciousness. She eschews temporal linearity, choosing begin her narrative by abruptly dropping her reader into a dinner conversation which is occurring at a date far advanced in the novel’s timeline without any character introductions or background explanation. Only through careful reconstruction and repeated readings is the reader able to identify the characters and comprehend their conversation. A commendatory review in *The Sketch* recommends that the reader begin at the second chapter, as beginning with the first “will only be time wasted in wild guessing” (“Concerning New Novels”). The book’s fragmented and “splatchcocked” construction is faulted as an “uncomfortable irritation” in a review in *The Times Literary Supplement* (“List of New Books and Reprints”).

These modernist techniques converge in the opening pages of the novel at a dinner party, related by the narrator, Jane Fairfax, in retrospect. Observing her guests, Jane suddenly sees them more vividly:

I remember quite distinctly the definite sensation conveyed by the almost audible click in my brain, as I looked up from my plate and as, in that instant, all the broken images that made up for me the impression of the dinner table, slid smoothly into a new pattern. The change was like the change worked by the turning of a kaleidoscope, and the people who came within range looked as peculiar as though I myself had stood on my head. . . . They all changed for me in

an instant, appeared strangely significant, and tremendously queer, as queer as ghosts and as significant as immortals, angels or devils. . . . [H]opelessly entangled in the meshes of the endless past and the more endless future. . . . It was as though all my life I had been dealing with the dried remains of these people, as though I had been living with a set of mummies, the remains of human beings I had known centuries before, and as if now we had suddenly been transported back to the time when they were alive. (8)

In this stream of consciousness narration, Jane fluidly changes tenses and moves seamlessly forward and backward in time among the present, the past, and the future. Her contradictory description of people as “ghosts,” “mummies,” “angels,” and “dried remains” conveys a lack of permanence or definition attached to either mortal or otherworldly existence. Paradoxically, Jane’s attempt to convey her newfound clarity reveals an ambiguous and convoluted train of thought.

Jane’s abstract ruminations on her thought process continue, then abruptly turn toward incongruently specific details of the dining scene, beginning with her plate:

I remember the very ordinary look of it, the bit of discoloured and decayed partridge, and ugly black part of the wing, lying in a little pool of gravy with a shred of lettuce mangled by my fork; and I remember the scarlet cuff of the footman’s coat as it came between my eyes and the white cloth while he removed the plate, good scarlet cloth woven on a Scotch loom, sold for three and six a yard, and worn by a well-trained arm. . . . (9)

As she considers each guest, Jane’s thoughts meander through past encounters and current entanglements, intermingling with her feelings and impressions. The cumulative effect is both dreamlike and jarring to the reader as the book’s narration proceeds disjointedly in time and subject. Borden’s technique transforms an otherwise-uninspired tale of love and infidelity—“hackneyed . . . done a thousand times,” her publisher’s agent wrote—into a vivid and modern piece of fiction (Sadleir, “Appreciation” 2).

As the war progressed, Borden expanded her experimentation with stylistic techniques. Her correspondence continues to intersperse friendly chatter—“Yesterday

was a warm sunny day so we carried the wounded out on the grass. . . . It was quite charming to see them in their gay dressing gowns, straw hats, Japanese umbrellas . . . as though they were children on a picnic” (11)—with intimate glimpses of surgery:

Two boys left us yesterday for the South of France. They came in two months ago, battered to pieces, in an apparently dying condition. Both were wounded in the head, arms and legs. Both had to have their legs amputated on arrival. One talked to me while lying on the stretcher in the operating room waiting for the things to be got ready. He was covered in bandages from head to foot. . . . While I cut away his clothes he talked to me as though we were in my drawing-room. Was I married, was my husband in the trenches? And as I hacked away at his coat with my scissors I wept. “Oh yes,” he said, “he knew the first thing they’d do would be to cut off his leg—he’d seen the pieces of it lying on the ground. There couldn’t be much of it left.” Poor child, he is only twenty. He has lost his leg and his left hand, but he and his comrade went away yesterday laughing and happy. (“From Mrs. Borden-Turner” 12)

While Borden carefully frames her letters as positive, encouraging missives, her casual insertion of graphic injuries into banal weather observations, and off-hand mention of the battlefield afford today’s reader a close look at the creation and evolution of modernist literature. In this same letter, Borden offers this description of her hospital grounds:

We have planted nasturtiums in borders in front of each hut and a hedge of sunflowers round the entire compound, and flower beds of pansies and forget-me-nots between the huts, so that it will all be charming a little later in the summer. It seems extraordinary that we are only seven miles from the trenches. It is so utterly peaceful. There is nothing to impress one with the horror of war except the pounding of the guns and the ambulances rolling into the yard with their terrible loads. (“From Mrs. Borden-Turner” 11-12)

Her composed acceptance that a well-tended garden be attended between performing surgical triage on battlefield victims is searingly ironic, yet superficially serene.

It is not clear whether Borden intends her letters to shock her readers or to solicit empathy and support for her hospital. “I do wish some of the friends who have helped us could come and see what we are doing,” Borden writes: “If they could only see the men as they come in, covered with mud and blood, writhing with pain,—scarcely recognizable

as human beings. . . . If they could only see I am sure they would realize what their help means” (“From Mrs. Borden-Turner” 12). If one of the indicators of literary modernism is to question the rational mind, Borden’s correspondence certainly qualifies; the abrupt juxtaposition of floral landscaping details with graphic descriptions of wounds and surgeries produces a surreal effect in which neither image appears based in reality.

The nurses at L’Hôpital Chirurgical Mobile No. 1 were closer to the battlefield than any other women, working on the most grievously wounded men brought in directly from the trenches. They witnessed horrific injuries, and carried out their duties while continually exposed to the German firing line. Borden reveals the appalling conditions they experienced in a letter appealing for assistance in *Brooklyn Life* in March 1917:

All day and often all night I am at work over dying and mutilated men. There is such a tremendous inflow of wounded that I can’t often sit down from 7 a.m. to midnight, except for a quick lunch and dinner. Impossible to tear one’s self away from the men who are crying for drink, whose blood is dripping in pools on the floor, to write letters. All the same, I *am* grateful, and I *do* appeal for more help.

The guns are pounding. An attack is announced for tonight. No one of all our staff of a hundred surgeons will go to bed. The struggle is ceaseless. An inflow of men covered with blood, men without faces, without arms, without legs, men raving in delirium, dying in your arms as you take off their clothes, and an outflow of men operated on who go into the interior to be nursed back to strength, and another outflow of the dead—the dead—

I can’t give you an idea of what it is like here, but the hospital looks like an American lumber town, a city of huts, and the guns beyond this hill sound like the waves of the sea, pounding—pounding—and the sky is a-whirr with aeroplanes, and, sometime, we are bombarded, and all the time troops and troops and more troops stream past. (qtd. in H. G. H.)

In three paragraphs, Borden conveys the brutal horror of the front-line hospital. Her modern mode of writing is shocking and unnerving in its unexpected poeticism, graphic war images, gender disruptions, and fragmentation of time and space. The manipulation of her subject, as she ricochets between her role as a nurse and the wounded men as fetishized body parts, contributes to the passage’s disorienting tone.

In her opening sentence, Borden presents herself as an angelic nurse. Clothed head to toe in white, untethered by time—"all day and often all night,"—she works "over" the corporal bodies of the "dying and mutilated men." Her description of the men as "mutilated" instead of a more decorous or less graphic adjective, such as "wounded" or "injured," signifies the violent and disfiguring damage done to them. She lulls the reader into complacency with prosaic discussions of long shifts and meal times, then, without transition, presents another gory image of blood "dripping in pools." The jarring effect of this sentence is a result of its multi-layered structure, which anticipates a third modifying clause about the men. Instead, Borden refocuses on herself, shifts from the gruesome hospital image to a point of social etiquette, and concludes with formal, polite niceties that emphasize her good manners.

An abrupt transition shifts attention to the mechanics of warfare in the second paragraph. The first four sentences are terse, staccato bursts of words, rhythmically iambic, mimicking the nighttime mortar attack in pace and intensity. Then, Borden breaks her cadence, moving her gaze back to her patients. This sentence, broken into short phrases by commas, runs on and on, disintegrating into repeated fragments, "the dead—the dead—," without final punctuation, an allusion to the seemingly endless stream of maimed men. Identified by their missing and damaged parts, "without faces, without arms, without legs," they are mechanized; their bodies, like military apparatuses, are processed as "outflow" either to be repaired, if possible, or discarded, if not.

The grotesque corporeal imagery in the second paragraph draws attention to the soldiers' bodies and heightens awareness of the gender difference between Borden's idealized femininity and the masculinity of her patients. She inserts a disconcerting

eroticism into the scene, implying sexual innuendo in the relationship between the nurses and the soldiers “dying in your arms as you take off their clothes.” By conspicuously denuding the wounded soldiers, Borden reminds her reader that these are men, not machines, who in other circumstances would be engaging in sexual activity when undressed in the arms of a woman. The phrase contains an echo of the orgasmic “little death,” which is unsettlingly ironic as presented in the context of war and life-threatening injuries. Borden’s position as a nurse ambiguously blurs her role as mother figure and potential sexual partner and inverts the conventional gender hierarchy by placing her in a position of superiority and control over the men in the hospital.

Borden then abandons the sexualized and intimate images of wounded men, drawing back in space to offer a panoramic vista of the hospital zone as “an American lumber town, a city of huts.” Despite ostensibly writing her letter while fatigued and under siege, Borden is careful to use descriptive language familiar to her American readers. In one long, intricate sentence, she compares the war zone to a construction site, the coastline, and a machine. Her language and syntax mirror the images of relentless bombardment with repetition—“pounding—pounding—,” the onomatopoeic “whirr” of airplanes, and, again, an unending surge of “troops and troops and more troops.”

The collective effect of Borden’s imagery and prosody fractures the literary realism known and expected by her readers, impressing them with the strange brutality of the war zone. Time and space, like her narrative, are fragmented and nonlinear. Norms of social correspondence are spliced with ghastly surgery scenes. Gender roles are subverted. Nurses and soldiers act, are treated, and appear to be automatons operating as

cogs in the machinery of war. Borden's published fiction from this period amplifies the modernist techniques and themes that first emerge in her personal letters and appeals.

Borden also used her correspondence with her English and American readers for political purposes, to foster solidarity among the nations of the Allied Forces. Mindful that her hospital was attached to a French, not a British, army, Borden's letters accentuate its multinational composition: "The Sisters are English-, Canadian-, and American-trained nurses, who have had the privilege to nurse among the French soldiers" ("Hôpital Mobile No. 1" 232).¹⁶ She offers fervent praise for the valor, manners, and self-sacrifice of the French soldiers: "What wonderful patience and endurance the French Poilus¹⁷ have always shown—there never were such patients. Never a murmur—always plucky and wonderfully cheerful . . ." ("Hôpital Mobile No. 1" 232). A profile of Borden in *Brooklyn Life* refers to "illustrations of the wonderful fortitude, patience, freedom from bitterness or hatred, and tender solicitude for their loved ones at home, of these desperately wounded and dying Frenchmen" in her letters. "Oh, these brave French 'poilus' with

¹⁶ Several nurses who worked for Borden at L'Hôpital Chirurgical Mobile No. 1 published war memoirs that include similarly horrifying descriptions. Ellen La Motte dedicated her collection of vignettes, *The Backwash of War*, "To Mary Borden-Turner; 'The Little Boss' to whom I owe my experience in the zone of the armies" (xi). La Motte's subtitle, *The Human Wreckage of the Battlefield as Witnessed by an American Hospital Nurse*, succinctly encapsulates the daily experiences of the nurses working in the frontline surgical hospital, and her sketches reiterate with clarity and simplicity many of the scenes and encounters described by Borden. Maud Mortimer, a New York society girl who served as a Voluntary Aid Detachment (V.A.D.) with Borden's hospital, published *A Green Tent in Flanders*, a self-illustrated diary running from December 1915 through March 1916. The letters of Agnes Warner, a Canadian nurse who became Borden's head nurse in her absence, were published anonymously without her knowledge in *My Beloved Poilus* in 1916. Warner's recollections "offer a homely and sympathetic perspective on the heroism of the hospital's French patients about whom Borden is pitying and La Motte scathing" (Hallett, *Nurse Writers* 51).

¹⁷ *Poilus* is an informal term for French World War I infantrymen. The literal translation, "hairy," derives from their customary thick whiskers. Borden uses the word in her writing as a term of endearment for the French soldiers she treats in her hospital.

their hope and their courage and their gratitude,” Borden writes: “Surely no comfort is too much for them; no effort to comfort them too great . . .” (qtd. in H. G. H.).

Borden expands on these themes in a series of modernist poems and semi-autobiographical prose sketches published by Austin Harrison in *The English Review* in 1916 and 1917. Although it is not known how Harrison obtained Borden’s work, a likely connection is Ford Madox Ford, a houseguest of the Turners on the weekend that war was declared: he was founder and editor of *The English Review* prior to Harrison’s tenure. During the war years, Harrison published many eyewitness accounts by female journalists and nurses, including those of May Sinclair. Borden’s are “the most artful depiction of the suffering in France and Belgium,” according to Harrison’s biographer (Vogeler 207). “Harrison’s claim as a modernist editor is enhanced by her contributions,” Vogeler concludes, “though it may be that their greatest appeal for him was her unflinching depiction of the agony of ordinary soldiers and war-battered civilians” (208). The war theater pieces published in *The English Review* were included in Borden’s 1929 collection *The Forbidden Zone*, although some were extensively revised in the interim.¹⁸

Borden’s first World War I fiction publications were a pair of sketches entitled “Bombardment” and “Rousbrugge”; they appeared together under the title “War Vignettes” in the July 1916 issue of *The English Review*. As with her novels, Borden signed these pieces as Bridget Maclagan. Both sketches, written while Borden’s unit was in Belgium, lambast the destructive forces of war, calling attention to the dehumanizing nature of mechanized modern warfare. In them, Borden maintains a distance from the

¹⁸ “Rousbrugge” was omitted.

subject, placing the narrator and the reader in the position of an outside observer as a witness to, but not intimately affected by the devastation.

Combining lyrical prose with modernist imagery, “Bombardment” describes an aerial attack on a city in which the airplane becomes a sentient source of terror, power, and beauty, while the residents are dehumanized:

[T]he sun rose, touching the aeroplane with gold, and the aeroplane laughed. It laughed at the convulsed face of the town, at the beach crawling with vermin, at the people swarming through the gates of the city along the white roads. It laughed at the great warships, moving out of the harbor, one by one in stately procession, the mouths of their guns gaping helplessly in their armoured sides. With a last flick of its glittering wings it darted downward, defiant, dodging the kisses of shrapnel, luring them, teasing them, playing; then, its message delivered, its sport being over, it flew up and away through the sunshine, golden, disdainful. (16)

Borden’s airplane is a disconcerting combination of anthropomorphized technology and ethereal beauty made more unnerving by its appearance as a heavenly body. Beneath it lies the city’s populace, stripped of individuality and humanity, helpless and panic-stricken. Powerful and destructive, the airplane’s threat is also sexual as it seduces the “gaping” guns of the warships; maneuvering overhead, “luring” and “teasing” the great ships into offering “kisses” before releasing, in an orgasmic allusion, its payload of bombs on the city. The conquest won, the airplane returns to its celestial position basking in the metaphoric and literal afterglow of the encounter, while below lies destruction and death. Borden’s imagery subverts the accepted position of humans at the top of Earth’s natural hierarchy and directly challenges prevalent theology by situating the airplane as a “golden” and malevolent god, akin to a Greek deity.

In a letter to Malcolm Darling, E. M. Forster grumbles that the sketch “contained more stuff than heat, stuff curiously disposed in metrical lengths. Quite three pages of the

prose ran into the rhythm of *Hiawatha*. . . . I cannot make out what she is up to, but then I never could. Some sort of effect is evidently intended” (qtd. in Lago and Furbank 239). Even for a writer at the forefront of the modernist movement, Borden’s poetic narrative was disconcertingly innovative.

Though taking a prose format, “Bombardment” contains many sentences which scan iambic, starting with the opening lines: “The wide, sweet heaven was filling with light. The perfect dome of night was changing into day. A million silver worlds dissolved from above the earth. The sun was about to rise in stillness. No wind stirred” (14). Borden achieves this poetic effect by using short, one and two-syllable words reinforced by short, end-stopped sentences—here, the spondaic “No wind stirred”—or employing comma breaks between dependent clauses in longer sentences. As Forster notes, these poetics create a curious effect, and the contrast between lulling and unadventurous metrical rhythm and the violence of the narrative is amplified to irony by Borden’s societally subversive imagery.

“Rousbrugge,” titled after the locale where Borden’s field hospital first operated, is a cynical sketch of a war-torn city which an Allied general is faulted for destroying economically. “All those Colonels, Majors, Captains, all that gallant blue and scarlet, all the noise, the grinding, shrieking, hooting motors, and the clinking of all that money, how could Rousbrugge keep its head? Well, it didn’t—” (18). Not as physically destructive as “Bombardment,” “Rousbrugge” is troubling in a psychological manner. Dehumanization becomes more personal and intimate: “The place has not been murdered as was Ypres, its showy sister—merely raped by its allies” (17). Borden draws out the metaphor of depravity in the character of Germaine, a “simple, kind,” rosy-cheeked beauty happy to

“go on with her scrubbing, singing” until the arrival of the army (19). Like the town, Germaine becomes a commodity, selling herself to the occupiers: “Later on I looked for Germaine. Found her up a narrow stairway—champagne bottles on the table—and I found she’d learned her lesson. Only officers admitted to the room . . .” (20). More realist than “Bombardment,” “Rousbrugge” includes features of the modernist mode such as the commodification of characters, including the town itself, and scathing irony derived from the self-inflicted damage caused by the city’s defending forces instead of by the enemy. Both pieces condemn the destructive forces of war, calling attention to the dehumanizing nature of mechanized modern warfare from the point of view of an outside observer.

Although the intensity of Borden’s writing implies otherwise, her life during the First World War did not revolve solely around her hospital. After publishing *The Romantic Woman* in 1916, Borden spent time in the autumn of 1917 trying to get her play, *The Faulconbridge Scandal*, produced in London (“Mrs. Turner Writes a Play”). There were domestic issues to attend to as well. Whenever possible, Borden travelled home from the front to see her daughters. In a letter to a member of the War Relief Committee at Vassar in July 1916, on the one-year anniversary of her hospital, Borden writes: “I am going home next week to be with the children at the seashore for a little while. Douglas is nowhere near me now. I don’t see him any more” (“More Letters” 8). Reasons for this were more complex than mere logistics.

While operating her hospital in Bray-sur-Somme in the summer of 1916, Borden met Captain (later Major General and KBE) Edward Louis Spears, then a British liaison officer with the French army commander.¹⁹ They met again in 1917 behind the Chemin

¹⁹ Prior to Anglicizing his name in 1918, it was spelled Spiers (Egremont 81).

des Dames during the Nivelle offensive, and struck up an intense correspondence which made clear that by April they were contriving “to meet as often as possible,” and that by May they had become lovers (Borden *Journey* 9; Egremont 61). Borden was hospitalized several times during their affair, first from a gangrene infection contracted at her hospital and then, in the summer of 1917, for surgeries likely related to an abortion (Conway 72). Turner visited during her recuperation, bringing their daughters with him; what reason he was given for her illness is unknown. Borden relates her unhappy reaction to Turner’s presence and Spears’s absence in a letter to Spears: “It is almost more than I can bear—not having you with me & not having the right to command your presence—our not having the right to be together” (qtd. in McGowan, ““Have””).²⁰

Throughout this period, Borden continued writing, more prolifically and intensely than ever. Her war literature became intimate and personal. The physical trauma and emotional horror she experienced while operating her surgical unit behind the front lines is poignantly portrayed in her poetry and prose. Her pieces depict the dreadful nature of modern warfare from the perspective of the nurses charged with caring for the most critically wounded and dying soldiers, and reveal the grotesque, banal, and dehumanizing effects of the battlefield in a disturbing and new form of literature. In addition to breaking with the conventions of romance and realism previously used in addressing the topic of war, Borden also crosses the tacit gender barrier that traditionally reserved this subject for male authors, bringing a new and complicating feminine perspective. Borden does this by

²⁰ The Postscript introduces unexplored primary sources, including Borden’s wartime correspondence with Spears. These materials raise new questions about the entanglement of sexual ecstasy and war trauma in Borden’s life and writing, and indicate that her relationship with Spears should be reevaluated as a significant catalyst for her literary creativity.

inserting herself—a woman—into the masculine war theater and by figuratively neutering the male soldiers who are the subjects of her works.

In August 1917, *The English Review* published three poems by Borden, “Where is Jehovah?”, “The Song of the Mud,” and “The Hill,” under the title “At the Somme: Under the Tricolour.” For the first time, Borden abandoned her pseudonym, Bridget MacLagan, in favor of her married name, Mary Borden-Turner. As the title of the grouping suggests, these poems were composed after Borden’s unit relocated from Belgium to France in 1917. In them, Borden expands on the themes of destruction and dehumanization evident in “Bombardment” and displays the power of modernist techniques to hone and amplify the horror of the war.

The free-verse poetic lamentation “Where is Jehovah?” displaces God and creates in his absence a landscape ravaged by armies and populated by a “host of men at the end of their strength, fighting death, fighting terror, with no one to worship” (97). Borden draws on the Psalmist tradition of complaint and alludes to several Biblical stories (Higonnet, “Great War” 130): “Here is a people pouring through a wilderness— / Here are armies camping in the desert— / Their little tents are like sheep flocking over the prairie—” (97). The poem anticipates the arrival of divine deliverance: “[T]he scene is set for His acting—a desert, a promised land, a nation in agony waiting—,” then reveals that “there are no more prophets to cry through the wilderness to comfort these people—” (99, 98). In this void, the manifestation of God’s omnipotent presence and vengeance through “his pet properties . . . the thunder, the lightning, the clouds and the fire” are assigned to armies: “The thunder is the thunder of their guns, and the lightning that runs along the horizon is the flare and the flash of the battle” (97, 98). In the absence of God,

the soldiers are forced to assume his authority: “They must look after themselves. / All the host of them . . . must stand up to meet the war” (98).

Borden subverts conventional authoritarianism by placing man in God’s position, and furthers the air of despair and hopelessness by repeatedly emphasizing the insignificance and powerlessness of each man: “He is so small in the landscape as to be almost invisible. We see him as a speck there— / He is dirty. He is tired. His stomach is empty— / He is stupid. His life has been stupid—” (99). The last line of “Where is Jehovah?” intensifies the contrast between God’s supposed omnipotence and man’s actual impotence in the face of war: “Jehovah’s not here— / There’s only a man standing, —quite still” (99). With deep irony, after pleas for the “God of the great drama” to come bringing thunder and lightning and “Pillars of Fire,” Borden sees only a solitary man, mutely motionless, unable to muster any response (99, 97). Stripped of name, voice, and action, he bears silent witness to the war.

Unlike the missing God and voiceless men, Borden endows the war and the battling armies with vigorous action and vast destructive power. They are able to create action where there was none—“Here is a land that was silent and desolate, suddenly covered with noise and confusion” (97)—and the force to move both heaven and earth: “With the sky cracking—” and “With the earth shaking—” (98). Under this onslaught the solitary soldier is expected to remain steadfast:

With the hills covered with fire and the valleys smoking, and few bare trees
spitting bullets, and the long roads like liquid torrents, rolling up with guns and
munitions and men, always men and more men, with these long roads rolling up
like a river to drown him and no way of escape. (98)

As well as conveying the futile plight of the soldier abandoned by God, these lines acknowledge his patience, strength, and endurance.

Borden's prosody reinforces her poem's tone of despair and her characterization of the lone soldier as besieged and defenseless against the assault of the war.

With all of the universe crushing upon him, rain, sun, cold, dark, death, coming
full on him.
With the men near him going mad, jabbering, bleeding, twisting,
With his comrade lying dead under his feet,
With the enemy beyond there, unseen, curious,
With eternity waiting, whispering to him through the noise of the cannon,
With the memory of his home haunting him, and the face of a woman who is
waiting,
With the soft echoes of his children's sweet laughter sounding, and shells bursting
with roars near him, but not drowning those voices,
He stands there. (98)

A long line of staccato, monosyllabic words quickly escalates through a litany of natural elements, "rain, sun, cold, dark, death," with a military cadence signaling the command that the technology of war possesses over nature. Borden's intentional conflation of physical wounds and mental trauma obscures which is the cause of death. The anaphora in these lines creates a driving rhythm that intensifies the emotion of the passage with each repetition. Longer, stretched lines slow the tempo and soften the heightened tension when the soldier contemplates home and loved ones. The eerie, otherworldly quality suggested by the "sweet laughter" of children that muffles the cannon's bombardment hints that the soldier has already passed from this world to another, metaphysical one. Perhaps he stands so unperturbed because he is already dead, if not in body, then in spirit.

Borden's second poem in the "At the Somme" triad, the elegiac "The Song of the Mud," evokes Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" in form and style, but in neither content nor mood. Her imitative free-verse catalogue ironically contradicts Whitman's optimistic and celebratory romanticism, mourning instead the destructive force of the mud of the

Somme battlefield. The poem opens with a lyrical description of the mud as beautiful, sexual, and powerful:

This is the song of the mud,
 The pale yellow glistening mud that covers the naked hills like satin,
 The grey gleaming silvery mud that is spread like enamel over the valleys,
 The frothing, squirting, spurting liquid mud that gurgles along the road-beds,

 The invincible, inexhaustible mud of the War Zone. (99)

Visually evocative language portrays the mud as a pretty painting, an image reinforced by the sing-song cadence of the poem's opening lines. This romantic, almost pastoral vision is distorted by the mud's hostility to man and nature, and the multiple ways it smothers life in the war zone. Disturbingly, Borden characterizes the mud as both inanimate—"satin" and "enamel"—and corporeally, orgasmically, alive—"frothing, squirting, spurting." The dichotomous combination of poetic language and flowing form with otherworldly inhabitants renders "The Song of the Mud" sublimely terrifying.

In Borden's observations the mud of the Somme is full of life, yet life-stopping; it possesses human attributes, yet defeats humanity by oozing over the men, their weapons, the armies, and the war. Instead of a foundation, it is quicksand. Here is the mud:

That spoils the working of motors and crawls into their secret parts,
 That spreads itself over the guns.
 That sucks the guns down and holds them fast in its slimy, voluminous lips,
 That has no respect for destruction and muzzles the bursting of shells,
 And slowly, softly, easily,
 Soaks up the fire, the noise, soaks up the energy and the courage,
 Soaks up the power of armies,
 Soaks up the battle— (100)

The poem's imagery becomes more distressing and cruelly ironic when Borden describes the intimate, suffocating effect of mud on the Allied soldiers:

Our men have gone down into it, sinking slowly, and struggling and slowly
 disappearing.

Our fine men, our brave, strong young men,
 Our glowing, red, shouting, brawny men,
 Slowly, inch by inch, they have gone down into it.
 Into its darkness, its thickness, its silence. (100)

She exposes the battlefield as a site of despair, where the most robust and courageous soldiers are subsumed by the ground upon which they have marched into war. There is no heroic engagement with the enemy. There is no excited action of combat. There is no honor or valor in their slow deaths or unmarked graves under the wet dirt of the Somme.

Borden's anthropomorphization of the mud provides the most disturbing imagery in the poem, particularly through the gross physicality and sexualization she attributes to it. The mud has a smothering, consuming orifice, "slimy, voluminous lips," a "mute, enormous mouth," and a "monstrous distended belly [that] reeks with the undigested dead" (100, 101, 100). Feminine attributes position the mud as the non-soldier, and intensify its unnatural presence and aberrant role on the battlefield. The "song" of the mud repeatedly "soaks," "spreads," "spoils," and "sucks": sibilant hissing that recalls the serpent and the Biblical story of another woman who ruined a garden for men. The concluding echo of the opening stanza, "beautiful, glistening golden mud that covers the hills like satin / The mysterious, gleaming silvery mud that is spread like enamel over the valleys" (101), appears sinister after the moist bodily imagery of the intervening lines. This is no painted landscape, it is a monstrous horror show.

"The Hill," the third poem included in Borden's "At the Somme" collection, describes a battlefield from a high vantage point. The narrator inserts herself directly into the poem, identifying as a viewer and reporter, a bold and irregular narrative choice. Because of her gender, Borden's proximity to the battlefield is unexpected, perhaps inappropriate, and certainly subversive. The strangeness of a woman as a battlefield

observer is reinforced in the absurd juxtaposition of uplifting and admiring adjectives in the poem's opening line: "From the top of the hill I looked down on the marvelous landscape of the war, the beautiful romantic landscape of the superb, exulting war" (101). She creates an impression of the landscape as sublimely flawed, using language descriptive of a painting or photograph, with words of shape, color, and form:

The crests of the wide surging hills were golden, and the red tents clustering on
their naked sides were like flowers in a shining desert of hills.
It was evening. The long shallow valley was bathed in blue shadow, and through
the shadow, as if swimming, I saw the armies moving. (101)

Borden's battlefield portraiture is ambiguous: is her impressionism a reflection of her feminine inability to find the language to describe the horror of war, or is it an effect intended to draw attention to the hollowness of the ideals of war as heroic and glorious? She complicates these questions when she appears to lean on gendered behavior tropes, admitting to being "dizzy with the marvelous spectacle of the war" (102). To contrast with the performance of war, Borden looks away from the vista, downward to "piles of rubbish, old shell-cases, and boots, and battered helmets" (102), reminding readers of the banal and intimate waste representative of the many lives destroyed by the war.

Borden concludes "The Hill" with a final allusion to the existential danger that the menacing, man-made destructive force of the war poses to the Earth: "The crests of the surging hills were still golden, and above the slumbering exultation of the prodigious war the fragile crescent of the new moon hung serene in the perfect sky" (102). Photographic images of natural, but ephemeral, beauty bracket an abstruse description of the war. As an adjective, "prodigious" carries an archaic, ominous tone that belies the benign and covertly angelic pose of "slumbering exultation." Repetition of these images from the poem's opening line, particularly the invocation of "exultation," makes a mockery of the

exaggerated and flowery language. Borden's hyperbole draws attention to the irony of her lines, reveals the monstrosity of the war, and conveys the vulnerability of the Earth, and perhaps the whole universe, to the actions of men taking place on the earth below. She amplifies her warning of "a curse crawling through the grave of our nation" and "invincible phantom armies" in "the deepening shadow of the valley" by suggesting that the steadfast and expectant moon may be a mirage (102).

Borden displays different aspects of her personal disillusionment and despair at the war and its effects in two pieces that appeared in *The English Review* at the end of 1917. "The Regiment," published in October 1917, uses collective groups of soldiers, townspeople, and officers to show the devastating effects of the war on a variety of constituencies. In "Unidentified," which appeared in the December 1917 issue, Borden's graphic imagery shows the destructive effects of war on individual soldiers and the nightmarish suffering that they bear, to little purpose. Recalling that Borden had been running her hospital behind the front lines for two years at this point, it is not surprising that her weariness and disillusionment with the ongoing war are more prominent in these pieces than in her earlier published works about the war.

In the short story "The Regiment," a battle-hardened regiment of French soldiers troops into a small town to watch a general decorate his officers. Steeped in irony and despair, the story refers to this ceremony as "the play." The men of the regiment, fatigued and suffering from fighting, are marched out of the trenches to serve as "the chorus" (350). Borden's elaborate characterization of the soldiers is a metaphor for the war:

And they were all deformed, and certainly their deformity was the deformity of the war. They were not misshapen in different ways. They were all misshapen in the same way. Each one was deformed like the next one. Each one had been twisted and bent in the same way. Each one carried the same burden that bowed

his back—the same knapsack, the same roll of blanket, the same flask, the same dangling box, the same gun. Each one dragged swollen feet in the same thick crusted boots. The same machine had twisted and bent them all. They did not look quite like men, and yet they were men. (“The Regiment” 343)

Borden’s poetically resonant prose scans as free verse in this passage. Each carefully measured sentence and phrase reverberates with similar cadences and metrical feet. Her insistent repetition of “each” and “same” reinforce the image of a regiment moving together as a single unit, the deformed and broken men more mechanical than human.

Borden isolates the men in “The Regiment” by introducing other groups of people as foils, including civilian townspeople and a group of military officers. None demonstrate any differentiating individuality; they are collective composites, like characters in a morality play. Strangers, they fall back on social conventions, affecting courteous manners and polite interest, but exhibiting little sincerity or enthusiasm.

The town said to the regiment:
 “You are strangers, but we know you; you come from war. You are welcome.”
 The regiment said to the town:
 “We have left our homes. You are kind, but we cannot stay here.”
 The group of officers said to the regiment:
 “You are soldiers. You are to be inspected by the General. We are officers. We shall receive decorations.” (346-47)

This is not a conversation: each group merely talks in turn without responding to or engaging with the others. The stilted, simplistic language of the dialog, and the direct, repetitive framing narration isolates each group, and places them in opposition.

Borden’s wartime writing is often classified as Imagist for its sharp clarity of visual images, or Cubist, because of the literary view she creates through multiple, simultaneous, and often contradictory perspectives. These styles and terms would have been familiar to Borden through her association with early artistic and literary innovators;

her experimentation with similarly unconventional techniques is not unexpected. For example, throughout the winter of 1916-1917, Borden was “very enthusiastic” about Gertrude Stein’s works, carrying her books back and forth with her as she travelled to the front (Stein 170). More than just a reader, Borden was interested in Stein’s avant-garde and experimental techniques as a writer, which she expresses in a letter to Stein:

In *Tender Buttons*, you are writing in pure code. I don’t know your cypher—I’m not in the secret—but I would like to have the key. Oh yes, I’ve an intense desire to possess the key. It seems to me that your treatment of subjects is more mysterious than that of painters such as the so-called cubists—because language is only partly writing, the rest is talking, and talking and writing upset each other in people’s minds. (qtd in H. Hutchinson, *War* 176)

Borden’s interest in clashing modes—writing and talking, for example—evolves in her wartime writing. The terse, disjointed, non-responsive dialog in “The Regiment” replicates the incoherencies and inconsistencies between spoken and written language. It exemplifies the variety of planes and angles of perception that are a feature of Cubism.

The most unsettling presence in “The Regiment” is that of a solitary nurse. In the town, she is characterized as a harlot masquerading as a nurse:

She was a passionate goddess dressed as a nun. She was a white, beautiful fraud branded with a red cross. Her shadowed eyes said to the regiment:
 “I came to the war to care for your wounds.”
 But the regiment said:
 “You are lying!”
 Her red mouth said to the officers:
 “I am here for you.”

 The presence of the woman was like a trembling current of delight reaching to the officers.
 To the regiment the woman was nothing but a lie, and the regiment was indifferent to her.
 To the town she was a strange thing, as fantastic as a peacock. (347-48)

Borden introduces the feminine figure of the nurse as “a confusing and libidinal mix of purity and animality” (Freedman 119). Here, she emits a cacophony of signals which are

interpreted “variously as repressed animal passion, sanctified self-sacrifice, mystery, flirtation and vain self-possession” (Ouditt 19). The fragmented ways in which the nurse is perceived reflects the many confusing and contradictory ways in which nurses involved in front line hospital work during the war saw themselves.

“Unidentified,” Borden’s final piece of war writing published in *The English Review*, is a poetic homage to the unknown French soldiers she witnessed fighting and suffering every day. This poem shows the deep respect Borden developed for these men as well as her growing sense of waste and futility. In this poem, she incorporates the techniques displayed in her earlier wartime writing, culminating in a modernist piece that starkly reflects the despair and turmoil roiling western society at this time. It opens with a call for attention from a legion of long-dead wielders of power and authority to serve as silent witnesses to the underserved fate of the unnamed soldier:

Look well at this man. Look!

 And in this vast resounding waste of death
 Be for him an unseen retinue,
 For he is going to die. (482-83)

Borden’s tone is indignant, shocked, and despairing. She directs her rage and horror at the predicament of the lowly soldier, who suffers appallingly during the war, and the seeming indifference shown toward him by those she holds responsible for this atrocious situation. “Some of you scorned this man,” she writes, accusing those in power of underestimating and, worse, abandoning their men: “It is too late to do him justice now” (484, 485). The heroism of these forsaken men arises out of their resolute will to persevere despite knowing that death is certain: “One blow—one moment more—and that man’s face will be a mass of matter, horrid slime—and little brittle bits— / He

knows— / He waits—” (485). Succinct, and seemingly offhand, grotesqueries such as these impress the reader with the banality of terror, injury, and death on the battlefield.

Borden’s intimate knowledge of life on the front lines in France and Belgium informs her descriptions of both the soldiers and their experiences in “Unidentified.” These she graphically depicts in terrifying fragments that immerse the reader in chaos and destruction. “Come back,” Borden calls to her ancient entourage:

Crowd up across the edges of the earth
Where the horizon like a red-hot wire writhes, smoking, underneath tremendous
blows.
Come up, come up across the quaking ground that gapes in sudden holes beneath
your feet—
Come fearlessly across the twisting field where bones of men stick through the
tortured mud. (483)

This hellish environment of the war zone, an unnatural panorama of industrialized and ravaged landscape strewn with the detritus of battle, is just one aspect of a world that Borden depicts in the midst of self-destruction:

The sky long since has fallen from its dome.
Terror let loose like a gigantic wind has torn it from the ceiling of the world
And it is flapping down in frantic shreds.
The earth, ages ago, leaped screaming up; out of the fastness of its ancient laws,
There is no centre now to hold it down;
It rolls and writhes, a shifting, tortured thing, a floating mass of matter, set adrift.
(484)

Nosheen Khan cites these lines in Borden’s “Unidentified” as the source of William Butler Yeats’s image of post-war anarchy in “The Second Coming,” composed in January 1919 and first published in *The Dial* and *The Nation* in November 1920 (“Mary Borden’s ‘Unidentified’” 21). In “Unidentified,” Borden describes the resultant chaos and disorder throughout the universe caused by the war: “There is no centre now to hold it down” (484). In “The Second Coming,” Yeats writes: “Things fall apart; the

centre cannot hold.” Khan explains that as Yeats had a “continuous relationship” with *The English Review*, it is “probable” that he read “Unidentified” in the December 1917 issue and “retained some memory of it which later surfaced in ‘The Second Coming’” (“Mary Borden’s ‘Unidentified’” 21). For both writers, the image of a world spinning out of control, and lacking either physical or metaphysical stability, provides a sublimely terrifying metaphor for their own sense of dislocation.

Against the impending collapse of the world, in “Unidentified” Borden repeatedly points to the solitary soldier who stands alone, defying governments, rulers, tradition, industrialization, and the natural world. Despite the futility of his position, she laments the way a nation looks to him alone to save the world; but she locates within him a singular essence of “self” which she declares sufficient to do just that:

It is his self you see—His self that does remember what he loved and what he
wanted, and what he never had—His self that can regret, that can reproach
his own self now—His self that gave its self, let loose its hold of all but
just its self—
Is that then nothing, just his naked self, inviolate; pinning down a shaking world
like a single nail that holds;
A single rivet driven down to hold a universe together— (485)

There is a veiled allusion to Jesus Christ in “His self that gave its self” and in the image of the driven nail. Unlike Jesus, Borden’s “Unidentified” soldier is doomed to a death both ignominious and anonymous: “Unfriended—Unrecognized—Unrewarded and Unknown” (486). There is no final redemption or salvation in “Unidentified,” just a solitary, grim, meaningless death in the mud of the Somme.

Borden composed other pieces about World War I and her experiences as a nurse which were never published. The poems “Escape,” “There is a Monster in the Valley,” and “Take Me Away From My Wounded Men,” and a Prologue to her collection of war

compositions reside in the Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center at Boston University, where Borden donated her papers in 1965. The pieces appear in holographic manuscripts of her wartime collection, *The Forbidden Zone*, but none appear in the book as published in 1929.²¹ These pieces affirm modernist and feminist interpretations of her World War I writing, and reveal levels of personal intimacy not found in those published.

In “There is a Monster in the Valley,” Borden presents the mechanical and technological aspects of modern warfare, expanding upon imagery found in other pieces, such as “Bombardment,” “The Regiment,” and “The Hill.” The poem adheres to a bare modicum of poetic structure, eschewing standardized meter, rhythm, rhyme. Stanzas are composed thematically, like paragraphs, and connected with a narrative thread. Juxtaposing guns, tanks, and airplanes with valleys, hills, and sky, she implores the reader to “Look. Listen,” and experience through multiple senses how the machines of war are destroying man and nature. In the poem, Borden’s “monster” is the army, and her strange “creatures” are the machines of war:

They are brown and green all over splotches
 They crouch in the sand as big as houses.
 Obscene crabs.
 And they move along on their stomachs
 Dragging themselves by their ears,
 Their great circling ears that go round and round like wheels.
 And they crush under their bellies,
 Whatever stands in their way.
 Men, houses, bushes trees.
 They are made so that their stomachs squash.

²¹ These pieces appear in early, holographic versions of the manuscript that do not yet contain the five stories that Borden states she wrote at the time of *The Forbidden Zone*’s publication in 1929. One of these early manuscripts bears a “censored” stamp, and Borden reports that her attempt to have the collection published in 1917 was rejected due to censorship issues. For these reasons, I believe the three poems and Prologue were written during the war period. Some of these pieces exist in multiple versions in the Mary Borden Collection. I selected the version that appears to be in the most finished format, i.e. choosing a version that incorporates holographic edits made to another, apparently earlier, version. The poems are in box 2, folder A. The Prologue is in box 1. None contain line or page numbers.

In this rendering of the army on the move, the mechanical apparatus of war subsumes and consumes the natural world, first as the ambiguous “creature,” then as the ominous “Monster.” In the final stanza, Borden extends the poem’s science-fiction blend of sentience and mechanization, suggesting that the army has assumed a god-like presence: “Forty slaves it has to feed it. / Forty men to wait upon it.” She completes the entity’s metamorphosis from machine to animate lifeform to supreme being by endowing it with speech: “They say that its voice is smooth and hard as iron and that when it speaks, houses in another land, crumble away, and trees in distant forests, fall crashing to the ground, and men of another race are blown to fragments and die cursing a foreign god.” This voice of the army is, of course, artillery and bombs, but the allusion to Biblical Old Testament stories of floods, earthquakes, and plagues, ensures that Borden’s readers understand her implication that the military has expanded beyond the control of the men who created it, acting outside of any earthly governance.

Of Borden’s unpublished wartime works, “Escape” and “Take Me Away from My Wounded Men” represent the most marked divergence from her pieces published in *The English Review*. These poems expose an intimate view of Borden’s personal, and highly feminized, reaction to the war not found in her published work. The first-person nurse-narrator of both poems forthrightly addresses her personal needs, wants, and desires, with little regard for the ramifications of her selfish gratification. In these poems, Borden’s concern shifts from universal despair for humanity and compassion for the suffering of individual soldiers to a self-centered preoccupation with her own well-being. It is difficult not to read these poems as semi-autobiographical, given knowledge of Borden’s role and activities during World War I. In them, battle fatigue drives the narrator to

descend Maslow's Hierarchy; she abandons higher level motivations, such as nursing, and seeks satisfaction of her more fundamental needs for intimacy, security, and sleep.

Both poems contain harsh sentiments and bald expressions of desire.

In "Escape," Borden addresses her unnamed lover, a military officer, imploring: "Steal an hour away from France and come with me." The narrator validates her longing by diminishing the value of the battlefield, the soldiers, and the war's purpose. In her embrace, she promises, he will find happiness, maternal safety, and sexual pleasure: "Together we will go, down and down / Into the wild sweet throbbing dream." In the poem's lyric and sensual final sentiment, she disregards and defies all societal norms:

Steal an hour away from France—
Where's the shame?
God won't care.
Leave your men and let them die in the mud—
Who will tell?
I so long to have you mine—
I would pay.
I would drink with my own lips all the blood that would stain if you came.

Borden mingles erotic innuendo with blood, a ubiquitous metaphor for injury, sacrament, femininity, and death. Her sexualization of the war mocks religion and the military, and shows a shocking female preference for carnal pleasure at the cost of soldiers' lives.

"Take Me Away from My Wounded Men" exhibits another facet of Borden's femininity through an exploration of the highly personal nature of the war fatigue she experienced as a front-line nurse. As in "Escape," the narrator pleads for time away, but here she seeks a break from the ceaseless demands of her patients in the hospital:

Their wounds gape at me—
Their stumps menace me—The bandaged faces grimace at me
Their death rattle curses me—Give me rest—Make me clean
I am stained—I am soiled—
I am streaked with their blood—

I am soaked with the odor of the oozing of their wounds.
 I am saturated with the poison of their poor festering wounds.
 I am poisoned—I'm infected—I shall never wash it off.

Relentless exposure to their injuries has harmed her; in acquiring her own wounds, the nurse becomes, like the injured men she tends, damaged. Like the soldiers in her sketch "Conspiracy," who cycle through injury, recovery, and reassignment, she identifies herself as another expendable commodity of the war machine. When, overwhelmed and tormented by her wounded charges, she begs for an hour of respite, no man is there to save her. The war has degenerated everyone, and each must save themselves.

The Prologue is the most personal of Borden's work written for, but not published in, *The Forbidden Zone*. In this long, free verse poem she directly addresses the French poilus, recollecting her shared war experiences with them. Much of the poem comprises a series of questions posed to the soldiers, seeking confirmation of her participation and empathy with them, and justifying her place among them. "Because I have shared the sufferings of France / I dare to claim her for my own," the Prologue begins: "Because I have shared your suffering / I dare to claim you for my own," it concludes. Borden lists the ways she has demonstrated her fidelity to the country and people of France. "I was with you," she repeats, challenging them to deny her actions:

Did I not wait on my knees for news of your successes?

 Did I not by day and night, fight to save you

 Did I not stay close beside you, hold you up and go out with you to the edge of
 the unknown?

 Did I not love you when you died?
 And when your poor weak broken bodies grew rigid in my arms,
 Did not my body comfort you?

The Prologue extends the romantic and sexual language of “Escape” and “Take Me Away from My Wounded Men,” by personifying France as “mistress to a hemisphere,” and naming the French soldiers and citizens “her favoured lovers.” “You shared the languor of her passions,” Borden writes, “And knew the secret of her subtle deep passions.” The erotic imagery becomes martial after the war begins:

I was with you when your manhood leapt to arms.
I was with you when your country dropped her languid silken mantle.
Flung aside her jeweled playthings
And of a sudden, clothed in armour,
Answered to the call of danger.

The “gallant warrior Queen” during the war, France is the “desolate, undaunted Queen of Nations” afterwards. Borden’s strong assertion of her “claim” to “own” France, combined with her emphatically declarative questions—“Did I not...?”—and her sexualization of France, lends a masculine element to Borden’s persona in the Prologue, and represents another form of gender subversion in her World War I writing.

Borden penned other romantic and erotic works which remained unpublished during this period, including a sonnet series, a lyric poem, and a dramatic vignette. The dramatic interlude, the songs, and several of the sonnets are among her papers at Boston University. The comprehensive series of sonnets, clearly written by Borden to Spears during their affair, are found in Spears’s papers in the Churchill Archives at Cambridge University (McGowan, “Have”). These pieces vary in style, subject, and quality. The dramatic piece, titled “Interlude,” and included in an early manuscript of *The Forbidden Zone*, is a lengthy, tedious, and trite back-and-forth conversation between an anonymous soldier and his lover over the course of an evening. The song, “Glad Knight,” follows a

traditional poetic format, with structured meter and rhyme and employing conventional chivalric conceits of ladies and knights.

“Sonnets to a Soldier” comprises nine poems, three of which are included in the early manuscript of *The Forbidden Zone*. This sonnet series is remarkable for the manner in which Borden depicts love and war as co-existent and the tension created between physical love and physical trauma. Working within the formal, conventional sonnet structure, Borden conveys many of the images and sentiments about the war, soldiers’ suffering, and her own battle fatigue that are present in her other war period writing as the background for her love affair. The nurse-narrator’s conflict between duty and love is reflected in the fragmented structure and imagery of the poems.²²

Borden’s affair with Spears remained a secret until the autumn of 1917, when Turner confronted Borden with an anonymous letter containing a romantic poem she had written to Spears (Egremont 64). After some prevarication, Borden confessed and asked Turner for a divorce, to which he reluctantly consented (Conway 86). In her letters to Spears, Borden expresses more certitude about her convictions than her hesitant actions implied: “I have done it because before God, I was born to be yours and you mine—and this is the only way to be true. . . . I destroy one life in order to create another—our life” (qtd. in McGowan, “‘Have’”). Divorce was still difficult to obtain in 1910s British society; divorcees of either sex suffered social ostracism. Although Turner wanted to wait until after the war, Borden successfully pressed for a quicker resolution. Their divorce hearing was held in Paris in early January 1918, becoming absolute eight weeks later.

²² Marcia Phillips McGowan presents a comprehensive study of Borden’s sonnets in the context of her developing relationship with Spears in “‘Have I No Sanctuary to Defend’: The Great War Sonnets of Mary Borden” in *War, Literature and the Arts*.

The dispute over custody of their three daughters would remain an unresolved source of tension until December 1921 (Egremont 66).

Immediately afterwards rumors began circulating in Paris that framed Borden as “the victim and [Spears] the villain”; he was accused of being a homewrecker, using Borden for her money, and forcing her to use drugs (Egremont 70). Borden’s reputation as a writer who cultivated a Bohemian coterie no doubt contributed to the gossip. The couple circumvented France’s required post-divorce waiting period by having the ceremony performed at the British consulate general in Paris on March 30. Religious rites were performed at the French Protestant Church Temple L’Etoile with both the American and British Ambassadors in attendance (“Mrs. Borden-Turner Weds”). Until her remarriage, Borden had managed to keep her divorce a secret from her mother, and Turner himself claimed that he only found out that it had been finalized by reading about her marriage in English newspapers (Conway 91).

Borden and Spears’s marriage brought closure to a period of intense passion and stress. Shortly afterward, World War I ended. The events of this era had subjected Borden to great physical dangers and intense psychological stresses which were expressed in her writing. Constant and intimate exposure to trauma was reflected in the increasingly experimental nature of her wartime compositions. The innovative poetic structures, narrative fragmentation, female perspective, gender confusion, ambiguity, distrust of technology, and sense of despair and disillusionment discussed in Chapter 2 remain prominent features of modernist literature today. For Borden, the genesis of this literary mode was inextricably bound with the emotions and experiences of the war.

Chapter 3

“CAMOUFLAGE”²³: BLENDING LITERARY REALISM

AND MODERNISM

The end of World War I offered a return to normalcy. Chapter 3 explores Borden’s new beginnings, both personally and professionally. She and Spears embarked on a relationship that was no longer secret nor conducted in the shadow of imminent danger. Borden became more politically astute, socially savvy, and increasingly confident as a public figure. She established herself as a writer whose works blend the domestic and societal drama of literary realism with modernist notions of fluidity of consciousness, temporal and spatial fragmentation, and destabilization of conventional authority. The books Borden wrote in the 1920s refer to World War I in limited, but significant ways that demonstrate her continued engagement with those experiences.

Following World War I, Borden and Spears were well positioned to enjoy civilian life; the British brigadier-general and his American heiress wife had a house on Rue Monsieur in Paris and an annual income of over £10,000 with which to support themselves (Egremont 94). During the Paris Peace Conference the couple “embarked upon tremendous social activity,” hosting parties, dinners, and receptions; illustrious guests included Winston Churchill, Lloyd George, John Maynard Keynes, Robert Cecil, Colonel House, Colonel (T. E.) Lawrence, Georges Mandel, Paul Valéry, Jean Cocteau, Henri Bernstein, Gertrude Stein, and Simone de Beauvoir (Egremont 83). Borden records entertaining a “colorful pageant” of company, comprising “soldiers and statesmen, artists

²³ The title of this chapter comes from Marguerite Fellows’s accusation that Borden’s publisher was attempting to “camouflage” *The Tortoise* as a romance.

and writers,” as well as “the fastidious ladies of quality” (*Journey* 10).²⁴ At the time, her three daughters were living with them. Although Borden would later recall these years as “the happiest of her life,” they were marked by some difficulties. Spears suffered from debilitating anxiety attacks that were a carryover from the war, and Turner renewed his claims for custody of the children. Borden’s divorce and her reputation as a writer who “moved among bohemians” were magnets for gossip—rumors about the invalidity of their marriage as well as her purported drug use persisted for years—and Turner used this as justification for his suit (Egremont 103, 70).

Unpopular in British diplomatic circles despite Churchill’s support, Spears resigned his commission in June 1919, citing war fatigue and nervous depression. This ended his role as Head of the Military Mission for Winston Churchill in Paris, although he was to keep the honorary rank of brigadier-general. Conscious of Borden’s feelings about Turner’s failure to earn money of his own, Spears started seeking out business opportunities, drawing on contacts in central and eastern Europe cultivated during the war to find investment opportunities and acquire corporate directorships (Egremont 86). He invested in a Rumanian bank and an oil company, and was appointed a director of the British Corporation of Mine and Steamship Owners in Russia (Egremont 91). In October, the former Director of Military Operations in Paris, Sir Frederick Maurice, passed through the city accompanied by his daughter, Nancy. Just nineteen years old at the time, Nancy had a good education and was a trained secretary, and she agreed to act as Spears’s personal secretary on a temporary basis. She would become indispensable to

²⁴ Borden wrote a novella about this period, *The Diary of Sir Peter Bottle, Serious Snob: Being a Faithful Rendering of Paris Gossip During the Peace Conference*, in 1921. It was never published. The holographic copy in the Mary Borden Collection at Boston University is too damaged to read.

Spears, remaining in the post for forty-two years and gradually “invading every aspect of his life” (Egremont 93).

Borden resumed her literary career with the republication of *The Romantic Woman* in the United States in 1920, at which time she also abandoned her pseudonym. From this point on she would be known professionally as Mary Borden, although she used Mrs. Spears, later Lady Spears, in her personal life. Borden never explained her purposeful and steadfast bifurcation of identity. She made no secret of it, invoking her position as Spears’s wife to establish credibility when discussing politics or business in interviews, readily using her title for public speaking engagements or fundraising activities, and signing her correspondence as Mary Spears.

Authors adopt pseudonyms for several reasons: to craft a separate literary persona, distance themselves from prior work, be taken seriously on a subject, or write about a topic that they might not otherwise be able to. For Borden, use of her maiden name may have provided some insulation, for both her and Spears, from the opinions, biographical details, and potentially-libelous third-person references embedded in her writing. Insistent use of her birth name, limited to her identity as an author, demonstrates a restrained autonomous self-determination and self-confidence, not unlike the “reluctant feminism” of her suffragette activities.

Upon republication, *The Romantic Woman* received compliments from both sides of the Atlantic. Michael Sadler²⁵ reprinted his 1916 review of the book, calling attention to the author’s cubist technique (“Appreciation” 2). An unattributed review in *The Nation* praises *The Romantic Woman* as “one of the very brilliant things in recent literature”:

²⁵ Sadler changed the spelling of his name from Sadleir in 1919.

The style has both dryness and coolness. These permit the author a frankness that . . . she sustains without a moment's loss of real dignity or spiritual poise. At its best that style has a quality like the bluish shimmer on steel. Aware of her romanticism, she yields to no eloquence of expression and writes with precision and sobriety. But always she conveys the richness, the distinction, and the vigor of an arresting character and mind. ("The Great Adventure")

In a long and enthusiastic review in *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Tod Robbins commends the novel as "truly remarkable," "exceptionally well written," and "extremely interesting and worth-while," recommending it as "one of the very best I have read this season . . . well worth a place in the library of a lover of literature."²⁶

Less favorable reviews overlook Borden's stylistic innovations in the novel, choosing to address Borden's characterizations of the upper classes. Author and literary critic H. W. Boynton calls *The Romantic Woman* a "diseased" book: "If you can find either constructive idea or positive personality in this book, I cannot; and therefore it remains for me . . . a string of anecdotes, and no more" (71-72).²⁷

The alteration in reception between 1916 and 1920 may be attributed to Borden's heightened name recognition and the acceptance of modernist literature by middlebrow readers and critics, both changes precipitated by World War I. By 1920, Borden had become a more recognized figure in both the United Kingdom and the United States. Her literary reputation had been enhanced by the publication of her wartime poems and sketches in the highbrow journal *The English Review*, providing her with unimpeachable modernist credentials. She had garnered much positive press while establishing and running her mobile hospital, adapting her tireless fundraising into a transatlantic publicity campaign during which pleas for donations were supplemented and then supplanted by

²⁶ See also F. H.; R. P.; Review of *The Romantic Woman* in *The New York Times*.

²⁷ See also Reely.

heartfelt and heartbreaking reports from the front lines. Her heroic efforts during the war were widely recognized by wealthy donors, politicians, and senior military officers from across Europe and the United States. Well-versed and practiced in the social arts, Borden cultivated these relationships after the war. Her marriage to a decorated career British officer who was personal friends with Winston Churchill,²⁸ among other foreign dignitaries, also boosted her social standing.

At the same time, World War I fundamentally altered the artistic landscape. Modernism, a niche experimental cultural form which was stirring in music, literature, and visual arts in the opening decades of the twentieth century, remained largely unknown to mass market audiences and was disdained by many critics prior to the war. The chaos and devastation of the war, including loss of life on an unprecedented scale and the industrialization of warfare, compelled writers and artists to find new forms of representations, new ways of expressing an experience that was shattering a continent. Some of these writers were journalists, soldiers, and nurses—individuals who had formerly defined the middlebrow tradition, as were the consumers of these new compositions. Middlebrow and modernism are often portrayed at odds with each other, but both categorizations blur edges, and after World War I there was more overlap and entanglement than defenders of either group would admit. Borden's writing provides a good example of this. Her poetic experimentation with form, abandonment of a fixed point of view in her narrative, and observation of humankind as deprived of humanity by the mechanization of progress are all features of the modernist movement. At the same time, Borden's reliance on traditional domestic and societal dramas peopled with a

²⁸ Churchill would be godfather to their son Michael, born in 1921.

narrow slice of upper-middle class characters combined with favorable critical reviews and commercial successes place her firmly within the middlebrow.

In 1921, Spears and Borden moved to London, where their son, Michael, was born on March 2. It was a difficult delivery that caused lasting health issues for Borden. Spears recorded events in his son's scrapbook: "[Borden] very nearly died after his birth & her life was despaired of for many hours. We only felt safe about her on the 6th March." Afterwards, the couple continued to entertain lavishly at their house on St. James Street and at a series of country houses; as well, they traveled abroad frequently. The tension of the ongoing custody suit hovered menacingly overhead, affecting Spears, Borden, and her daughters; accusations, counter-charges, and drama dragged out until Borden was awarded permanent custody at the end of 1921, though not without irrevocably damaging her relationship with Turner (Conway 111). And between Spears's extensive business travels across the continent, the couple's entertaining, and maintenance expenses for the houses in Paris and England, "the bills were mounting," according to Egremont, "too much even for [Borden's] fortune" (98). It was a stressful period for Borden, and so it is not surprising that she confided to her husband that she was alarmed at the way her writing had changed (Conway 98).

Borden's first post-war book was *The Tortoise*, published in the United States in August 1921. The book was never published in the United Kingdom. Set in England and France during World War I, *The Tortoise* explores the effects of war on a love triangle amongst a wealthy, high-ranking British government official, William B. Chudd; his beautiful wife, Helen; and a womanizing French aristocrat, Jocelyn de St. Criste. As with most of Borden's fiction writing, *The Tortoise* contains scenes, characters, and plot points

taken directly from the author's personal experiences. Her residences in London and Paris, and experiences running her surgical unit at the front in France emerge in similar settings. Promoted by Knopf as a romance rather than as a war drama, *The Tortoise* received mixed reviews that commend the novel's adherence to a strong, traditional moral code but criticize the book's overwrought emotional intensity. Modernist sections of the novel were mostly ignored by the critics ("Latest Works" 23).

At the novel's outset, Helen, just arrived home in England from a holiday in France, informs her husband that she intends to leave him for her French lover. In Paris, Jocelyn is called up for service with the French army, while in London, William, distraught over Helen's rejection, enlists in the military. Alone and despondent, Helen joins a friend as a nurse in a field surgical unit behind the lines on the Western Front. In contrast to Borden's real-life extramarital affair, in *The Tortoise* exposure to modern warfare disrupts the fictional love triangle, causing Helen to reevaluate her marriage. After William's release from a prison of war camp, the couple reconcile.

A dramatic shift in *The Tortoise* occurs in Part Four, when the plot moves from the cosmopolitan settings of London and Paris to the French evacuation hospital. This section reads like a separate book. Parts One, Two, Three, and Five are not atypical of contemporary middlebrow domestic dramas. Upper-class characters become embroiled in inappropriate romantic entanglements which resolve in a manner that preserves current moral codes, providing readers escapism with a whiff of safely avoided scandal.

Part Four of *The Tortoise* could be a completely different book. These passages, set in the field hospital in Picardy, France, in the midst of the fighting, contain vivid, modernist descriptions of the war. Borden uses fragmentation, shifting perspectives,

discontinuity of time, and mechanical imagery to create the atmosphere of violence, futility, and inhumanity reminiscent of her poems and sketches published in *The English Review*. In a description of the trenches, Borden bleakly conveys the dehumanizing nature of the battlefield: “A scar showed across the face of Europe . . . the men looked like beetles; struggling through debris, burroughing [*sic*] underground; crawling over the obstructing edge of the ditch and dropping in it” (186). To emphasize the universal despair and disillusionment of the war, she uses a confluence of multiple perceptions: “God in his silent heaven . . . saw masses of infinitesimally tiny corpses strew like dead flies . . . the politicians in London saw rows and rows of figures on sheets and sheets of paper. The soldier . . . saw what an insect can see” (187). These bleak images pervade Part Four, isolating it from the rest of the work.

The war effects the characters as well. Borden makes the brutality and trauma intimate and feminizes it by dramatizing the effect on Helen caused by the relentless stream of wounded men that pass through the surgical center: “It had been a question of becoming a machine or going mad” (198). Borden probes the psychological toll this choice took on nurses at the front using a similar conceit in her wartime writings. In *The Tortoise*, the inhumanity and horror depicted in this section contrast almost grotesquely with the melodramatic romance of the opening and closing parts of the book. The jarring discontinuity between the sections explains Borden’s concerns about her writing styles and the uneven reviews the book received.

Many reviewers seemed to be unsure how to handle the modernist section of the book, and so simply ignored it, focusing instead on the comfortable, predictable aspects of character, plot, and setting, and applauding Borden’s moral resolution. The reviewer

for *The New York Times* expresses satisfaction with the novel's plot conclusion in which Helen safely returns to the comfort of her English marriage, and congratulates Borden for adhering to tacit middle-class moral sensibilities:

The author deserves much credit for working out in an entirely wholesome way the ancient theme of the triangle. . . . The sudden declaration of war saves her from herself . . . she learns how transitory, how unsubstantial, how illusory, is the feeling that for a little while had gripped her heart and transformed her conception of the values of life. ("Latest Works" 24)

The Boston Daily Globe critic concurs that "much of the charm of the present book lies in its serene and beautiful ending" far from the dangers of the French ("Love Story" 5).²⁹

When critics did address the modernist section of *The Tortoise* most were positive. Marguerite Fellows calls *The Tortoise* "a first-class war-book," deriding the publisher's advertising campaign to "camouflage" the book as a romance. Borden's portrayal of the war provides "convincing" and "unsurpassed war pictures . . . in a series of vivid, unforgettable scenes," she writes. A review in *The Washington Herald* calls scenes in *The Tortoise* "one of the most stirring pieces of war writing that we have read in a long time." Noting Borden's own wartime nursing experience, the reviewer explains: "[She] writes most simply and with greatest conviction about those things which she has experienced most vividly herself" ("War Chapter's Salvation"). A few reviews were less commendatory of the novel's war section. For example, the *Boston Transcript* critic accuses Borden of using her femininity to trivialize the war. "The European war was too devastating and terrible to be used as a peg upon which shallow-minded women may hang their unsatisfied souls, even in fiction" (Review of *The Tortoise*).

²⁹ See also "Uneasy Hearts" in *The Independent and the Weekly Review*.

In 1922, Spears was elected to Parliament for the National Liberal Party at Loughborough. As an MP, Spears showed an independent streak; he took up individual “lost causes,” advocated for reforms, and openly criticized the foreign service (Egremont 104-05). In the December 1923 election, Spears retained his seat as a National Liberal. Concurrent with his political career, he partnered with a Finnish businessman to establish trading links in the newly founded republic of Czechoslovakia. In Prague, he met Eduard Benes, the Prime Minister; Jan Masaryk, son of the President; and officials at the Czech Finance Ministry (Egremont 98).

Their separate careers kept Spears and Borden busy and often away from home. Spears’s parliamentary work was unremitting, and took priority, often to the neglect of Borden. During the election of 1923, Spears campaigned for himself as well as for Churchill. He was often accompanied by the “increasingly important” Maurice, who was becoming an invasive presence in their marriage (Egremont 101). Borden felt that the stress was changing Spears, and was hurt by his “bad temper and increasing remoteness.” She often followed up an intensive day of writing by attending evening engagements without her husband (Conway 122).

In October 1923, Borden’s first best-selling novel, *Jane—Our Stranger*, was by published by Alfred A. Knopf in United States; it was released in early 1924 by William Heinemann in the United Kingdom. The novel experienced a “tremendous vogue” (McCommon). Favorable reviews compared Borden’s writing to that of Willa Cather, Charles Dickens, William Thackeray, Charlotte Bronte, Henry James, Edith Wharton, and Anne Douglas Sedgewick, catapulting her into illustrious company (“*Jane—Our Stranger Tells*”; Thomas; Overton 42; Conway 116). The American edition went through

four printings by 1924 and was reissued in a new edition in 1925; new impressions of the British edition were released monthly during the early part of 1924 and a new edition was issued in 1926. The success of *Jane—Our Stranger* prompted Heinemann to arrange for the release of a new edition of Borden's third novel, *The Romantic Woman*, in the United Kingdom in 1924.³⁰ The novel's popularity in the United Kingdom led to inquiries about the author Mary Borden, identifying her as Mrs. Spears, the wife of Brigadier-General Edward Spears.³¹

Borden's reflective essay, "A Self-Review of *Jane, Our Stranger*" [*sic*] in *The Sketch*, coincided with the British publication of her novel. In it, she admits feeling a "certain antagonism" toward the book because of its success: "For me *Jane, Our Stranger*" [*sic*] . . . has ceased to be a book. It is a commercial commodity. I feel as if I had invented some new kind of soap or toothpaste." The novel's characters developed in unintended ways; she feels that "the result was too sensational and too violent for art." These sentiments reveal the author's discomfort with the public consumption of writing, and an awareness of the distinction between popular, middlebrow fiction and literary art.

Jane—Our Stranger is the story of an international *mésalliance* in the early twentieth century. Typical of Borden's early literary realism, the novel emphasizes the contrasts between European and American societies. Exploration of cultural and social differences among France, England, and the United States would become an increasingly important theme for Borden in her fiction, essays, and speaking engagements. In *Jane—*

³⁰ *The Romantic Woman* was published first in the United Kingdom in 1916 under Borden's pseudonym, Bridget MacLagan. It was subsequently published in the United States in 1920 with Mary Borden acknowledged as the author.

³¹ Borden had used her given name on *The Romantic Woman* and *The Tortoise* in the United States in 1920 and 1921, respectively.

Our Stranger Borden explores differences between the national characters of France and the United States through the novel's protagonist, Jane Carpenter, a young heiress born and raised in the American Midwest town of St. Mary's Plains. Jane represents "the flagpole of American idealism, with a banner floating over her head, casting a shadow of purity, honesty, fear of God, written on it in shining letters" (50).

Raised by a strict, puritanical aunt, Jane's sheltered, wholesome, and nearly-idyllic life is interrupted shortly after she reaches her majority, when her mother reappears and takes her to France to unite her fortune with the title of the notoriously decadent but impoverished Philibert, Marquis de Joigny. His aristocratic family disparage and disdain the American for her lack of sophistication and foreign manners. Innocent, socially naïve, and romantically idealistic, she becomes immersed in a world of ritual and artifice in which she, as an American, will never be accepted.

Bound to France by their daughter, Jane tolerates Philibert's immoral and irresponsible behavior, ruinous spending, and adulterous relationships for decades, spending twenty years in Paris. Though her innate morality recoils from her husband's faithlessness and the rottenness of the aristocratic society, Jane works hard to integrate and present herself as a sophisticated woman. The only alteration she truly undergoes is learning how to conceal her true feelings and emotions, and to convey the opposite appearance. Her daughter's eager acceptance of an arranged marriage to a degenerate with money and a title completes Jane's disillusionment with France.

At the end of the novel, Jane returns to the United States and takes refuge in her hometown. Here, Jane finds comfort in shared beliefs in "love, democracy, the greatness of the American people, and the equality of the sexes" (228). The United States has a

populace that she judges to be morally superior, and offers a spiritual experience that brings her closer to a universal godliness. In part, this is a repudiation of the urban areas that dominate the environment in Paris.

In the American landscape, Jane discovers a peaceful and spiritual connection to nature akin to religion, experiencing it as a prelude or introduction to a cosmic force. Her mind-expanding encounters evoke nineteenth-century Transcendentalism:

The forest spread away, further and further away, endlessly, countless trees murmuring a strong chant under the wide sky, stretching beyond the edge of the mind's compass, as far as one could think, as far as one's soul could reach out, the forest, the sky, the water, calm, untroubled, eternal. (235)

Later, Jane travels across America by train, a journey that excites and stimulates her:

“[R]ushing across the earth at such speed, suspended in space as if on a giant bridge, and the vast, the immense, the overwhelming panorama flying endlessly past . . . the steel jaws of stations engulfing you . . . a steel comet cushioned inside . . . whirling through space, a blaze of flying light” (239). The force of machinery and technology is frantically paced and at odds with nature and humanity. Unlike the earlier pastoral and naturalist vision of America, this imagery is powerful and modernist. Borden's passages integrate these impressions, proposing the country as an ideal civilization in which the benefits of both mitigate the shortcomings or dangers of either.

The book's conventional concern is the triumph of morality over debauchery. Though the primary contrast is that of the moral, American Jane set against the worldly, immoral Philibert, there are two female foils to Jane. One of her best childhood friends is an orphaned neighbor, Fan, who cannot wait to become an adult: “I'm going to have a good time. You wait. You just wait. I tell you I'm going to have a good time—fun, fun, fun” (37). Fan marries Prince Ivanoff, a professional card player. They live dangerously,

alternating between indulgent luxury and financial destitution. Eventually, as befitting a woman who cavorts and succumbs to the temptations of money, gambling, drugs, and love affairs, Fan wanes and dies.

Jane's other counterpart is Philibert's Italian lover Bianca, "priestess of the occult powers of darkness" (112), "one of the most alluring villains in contemporary fiction" (Cooper 150). Bianca and Philibert's long-standing affair predates Jane's arrival in France. Like Fan, Bianca suffers from maladies brought on by excessive drinking and drug use, and dies alone in a hotel in a foreign country. The anonymous "Bookman" describes these contrasts as a "comedy of manners" in which the reader could "savour the instinctively moral attitude directed not towards the immoral, but the amoral," praising Borden's "delicate humor of the ironist . . . [and] sophistication of outlook."

In her self-review of the book in *The Sketch*, Borden explains that public interpretations of the book as bearing a moral theme of "virtue rewarded in the end" differ from her intent and understanding of the character Jane: "One's fate hangs by a thread. There is in one's life a moment that passes unnoticed—a small, invisible moment when over some seemingly trivial point one takes, without knowing it, a decision that has immense and lasting consequences." The clichéd reference is to the Sword of Damocles, and an allusion to the peril facing those in positions of power. In Borden's interpretation, random and insignificant events usurp the role of deterministic religion, and present a subversive explanation for Jane's morality that undermines tacit and explicit rules of civility. Borden claims not to know where this point occurs in her narrative, wishing that she could find it for "that would have been another story" ("Self-Review").

Borden elevates the moral struggle in *Jane—Our Stranger* to a universal level and addresses it in modernist prose. The novel contains an indictment, not just of individuals who breach convention, but a whole society teetering on the edge of a looming disaster of epic proportions. Jane recognizes their mendacity and impending doom:

Looking back now to that winter of 1913-1914, I see it as a season of delirium, of fever, of madness. Paris glows there, at the eve of war, in a lurid blaze of brilliance, its people giddy, intoxicated, dancing over the quaking surface of a civilization that was cracking under them. (310)

There is apocalyptic insinuation in Borden's choice of words of destruction, and a destabilization of the earth as well as civilization. Jane is also distressed at the role women in France, comparing them to consumable commodities:

A gold mine, a rubber plantation, a motor-industry, suddenly looms into prominence. It takes the fancy . . . shares go higher and higher . . . a scramble, and then perhaps a fraud is discovered, there is a collapse . . . expensively fooled. So it is in society. Women loom on the horizon; suddenly for no apparent reason they take the popular fancy. (121)

In her wartime writing, Borden uses this dehumanizing and objectifying language to draw attention to the insignificance of individual men on the battlefield. Here, the trope conveys a similar sense about women, implying that their only value is as goods used in service to men. The irony that Jane, a woman, is one to observe and record this commodification of women is invalidated by the novel's framing device in which Jane's words are related through her brother-in-law, Blaize. His control over her speech enforces the conventional gendered hierarchy that Jane critiques; yet, in one more turn, it is Borden as the author who exercises ultimate power over the narrative. These layers of voice, meaning, and narration, are aspects of modernist writing.

Additional features of the modernist mode in *Jane—Our Stranger* include the narrative's fragmented construction and Jane's experiences as a nurse in World War I.

The book is narrated backwards in time; Blaize uses his own words in the first part of the book and relates the second half through Jane's letters to him. Eva Goldbeck explains the distinct differences between the two sections in her review in *The Literary Review of the New York Evening Post*. The first part provides the background of the story, "the creation of its color and tone," where "we feel the full impact of Jane's personality and the undeviating enmity between unalignable forces." In Jane's monologue, which follows, characters are "ignited into action; the elements fuse . . . and disintegrate in the battle for mutual destruction." Goldbeck calls the novel's construction "strange," noting that "in the unhesitating, dramatic march [the second half of the book] makes upon events it loses something of the reminiscent sadness, the troubling but more detached wonderment that communicates itself to the reader in the first part of the book" ("In the Toils" 124).

The second part contains descriptions of Jane's service as a surgical nurse during World War I, an experience that has a transformative effect on her. In a Whitmanesque passage that echoes Borden's wartime sketches, Jane explains how the war changed her:

I enjoyed the War. It set me free. I reverted to type, became a savage, enjoyed myself. In a wooden hut, on a sea of quaking mud under a cracking sky, I lived an immense life. I was a giant—I was colossal—I dwelt in chaos and was calm. With death let loose on the earth, I felt life pouring through me, beating in me; I exulted. Danger, a roaring noise, cold, fatigue, hunger, these my rations, agreed with me. . . . I was a link in an immense machine, an atom, a speck in an innumerable host of atoms like myself, automatons, humble ugly minute things doomed to die, immortal spirits, human beings, my brothers. (317)

This passage is full of contradictions. Borden's language and style in the beginning of the passage evokes Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself," and reflects a similar fusion of realism and spirituality. Paradoxically, Jane seems to be universally immense and miniscule. There is a sense of the sublime in her smallness and insignificance that gives her an ethereal presence. In opposition, the latter part of the paragraph offers a modernist

vision of the war in which technology overpowers humanity. Jane is both a “savage” and a cog in the machinery of war, either of which is far removed in temperament from Western civilization.

Critical reception of the novel was strongly favorable. A review in the *San Francisco Chronicle* compares the novel to those of Dickens, Thackeray, and Cather, recommending it for its “freshness and originality” told with “good artistry” and “easy, skillful style” (“*Jane—Our Stranger Tells*”). *The New York Times* reviewer admires Borden’s characterizations and prose, calling the book “powerful,” “highly distinctive,” and “one of the finest novels of the year” (Review of *Jane*). A review in the *Boston Evening Transcript* praises Borden’s theme, characters, and writing: “[I]n this book she has transcended the usual limitations of the problem novel and constructed around an exceptionally beautiful and well-drawn character a profoundly moving story” (J. F. S.).³²

The critic in *The Dial*, an influential outlet for modernist literature, admires Borden’s narrative for its unusual technique:

[It] reaches descriptive tentacles about the plot and renders thoughtfully and suavely the overtones of French social culture. . . . The effect of the novel is that of a painting in flat colours done by a hand that knows how to give design to unusual flexibilities of style and to convey an impression of substance by outlines. (Review of *Jane*)

This modernist appreciation is not shared by all readers; the book is also critiqued as “too wordy” (Bracey) and possessing a “rambling quality” (“*Jane—Our Stranger Tells*”).³³

The reviewer for *The Times Literary Supplement*, Marjorie Grant Cook, identifies autobiographical aspects of the book, asserting that surely “the knowledge of a lifetime

³² See also Cook, Review of *Jane*; Cooper, Review of *Jane* in *The Nation*; Thomas.

³³ See also J. F. S.

lay behind it.” Remarking that “there seems to be more than one page that appears to be emotion remembered in tranquility,” Cook asks rhetorically: “Is it through [Borden’s] eyes that we see Jane in Paris, or is it through Jane’s own?” (Review of *Jane*). The book caused “great excitement” in Paris, particularly among people who thought themselves models for the less-than-admirable characters in the book (“Mary Borden’s Book”).

Borden vigorously denied this allegation: “Of course, my characters are not real people,” she stated, annoyed that readers believed her devoid of the necessary imagination to create her own characters. “It is amusing and at the same time disconcerting. I do not and never did take any characters from real life” (qtd. in “Mary Borden’s Book”).

While some readers see autobiography in Borden’s novel, the real-life marriage of Marquis Boni de Castellane and Miss Anna Gould was also a likely source. In 1895, Castellane, eldest son of the Marquis de Castellane, and his wife, the former Anne-Marie Le Clerc de Juigné, married Anna Gould, the nineteen-year-old daughter of Jay Gould, the American industrialist and millionaire. Their marriage epitomized the elegance of Parisian *la belle époque* at the turn of the century, but their lavish mode of living and profligate spending on yachts, art work, and entertaining took a toll on their marriage and her inheritance. By 1906, when Gould obtained a civil divorce from Castellane, they had spent \$10,000,000 of her fortune (“Duchesse de Talleyrand”). While this period saw many transatlantic matches between young American heiresses and impoverished continental nobility, notably that of Jenny Jerome and the Duke of Marlborough, the similarities between Borden’s narrative and the Gould-Castellane marriage are striking.

When Castellane published a memoir, *How I Discovered America*, in 1924, the resemblances between Borden’s novel and his memoir were noticed (Cooper 150; “Who

Was ‘Jane’”). The anonymous writer of “Who Was ‘Jane—Our Stranger?’” details these at length, including the age and nationality of the parties, the bride’s wealth and inconsideration for rank, the groom’s family history, military service, appreciation for fine art and disdain for nature, and the very nature of the union. Borden writes, “Jane had enough money to realise even Philibert’s dream, and he was to supply the required knowledge as well as the billet d’entrée into the social arena of Europe” (51). Castellane similarly relates: “American wives endow us with their wealth, we for our part, give them in exchange . . . a tradition and taste which their superficial education does not give them the power of obtaining for themselves” (132). Borden certainly borrowed from her own experiences in parts of the book concerning the war; her appropriation of details from the Castellane-Gould marriage is equally evident. It was not be the last time she would be publicly accused of appropriating someone else’s name for her benefit.

After the success of *Jane—Our Stranger*, Borden gave her writing more attention. An interview in the *Chicago Tribune* identifies her as “a constant contributor to various English periodicals” for which she earns “good pay,” as well as a novelist (“News of Chicago Society”). Borden explains that she writes mostly “at and after midnight, when the rest of the world is asleep and deep silence prevails over the usually clamorous city.” The interview adds: “She leads a gay social life and keeps it quite apart from her work, which she seems to look upon with a mild and humorous surprise, as if wondering why others took it seriously.” This report belies the intensity with which Borden pursued her writing career, leaving one to wonder if Borden is being disingenuously blasé about her career or if she is avoiding acknowledging her aspirations. Although she relished the

public role of author and never hesitated to promote her work, Borden avoided appearing competitive with Spears and maintained a clear hierarchy in her marriage.

In 1924, the Speares moved to a house designed by Sir Edwin Landseer Lutyens at 8 Little College Street in the heart of Westminster. It is described in rich detail by Cooper in his 1927 biographical sketch of Borden:

The great hallway and main staircase are of veined, cream-coloured marble, and the library is finished in the beautiful, natural paneling for which many old English houses are famous. The floor of the dining room is made of squares of polished steel that gleam like silver. On this stands a dining table made of a solid slab of green marble, flanked by chairs of a soft yellow decorated with delightful little red flowers. This gracious old house with its daring modern touches is a perfect setting for Miss Borden's sophisticated and by no means colourless personality. Here she gathers about her the most brilliant members of London's diplomatic and artistic world. (158)

A parade of artists and politicians continued for decades; in *Middle East Diary*, written after VE Day, Noël Coward recalls calling on General Eisenhower with a letter of introduction from Lord Louis Mountbatten, only to find both staying with the Speares (Maloney). The couple and their children did not reside full time in London; they also spent time in Leicestershire, where Spears stood for Parliament, at houses in the country for weekends, villas in France during summers, and travelled abroad frequently for work and pleasure. Spears also had a yacht, *The Bittern*, which he sailed in the English Channel (Egremont 116).

Both Spears and Borden availed themselves of separate vacations unaccompanied by each other or their children, although Spears often brought Maurice with him. Through her many holidays and trips abroad Borden began to see travel writing as a "niche worth exploiting" (Conway 145). The perspective of writing as a commodity was new to Borden, who had not previously demonstrated an interest in writing as a

commercial enterprise. A series that she wrote for *The Evening Standard* in 1924 about her travels for Spain marked the beginning of a new literary form for the author.

Late in the summer of 1924, Borden embarked on her first visit back to the United States since 1913; her excursion was to encompass book publicity, visits with family, social engagements, and vacation time with Spears (“Says British”). Borden traveled with their son Michael and a nurse; her daughters and Spears joined her later. In New York City, Borden was “treated as a celebrity” for her dual roles as a successful writer and a British politician’s wife (Conway 125).

The day after her arrival, Borden granted an interview to reporters in which she offered opinions on a variety of subjects. Discussing literature, she declares that “women are doing better writing than the men,” and scoffs at American censorship: “there were no such moral crusades in England, and certainly not so many ‘crank societies’” (“Says British”). Borden expresses strong political views, criticizing British Prime Minister Ramsey MacDonald and the Labour Party for failing to alleviate taxation or address unemployment, and advocates for total disarmament and the League of Nations, which her husband was attending as a British delegate at that time.

Borden is most articulate in expounding upon the differences and similarities between American and English husbands, wives, and marriages; her comments on love and relationships were picked up and distributed by newspapers throughout the country in a sensational manner. “U.S. Woman is Best Dressed,” “Woman Writer Relegates Love to Background,” or “Women Can’t Live for Love Alone These Days, Says Charming Novelist” (Rich) read headlines in numerous local papers: “American wives are dolls” was the lead sentence. Borden’s commentary begins as a reflection on love:

Its place in current literature and conversation is entirely disproportionate to its real importance.

Yes, the world is so full of things right now we don't live for love alone. With women going into politics, business and the professions, they have much more to think of than dressing up and beautifying for some man.

Love, at least the kind that the old-fashioned novelists raved about, has its place in the world, of course, and a big place it is too. But it is co-ordinate with many other activities.

Can you imagine a 1924 woman mooning about because she is in love? Certainly not. Love makes a nice and comfortable background for the other things she has to do. A woman like the heroines of Dickens would be utterly ridiculous today.

Borden also dismisses sex as "a threadbare topic of conversation" ("Woman Writer").

In the interview, Borden illustrates the difference between American and English marriages through the lens of women's fashion. American women are the best-dressed women in the world, Borden observes, even better than French women: "American husbands are indulgent" ("Woman Writer"), she explains, and treat their wives "as dolls, spoiling them with presents, furs and jewels," because they "like to see how pretty [they] can look" ("Says British"; "Woman Writer"). In contrast, Borden claims: "A wife to an Englishman is a pal, and their life is more normal than over here" ("Says British"). English wives are less well turned-out than American wives because an English husband is more interested in seeing that his wife is

doing something worth while in the world than in her being merely a thing of loveliness. He is particularly anxious for her to enter politics and make speeches. If she takes an active part in her country's government, she must study and do a thousand things that take time. He wants her too, to go in for sports and to manage his estate if he has one. Then she simply hasn't enough hours in the day to concentrate on her appearance. ("Woman Writer")

Borden's pronouncements were likely drawn from observations during an expensive dinner at an exclusive establishment the preceding evening: "I had dinner at a Fifth avenue hotel last night and I was amazed. Some of the costumes were extravagant,

but not one was unbeautiful” (“U.S. Woman”). Her thoughts on British marriages are less superficial, reflecting her personal experiences as the involved wife of a well-to-do, cosmopolitan, and politically engaged English Parliamentarian. In both cases, Borden conflates women and wives in an old-fashioned manner that disregards unmarried women. She evaluates and describes women not based on their own achievements, but merely as accoutrements for their husbands.

These perspectives are peculiar, coming from a woman who accomplished so much independently of her husbands, and who was the primary financial provider in both marriages. Her generalizations are inconsistent with the strong, independent American women who populate her novels, such as *The Romantic Woman* and *Jane—Our Stranger*. Most at odds with her earlier writing, particularly the sensuous love poetry composed during her courtship with Spears, is the notion of an English wife as a “companion” (“Says British”). If Borden is speaking from personal experience, then her relationship with Spears had cooled significantly from its beginnings as a passionate love affair.

These years were a time of tension in their marriage, and both parties viewed the other’s behavior as neglectful. Borden allowed, and may have encouraged, an intimate friendship with a man that they knew socially, Claude Rome. Spears’s awareness of Rome’s affections widened the rift between them, reaching a crisis point in 1924 when he found written evidence of their affair (Conway 124; Egremont 110). Spears was enraged by Borden’s behavior, and only after numerous protestations of innocence and written declarations of devotion, did she persuade him to reconcile. Spears never forgot the affair and later cited it as the reason for his increasing intimacy with Maurice (Egremont 111).

With the affair behind them, Borden and Spears travelled to Chicago, where they were feted by her family and old high-society friends, and through the western United States to California (Conway 128; Egremont 112). The couple cut short their trip to return to the United Kingdom in October to campaign for the parliamentary election. Spears finished in third place behind both the Conservative and Labour candidates.

That month Borden's new novel, *Three Pilgrims and a Tinker*, was released. It was published by William Heinemann in the United Kingdom and by Alfred A. Knopf in the United States. Borden's contract reflected the success of *Jane—Our Stranger*, providing the author with her first advance and stipulating higher royalties on greater anticipated book sales (Memorandum of Agreement 6 July 1924). Like her earlier novels, *Three Pilgrims and a Tinker* dramatizes societal and domestic conflicts, but its narrow scope and absence of international flavor leave it a hollow shell of her previous books. Missing as well are the elements of modernism that define her wartime writing and are evident in her first post-war novels. In their place, Borden relies on autobiographical details to draw a picture of a blended family and expose the unpleasant effects of a troubled marriage. The feel-good ending, in which no harm comes to the family and the married partners agree to soldier on, seems contrived to be titillating yet inoffensive. The book is more potboiler than good literature.

The novel's plot is straightforward and predictable. A newly-married couple, Jim and Marion Dawnay move to Broadshire, a Midlands village in the heart of English foxhunting country, with her daughters, the titular "Three Pilgrims," and their son Tim, the "Tinker." Before marrying Jim, Marion led a bohemian yet cosmopolitan life; as the child of an English diplomat "growing up in the gardens of foreign embassies, Polyglot

from birth” (13), then, as an adult, living in India with her Scottish husband, where her first two children were born, and in Paris with her second husband, Count d’Erlingcourt, the father of her third daughter. In between were houses in London, Scotland, Rome, and Brighton; a chateau near Versailles; a palazzo in Venice; and a villa by the sea in Biarritz. Less is known about Jim; he ran away from his father at a young age, and made his way independently after being disinherited. Both bring much baggage to the marriage.

Finding themselves financially ruined, Marion and Jim have accepted an offer from Jim’s father to live in a tenant cottage on the family estate; a move which brings them to Broadshire. This is English hunting country, where everything revolves around horses. An outsider, Marion is out of her element, and she hates her new home. Jim is suffering self-esteem and insecurity issues deriving from his financial failures. This matrimonial mismatch provides the opening for intrusions by third parties into the marriage; Marion strikes up a relationship that becomes too friendly and Jim becomes reacquainted with a local woman. When the three older children sense the discord between their parents, they hatch a plan to run away. Trouble ensues and disaster looms, but gets resolved without any lasting damage. Jim and Marion are saved from potentially ruinous or scandalous behavior just at the brink by unforeseen circumstances—a precipitous accident, an inadvertent interruption—and come to their senses before any irrevocable actions are taken. In the end, the children compel Marion to see and accept the role which the Midlands community expects of her.

Although the title suggests otherwise, *Three Pilgrims and a Tinker* is more an autobiographical treatise on marital dysfunction than a domestic narrative about family or children. The family and the marriage obviously parallel Borden’s; she acknowledges

that the children in the book were modelled on her own: “The whimsies and fancies of the children in the book are those of my own children” (qtd. in McCommon). Similarly, Borden seems to have drawn on the infidelity, distrust, and tension in her relationship with Spears in developing the narrative of Marion and Jim’s marital friction.

It is reasonable to read Marion’s thoughts of family and marital commitments as suggestive of Borden’s own decision-making, particularly in light of other resemblances between the author and her protagonist. When Marion commits to her marriage at the conclusion of *Three Pilgrims and a Tinker*, it is out of a sense of security and contentment that her husband “would never be new nor strange; he would, thank God, always be the same, the one individual on the earth whom she knew best, possessing the only face, the only voice, the only heart in which she could feel at home” (294).

The passage of time looms large in Marion’s reluctant reconciliation with Jim. Her internal struggle surpasses that required of a straightforward decision, and reveals a dawning recognition of the loss of youth and her looming mortality:

[W]hen one is thirty-six one swings from fierce longing to live furiously while there is yet time. . . . And if one had the courage—flung oneself out, determined to grasp it, the life that is eluding one . . . what would one do? . . . What does one want? . . . One wants to go back. One wants more time, more youth. . . . (302)

Marion’s launch into the exposition of her crisis divulges her age, not coincidentally the same age Borden was when writing this work in 1923. Numerous parallels between Borden’s personal situation and that of Marion encourage the reader to conflate the two.

Reviews of *Three Pilgrims and a Tinker* were tepid. Critics faulted Borden’s disjointed narrative, lackluster characterizations, and conventional melodrama. Marjorie Grant Cook, writing for *The Times Literary Supplement*, finds the novel unoriginal, “well worn and mildly melodramatic,” and the character of Marion to be “the kind of woman

who fascinates in real life” but in print is “not very interesting” (Review of *Three Pilgrims*). A review in *The New York Times* judges the competing themes of Marion, Jim and his horses, and the children’s adventures “disconnected,” and concludes that “the narrative suffers from jerkiness” (“Youth and Age”). *The Saturday Review of Literature* critic asserts that the novel lacks any importance or poignancy, warning readers that the narrative “follows no track at all. . . . [A]nd becomes at the end no unified whole; to escape being trite it has become diffuse” (Review of *Three Pilgrims*).³⁴

Critics familiar with Borden’s previous novels expressed the strongest disappointment with *Three Pilgrims and a Tinker*. A critic writing for *The Age* calls the book “disappointing” after *Jane—Our Stranger*, noting “this trifling tale may very well seem an earlier specimen of the writer’s work” (Review of *Three Pilgrims*). In an ambivalent review in *The Spectator*, Philip Carducci writes that although Borden “still writes with an ease and quickness of expression,” he “had hoped to see her increasing in vigour and ability.” Calling parts of the novel “pure convention,” he accuses Borden of “overreaching herself” to the point of reciting “common poeticisms” (706).

Some reviews focused on the moral and social codes embedded in *Three Pilgrims and a Tinker*. *The New York Times* review notes the significance of Marion’s decision to remain in her marriage at the novel’s resolution with apparent relief, saluting the book’s virtuous lesson that “our conduct is shaped by our necessities rather than our deeds” (“Youth”). The reviewer in the *Boston Evening Transcript* attributes a different purpose to Borden’s narrative: “She is an American living in England, and naturally she has an

³⁴ See also “Mary Borden’s Latest” in *Chicago Tribune*.

intense desire to make English life real to her own countrymen.”³⁵ Several reviews hail Borden’s robust and detailed depiction of the Midlands. The *Chicago Tribune* review judges her local background “sharp and memorable,” and *The Aberdeen Journal* critic admires the “vivid and arresting description of a hunting set in the Midlands” and “clear-cut, exhilarating pictures [of] the hunt” that breaks away from the archetype of the horsey set (“Mary Borden’s Latest”; N. T.).³⁶

The subject of differing domestic relationships between men and women in the United Kingdom and the United States continued to interest Borden. When she and Spears returned to the United States at the end of the 1924 to spend the holidays with her mother and sister in New York City, Borden granted an interview to R. le Clerc Phillips for *The New York Times*. She discusses her literary career, and admits that she had “been writing for years” before achieving popular success. Referring to *The Romantic Woman* as her first novel, she implicitly disowns her first two books, *The Mistress of Kingdoms* and *Collision*. She confides that she is writing short stories, but complains that she finds it difficult to get them published in the United States. “[T]he stories in demand in this country are all standardized to a formula. . . . They do not seem to want anything different,” she says, citing a recent submission which had been rejected by an American magazine but published in *The Royal Magazine* in the United Kingdom (qtd. in Phillips).

In an interview with Katharan McCommon for *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* a few months later, Borden provides additional details about her literary background: “I began writing when a child, and from the first I was determined that I was going to learn to

³⁵ See also D. L. M.

³⁶ See also Cook, Review of *Three Pilgrims*; Reid, “Two Good Novels”; Review of *Three Pilgrims* in *The Indianapolis News*; L. R. T.

write. . . . [I]t took me fifteen years to learn my job, and I have found it very hard work.” Borden admits that her “first two novels were published under another name and were so bad that they have been lost in limbo and will never be resurrected.” She also confides that she never had any feeling for the short story: “I wrote a few short stories for the *Atlantic Monthly* [*sic*] years ago, but I don’t think that is my medium. I like to work in a big canvas and I find it difficult to restrict myself to the confines of the short story” (qtd. in McCommon). Nevertheless, over the next few years Borden wrote several short stories which were published in *Harper’s Bazaar*, *The Royal Magazine*, and *The Forum*.³⁷

Borden displayed more enthusiasm for the theater than she did for short story writing: “I think writing a play is great fun. There is something exciting about it, for the mere writing is only the beginning. . . . [W]ith a play so many things have to be done to it before it goes before the public” (qtd. in McCommon). Borden adapted *Jane—Our Stranger* for the stage in October, 1925. Directed by William Adams and produced by Herman Gantvoort, *Jane—Our Stranger* ran at the Cort Theatre on 48th Street in midtown Manhattan in New York City. Despite advance anticipation, the play was widely panned and closed after three performances. In *The New York Times*, drama critic Olin Downes labels it a “witless and spiritless play” performed by “appropriately indifferent actors.” “The writing of the piece is naïve and amateurish . . . dull and boring,” Downes reports, claiming the only aspect worthy of the advertising are the “gorgeous furnishings” by Elsie de Wolfe. Another local reviewer calls the play “strained” and bizarre,” a “cold-blooded melodrama . . . hardly suitable for domestic consumption” (*Jane—Our Stranger*

³⁷ “A Meeting in Mayfair,” *Harper’s Bazaar* (1925); “This Can’t Go On” (“An Accident on the Quai Voltaire”), *The Royal Magazine* (Dec. 1925); “Four O’clock,” *The Royal Magazine* (June 1926).

at Cort Theater”). Borden accepted the criticism, and “declared the experience had done her good. . . . [S]he had learned a great deal about producing for the theater and was sure that [her next novel] would dramatize well” (Conway 133).

That novel, *Jericho Sands*, was published by William Heinemann in London in 1925 and by Alfred A. Knopf in New York in 1926. Strong sales expectations earned Borden another advance and generous royalties in her contract with Heinemann (Memorandum of Agreement 29 July 1925). Spanning the years immediately preceding and following World War I, *Jericho Sands* takes place in the small parish of Creech St. Michael in Somerset, England; it is an English romance set against a background of old, landed aristocracy. On the surface, the narrative depicts the destructive influence of that environment on three young people who become entangled in a love triangle. The ambiguity introduced through the participants’ immorality and the surprisingly tragic ending defy a singular interpretation or clear moral judgment. Borden strikes a modernist tone as the characters struggle to integrate truth, representation, and the nature of reality, particularly in a section that takes the form of a confessional journal.

Told in retrospect, the narrative commences in 1912. The main narrator, William Tweedle, an intimate of the three protagonists, promises the reader “a love story of the first order” (5). Priscilla Brampton, Tweedle’s godchild, daughter of Lady Agatha and Colonel Brampton, distraught by the sudden and untimely death of her father, and mentally exhausted by her piously evangelical mother’s incessant prayers, looks to marriage as an escape. Borden’s characters mimic autobiographical details that the author cannot seem to excise from her fiction. The bridegroom in *Jericho Sands* is Simon Birch, rector and baron of Creech St. Michael. He is an intense, passionate man of God. “I

married him to be safe,” Priscilla confesses (27). Yet, while she finds Simon to be good, and is “fond of him,” as a man he holds no appeal for her (47).

The marriage begins to deteriorate in 1914, when Priscilla suffers a miscarriage. Anxious for her health, as doctors have warned that another pregnancy could kill her, Simon “relinquished his claim to the passionate healing beauty of her body” (90), a position that Priscilla doesn’t understand. Soon after, war breaks out and Simon reveals himself to be a strident pacifist, interpreting the war as humanity’s just punishment for sinful behavior. “The world is mad. It will go under . . . the whole ghastly fake, the whole great edifice of fornication and lust. . . . [T]o save this monstrous monument of godlessness and injustice we must send out our manhood to do murder” (104-05). His anti-war position makes Simon exceedingly unpopular in Creech and harder for Priscilla to tolerate. He is torn between a frenetic and mystical devotion to his God and his repressed love for his wife: “There is no longer any relief for me in prayer. When I pray I do not see the face of God, I see Priscilla” (109). Plagued by self-disgust at his sexual desire for Priscilla, he torments himself even more than he does his wife.

At this point in the narrative, Tweedle inserts Simon’s journal, the narrative device for the middle third of the book. In it, Simon introduces the third member of the triangle; Crab Willing, only son and heir of the 15th Marquis of Moone, lord of the manor house in Creech, Jericho Sands. Childhood friends, Priscilla and Simon have not seen Crab for many years when he returns from a deployment to the front lines. As they become reacquainted, Simon begins to believe that Priscilla is in love with Crab. Priscilla denies her longing, until Simon, raging with jealousy, taunts and nags her into a confession that shocks her. When she asks Simon for a divorce he refuses. Although

Priscilla struggles with her decision, she eventually leaves Simon to be with Crab, for whom her love is too “compulsive” and “uncontrollable” to deny (219).

Borden’s best prose in *Jericho Sands* addresses the effects of the war. The war has changed Crab, dehumanizing him:

He had become more primitive. What he had met over there had reduced him, as it were, to his lowest terms. He had become the bare bones of himself. Nothing remained of him but what was essentially his self. One felt that if he lost anything more he would crumble to pieces, cease to exist. (120)

Ironically, the stripped down, essential self that Crab retains is sufficient to draw Priscilla from her husband. Simon, who voluntarily sets aside his masculinity by denying himself sexual relations with his wife, finds his neutered condition amplified by her final rejection. The war, while seemingly hollowing out Crab, further emasculates Simon. Borden presents his arguably courageous refusal to engage in the ultimate exercise of manly aggression on the battlefield as a further blow to his masculinity.

The shell-shock Simon sees in Crab also affects the larger population. He describes the nation’s exhaustion at the end of 1917 as a malformed hybrid of animal, vegetation, and technology, grown and harvested to feed the machinery of war:

[S]o the winter dragged on . . . icy months of the harvest of death when men were mowed down like fields of corn. . . . I saw them growing miraculously in a night, new crops of iron-hooded men ready for the reaping guns . . . planted thick for death . . . mushroom food, cannon-fodder for the glorious war. (180-81)

Borden’s battlefield imagery and soulless characterization of warfare are hallmarks of her modernist writing, here expanded to encompass an entire country.

The continuing war exacerbates Simon’s mounting spiritual and emotional breakdown, leading him to question life’s meaning and toward bleak nihilism.

We are all adrift. . . . There are only men to help us, men who are fighting to keep afloat . . . peering blindly ahead through the dark, seeing only a little way, lost like me, lost, I tell you, in the immense dark confusion, doomed like me to die.

What good is man to me? Can the blind lead the blind? What man is there alive or dead that can tell me what I want to know; where I came from, where I am going, what there is beyond, what it is all for, what, quite simply, it *is*, this thing we call existence?

There is no answer . . . there is only the question. We are put here on this planet to wonder for a little, then flicked off it like flies off a cake, into nothingness, where we do not even know that we have wondered. (209-10)

Simon's sentiments echo those of Shakespeare's blinded Gloucester in *King Lear*: "As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods, / They kill us for their sport" (4.1.36-37). Simon finds himself unmoored by the cruelties inflicted by humankind and perceives himself the subject of the random whims of supernatural forces. His conclusion that there is no intrinsic meaning in life, and that it is futile to try to construct any such meaning, represents an absolute rejection of his religious faith and belief in God.

As Simon waits for Priscilla's return, he drives himself into a feverish insanity in which dreams and reality, past and present, science and religion, become blurred:

I saw the beginning of the world. It was an accident. A ball of fire was spinning in the Heavens. A lump of glowing stuff, white hot, flew off it. . . . Its surface turned from fiery red to grey. It was crawling now with vermin. . . . Like a fungus it spread over the surface of the globe, a diseased and poisonous growth, slimy, a slimy film. Something stirred in it, some blind impulse, some senseless urge. The glaucous mass took shape. . . . Time fled past my ears in a hurricane as I watched . . . [t]he aeons were flying spirals, scurrying off into nothingness. . . .

I saw the whole race of man from the beginning, stretching round and round the earth in a long chain, a gang of slaves, like a gang of black men, each one chained to the next one with iron shackles. . . .

"They go nowhere," [said] the voice. "They go back where they came from. They are an accident. They have no souls. There is no hope. They only imagine because they suffer." (263-64)

The reader's last glimpse of Simon, in the final section of the novel, again narrated by Tweedle, is in a sanatorium. He deliriously scribbles Priscilla's name "surrounded by cabalistic signs and queer drawings . . . resembling grotesquely some of Blake's

woodcuts” (275). Simon’s deteriorating lucidity and abandonment of his religious convictions undermine his sympathetic role as the wronged party in the marriage. As his determination to wait for Priscilla careens into unreasonable obsession, his failure to adhere to the principles of his faith and his incomprehensible babble erode any compassion toward him that Priscilla’s infidelity may have provoked in the reader.

In contrast, Priscilla’s conduct after leaving Simon evokes compassion, despite her immoral actions. After moving with Crab to the United States, Priscilla becomes pregnant, determinedly keeping her doctor’s caution a secret from Crab. As predicted, she dies shortly after the birth of their son. *Jericho Sands* ends with Priscilla’s deathbed confession. “I married Simon to be safe . . . it was all a mistake,” Priscilla repeats. “It was because of Daddy’s dying. I was frightened . . .” (306). Every turn of the narrative in *Jericho Sands* has derived from the fragmentation of the father-daughter relationship. It is a testament to Borden’s fascination with her own traumatic loss that her art requires and continues to feed off this catastrophic event decades later.

Priscilla is relieved of her suffering in a beatific manner. She lays dying, blazingly angelic, “in the white bed, in the white room,” her voice “like a bell ringing” from her “still white lips” in her “still white face” (311). Then, turning a “heavenly smile” to Crab, Priscilla “seemed to have fallen asleep, so sweetly, so comfortably” in his arms (312). Borden implies that Priscilla, the unfaithful wife of the pious curate, ascends to a form of exalted afterlife which is denied to Simon. Although Borden is pushing the bounds of a long-standing moral code in redirecting her reader’s sympathies toward an unrepentant adulterer, the transgression is mitigated by the finality of the heroine’s death and Simon’s continued existence, however debilitated and delirious.

Jericho Sands provides a good example of Borden's blend of middlebrow sentiment and modernist technique. The critique of English gentry and challenges to social conventions which followed in the wake of World War I were familiar themes by the middle of the 1920s. Priscilla's failure to adhere to moral standards of Church and community test and break expectations, but her defiant behavior is moderated by her death. Borden's use of narrative fragmentation, skepticism toward modern technology, invocation of wartime despair, and stream of consciousness, notably in the long interior section of the book that purports to be Simon's journal, create a modernist impression.

The novel garnered significant critical attention in major newspapers and literary reviews in both the United States and the United Kingdom. Reviews focused on three aspects of the novel: the aristocratic English setting and characters; the subversive love triangle in which the reader's sympathies are redirected from the wronged to the guilty party; and the unconventional narrative technique. Often, reviewers seemed perplexed by these contradictory themes. Eva Goldbeck, writing in *New York Evening Post Literary Review*, criticizes Borden's book for possessing "an antiquated theme and style," which "imperil this book all but fatally," and pans Borden's "method of circumambient narration" as "unfortunately chosen" ("Mary Borden").

Many reviews draw attention to the book as a study of England's aristocracy. Comparing *Jericho Sands* to the works of Maugham, Walpole, and Rousseau, Chester E. Durgin lauds Borden's book as "the outstanding novel of the year," and declares it superior even to Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*:

It is impossible to read this tragedy of mismating among the British upper classes and not be stirred to the depths of your inmost being. . . . The outstanding feature of Miss Borden's novel is its grim reality. Every character is perfectly limned. Every scene is as real as the reader's bedroom furniture.

Marjorie Grant Cook's review in *The Times Literary Supplement* is also favorable: "[T]he country scenes are excellent, . . . so imaginatively and affectionately described that the reader walks through them with an unusual sense of reality" (Review of *Jericho Sands*). In *The Saturday Review of Literature*, prominent liberal journalist Elmer Davis calls Borden's characterization of English country life "the best feature of the book" (492).³⁸ A less laudatory review in *The New York Times* describes the novel as conveying "an enthusiasm for England a trifle too articulate to be characteristically English and an essential sentimentality in the theme which prevents it from becoming anything but a romance, whereas the story is ostensibly [a] tragedy" ("*Jericho Sands*").³⁹

Borden's handling of the relationships between her characters was of most interest to reviewers, who unanimously acclaim her adept manipulation of reader's sympathies. Cooper concludes: "Miss Borden builds a story of remarkable psychological insight and power, a story in which one is brought to understand and sympathize with each of the three who unwilling wrecked the others" (154). "In other, less competent hands the theme might have been sordid and commonplace," an anonymous reviewer writes in *Bookman*, noting Borden's skill in getting the reader to empathize with the sinner and disdain her wronged husband: "Priscilla . . . rises from the pages serene, intrinsically honest, courageous to the last," despite her moral failure, allowing the reader to indulge in guilt-free empathy ("Books Abroad" 433).⁴⁰

³⁸ See also Cooper; M. Ross.

³⁹ See also Pearson.

⁴⁰ See also Cook, Review of *Jericho Sands*; Durgin; Farrar, "Editor"; Goldbeck, "Mary Borden"; L. Hartley, Review of *Jericho Sands*.

The ill-fated love triangle was mentioned in many reviews. “It is a story of inward fires that burst at last through the crust of conventionalism and burn themselves out to the gray ashes of tragedy; a strong and vitally truthful piece of work” states the reviewer in *Bookman* (“Books Abroad” 433). The anonymous critic in *The New York Times* likewise praises Borden’s handling of the conflict:

Tragic or happy, those whom the blind god smites can only accept the blow and bear the wound and there is nothing more to be said about it. Scruples, conventions, consideration for others weigh only up to a certain point; after that lovers are helpless victims of the passion that is begotten in them by the God of Love. (“*Jericho Sands*”)

One of the most modernist features of *Jericho Sands* is Borden’s use of multiple narrators with distinct, incongruent styles. Tweedle narrates Parts One and Three, the first in hindsight and the last in present tense. Part Two unfolds as Simon’s written journal. Bracketing Simon’s diary pages with Tweedle’s third-person, objective accounts draws attention to the rambling and incoherent effect of Simon’s stream of consciousness.

Critical reception of this technique was mixed. A review in *The Nation and the Athenaeum* admires Borden’s deft juxtaposition of Simon’s “passion and prim ignorance” and the “vigorous and apt” style of Tweedle’s section (Review of *Jericho Sands*). Borden “attempted a most interesting technical feat,” writes John Farrar in *The Bookman*, that is “successful . . . [and] fascinating” (“Fiction Reader” 202). For a mainstream critic, Farrar was unusually open to Borden’s unorthodox narrative technique: “There are some among critics and public who find any departure from the smooth course of ordinary narration annoying; but this particular method, it can readily be seen, offers a chance for rounding out incidents and characters which is not often taken advantage of by the novelist” (“Editor” 712). However, many reviewers describe Borden’s multiple narrators and

stream of consciousness approach as “irritating,” “unusual,” a “nuisance,” or “a millstone” (“*Jericho Sands*”; Durgin; Cook, Review of *Jericho Sands*; E. Davis 491).

Borden remained a tirelessly devoted writer in the years following the end of World War I. Her exposure to a broader spectrum of people and ideas, facilitated by Spears’s interests and activities, was reflected in her writing. Chapter 3 shows Borden evolving as an author, deftly integrating wartime experiences into domestic dramas which she enhanced with modernist techniques of consciousness, fragmentation, and destabilization. Her blend of conventional subjects and stylistic innovations garnered her books increasing popular and critical success in both the United Kingdom and the United States during the post-war period of the early 1920s.

Chapter 4

“THE UNUSUAL, THE ABNORMAL, AND THE BRILLIANT”⁴¹:

MODERNIST NOVELS

Borden’s experimentation with modernist prose techniques continued to advance throughout the 1920s. Chapter 4 examines the latter part of this decade, when Borden composed her most modernist novels, *Flamingo* and *Jehovah’s Day*. With numerous books to her credit, Borden was comfortable in the role of a public literary figure. She took advantage of the platforms available to expound on politics, religion, culture, and social issues of the day. In her writing, she continued to experiment with aspects of the modernist mode, refining the use of stream of consciousness, temporal and spatial fluidity of time, questioning religiosity, and conveying a distrust of modern urban life.

In 1926, Borden published a collection of short stories, *Four O’clock, and Other Stories*, which included several pieces recently published in magazines.⁴² None of Borden’s sketches which had appeared in *The English Review* during the war were included in this volume. Following publication by William Heinemann in London in 1926, the collection was released by Doubleday, Page in New York in March 1927. As the title indicates, all the stories contain an allusion to four o’clock in the afternoon: this point in time becomes a focal point for life-changing decisions and actions.

In Borden’s stories, the hour of four o’clock operates as an objective correlative, a literary term referring to a symbolic article used to provide explicit, rather than implicit,

⁴¹ Borden, “London Letter” 11 June 1927.

⁴² “A Meeting in Mayfair,” *Harper’s Bazaar* (1925); “This Can’t Go On” (“An Accident on the Quai Voltaire”), *The Royal Magazine* (Dec. 1925); “Four O’clock,” *The Royal Magazine* (June 1926). “An Accident on the Quai Voltaire” was published concurrently in *The Forum* (Mar. 1927).

access to traditionally inexplicable concepts such as emotion or color. The theory of the objective correlative as it relates to literature was developed by poet and literary critic T.

S. Eliot and explained in his influential essay “Hamlet and His Problems” in 1919:

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an ‘objective correlative’; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. (92)

The objective correlative’s purpose is to express emotions by showing, rather than describing, feelings, and then creating and evoking this emotion through linked external factors. An effective objective correlative should produce and unite the emotion of the literary work. Eliot suggests that if a piece of literature succeeds and inspires the right emotion, the creator has found the right objective correlative. If a particular scene seems heavy-handed, fails to inspire the intended response, or invokes a reaction inappropriate to the scene, that objective correlative does not work. In *Four O’clock and Other Stories* Borden uses the afternoon hour as an external factor to produce almost dreadful tension, particularly surrounding the act of decision-making.

The afternoon hour becomes fraught, beginning with the opening story, “Four O’clock.” This is a tale of lost youth, of squandered opportunity, of living without joy, told within an hour. Four o’clock is the time of Clarissa’s wedding and her daughter’s christening, as well as the hour at which she received a telegram informing her of her sons’ deaths in World War I. It represents a time of “soft violence” (10), a sorrow that has left her in perpetual agony which she concentrates to control. The hour is announced by the tolling of Big Ben in the background, with an ominous “soft, familiar boom”—evocative of the distant war’s cannon fire—to which Clarissa listens fearfully (9).

Later, as Clarissa hears her daughter talking during that hour, confiding her secret romance and questioning her marriage, Clarissa recalls her own extramarital temptation, resistance, and anguish, but remains mute to her daughter's pleas for advice. The silence is broken by the sound of Big Ben striking five o'clock: "Slowly the measured notes boomed over their heads. The two women listened. There seemed to be a curious hush in the room when they had died away" (25). The distance of "they" in the last sentence from the subject "measured notes," interrupted by "their heads," hints that the tolling also indicates the figurative death of the two women. Like the soldiers on the front, they are unable to make decisions for themselves and so follow the course determined for them. Borden uses social structures to indirectly address the subject of war (Freedman 111).

The story ends with Clarissa's introspective questioning: "Then what did it mean? Then, why? Was it after all for nothing or for something important that one did not even understand oneself?" (27). More an interrogation of values than a plotted narrative, "Four O'clock" exemplifies the modernist direction Borden was continuing to explore in her writing. She takes a single hour of time, with very little action and dialog, and uses interior monologue to expand and elevate her narrative, addressing issues that represent the essence of existential questioning found in modernist literature.

In "Tapestry Needlework," Borden builds on the foreboding created in "Four O'clock," entangling marital fidelity with the martial theme set in the opening story. A woman sits in stillness reading a letter from a childhood friend, sent from Paris along with a parcel containing a fortieth birthday present. It is nearly four o'clock, and Penn is mulling an invitation to leave her unfaithful, inebriate husband of many years and go away with her unnamed correspondent. As the chiming of the hour nears, she rereads the

letter: "Listen to the call, to the summons that is ringing in your ears; listen to your heart that has been beating out its message all your life in your breast. Listen to the blood in your veins, the gallant adventurous blood of your fathers and forefathers. Listen, Penn, Listen" (60). Readers of "Four O'clock" sense that the pumping blood and beating heart are no longer signs of life. The tolling of the bells brings death: these signs of vitality have been subverted into ominous portents, the bleeding out of life.

In the interval before the clock strikes, Penn's reverie is interrupted by heavy footsteps, and her hungover husband enters to tell her that he is "off to the club." After he departs, tranquility returns until broken again by the clock striking the hour:

She could not make the slightest movement to save herself. It was impossible for her to go to the telephone. Still, so still as to seem like a hypnotized woman, or a woman turned to stone, she sat there, listening, listening, to the soundless seconds that dropped round her, from the future into the past, that was all of it, both future and past, round her like still water, in the room. (70)

Penn's decision is not hers to make. Although she hates her husband and longs to escape, she is bound by powerful forces outside of her control. Borden's invocation of the tolling bell intimates a connection to the trauma of war experienced by Clarissa. Like her, Penn cannot rouse herself to take any action and the impending, and then present, striking of the hour represents the inevitable arrival and passage of time. Before they know it, the future is past and the present is forever. A sense of futility derived from the war surrounds these women, and the future has become a source of unnamed, paralyzing fear.

Most of the stories in *Four O'clock* address contemporary issues from a woman's perspective and embody modernist themes and techniques. In them, Borden experiments with a wider range of material than in her novels. This is evident in the variety of protagonists, male and female, from across the social class spectrum, ranging from

housemaids to clerks, to writers (successful and failed), and society hostesses. The collection is a series of character sketches rather than short stories; plot frequently plays a secondary role to personality, and atmosphere derives from interior ruminations.

“Beauty” describes a mentally disabled and physically handicapped housemaid who sacrifices herself to save the life of a little girl from a runaway horse. The story touches on sensitive subjects including workhouses, mental healthcare, sexual assault, out-of-wedlock pregnancy, eugenics, and bullying. In “The Little Horse,” a recently disgraced and divorced banker flees London for the anonymity of Rome, where he acquires a piece of artwork attributed to Leonardo da Vinci. The statuette becomes a talisman, giving him hope after he returns to his dreary existence in London. A shabby, tormented poet attains respectability for an hour before returning to obscurity in “An Accident on the Quai Voltaire.” “Siegfried and the Step-Daughter” is an extended reflection on Pirandello’s play “Six Characters in Search of an Author,” in which the animation of literary characters crosses a line with reality. In Borden’s retelling, an impoverished, unsuccessful writer comes to believe that the actress playing a role in a play is actually that character come to life. “A Meeting in Mayfair” presents the interior dialog of a young married woman who runs into an old beau on the street. As they converse over a cocktail, she relives her year-long flirtation in a “queer, concentrated, new edition of all her old story” (50) without learning anything new from the experience.

Borden borrows heavily from personal experiences in the collection: three of the stories feature protagonists who are writers. Their character expositions dwell on unoriginal themes of artistic inadequacy and failure. “An Accident on the Quai Voltaire”

and “Siegfried and the Step-Daughter” are mentioned above. “Miss Bateman and the Medium” explores the mind of a novelist unhappy with her recently completed novel.

In this story, Christine is unable to separate her creative process from the figures she has conjured from her imagination, losing control to “all those awful people [who] had banged at the doors of her mind, wanting her to write about them, wanting to live in a book of hers” (180). She resents them for hijacking her novel and turning it into something “antipathetic” to her: a “wild love affair” populated with “smart people . . . the whole fox-hunting, jazzing crowd” and “Earls and Countesses . . . who thought they were endowed with some special right to be rude” (181, 180). The resemblance to Borden’s own novels is striking. Christine despises the characters and the book they created. Blaming Pirandello’s influence, she muses: “It was difficult enough to keep sane without submitting oneself to such metaphysical nonsense” (179). Once finished, Christine hates the book even more because she suspects that it may be the best thing she has written.

Setting her completed manuscript aside, Christine visits a clairvoyant to try to reconnect with a neglected suitor, but the only souls the psychic channels are characters from her novel. In anger and frustration, she curses the characters that have appeared like spirits: “I hate them, and I wish they’d never been born, I wish I’d never let them come alive in my mind” (192). Christine returns home to discover her housemaid burning her manuscript. “Something told me to burn it,” Jenny confesses: “Like a voice, like a voice you couldn’t not mind. . . . It was like the Devil speaking” (195). Unleashed by Christine’s curse, her characters escape the bounds of her written pages. Whether an act of vengeance or a demonstration of autonomy, their instigation of the book’s destruction is a display of control and power that silences the author. Unable to recreate the book,

Christine “still writes very charming books, but she is haunted by the suspicion that she will never write anything as good as the novel she hated, the one that was destroyed” (195). Late in life, Borden would invoke a similar spectral image when considering how her active and full life may have interfered with her ability to write good books.

The two most critically admired pieces in the collection, “No Verdict” and “To Meet Jesus Christ,” feature characters and situations that Borden encountered in real life. The writing in these stories exemplifies Borden’s evolving use of modernist techniques. Both pieces garnered press for their thinly veiled discussions of actual events and people.

“No Verdict” tells the tale of a pitiful young druggist’s clerk, who, lacking the courage to drink the poison obtained for a dual suicide with his sweetheart, must face trial for her murder. While the couple are engaged to be married, Susie is assaulted and impregnated by a stranger, and convinces Charlie that suicide is her only way out. When they drink the poison together Susie dies quickly, but the pair is discovered in time for Charlie to have his stomach pumped and survive. Charlie feels guilty because he “cheated,” purposely tilting the bottle and spilling some of the poison because he was afraid of dying, and then crawling away in hopes that someone would find him (172).

Under English law, a survivor of a suicide pact is guilty of murder. The first jury having been unable to reach a verdict, a second trial is underway. Scared to face Susie in the afterlife, Charlie works himself into such a state that he faints in court during the second trial. Borden evokes his distress and panic in a long interior monologue:

All the shame, all the reaching back and wishing he’d done differently, all this turning forward and back, back and forward, this spinning on a narrow foothold of life between two deaths, the one behind and the one in front, he felt as if he were dancing, skipping rope, on a little turning platform over a pit, for the witness-box was going round and round; all this would be over. And the hurrying, scurrying, hot, panting fear inside him, that live thing that scurried round him like

a rat; as if there were some little scared animal jumping about in him, and clutching at the inside of his stomach; that, too, would be dead and still. (165)

Borden's syntax in the first sentence creates a sensation of vertigo. Words of movement—"turning," "spinning," "round and round"—and direction—"forward and back," "the one behind and the one in front"—combine with a chain of clauses and phrases, building to a crescendo: "this would be over." The next sentence intensifies the syntactical urgency, as Borden adds increasingly detailed and frenzied images, ending it abruptly "dead and still." Shortly afterwards, Charlie dies in prison awaiting a third trial.

"No Verdict" is notable for the shifting narrative perspectives between an omniscient third person and the first-person stream of consciousness interior dialog that the protagonist alternately conducts with himself, with God, and a deceased character. On the stand, Charlie struggles to respond to questions from the judge:

"Where are you, Susie?" he whispered, the sweat trickling down his face. He listened then—you could see him listening—his head down a little, and to one side, but she didn't answer. It was his own voice that answered, the voice of another self that seemed to be separate in him. It said to him: "Why didn't you tell Susie it didn't matter before it was too late . . . ? Why did you let her take on so? What difference did it make . . . ? She might be alive now if you'd said just one word to her then. . . . Why didn't you? Didn't you know how happy you two were together?"

Yes, why hadn't he? (169-170)

Borden complicates the unstable narrative point of view by relating the story in retrospect, beginning with Charlie on the stand, and revealing events through his spontaneous emotions and fragmented memories. These are supplemented with the external observations of courtroom participants and trial watchers.

The Times Literary Supplement review commends Borden's characterization of the protagonist, admiring the manner in which "his agony and bewilderment is communicated to the reader" (Review of *Four O'clock*). "No Verdict" receives praise

from Louis McQuilland in *The Bookman*: “every detail . . . is magnificently true” in this “strongest story in a collection of marked excellence” (286).

Cooper calls the story “fictional propaganda,” explaining that the legal provision for the death penalty for a suicide pact survivor garnered Borden’s attention when she followed a similar case “in which the injustice of the law was striking” and the defendant eventually died in prison from the stress of enduring a third trial (155). In her words:

We have jurisdiction only over this earth. If one goes beyond judgment for this life, one goes beyond one’s limit of judgment. The law has to protect society but has nothing to do with our immortal souls. I don’t think suicide is a crime. We had no choice about being born, and we have a right to die. (qtd. in Cooper 156)

In response to this real case, Spears introduced a bill to modify the suicide-pact law into the House of Commons, discerning between a person who is “sincerely depressed and wants to die” and a person who influences another to commit suicide (Cooper 155).

Conway asserts that Borden wrote “No Verdict” deliberately to promote this bill (137).

Borden was sued for libel for giving a minor character “a combination of typical English names which she believed were of her own invention” (Cooper 156). In “No Verdict,” Lady Comyns Platt, “a very pretty woman and the wife of a Member of Parliament” comes to court because she is intrigued by a story about the trial in the paper and, “bored with life,” is hoping for some drama (130). The husband of a very real Lady Comyn-Platt, Conservative politician Sir Thomas Comyn-Platt, “objected to being labelled tiresome” and sued for damages (Cooper 157). At trial in 1927, Borden refuted the charge, asserting that the identity was a coincidence and agreeing only to change the name in the US edition and in future reprints (Conway 136). In the American edition of *Four O’clock*, the character in “No Verdict” is named Lady Pym-Dymock.

The last story, “To Meet Jesus Christ,” is notable for Borden’s sharp portrait of the English upper-class and the women who drive it. Lottie, a social-climbing society grandee, believes she has triumphed above all her peers in the mad delusion that she has secured Jesus Christ as a dinner guest. Her esteemed company react with silence, terror, hysteria, and fascination as the hostess continues “smirking and smiling and talking to the empty chair” (285). Borden’s satiric use of absurdity in the story simultaneously subverts Christian orthodoxy, mocks class hierarchies, and legitimizes psychosis.

“To Meet Jesus Christ” elicited strong reactions. *The New Republic* reviewer praises it as a “delicate grotesque horror” and “a triumph of virtuosity,” while *The Spectator* critic calls it “the bitterest comment ever made in good temper on modern social life” (E. H. W.; Review of *Four O’clock*). The review in *The New York Times* derides it as the “most tasteless story, not only [in] this but any book,” labelling it “off the reservation” (“Ten Short Stories”). In *The Evening Standard*, Arnold Bennett concurs with reports that the story “amounted to a sad lapse from good taste,” adding: “Mary Borden will be best forgotten as the author of “To Meet Jesus Christ”” (3).

In his survey of English class culture in the early twentieth century, *Classes and Cultures*, Ross McKibbin claims that Lady Sibyl Colefax was the model for Lottie. The wife of lawyer and future MP Sir Arthur Colefax, she gained a reputation as a hostess who specialized in the capture of the famous. According to McKibben, Lady Colefax’s “determination . . . ‘lion-hunting’ as her contemporaries called it, had a frantic character which often unnerved the pursued. The desire to accumulate the most successful, the most fashionable, the most powerful, seemed to dominate her existence” (25).

McKibbin's identification likely came from John Beverley Nichols's book, *A Case of Human Bondage*, about the marriage and divorce of writer William Somerset Maugham and his wife, Syrie. Nichols recounts an evening at the house of the Maugham's neighbor, Lady Sibyl Colefax, "a gallant old snob" whose salons included literati and intellectuals from around the world: "She stretched her nets very wide, anchoring them to the somber coasts of Bloomsbury, setting them cunningly through every winding channel of Mayfair, and then tossing them over the Channel, across the Atlantic and far beyond" (Nichols 53). On the evening described by Nichols, the "atmosphere was somewhat tense" owing to the recent publication of "To Meet Jesus Christ" in which the "principal character bore a suspicious resemblance to Sybil and which was a source of *sotto voce* comment" in the corners of the room (Nichols 54). Nichols asked Maugham if he had read the story, to which Maugham replied: "Of course, my dear B-B-Beverley, and I am quite sure that it must be t-t-true. Dear Mary has not such vivid powers of invention" (qtd. in Nichols 54).

Reviews of the collection were positive. "Miss Borden is a writer of considerable talent," H. P. Hartley states in *The Saturday Review*: "These short stories show a genuine versatility. . . . [T]here is excellent material in her stories, excellently handled. And she has wit too" (Review of *Four O'clock*).⁴³ *The Spectator* review declares it "brilliant," "among the best published for a considerable time," and states, "Mrs. Borden writes with great ease and understanding, both of high life and low" (Review of *Four O'clock*). In *The Bookman*, Louis McQuilland observes that Borden "is as much at her literary ease among the tents of the lowly as the palaces of the caliphs" (286). This variety, absent

⁴³ See also "Four O'clock and After" in *Brooklyn Life and Society*.

from her previous novels, may be attributed to her proximity to Spears's political activities, which brought her into closer contact with people outside her own socio-economic class than she had experienced since the years spent in India decades earlier.

Many reviews acknowledged Borden's blend of realism and modernist features and the appeal of these modes to middlebrow readers and literary highbrows. Borden's tales "meet the requirements both of Academe and Grub Street," Grace Frank writes in *The Saturday Review of Literature*: "the former will acclaim them with enthusiasm, the latter will accept them with an air of self-conscious righteousness" (753).⁴⁴ *The New Republic* reviewer concurs: "Borden has played tricks with her unusually accomplished style and her flair for drama" (E. H. W.).

The traditionalist Arnold Bennett acknowledges Borden's versatility: "[S]he is a very bright, clever writer who can be read without excessive fatigue," and her technique, which he disapproves: "She has two faults . . . common among young or youngish novelists who devote themselves to the portrayal of smart or high-brow circles. The first is the she describes her circles without any background of the general life. . . . The second is that she rarely writes natural dialog" (3). The reviewer for *The Times Literary Supplement* observes that "Mrs. Borden likes to observe failure," a virtue of modernist literature (Review of *Four O'clock*). *The New York Times* reviewer dislikes her modernist style, and calls the collection inharmonious, comprising "'arty' stories. . . made out of nothing, out of literary emotions and feelings, as if Mrs. Borden had read and admired too much and too widely" ("Ten Short Stories"). The staid *Boston Evening Transcript* is more explicit, but dated in its nomenclature, calling the book "bizarre . . . modern and

⁴⁴ See also Kennedy.

vortistical,” and warning readers that they would find it dark and depressing despite its virtuous morals (Review of *Four O'clock*).

In 1926, Spears began working on his own literary project, an account of his experiences with the British Expeditionary Force during World War I. Writing was a new endeavor for Spears, who struggled to find viable career options following his election defeat in 1924. He was sensitive to Borden’s feelings about Turner’s lack of earnings, and realized that the family was living beyond the means her fortune could support (Egremont 98). He had forged business connections in central and eastern Europe in the years after the war, but these were proving unprofitable as well as dangerous. In 1925, Spears had joined the Conservative party, following his friend and mentor Winston Churchill, who encouraged his political ambitions (Egremont 115). He made another unsuccessful attempt at a parliamentary seat, at Bosworth in 1927.

If Spears was busy pursuing business and political ambitions, Borden was even more so. She managed their household and children, supported a variety of social causes and charities, and spoke and canvassed for Spears’s campaigns. Michael was a frail child, and diagnosed with a low immunity to infections (Conway 146). As well, there was ongoing conflict with Turner over their daughters’ activities. Between escorting the girls to Turner, attending campaign and charity events, holidays in the countryside, vacations abroad, and keeping up with her writing, Borden was continually on the go. Despite a full complement of staff to assist her, responsibility for these concerns fell on Borden. Both she and Spears continued to indulge in independent travel, and Maurice’s increasingly frequent accompaniment of Spears likely created more anxiety for Borden.

In 1927, Borden contributed a weekly column to *The Graphic* titled “London Letters.” These wide-ranging epistles allowed Borden the discretion to address a variety of issues seemingly free from editorial direction or restrictions. Running for twenty-one weeks between February and July with a length of 1,500 to 2,500 words, Borden’s ruminations reveal her attitudes towards current political, social, and cultural events. In her inaugural essay, Borden explains that her purpose “is to represent the woman’s point of view on affairs of the day” (26 Feb. 1927). These are not meandering recollections of leisurely travel or outings to the theater; nearly all her letters express strong ideological or political viewpoints in no-nonsense language. She advocates for education, suffrage, and employment for women. She complains about laziness, encouraging inventiveness and enterprise as the cure for unemployment. She champions modernization, from the cinema to skyscrapers to mass production technologies, often contrasting old England with new America. Communists, Labour agitators, and Chicago politicians are targets of vitriol, and she shows no reluctance in castigating well-known leaders and writers for taking positions or making statements with which she disagrees.

Of most interest to this project are the opinions and estimations of literary culture and the process of writing which Borden reveals in her “London Letters.” Two main themes emerge from this series: disdain for the highbrow, and regret for the frenetic pace of her life. Although she never defines highbrow for her readers, she implicates the Bloomsbury group and clearly intends the label as a derogatory one. “Highbrows,” Borden asserts, is a “detestable word for detestable people” (9 Apr. 1927). In an early letter, she describes highbrow writers as “the neurasthenic, self-conscious, precious group . . . who are supposed to be forming the literary taste of the day.” With sarcasm, she

decries “the Bloomsbury obsession. I refer to an *idée fixe* in the minds of our choicer saints, that anything which gives delight to the masses must be bad art” (26 Feb. 1927).

Borden is not criticizing the artistic or literary creations of the Bloomsbury group; rather, she is offended by their opinion that the best art and literature is that which is unintelligible to the average person. In a letter in which she discusses class differences in England in terms of pastimes, Borden explains:

[I have] omitted the highbrows . . . the people whose pleasures are supposed to be artistic and intellectual. But I have been writing of amusements, and the point about these people is that they don't amuse themselves. I am . . . referring to . . . those who claim to be extraordinary, and truly in the effort to attain to the unusual, the abnormal, and the brilliant, they become very dreary.

Their only pleasure is in the bitter satisfaction of a lovely sense of superiority, and the exotic exhaustion resulting from an unceasing attempt to be unnatural. In a word, they are the unhappiest of the lot. (11 June 1927)

Borden cannot dispute the quality of art and literature that Bloomsbury members attempt to create— “the unusual, the abnormal, and the brilliant”—as these features are to be found in her most experimental and modernist works. Her quarrel with the highbrows focuses on who they are and how they comport themselves rather than on the artistic and literary works they produce and value. Her denouncements stem from the group's self-imposed exclusivity and their artificially derived sense of superiority.

Borden was no stranger to the Bloomsbury group: she and Turner hosted E. M. Forster in Lahore and London; John Maynard Keynes was a repeated guest after the war. Borden's past enjoyment of their company leads one to wonder why her attitude changed. Resentment at her exclusion may be one explanation. “I am a frivolous sort of ignorant, open-air woman,” Borden explains, “with a distaste for secret societies, secret cults, secret compacts, and secret purpose” (2 Apr. 1927). Although the group's existence was no secret, their boundaries were clear, and Borden was not invited to join them.

Exposure to politics on a national and international stage, particularly during Spears's unsuccessful Parliamentary race as a Conservative in the industrial and mining district of Bosworth in 1927, also effected Borden's attitude toward highbrows. She was taken aback by the extremism evident in the Midlands, and rails against the "Red Snobs" in a June letter. "They use the word Bohemian. . . . They use many of the words and phrases used by the young intelligentsia," Borden warns: "Some of our highbrows who toy with new ideas would be surprised at the potency of words in the coalfields" (18 June 1927). Borden's newly-voiced disdain for Bloomsbury may be a transference of her experiences with campaign agitators who self-identified as Bohemians.

As well, Borden's reaction may have had a more personal source, as she reveals in a "London Letter" later that summer:

A Socialist-Communist paper has . . . called me "a middle-class novelist," not a second-rate novelist, with which term I could not quarrel, but a novelist who is a woman of the middle classes.

This is disturbing to me as a writer and an important confession of artistic faith on the part of the proletarian leaders. A bad book, you see, by a worker is a better book than a good book by an aristocrat or a bourgeois. In writing, painting, music, only the uneducated need apply for laurels in the Socialist State. . . . (16 July 1927)

Without more insight into the offending paper's intention, it is nonetheless reasonable to speculate that the class label applied to Borden is not that she herself is a member of the middle class, but that her writing appeals to the middle class. The unstated implication here is that Borden's writing is middlebrow. Her reaction confirms that this label was neither meant nor received as a compliment. The accusation infuriates Borden, who would prefer her writing judged "second-rate" over herself being identified as "middle-class," or being tacitly accused of producing middlebrow fiction. Borden packs a lot of ambiguity into the few sentences that follow.

Her assumption about the socio-economic class alignment of political party affiliations, while accurate, skirts the issue of the brows. Borden's labels of "good" and "bad" books remain undefined; one must assume that there is "bad" highbrow literature just as there are "good" lowbrow novels. If lowbrow equates with proletariat, does highbrow align with aristocratic? Is "a good book by an aristocrat or a bourgeois" self-referential? It must be, since the only other class option presented by Borden is that of "worker," which she clearly is not. Borden's affront arises from two perceptions: the class-based dismissal of her writing by a political group she despises, and that group's undeserved qualification to adjudicate the quality of "writing, painting, music." When she criticizes the "Red Snobs" for practicing highbrow elitism, her ire is informed not only by her loathing for the Bloomsbury group but is also aroused by her political prejudices.

Borden's views about the class of people she labels highbrows persisted for years. During a publicity tour in the United States in 1930, Borden refers to Virginia Woolf and David Garnett as "our 'exquisites,'" because she "hate[s] the word highbrow" (qtd. in McLaughlin). Later, she disparages Virginia Woolf as "the mad Madonna of London," and claims that parts of London were "drowned by the Bohemian effrontery of Bloomsbury" (qtd. in Cousin Eve). Several years later, in a column titled "Highbrows and Patriotism" in *The San Francisco Examiner*, Borden again links highbrows with socialism, complaining that "to decry the feeling of patriotism has become a fashion and the habit of highbrows, intellectual snobs and Socialists." She excuses socialists for these feelings, because she appreciates the struggles of the working class, but she is unsparing in her attack on "intellectual snobs," calling each "a sneak, a cad, an utterly ignoble creature" for their display of "disloyalty." When she concludes: "I think I am getting sick

of highbrows,” it is evident that this sobriquet applies to a select group of people, not a cultural mode (“Highbrows”). At no time does Borden refer, either positively or negatively, to art or music or literature as highbrow in concept or construction.

Borden’s distinction between those who produce works of art or literature and their creations mirrors her personal conflict between the manner in which she lived her life and the art that she produced as a writer. Her “London Letters” in *The Graphic* provide the first public glimpses of the tension she senses between experiencing life and creating literature. These early manifestations of her discomfort commence as general explorations of modes of living. Her ruminations begin with questions: “[I]s this cherished modern passion for moving rapidly in boats, trains, and motor-cars from one place to another really so valuable as experience? Is it a way of experiencing life at all? Isn’t it rather, simply the most agreeable way of avoiding it?” (12 Mar. 1927). Borden’s rhetorical turn from a positive to a negative inquiry prepares readers for her soothingly-worded opinion: “I have a feeling that the fruit of wisdom ripens and the flowers of thought bloom in seclusion, in solitude, in the monk’s cell or the laboratory; the same with art” (12 Mar. 1927). In this brilliantly crafted sentence, Borden leads her reader gently, “I have a feeling,” using traditional, romantic tropes, “fruit of wisdom” and “flowers of thought,” offering a non-conformist proposition, “in seclusion, in solitude,” that she buries behind concrete, indisputable imagery, “the monk’s cell or the laboratory.” The understated reserve of Borden’s appended clause, “the same with art,” leads into an unexpectedly firm warning: “Too much of this sort of material [observation] is bad for creative work” (12 Mar. 1927). With this segue, Borden shifts from assessing the effect of experience on contemplation to creative productivity.

The intensification in Borden's tone of this "London Letter" accompanies a shift from generalization to introspection, as she describes how excessive activity interferes with her creative process. Her intense schedule and many pursuits, Borden believes, negatively affect her life, which "has been cut into bits, and has been shortened" (12 Mar. 1927). Although a lifetime of constant travel and activity has produced a "magic scrapbook" in her mind, Borden discloses a correspondingly adverse consequence:

[A]t the same time another feeling haunts me, the feeling that my life and the world I live in are too crowded; that by doing so much and seeing so much I am missing something, something hidden, unique, and precious that is waiting for me alone; some little thing that will never be discovered by anyone else: something that I might perhaps derive if I withdraw from all this feast of fascinating phenomena into a dark, narrow, silent sort of cupboard or closet. (12 Mar. 1927)

Although Borden is unable to define the "something" which eludes her, her conviction that having too vigorous a life has been distinctly disadvantageous remains firm. Her speculation that sequestering herself away would encourage or enable discovery of the "missing something" stops short of the conclusion hinted at earlier: that it would improve her writing. While Borden pines for a more passive existence, she does not make a connection between this altered mode of living and her literary efforts in this letter.

Borden considered writing her true calling and profession. Reflecting on her literary career for a newspaper interview in 1925, Borden describes her writing practices: "I try to [set aside time every day], though sometimes the demands on my time prevent a regular schedule for writing. But I usually retire to the top of our house, and then I am out of town to everybody" (qtd. in McCommon). In response to a question about what goes into the making of a novelist, she replied:

One must have a great interest in human life, in human beings of all types, a capacity for hard work and a very uncompromising, critical attitude toward your own work, never doing anything except the thing which is as perfect as you can

make it. It is a temptation to dash off a story now and then, but this should be resisted, I am never satisfied with my own work because I am always trying to do something that I can't do . . . I am determined not to let it go! The one thing I want in life is time, I never have enough of it. (qtd. in McCommon)

Any suggestion that her writing suffered to some degree or could have been improved by easing her schedule or modifying her activities remained unaddressed for now.

As Borden was beginning to engage as a writer in public discussions about literature and literary creation, she was also writing the most ambitiously modernist novels of her literary career. *Flamingo* and *Jehovah's Day*, published in 1927 and 1928, respectively, show Borden's prowess with the modernist mode. These novels depict alternative representations of worlds in which the ascendance of technology, urbanization, and capitalism is placed in opposition to spirituality, individuality, and community. The resulting tension and conflict, represented in Borden's books through the fragmentation of personal, domestic, political, and corporate relationships, produces an overwhelming sense of hopelessness and futility.

Flamingo; or the American Tower was published in 1927 by William Heinemann in the United Kingdom, and by Doubleday, Page in the United States. A larger advance on the novel indicates that her publishers expected *Flamingo* to be more successful than any of her previous works (Memorandum of Agreement 14 July 1927). Aside from *The Forbidden Zone*, her World War I collection published in 1929, *Flamingo* is the only one of Borden's books that continues to receive critical attention today. It was featured in a fifty-year retrospective article in *The Times Literary Supplement* and included in scholarly articles investigating modern American literature of the period (Bigelow; Eckman 127).

In *Flamingo* Borden posits modernity, represented by New York City, as a threat to civilization. One retrospective literary critic, writing in 1941, called *Flamingo* the “highest peak” of Borden’s work as a modernist:

Upon a huge canvas she drew the picture of contemporary American civilization, drama, frenzy, imagination welded together by successes and disasters. The most spectacular of all American cities is seen in perspective, looked down upon from the eminence of the tower from which hope and achievement are finally dashed to fragments. (R. K.)

In the novel, Borden creates a modern, materialistic American culture in conflict with metaphysical idealism, a struggle seen in the clash of contradictory human values. These encounters revolve around the urban center of New York City:

Our story has to do with a group of English people who are on their reluctant way to America, and with a group of Americans. This dozen or so of men and women are drawing together as the result of some cause that is obscure: some complicated delicate interplay of forces perhaps beyond the stars, some pattern of small accident, minute chance and so on. . . . (9)

This introduction presages the structure of Borden’s novel: the first half of the narrative develops the book’s distinctive characters and draws them into the locus of the city, and the second half explores their interactions, conflicts, and consequences.

The thematic tensions in *Flamingo* manifest themselves in interpersonal struggles. Borden develops rich human characters and uses them to illustrate and contrast social and ideological factions. “New York is the magnet” (9) that draws these characters together into a disintegrating orbit around the novel’s protagonist. Peter Campbell, a genius architect of ideals and imagination, is conflicted by the excitement offered by the city and the resulting challenges to civilization. Fascinated by science and engineering, he believes in the perfectibility of man and a personal “sense of Destiny” (5). He has a futuristic vision of the city and envisions an ideal skyscraper that will redefine the skyline

and the lives of its inhabitants. Determined to build his visionary city block-sized tower, Peter works tirelessly on his designs, revising and refining them to perfection.

This introspective, sensitive dreamer is married to Adelaide, a cold, overindulged society woman: “a marionette . . . an elaborate doll, animated by a semblance of life” with “a machine inside her . . . instead of such ordinary human organs as a heart pumping warm blood” (141). Borden generalizes American women as self-absorbed and shallow, living “in a sort of Arabian Nights harem . . . a lovely little bunch of Narcissuses, very much in love with themselves” (142). Their fascination with things of English origin is an indicator of American superficiality. Encouraged by her mother, who is discontented with her own life, Adelaide turns on Peter. She remonstrates him for his drinking, mocks him as an “intermediate,” and threatens to divorce him.

In contrast to his marital mismatch, Peter holds a secret infatuation with Frederika Joyce, an English socialite. Once romantic and adventurous, Frederika has been destroyed by her marriage to the career English diplomat Victor Joyce: disillusioned by the knowledge that Victor’s long-time paramour had selected her to be his wife, depressed by his expectation to be “decorative in a formal way” (54), and drained by an unending schedule of activities in support of his political career: “She was tired to death of her crowded life, she was no good now for anything else and wanted only one thing—to be quiet and to be alone . . . she was like a drugged woman” (70). Although friends in childhood, Peter and Frederika have led separate lives since, their paths crossing several times in foreign cities for fleeting moments that never allowed for recognition. Theirs is a mystical relationship, “purely spiritual . . . a matter of secret chemistry” (Lawrence 266).

Peter and Frederika are linked by their mutual affinity for technology and his unexplained telepathic visions of her house. A painted flamingo screen in her bedroom serves as an objective correlative; it represents Peter's relentless, almost possessed, pursuit of the "elusive sprite called Beauty" (155). Although the screen never moves out of its aristocratic home in England, the anthropomorphized bird materializes in the corner of Peter's office and goads him in his quest. He seeks the technical, structural beauty of the city and a spiritual, mystical beauty of omniscience. When he catches each, like the ephemeral exotically plumed bird that is merely a painted façade on silk in a room across the ocean, so he finds that what he has obtained is not his either.

Frederika's presence has so affected Peter's life, and so mentally in tune with her does he feel, that he has been able to recreate her house in the suburbs of New York City from the foundations to the drawing room wallpaper without realizing it. Like Peter, Frederika secretly nourishes an interest in science and a fascination with machinery, which her husband denigrates as middle-class. When the pair finally reconnect, circumstances prevent the romantic conclusion to which the narrative appears heading. Instead of the closure offered at the conclusion of a conventional domestic drama, a sense of disjointed futility remains.

Borden surrounds this trio with a diverse cast, assembled on a transatlantic crossing from London to New York City aboard *The Aquitania*. Victor Joyce is travelling to defend the United Kingdom's interests in meetings with President Calvin Coolidge and officials of the United States government. Frederika is with him, as is her friend Bridget Prime, and Victor's secretary, Robert Parkinson. Americans on the ship include Ikey Daw, a Jewish financier from New York, and Augusta Green, a Broadway actress. Later,

at a Harlem jazz club, several African-American characters are introduced, including Carolina Sue, a singer, and her accompanist on the piano, Big Joe. In rural upstate New York, Peter's widowed mother lives on a farm with his mentally disabled brother.

Aboard *The Aquitania*, Ikey becomes infatuated with Bridget. Once in New York, Peter makes Bridget's acquaintance and the two begin an affair. To retaliate, Ikey attempts to scuttle Peter's financial backing for his skyscraper. At the same time, Victor and Adelaide begin an affair. In the end, everyone returns to their rightful positions, except Peter. Adelaide announces that she is divorcing Peter, and her father forces Ikey into financial ruin and remonstrates the Manhattan Building Company's directors into building Peter's skyscraper. Frederika, in a blatant rejection of American modernism, chooses to return to England with Victor.

Victor is described as a partner to the old lady, England: "He is impressive. . . . [T]aller and more massive than most men. . . . He is like a large solid, a block of something of a close consistency, like cement" (10). In his career, Victor has resolutely served England and she has stood by him.

Steadily, he had mounted from strength to strength, carrying the respect of England with him. . . . [H]e knew England, and was certain that England would behave as he expected her to; and, of course, he was right. England had behaved as he expected, and had always ended by coming back to him and asking him to take care of her. (42)

Victor and his country have a marital and sexual relationship, with the diplomat assuming the dominant role of provider and protector, and England filling the domestic and subservient role of a wife or mother. There is an unspoken assumption that Victor expects the same deference from his wife, Frederika. Her decision is an acceptance of this arrangement as well as a rejection of Peter and modernity:

One knew where one was with Victor, one knew what one could expect. . . . Victor was all on the level, compact between his habits and traditions. He forged ahead like a train, but Peter swooped about in the air and looped the loop, and seemed likely to crash at any moment. . . . [F]or a husband, Frederika evidently preferred the strong man who didn't care so very much; and although the giant profiles of those tapering American towers had thrilled her, New York City, exciting as it was, wasn't her home. It was a strange place—too strange. (410)

Peter cannot stand the thought of living without Frederika. Unable to resolve his obsession with futuristic architecture with this “nostalgic primitivism,” he is driven to suicide by the tension between these two incompatible paths (Eckman 127). Margaret Lawrence observes: “[N]o freedom to express oneself in a career of one's own can atone to the lonely spirit for its loneliness” (267). By choosing death, Peter capitulates to the relentless progress of modern, urban life, and acknowledges that “we've been tricked, hoodwinked, fooled . . . into thinking it was something more, something wonderful and endless, with a meaning – but all that's nonsense . . .” (224). In his final soliloquy to the phantom flamingo, Peter ironically twists his triumph at finding Frederika into defeat: “I'm finished. I've got nothing more to do here, and I'm quitting this planet” (415).

Flamingo is a study of geographical contrasts reflected in their accompanying social values. The threatening modernity of New York City contrasts with the controlled, measured maturity of London, which is different yet, from the agrarian, picturesque countryside of Campbelltown, New York. Borden's characterizations of locales are particularly and harshly racialized in *Flamingo*: the African-American club denizens and the Jewish financier representing the uncontrolled, dehumanizing growth of New York City. These contrast with England's representation by the refined and staid diplomat and his wife Frederika, who Borden masculinizes to emphasize her unexotic nature, and the hard-working widow and her dimwitted son in the countryside of New York. Borden's

idealization of London and nostalgia for pre-industrial America are threatened by increasing dependence on and interactions with the city (Eckman 134).

In *Flamingo*, New York City appears as a living sentient character, “perhaps the principal character” of the story (14). It is alive in a threatening manner: “The city clanged and roared . . . it was a portrait in stone and steel and reinforced concrete . . . it was a living thing . . . a monster . . . the force of electricity beat in its steel veins and animated its stone sinews” (5). The skyscrapers of the metropolis are both “the hero and the villain,” one critic observes: “[T]he people of the book are not very much more than a background for the buildings” (Anthony 632). Peter’s grand, unified concept for New York City is built on a fervent belief in human progress aimed toward omniscience that relies dangerously on science and engineering: “He was fond of finding resemblances between men and machines. They did almost everything that man could do much better than men, and many things that men couldn’t do at all” (5).

Borden swiftly undermines Peter’s vision, revealing the fallacy of machine superiority. Within a page, the narrative quickly shifts from Peter’s perspective in his Manhattan skyscraper overlooking the city to a terrifying description of World War I as an instrument of a consciously malevolent mechanized organism.

Half a dozen nations had for some undefinable reason been filled with hatred of each other. And as if anxious to help the machines in the business of exterminating the human race, they had fought until they were tired of killing each other, until there were really not many young, healthy men left among them. It was really the machines that were at the bottom of it all. Thousands of guns and innumerable engines of destruction had been waiting, champing at the bit, bursting to do something. . . . They had had a good time of it; they had had their money’s worth; they had had everything their own way during the war. They had blown ten million men to smithereens. . . . [A]nd they had come out of it exultant, above themselves. They hadn’t known until the war how powerful they were. Now they knew. You could imagine them laughing among themselves . . .

chuckling and rumbling . . . over the joke of having turned men into their slaves and devoured millions of them. (6-7)

Borden's language and metaphor in this section extends the modernist, mechanized imagery that she used powerfully in her poems written during World War I, particularly "The Hill" and "There is a Monster in the Valley." In *Flamingo*, the description takes on a troublingly sinister overtone because "the iron armies" and the "regiment of monsters" (*The Forbidden Zone* 185-6) have evolved from advanced tools of modern warfare to an intelligent presence. Here, they intentionally create and enjoy the war that men have become the disposable means of waging.

The United States and the United Kingdom have distinct personalities in *Flamingo*. London, representing the United Kingdom, is personified as wise, respectable, and dignified: "[U]nder her cap of fog," she "huddled herself closer in her dingy wraps of mist and smoke, drawing them round her haughtily, in the grand manner, as a great dowager" (25-26). America's personality is youthful, rich, and idealistic: "See how clean my face is," it boasts, "see how I sparkle and shine, and just see how I hustle. Could anyone resist me? Won't they all come flocking? Am I not beautiful and young and alluring? And am I not the greatest heiress on earth?" (28). Borden uses this geographic synecdoche to describe the political action of the plot and contrast the countries:

London and New York had been talking. . . . They had been trying to understand each other, but with very moderate success. They saw things differently, or perhaps New York didn't try very hard to understand that old woman across the Atlantic. . . . The young are inclined to be harsh in their judgments. (25)

At the end of the novel, the international conflict disappears, becoming as insignificant to New York's progress as the lives of Frederika and Peter.

Flamingo met with mixed reviews. Borden's ambitious scope and intentions were the subject of both praise and criticism. "This imaginative effort to put the greatest of modern cities on paper is quite remarkable," Marjorie Cook writes in *The Times Literary Supplement*, noting that although Borden "is inconsistent and sentimental . . . she has written a notable book" (Review of *Flamingo*). In *The New York Times*, Louis Kronenrenilk concludes that "the themes and elements of *Flamingo* are so numerous and often so irreconcilable that the book eludes all sense of form, all basic unity." He calls *Flamingo* "muddled art" in which "Borden has tried to do too much at once and, however stimulating her attempt, in any enduring sense she has failed."⁴⁵

Borden's stereotypical characterizations were scrutinized by reviewers. Joseph Anthony, writing in *The Century Magazine*, lambasts Borden's characterizations of America and Americans as unconvincing and stereotypically wrong, and accuses her of "failure of sympathetic insight" and "wrong observation" (634). While the sensational characters give the reader "a cross-section of life," Kronenrenilk asks: "[O]ught they not give meaning as well as surface reality to the huge canvas they compose? . . . [W]hat we miss in the book is a deeper sounding of these lives for their own sake, a knowledge of how they were inwardly affected by their contacts and their environments." In contrast, Ernest Sutherland Bates commends for Borden her excellent characterizations and her portrait of "the demoniac personality of New York" ("Metropolis").⁴⁶

⁴⁵ See also Anthony; Bigelow; Hartley, "Review of *Flamingo*"; Lohrke, "Review of *Flamingo*" in *The Spectator*.

⁴⁶ See also Doubleday.

Some critics recognized Borden's modernist techniques in the book.⁴⁷ The most flattering review is provided by the American academic Ernest Sutherland Bates in *The Saturday Review of Literature*, in which he lauds Borden as "a distinctly major writer." *Flamingo* "show[s] a splendid scorn for all the popular devices of the novel," he asserts, pointing to Borden's experimentation with narrative form and plotting:

It is as if we were being taken through the inside of some enormous machine and were shown its wheels and bands and cylinders, its saws and blades, until we grasp its potential power and impatiently long to see it start; then . . . slowly and imperceptibly the wheels begin to turn; they move faster and faster with increasing momentum and we perceive with terror that men and women are being ground up in it and that no human power can stop it. ("Metropolis")

Where others read Borden's narrative as uncontrolled and clumsy, Bates recognizes the deliberation and method of her writing that signals a successful modernist novel where others paint it as a failed realist book (Eckman 133). Marjorie Grant Cook draws together Borden's larger than life themes with her character's actions:

Her desire is to see the city from another star . . . the glory of its material ambitions expressed in monstrous architecture, in increasing speed, in mechanical devices that supersede man's hand and brain; at the same time she wants to realize acutely man's reaction to the towers that soar above him, to the immense uncontrolled forces he has let loose on the earth, and his puny efforts to hide himself from them when he feels overwhelmed. (Review of *Flamingo*)

Not all critics appreciated Borden's unconventional technique. L. P. Hartley complains: "A suggestion of hysteria pervades the book. . . . [S]he drags from their modest homes all the odds and ends of culture and metaphysics she can find, and hurls them into the melting-pot" (Review of *Flamingo*). Writing in the weekly feminist magazine *Time and Tide*, Anne Doubleday calls it "a curiously restless production" with a "tawdry and rather pretentious mixture of cynicism and sentimentality" that instills "a

⁴⁷ See also H. W. R.

sense of discomfort and breathlessness in reading it.” *Flamingo* is like “an intellectual jazz band” that is taken too seriously, Doubleday announces: “I have read clever claptrap, I prefer to read claptrap that is not clever” (1016).⁴⁸

Concurrent with her increasingly modernist writing, Borden embarked on a parallel literary career chronicling social behaviors and manners. Unlike her candid, unbounded “London Letters” column in *The Graphic* in which she freely discussed divisive subjects like politics and religion, her new articles address uncontroversial subjects and project a light-hearted tone. Borden wrote for a variety of American and British magazines with differing content, audiences, and political orientations. In articles published in British periodicals, Borden emphasized her American roots, but she wrote from the perspective of an Englishwoman when writing for American audiences. For example, in May 1927, “The English Week-End Party” appeared in *Vogue*. Borden’s description of the British country-house weekend party captures the lavish spending and entertaining habits of the English upper-classes at their leisure, written to appeal to an American middlebrow audience interested in high fashion and society women. A pair of Borden’s articles in *The Spectator*, a British weekly, offer unflattering characterizations of “The American Woman” and “The American Man” as culturally inferior to their English counterparts due to the American obsession with modernity. “The American man,” she observes, “is an insect swarming over the machine” (“American Man” 958).

Borden published her next novel, *Jehovah’s Day*, in 1928. It is undoubtedly her strangest novel. In it, she presents a domestic drama in the guise of science fiction, mingled with religious philosophy and secondary political themes. In this novel, Borden

⁴⁸ See also D. B. W.

undertakes an imaginative effort to describe the progression of life across the whirling planet, through a combination of science, fantasy, and history. *Jehovah's Day* also demonstrates the author's continuing experimentation with literary techniques. In it, she uses stream of consciousness narration, irony, and ambiguity to develop an atmosphere of futility and human insignificance. *Jehovah's Day* was published by William Heinemann in London in 1928 and by Doubleday, Doran and Company in New York in 1929.

Jehovah's Day was likely inspired by Alfred North Whitehead's book, *Science and the Modern World*, which Borden reports reading numerous times during 1927 ("London Letter" 16 July 1927). In his book, Whitehead, a prominent mathematician and philosopher, criticizes scientific materialism and argues that reality consists of processes rather than material objects, and that processes are best defined by their relations with other processes. Borden describes it as "the most valuable thing I can pass on to those who . . . are passionately interest in the great and bewildering drama of the world" ("London Letter" 16 July 1927). Borden does not mention Whitehead's subsequent work, *Religion in the Making*, although it is likely that she read it as well. *Jehovah's Day* obliquely refers to the philosopher's articulation of process theology, most evidently in Borden's attempt to create a unified universe in which each individual entity exists in relationship to all others, unbound by nature or time.

Jehovah's Day's narrative begins with the moment when the first land-dwelling creature drags himself from the primeval slime to become the ancestor of the human race. Borden names this character Eryops, the Mud Puppy, and identifies his movement from the sea to land as a milestone for humanity. Against this evolutionary backdrop, a modern-day romantic entanglement emerges and resolves. The plot touches on current

events, including the general strike in England, the Communist menace, and forest fires in the Esterel, in a narrative that interweaves science fiction and modern domestic drama.

As in many of Borden's novels, the plot of *Jehovah's Day* is driven by a romantic triangle. Ann, the widowed mother of Hilary Stewart, has remarried Peregrine Wood. Gradually, she and her life-long friend, Patrick O'Hagan come to realize and express their love for each other. When Ann and Patrick's plans for a life together clash with his compulsive geographic explorations, Ann returns to Peregrine.

The three men are archetypes: "Three explorers, exploring different worlds" (67). Peregrine, a world-renowned mathematician, represents intellect: "Thinking was for him like indulgence in some dangerous and exciting drug" (29). His rival, Patrick, is a scientist and explorer who disdains the "machine craze of his age"; he is "enthralled with the psychic substance of life itself. He worshipped the eternal fire" (38, 39). Both men seek essential knowledge, albeit from different perspectives; their quests are variants of the same character trait. In contrast, Hilary is a daredevil airplane stunt pilot, fascinated by engines and mechanical things, an absorption that differentiates him from the cerebral and mystic characters of Peregrine and Patrick. "[T]rained to be the Modern Man," Hilary is defined by his use of machines and his likeness to one: "He seemed . . . like a loaded rifle" (55, 54). There is a sly irony in this representation; by the 1920s rifles were not very modern devices. While the metaphoric "loaded rifle" explains his propensity for impulsive and dangerous behavior, the semantics create a connection between modernity and destruction which undermines the superficial superiority of the "Modern Man."

These three men are tied together through Ann, their mother, wife, and friend. Gifted with second sight, Ann has visions which allow her to see the future, sometimes

with clarity and other times with ambiguity, but never for any momentous effect. Ann's second sight is ironic because this extra-worldly talent expected to benefit or privilege her is an imperfect, and frustrating, gift that causes anxiety. The emptiness and meaninglessness of this purportedly special gift undermines both the significance of the talent and its source. Whether Ann's second sight is an accident of nature or a gift from a divine being, there is an implied diminishment of that source.

Numerous subplots involving doyennes of Mayfair society and their hangers-on, poor miners in the English Midlands, and increasingly shrill Communist agitators drag the action in *Jehovah's Day* from London through the French countryside to the outskirts of Cannes. A stifling mistral wind culminates in an engulfing conflagration which resolves loose plot lines with several coincidental character deaths. In the end, virtue triumphs over immorality: wicked people suffer, and the good and gifted are rewarded.

Borden wraps the stories of her characters within an unusual framing device, comingling evolutionary science with religious dogma. Her characters inhabit a small fraction of the earth's one hundred million year-long day, the titular "Jehovah's Day." In this meta-history, the earth, the narrator states, "is a tragic figure surely, and the great personality of this tale" (6). Humanity's place in this expansive view of history is juxtaposed against the emergence of sentient life from the primordial sea onto land in the form of Eryops, the Mud Puppy, a giant prehistoric tadpole compelled on his migration only by basic physiologic needs. Existing above, and providing guidance to these characters, is the Cosmos, Borden's interpretation of a cosmological deity.

Borden's perplexing mix of science and religion, specifically biological evolution, cosmological science, and Christian eschatology, is present in book's opening sentence:

“The day began, the day I have chosen because it is the only one I knew of Jehovah’s days, with the appearance on the swampy shore of an inland sea, one hundred million years ago by the clock on the mantelpiece, of a strange and clumsy creature, my grotesque father” (1). Unpacking this sentence reveals the ways in which Borden uses these complex concepts to create ambiguity and a sense of humanity’s insignificance.

Jehovah’s Day opens with a declarative statement: “The day began.” This phrase recalls the opening chapter of the Biblical Book of Genesis, in which God creates the heaven and earth and all life in a series of six days. Borden’s repeated use of “day” in this opening—“The day began, the day I have chosen”—echoes the language of Genesis in brevity, diction, and repetition. In the Bible, the sentence: “And there was evening and there was morning, one day,” appears in Genesis 1 verses 5, 8, 13, 19, 23, and 31. This association is reinforced by the phrase “one . . . of Jehovah’s days,” words which emphasize the religious nature of time and universal origins in *Jehovah’s Day*. By calling it “one . . . of Jehovah’s days,” Borden suggests the six days of the Biblical creation, specifically the sixth day of creation described in the Book of Genesis in which God calls forth “creeping things and beasts of the earth” (1.24). This contributes to the first point of ambiguity in *Jehovah’s Day*: to which definition of “Jehovah’s day” does Borden refer?

Throughout the book, the narrator refers to the period of “one hundred million years,” cited in the introductory sentence as representative of the Earth’s lifecycle. In this context, the entire span of humankind’s existence occurs within a metaphorical single day. Borden explains this allusion to her readers:

One must get the scale. The Mud Puppy appeared at dawn. Man arrived on the scene in the evening. At midday the first bird took the air. The sky at daybreak was low. It had lifted by high noon, golden hour of the great dinosaurs. . . . By evening, human beings were exploring with telescopes the Island Universes of the

starry firmament, and were peering over the edge of a spiritual world, as yet only dimly apprehended. (5)

This description correlates to the six-day Biblical creation period, compressing a week into one day, hence “Jehovah’s Day.” The title may also refer to the Biblically prophesied events of the Apocalypse, when God will judge, and punish, the nations of the Earth and deliver his people from injustice and oppression. Borden’s narrative chronology partially supports a reading in which the end of the metaphoric day equates to the end of the world. Judgment appears in the storm of wind and fire that destroys property and lives at the end of the novel, but there is no redemption for characters who are spared.

The reader faces two diametrically opposed interpretations of “Jehovah’s Day,” which the work purposefully encourages: “But this occurred at the end of the story towards nightfall of the day. Or was it just before the dawn of a new morning?” (7). The confusion between creation and Apocalypse destabilizes the entire narrative, not only those portions which deal directly with the evolutionary elements of the narrative. The resulting ambiguity and unresolved tension over the meaning of the book’s essential frame of reference throw the entire narrative into uncertainty, and establish questions of meaning as the underlying theme of *Jehovah’s Day*.

Borden complicates the religious ambiguity in the novel by introducing cosmology, measuring the age of the universe as “one hundred million years ago by the clock on the mantelpiece.” This insertion places the study of the origin, evolution, and fate of the universe, at the center of *Jehovah’s Day*. Borden’s interpretation of cosmology mingles mythological, religious, and esoteric literature with traditions of creation and eschatology. Her blend of science and philosophy produces a nuanced view of the evolutionary motif in which time, as measured in minutes and days, is conflated with the

passing of millennia. “This happened in the morning of our day, and by evening the earth was swarming with men,” Borden writes at the beginning of *Jehovah’s Day* (5).

Similarly, she begins the novel’s concluding chapter: “And now the day was drawing to an end” (362). The imprecise co-mingling of clock time with cosmic time loosely mirrors Borden’s purposeful vacillation between religious interpretations of her title.

Borden is not a philosopher, cosmologist, or theologian: her work is literature. Her fictive science does not celebrate life or creative force, rather, it recognizes the passing of time and marks the age of the universe as a sign of impending doom:

The earth, a little lonely freak among the stars, solitary, abnormal, a speck of a thing. . . . Life was an interloper, that had slipped into the Universe by mistake. Immortal perhaps, a spark struck from the impact of forces in a different time and space, and dropping down here on to the earth that was dying. But the sun was dying too, and the stars. The whole universe was melting away. (369)

There is sarcasm and bitterness in Borden’s identification of the Earth as “a little lonely freak,” and a denigration of humanity in her categorization of “Life” as an “interloper” and a “mistake.” Her repetitive insistence that the world and everything, and everyone, in it are on an irreversible course toward eventual demise imbues the book with a tone of despair and meaninglessness. This sense of futility and fatalism is reflected in the narrative’s plot and character development. Her dispassionate, measured, and definitive language reinforces the inevitability of death with finality, against which parsing the creation of the universe becomes another empty and facile activity.

Questions about the source of life in *Jehovah’s Day* are complicated by the presence of the character Cosmos, an ethereal presence in the book. Omniscient, but not omnipotent, the Cosmos “noticed” Eryops emerging from the sea: “[T]hough occupied that morning with the birth of several stars, nonetheless was aware that he [Eryops] had

climbed out of the sea, and that after him would come Christopher Columbus and Captain Scott” (2). The Cosmos has knowledge of events past, present, and future, but possesses no controlling power to affect any action. The passive nature of the Cosmos indicates a role as an observer rather than an actor, leaving *Jehovah’s Day* without an identifiable deity, in an apparent contradiction to the Christian God named in the book’s title.

The final, sweeping contradiction posed by Borden in the opening sentence of *Jehovah’s Day* is the science of biological evolution: “[T]he appearance on the swampy shore of an inland sea . . . of a strange and clumsy creature, my grotesque father.” Eryops, the Mud Puppy, “an ugly brute, a giant tadpole four feet long, small brained and slow,” emerges from the primordial ooze to be identified as the literal “father” of humanity (1). *Jehovah’s Day* clearly links modern humans to a definitive universal ancestor, the organism with which all living organisms share a common descent. In the 1920s, the creation-evolution debate was far from resolved outside of scientific circles. Biological evolution and evidence of common descent were still contested by religious creationists and would be the subject of legal challenges for decades to come. Inclusion of these concepts, particularly Borden’s grotesque description of the seminal creature Eryops, contradicts the creationist suggestion inherent in the definition of Jehovah’s Day, and introduces one more source of tension into the narrative.

Borden exploits these numerous thematic contradictions, interweaving evolutionary creationism, Abrahamic eschatology, and mystical cosmology with the commonplace plot and characters of her domestic drama. Connections between evolutionary life forms and people are numerous in the book; nary a character lacks an equivalent in the animal kingdom. Society matron Carrie Whitaker “resembles a fish,”

and her friend Rose Kimberley a horse (17); Patrick O'Hagan who "looks like a faun," nonetheless thinks of himself as a "toad" (42, 39); a charwoman morphs into an iguana (33); a constable appears as a walrus with talons (27). The collective upper classes are "fish people" living in an aquarium: "They suspected nothing, knew nothing, were interested in nothing save themselves, and believed in the existence of nothing beyond the lighted tanks they lived in" (23). In *The Times Literary Supplement*, Marjorie Grant Cook commends the "swift and cruel insight" of Borden's animal imagery which ties her characters into the overarching evolutionary conceit (Review of *Jehovah's Day*).

Borden's satiric zoomorphism produces multiple effects. Her choice of the corresponding animal for each character illustrates, through physical appearance, behavior, or cultural association, a significant idiosyncrasy or weakness of that character or group. Borden never selects an animal to emphasize a positive attribute, such as beauty or strength; the intention is always critical and humorous at the expense of her characters. The incessant ridicule of human characters produces a collective devaluation of humans and lowers their relative position in any hierarchy of life, whether derived from Biblical sources or natural sciences. Borden establishes frameworks, such as Christianity and biological evolution, only to immediately undermine them.

Periodically, the narrator reflects on the place of these characters in the evolutionary narrative created in *Jehovah's Day*: "Each was enmeshed in the net of life. One sees them as little blind fumbling animals, struggling in elastic nets, dragging their sickly bodies after them, heavy, clumsy things, weighted with aged habits, each a world of warring forces, invaded by armies of microbes" (118). As well as dehumanizing the characters in the book, this description intimates a degree of insentience. Their animation

appears artificial and mechanized, futile and unaware. Borden uses blindness as a trope to indicate humanity's lack of awareness or purposeful existence. Their lack of agency and power is rendered more dismal by resulting not from the whim of some omnipotent presence, but from an insidious, microscopic vermin consuming them from the inside.

Borden's characterizations of the human characters in *Jehovah's Day* extend beyond zoomorphism into chremamorphism. She refined this modernist technique of assigning the qualities of an object to a person in her wartime writing. Her use of this literary mode in *Jehovah's Day* is particularly effective when applied to collective groups of people. A strong example occurs when miners are riled up by Communists and their use of a new tool, a microphone. The narrator predicts that this "new means of speech . . . would be of invaluable assistance in the future to the forces of death and destruction" by allowing for the deployment of ever-larger masses of humanity:

The mob beasts of the future would be the great monsters. There would be no limit to their possible size.

A hundred thousand, a million men, could be moulded into one bestial being, controlled by such voices as the one now sounding in the square, and animated by the tiny brains of threepenny toys. The new Brontosaur was out there already. Soon, quite soon, it and its kind would conquer the earth. Monster group-beings, clothed in the armour of machinery, covered with steel plates, bristling with guns, belching out poisonous gases, the clumsy brutes would war upon the earth like immense snails, the habitation of each one, a giant, granite shell called a city. (235)

Borden mingles together men and beasts and machinery into an otherworldly creature reminiscent of those in her World War I poems. Like "The Hill" and "There is a Monster in the Valley," *Jehovah's Day* presents an unnatural and alarming vision of men acting in unison as a bizarre permutation of monstrous machinery. Her description of the collective as a militarized beast mirrors her previous poetic lines describing the Allied armies of the Somme. The vivid picture of "Monster group-beings" as "immense snails,

the habitation of each one, a giant, granite shell called a city” is markedly similar to her description of the procession of tanks as “heavily armoured / Obscene crabs, armoured toads, big as houses” in “The Hill” (*The Forbidden Zone* 186). Borden’s objectification and chremamorphism are demeaning and dehumanizing; together, they effect a dreadful and dreary description of humanity that offers little in the way of redemption or hope.

Humanity isn’t the only life form facing extinction in *Jehovah’s Day*: “It is a question of life in many forms running at different speeds. The drama of the earth is playing itself out slowly through geological time . . .” (7). As a prominent component of the Cosmos, the Earth, “with its great wrinkled mobile face and throbbing body, its growling voice and its passionate white hot iron core,” is described in the narrative as a “tragic figure surely, and the great personality of this tale” (6). Despite this vigorous portrait, the Earth, like the rest of the universe and humanity in *Jehovah’s Day*, is “doomed to die” (6). At the end of the book’s metaphoric cosmological day, the Earth “shows signs of weariness. Its body is growing old and cold. . . . [I]ts flesh withering as if the chill of death were creeping over it” (13). The book leaves unresolved the contradictory pictures of the Earth as both a sexualized body, with physical desires, and a depleted, declining planet spiraling towards its demise.

In the book, the Earth is accompanied by physical elements which perform significant roles in reacting to and determining the fate of humanity and the earth.

These were the huge characters. . . . [T]hese great individuals, the wind, the fire and the sea and the earth fought it out between them. Immense protagonists of a hundred moods, subtle, complicated, huge and infinitely varied, not limited to do this or that and then the other, but launching themselves in a thousand actions at one and the same instant, growling, laughing, storming, and pretending to sleep, tender and terrible; sly brazen, boisterous, exquisitely gentle, amorously seductive and cruel as flashing knives, the three quick mobile ones changed like lightening, flashed past in whirlwind chariots and flaming clouds, and the patient, dark,

dynamic earth endured then, drew them close, drew them down into itself, thirsting for them, hungering, quaking and exerting upon them the tremendous attraction of its deep, powerful, passionate body. (325)

After the human drama has played out, fire, wind, sea, and earth emerge as the most dynamic and powerful of the novel's characters. Borden anthropomorphizes them with emotions, motivations, and abilities more nuanced and refined than those of the novel's human characters. In magnitude of power and effect, they far surpass the span of human influence. Yet, curiously, they are distinct from the Cosmos, separate and unaffected by the collapsing, dying version of the universe established earlier in the narrative.

Literary critics avoided lengthy reviews of *Jehovah's Day*, likely because a neat encapsulation of the novel's banal romantic plot and stock society characters allowed them to bypass the book's far more remarkable, but much less condensable, science fiction and religious doctrine. This is unfortunate, as her novel is distinguished by these elements. While one might label *Jehovah's Day* genre fiction, that categorization fails to convey the innovative and modern novel Borden created. Instead, reviewers explain it as "the story of Evolution reduced to the limits of the popular novel" ("Evolution in Parvo"), or "a modern novel against a semi-symbolic, suggestive-progressive background of the growth of human passions and intelligences" (Gorman 431). Even the publisher's remark on the front flap of the American edition's book jacket begins by warning: "This is a queer book." Referring to Borden's "modern characters" and calling it "no ordinary novel," Doubleday, Doran demonstrate that modernist constructions and features found in Borden's writing were being accepted as mainstream modes of literature.

Critical reviews were simultaneously wary and commending. Acknowledging *Jehovah's Day* as "decidedly odd," Marjorie Grant Cook, literary critic for *The Times*

Literary Supplement, congratulates Bordon for a “daring” and “imaginative effort . . . full of a contagious interest and excitement” (Review of *Jehovah’s Day*). The review in *The New York Times* boldly commends Borden’s effort as “an achievement in the grand manner” and notes her “ability to focus the significance of a limitless body of material” (Review of *Jehovah’s Day*). *The Times* reviewer calls the novel “very interesting, vivid and exciting, written with an effect of personal eagerness that is quite uncommon” (Review of *Jehovah’s Day*). *The Spectator* ambiguously predicts that, as “an unusual comment on social conditions and their future development, as a piece of glittering intellectual activity, it will attract, repel, and surprise” (Review of *Jehovah’s Day*).

Other critics were less favorable. Herbert Gorman, in *The Bookman*, calls it “overdone”: “[Borden’s] struggling and dreaming characters are set against a background that is as broad as history but the intensification that she evidently intended by such a machinery somehow defeats itself” (430). Gorman compliments Borden’s “intellectual ambitiousness” and “excellent writing,” but concludes that the “arresting” story is “jarred . . . out of focus” by the ambitiousness of her project:

Miss Borden has placed the action of a modern novel against a semi-symbolic, suggestive-progressive background of the growth of human passions and intelligences. . . . At first, this *modus operandi* of compelling our orientation of man in his own history seems admirable but there comes a point when the constant interjection of the past into the present clogs the modern story. (431)⁴⁹

British novelist and critic L. P. Hartley condemns the novel as uninteresting, shrill, and hysterical: “[T]he voice of a good number of birds of prey, perhaps not quite ten thousand, seems to scream through *Jehovah’s Day*” (Review of *Jehovah’s Day*).

⁴⁹ See also Dawson; G. T. H.; Review of *Jehovah’s Day* in the *Boston Transcript*.

Some reviews seek to reassure readers intimidated by the science in *Jehovah's Day* that the book is readily accessible, does not require a science background, and will be neither too boring nor too difficult to read for enjoyment. Writing in *The Forum*, Donald F. Rose downplays the novel's expansive scope and cosmological theme:

It begins in the prehistorical slime and ends somewhere in the unimagined future, all of which does not greatly affect the story itself, but permits yards and yards of semi-scientific embroidery to be added to the tale, much in the style of H. G. Wells. . . . It is thoughtful stuff and interesting.

To assuage readers, Rose incorporates language of feminine domesticity—"yards and yards" and "embroidery"—and associates Borden's work with that of a familiar author.

Similarly, in the *Detroit Free Press*, Josephine Proctor, writes:

There is nothing technical about this novel. Anyone, whether or not he is familiar with the theory of evolution can read and enjoy a very charming love story and at the same time be diverted from the ordinary line of thought and given enough of the romance of biological history to desire a more thorough knowledge of it.

She devotes several paragraphs to the book's characters, suppressing its fusion of mysticism and science with a simplified distillation of plot and theme.⁵⁰

In a review of *Jehovah's Day* for *New Statesman* in 1928, modernist critic Cyril Connolly calls Borden's novel an "amazing experiment" admirably executed. Unlike some critics, Connolly finds a real continuity in transitions between pre-history and the present and a genuine picture of the primordial jungle. He praises her writing style and satirical take on fashionable society as "a rare blend of intellect with imagination" more comparable to "Girandoux [*sic*] and certain French writers than the English." E. M. Benson, for *The Outlook and Independent*, reads the books as an indictment of modern humanity and society, and a "challenge to scientists who take themselves seriously

⁵⁰ See also "Evolution in Parvo"; H. M. S.

enough to imagine that their incantations have brought us any nearer to the secrets that worried Kant, Newton and Darwin, and now Whitehead, Eddington and Einstein.”

Writing *Jehovah's Day* took Borden nearly a year. Following her own advice about retreating from activity to stimulate creativity, she spent time secluded in a bungalow on the coast, accompanied only by her young son Michael and a nurse (Conway 147). Her daughters Catherine and Mary remained at home in London, where they were day students at public schools. Her eldest daughter, Joyce, attended Somerville College, Oxford, as Catherine would later. Despite Borden and Spears's frequent absences, the family were close, and Borden's daughters had warm and affectionate relationships with their stepfather (Egremont 115). In June 1929 Spears stood for Parliament again, as a Conservative in Carlisle, losing to the Socialist candidate. Borden joined Spears on the campaign trail, canvassing and speaking to rowdy and often hostile crowds. After the election, the couple relaxed on a vacation, hosting a group of friends on Spears's yacht, *The Bittern*, on a summer cruise through the Channel Islands.

The decade of the 1920s was an exciting and positive one for Borden, personally and professionally. She had established herself as an increasingly successful author and was developing a recognizable public persona in the United Kingdom and the United States. Her novels, in which she applied increasingly innovative techniques to literary realism, were both popular and well-regarded by national literary critics. She would finish the decade by revisiting her most experimental pieces of modernist literature.

Chapter 5

“DROPS OF DISTILLED HORROR”⁵¹: *THE FORBIDDEN ZONE*

At the end of 1929, Borden’s compilation of World War I poetry and prose writing was published as *The Forbidden Zone*, which is the subject of Chapter 5. Although some of Borden’s wartime writings appeared in *The English Review* in 1916 and 1917, as discussed in Chapter 2, Borden’s published collection differs expansively from the selection of earlier pieces. As a collection, these works show Borden at her fullest power as a modernist writer.

The Forbidden Zone was published by William Heinemann in the United Kingdom in 1929 and by Doubleday, Doran and Company in the United States in 1930. Her contract for *The Forbidden Zone* included a very small advance allowance and a flat royalty on all copies sold, regardless of volume (Memorandum of Agreement 12 Nov. 1929). These figures indicate that neither Borden nor her publishers expected the book to reach the sales that her novels had consistently achieved since *Jane—Our Stranger*.

Borden had sent a manuscript version of *The Forbidden Zone* to Collins in August 1917 (H. Hutchinson, Introduction xiv). “The publication of them was stopped by the censors,” she recalls: “They were so dismal that it was thought the effect upon the morale of the soldiers would be bad” (qtd. in McCommon). For most of the decade of the 1920s, “books that were in any small way realistic in their treatment of the brutality of the war . . . were covered in paper to hide the title, and hidden beneath cushions and furniture when not being read” (Edwards 5341). By 1929, Borden was following on the publication of other war-related writing, including Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*, Robert

⁵¹ Busey 24.

Graves's *Good-bye to All That*, and Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, which she believed were helping to "strip the glamour from modern warfare" (Conway 149). Her book conveys the violence and horror of war as effectively as the soldier's narratives, albeit from her perspective as a field hospital nurse. Her first-person, front-line, feminine viewpoint, unusual among World War I literature, combined with innovative modernist techniques, distinguishes her work from other wartime fiction or memoir. The published version differed from that sent to Collins years earlier: "Modernist in their arresting imagery and startling verse forms [at the time she first wrote them], they would become even more experimental when she revised them for *The Forbidden Zone*" (Vogeler 208). The book also contains five new stories written in 1929.

Although a war memoir, *The Forbidden Zone* is not a record, chronicle, autobiography, or a series of impressions. Instead, Borden creates a new literary genre, combining elements of narrative fiction, essay, and poetic form, and blurring the boundaries of imagination and documentary (Freedman 110). Borden's viewpoint as a nurse defies traditional roles of soldier and noncombatant; her book, like that of the *zone interdite* to which her title refers, works at the edges of these representational perspectives. Her experimental and fragmentary vision introduces the reader to an alternative and intimate portrait of the destructive and dehumanizing brutality of the war not found in contemporary literature of the period. Because *The Forbidden Zone* comprises numerous distinct pieces, which veer from "the gently whimsical to the professionally detached to the sentimentally engaged" (Freedman 123), any attempt at a thorough understanding, interrogation, or assessment of the collection as a whole must be built upon a study of the individual components. Each loosely autobiographical piece in

the collection contributes fragmented and experimental imagery, representations, and aesthetics to the overall surreal and modernist impression of Borden's memoir.

The Forbidden Zone includes two of Borden's sketches and the four poems published during the war in *The English Review*; it omits the sketch "Rousbrugge." Borden supplements these pieces with ten additional sketches, one poem, and five stories. In the Preface, she explains that sketches and stories are distinguished by when she wrote them: "The sketches and poems were written between 1914 and 1918. . . . The five stories I have written recently from memory." Borden implies that the prose pieces she considers sketches were written during the war, although there is no substantiating evidence. Stories are specifically labelled as such in the book's table of contents. Geography organizes *The Forbidden Zone*: "Part One: The North" comprises ten vignettes and short stories from Belgium and northern France; "Part Two" includes four sketches and three stories about patients treated at her mobile hospital in a section titled "The Somme: Hospital Sketches,"⁵² followed by her poetry in a separate section of "Poems."⁵³

Borden begins *The Forbidden Zone* with a seemingly straightforward, yet intricately deceptive Preface, establishing the collection as a blurred fusion of memoir and fiction: "I have not invented anything in this book. The sketches and poems were written between 1914 and 1918, during four years of hospital work with the French Army. The five stories I have written recently from memory; they recount true episodes that I cannot forget." These lines contradict the book's literary form. Creative writing necessitates invention, and composing poetry and prose, even pieces based closely on real

⁵² "The Somme" also includes stories, despite the subtitle.

⁵³ The "Poems" do not include "Sonnets to a Soldier," "Glad Knight," "Interlude," "Escape," "There Is a Monster in the Valley," or "Take Me Away from My Wounded Men."

events, requires imagination, creativity, and craft. By challenging this presumption with her opening words, Borden jars the reader into confronting this contradiction on the first page. “I have not invented anything in this book,” whether naïve, cleverly devised, or intentionally misleading, is provocative. The author’s defensive stance invites, even demands, the reader to stop and consider Borden’s intent, credibility, and trustworthiness. Why does the author need to justify her narrative? The auto-referentiality in this passage produces what Christoph Bode identifies as “an augmented, an enhanced kind of ambiguity . . . the hallmark of modernist literature” (78).

Borden’s use of the first person inserts the author as a presence, arguably as a primary character, into all the stories, sketches, and poems. For a work ostensibly about warfare, the presence of a woman as participant and mediator is unusual and unsettling. Her opening line frankly addresses this issue and dares the reader to doubt her veracity. These reflections draw attention to the emergence of gender-based sources of tension and instability in the book, including the juxtaposition of femininity and warfare, definitions of masculinity, and the uncomfortable presence of sexuality. Borden’s introductory sentence simultaneously acknowledges and blurs the boundaries of propriety as well as those between reality and art, establishing a destabilizing tone from the outset.

In the Preface’s third paragraph, Borden seeks to clarify the confusion between reality and art, but her explanation compounds the reader’s perplexity:

To those who find these impressions confused, I would say they are fragments of a great confusion. Any attempt to reduce them to order would require artifice on my part and would falsify them. To them on the other hand who find them unbearably plain, I would say I have blurred the bare horror of facts and softened the reality in spite of myself, not because I wished to do so, but because I was incapable of a nearer approach to the truth.

Borden defends her writing as a truthful depiction of real events, claiming that any attempt to moderate her account would “require artifice,” while at the same time admitting that she has “blurred . . . and softened the reality” of events. These contradictions surpass ambiguity; there is no room for interpretation or nuanced meanings. Borden provides two mutually exclusive understandings of the work that follows, and leaves the reader oscillating between reality and truth, fact and fiction. The resulting confusion encourages readers to disassociate their understanding from normative referential meanings and explore new semiotic configurations.

An earlier draft of her preface found in the archives at Boston University appears to be a precursor to that published in *The Forbidden Zone*. The unpublished Prefatory Note presages the modernist form of *The Forbidden Zone*’s sketches and poems which, while evocative of the newly mechanized nature of World War I warfare, subvert the conventional soldier’s story through feminized interpretations and perspectives:

Week after week, month after month, in Flanders, on the Somme, in Champagne, I lived within range of the cannon, with the roaring of guns sounding in my ears, with the piteous horror of the wounded, before my eyes . . . I gradually became conscious of the War as a being, an essence, with a quality, as unique as the quality of a race, a country, or a person. This quality I have tried to convey.

That it can be conveyed to those who have never heard for themselves the voice of the War, I am not sure.

The bombardment of her poetic cadence, “Week after week, month after month, in Flanders, on the Somme, in Champagne . . .” introduces the fragmentary, staccato technique of her prose and poetics, the measured pace of which reverberates like the relentless cannonades she describes. In this version, she begins to develop the menacing persona of the war, manifested by “the noise, the suffering, the confusion” of the war zone, yet eerily extant only as a metaphysical “essence.” Revealing personal sentiments

excised from the published Preface, she acknowledges that the war has left “a profound and terrible impression” upon her, and emphasizes the primacy of her role both in her hospital at the front lines and as an invisible persona throughout her book.

Without neglecting the soldiers’ suffering, Borden reconfigures the conventional definition of war casualties to encompass civilians and non-combatants, uniting all who, like her, have shared this experience. She seeks to overcome what James Campbell defines as “‘combat gnosticism,’ the belief that combat represents a qualitatively separate order of experience that is difficult if not impossible to communicate to any who have not undergone an identical experience” (203). Borden offers her collection to men and women “who have never heard for themselves the voice of the War,” an inclusive and hopeful gesture meant to enhance their understanding of the war’s horrors.

In her published Preface, Borden softens this allusion, obliquely indicating that “the book is not meant for [the Poilus]. They know, not only everything that is contained in it, but all the rest that can never be written.” Borden’s insinuation that the book is incomplete because she has omitted details too horrifying to record, bolsters her authorial credibility by attributing to her a sense of decorous reticence. Within the realm of the battlefield these are oppositional, even incompatible, positions. Her simultaneous claim to the modesty of feminine society and the unspeakable horrors of the combat zone epitomizes the fundamental paradox of *The Forbidden Zone*, of borderlines violated. Neither spectator nor combatant, Borden occupies a strange and subversive position that is reflected in her experimental and fragmentary perspective.

The first several prose pieces in *The Forbidden Zone* are scenic, distant vignettes in which Borden deliberately presents the war zone in ways that destabilize established

ideas about war, trauma, gender, and modes of representation. “Belgium,” the opening sketch, is a second-person, present-tense introduction that validates Borden’s credentials and introduces the reader to the geography of the war. As narrator, she acts as a “macabre tour guide,” directly addressing her audience as she shepherds them through France into Belgium toward the front lines (Freedman 115): “On our right? That’s the road to Ypres. The less said about it the better. . . . Ahead of us then? No, you can’t get out that way. No, there’s no frontier, just a bleeding edge . . .” (3). Her conversational mode and nonchalant familiarity with the topography of the war authenticate her narrative persona and disrupt the reader’s expectations. As a guide and a nurse, she conforms to feminine roles of nurturing and instruction, but the arena in which she demonstrates her expertise is misplaced. Her knowledge of the front is unexpected, her authority in an active military zone is unwomanly, and her sarcasm is irreverent.

Borden begins her book with the defining, lifeless image of war in “Belgium”: “Mud: and a thin rain coming down to make more mud” (3). As in “The Song of the Mud,” mud represents the destruction of the land, the loss of lives, and the decivilizing effects of the war. The predominant geographic feature of the war is a slippery slime that consumes the soldiers by covering them and erasing all individuality, and when they die, or are near death, by sucking their bodies under the ground. Borden equates the countryside to a cemetery, and connects the mud’s consumption of the soldiers’ bodies to the war’s obliteration of Belgium as a nation.

In this brief vignette, Borden’s prose approaches prosody: “There is plenty of mud, and a thin silent rain falling to make more mud—mud with things lying in it, wheels, broken motors, parts of houses, graves.” She ends the piece similarly: “There is

nothing but mud all about, and a soft fine rain coming down to make more mud—mud with a broken fragment of a nation lolling in it . . .” (4, 6). With verse-like repetition, metrical cadence, and soft, alliterative phonics, Borden creates a lulling, deceptively benign portrayal of mud. The rhythmic lyricism of the first lines is disrupted by the literally and figuratively abrupt “graves.” Similarly, the multiple hard consonants and vowels of “broken fragment” contrast with the iambic, imperfect rhyme of “broken motors, parts of houses” and the soft murmuring alliteration of “make more mud—mud.” These textual interruptions mimic the war’s disruptive effect.

The next several pieces in *The Forbidden Zone* focus on the dehumanizing nature of mechanized modern warfare. In “The Captive Balloon,” “The Square,” “Sentinels,” and “The Regiment,” Borden maintains her narratorial distance, aligning herself with the reader as an unaffected observer. Here, technology is confused with nature; machines subsume, and assume, humanity. The manned observation balloon in “The Captive Balloon” appears “like an oyster floating in the sky” (13). In “The Square,” “the motor cars have gone all wrong”; limousines function as lorries that “crouch in the square ashamed, deformed, very weary”; and “snobbish ambulances . . . have self-assurance” (16, 17). At a checkpoint, “Sentinels” perform their paper-checking duties like automatons, summoned to “pop out at the sound of a motor and wave a flag and look at a piece of paper” (20). Borden’s mixture of organic and inorganic images has two disturbing effects. In “recreating the technologies of war as natural forces” (Freedman 117), she creates a new and unnatural sentient being: an animated, yet soulless, creature that exists solely to wage war. These machines have thoughts, feelings, and intentions,

often exceeding those attributed to human characters. In this inversion of natural order, machines surpass humanity and approach a god-like position in the epic hierarchy of war.

In these sketches, Borden shifts from a panorama of the devastated landscape and the transmogrified machinery of war to a closer consideration of people. Officers, soldiers, nurses, civilians, mothers, and children appear and move from the periphery to central positions in these narratives. Within the locus of the city or town, characters act in a manner oblivious or in direct opposition to the war. In "The Square," women, with children in tow, are too busy to notice the generals, transports, or ambulances with whom they jostle for space in the marketplace: "They scurry across to the shops. . . . [T]hey buy and sell . . . they bargain and they chatter" (17-18). Bitterly, the narrator explains: "The business of killing and the business of living go on together . . ." (17). Ironically, the only combatants present are the insensate, wounded men: "[T]hey can see nothing and hear nothing . . . they are lying on their back in the dark canvas bellies of the ambulances, staring at death" (18). In this atmosphere of commoditization, the only things without value are the wounded men, who are damaged, repairable, and replaceable.

Borden differentiates generals and their staff from combat soldiers, scorning the former for their roles in planning and executing the campaigns' actions and the latter for their rote compliance with "one's duty" (16). Officially the officers "salute one another stiffly like wooden toys, then disappear into the buildings where they hold murderous conferences and elaborate plans of massacre" (16). With harsh irony, Borden exposes their meticulous planning of death as part of the process of living. "Fools," she calls them in "Sentinels," warning: "they will be destroyed. The generals who do not look and the

colonels who glance sideways, and the lieutenants who make bad jokes—the English and the French and the Belgians—they will all be destroyed” (21).

Borden is more forgiving, but still dismissive, of the low-level soldiers who guard checkpoints on the road, denigrating them as unfit to wear their military uniforms: “The coats of the little men who come out of the boxes are too big for them; their rifles with the bayonets are too heavy.” (19). She caricatures them as puppet sentries who “pop out the boxes into the middle of the road,” and for whom this “minute task is too much” (19). While stilted and two-dimensional, her early characterizations of ancillary individuals are important to the overall context of *The Forbidden Zone* as a prelude to the encounters between civilians and combat veterans yet to come. Collectively, characters like the generals and the women of the town are tangential to Borden’s purpose; they function as part of the background to the war and to the men and women who inhabit the war zone.

As discussed in Chapter 2, “The Regiment,” first appeared in *The English Review* in 1917. Borden edited the sketch prior to publication in *The Forbidden Zone* in 1929; the passages altered describe the nurse and her interactions with the soldiers. In the revision, Borden redraws the nurse as more boldly sexualized, a feminine figure who is “a confusing and libidinal mix of purity and animality” (Freedman 119). The reason for her presence, “to care for your wounds” is replaced by a more suggestive explanation: “[T]o nurse you and comfort you” (37). Borden’s revisions also complicate the soldier’s reception of the nurse. In the early version, they recognize her as “nothing but a lie,” and confront her: ““You are lying!”” (37). In the new rendering, they view her as a “puzzle” about which they are “too tired to bother,” so they say “nothing.” The alteration intensifies the effect of the unconventional role she performs. Though not evident in “The

Regiment,” which focuses more on the relationships between combatants, officers, and civilians, the nurse will come to occupy a strange, undefined place and role in *The Forbidden Zone*; operating in a combat zone, yet not a combatant, stripped of her femininity by proximity to men stripped of their own masculinity. Their confusion and dismissal of her feminine wiles in “The Regiment” presages the conflicted and subversive portrait of this woman that evolves as *The Forbidden Zone* progresses.

“The Beach” and “Moonlight” are the central sketches in “Part One: The North.” They connect the distant, objective vignettes of the battlefield in the opening pieces of the book with the more intense character sketches that follow. In these pieces, Borden probes the relationships between the men and women intimately involved in the war. Her narratives show how the resulting damage and trauma has affected their interpersonal dynamics. In these vignettes, the war causes an increasingly dramatic overthrow of conventional roles: in a subversion of gendered expectations, women—particularly nurses—find themselves in positions of superiority, while men—specifically formerly strong, virile soldiers—are objectified, often sexually.

“The Beach” describes an awkward reunion between a woman and her lover, a recuperating soldier. Although they sit together and talk, she in the sand and he in his wheelchair, they are disengaged and alienated. The woman allows herself to be distracted by her surroundings: “The beach is perfect, the sun is perfect, the sea is perfect. How pretty the little waves are. . . . They are perfectly lovely” (45). Her interior musings are shallow, simple, and naïve, reflecting her inability to probe below surface appearances. The soldier, desirous of his lover and tormented by the knowledge that his injuries have diminished him, launches into a harsh description of the hospital’s casino nights intended

to shock her with its brutality. “You never saw such a crowd. . . . Gamblers, of course, down and outs, wrecks—all gone to pieces, part of ‘em missing, you know, tops of their heads gone, or one of their legs. . . . Some of them have no faces” (50). Her pleas, “Stop, darling—darling, stop!” are ignored. “It’s a funny place,” the soldier continues:

“You go through the baccarat rooms and the dance hall to get to it. They’re all full of beds. Rows of beds under the big crystal chandeliers, rows of beds under the big gilt mirrors, and the skating rink is full of beds, too. The sun blazes down through the glass roof. It’s like a hot-house in Kew Gardens. There’s that dank smell of a rotting swamp, the smell of gas gangrene, Men with gas gangrene turn green you know, like rotting plants.” He laughed. (50-51)

This back-and-forth continues; he describes scenes of horrifying ugliness and she protests. Neither responds to the other, and when both are worn out their dialog retreats to silent thoughts. Just as the woman cannot escape from her lover into the sea, nor the wounded soldier from the scars of the war, there is no escape for the reader from the grotesque imagery. Visions of the tranquil sea, sunshine, and seashells in the sand magnify rather than ameliorate the bizarre and gruesome scene in the casino.

“The Beach” is a study in oppositions: between a man and a woman, words spoken and thoughts unsaid, contrasting beauty and health with cruelty and damage, and pitting the serenity of nature against the brutality and destruction of war. The end of the sketch pans away from the pair, shifting the reader’s gaze out to the ocean, as if seeking an answer in the infinite seascape:

How perfect the beach is. The sea is a heavenly blue. Behind the windows of the casino, under the great crystal chandeliers, men lie in narrow beds. They lie in queer postures with their greenish faces turned up. Their white bandages are reflected in the somber gilt mirrors. There is no sound anywhere but the murmur of the sea and the whispering of the waves on the sand, and the tap tap of a hammer coming from a great distance across the water. (53-54)

The passage assails the reader with a chain of incongruous images. The natural, ethereal splendor of the seashore is interrupted by the gay frivolity of the casino, a symbol of debauchery corrupted by its conversion into a convalescent hospital. The men inside are not frivolous gamblers, but unnaturally damaged and disfigured pawns, their fate determined by the anonymous machinery of war. The distant sound of gunfire is a reminder of the omnipresent war; like the sea, it is vast and inescapable. There is no consolation or reconciliation for the couple on the beach, nor for the reader.

The anonymous woman of “The Beach” is replaced by a more specific, although still unnamed, hospital nurse in “Moonlight.” Here, Borden moves the nurse to a position of prominence by narrating the sketch as a first-person account in the caregiver’s words, interpreting the hospital, the wounded men, and the war, through the singular “I,” and, later, the representative “we” of the nurses. Borden reconstructs her, an object of desire in “The Regiment,” into a source of healing. Nursing expectations in a front-line surgical hospital surpass traditional demands of the profession, and exposure to relentless suffering and death changes her. She becomes detached from the natural world: “[T]he whispering of the grass and the scent of new-mown hay . . . makes me nervous” (57), and attuned to the machinery of war: “The cannonade is my lullaby. It soothes me” (56).

Overexposure to severe injuries and surgeries inures the nurse to the distasteful aspects of her job and desensitizes her to the losses experienced by her patients. “The moon is just above the abdominal ward,” she observes, nonchalantly: “Next to it is the hut given up to gas gangrene, and next to that are the Heads. The Knees are on the other side, and the Elbows and the fractured Thighs” (63). Although the nurse performs her work with efficiency—“She can straighten a pillow, pour drops out of a bottle, pierce a

shrunk side with a needle”—she functions like “a machine inhabited by the ghost of a woman” (63, 64). Like the regiments Borden portrays as mechanized creatures, the nurse surrenders part of her humanity when she becomes a participant in the war theatre.

Her self-perception is inexorably entangled with the changes wrought to the bodies of the men she cares for. Their war-damaged physiques, missing parts, suffer further humiliation when they are handled like carcasses by the surgeons and orderlies. The hospital staff, overwhelmed by the stream of casualties, begin to refer to them by the injuries. “Certainly they were men once,” the nurse reports: “But now they are no longer men. There has been a harvest” (65). Borden’s language dismantles the men into components: pieces of machinery, objects to be handled, and commodities to be traded. Once broken, they lose their identities as individuals, as soldiers, and as men.

There are no men here, so why should I be a woman? There are only heads and knees and mangled testicles. There are chests with holes as big as your fist, and pulpy thighs, shapeless; and stumps where legs once were fastened. There are eyes—eyes of sick dogs, sick cats, blind eyes, eyes of delirium; and mouths that cannot articulate; and parts of faces—the nose gone, or the jaw. These are things, but no men; so how I could be a woman here and not die of it? (64)

Her female gender defined by comparison to the masculinity of men, the nurse struggles to recognize and distinguish her femininity in a world in which the men she sees have been degendered. Abandonment of her femininity represents the final stage of the nurse’s transformation that Borden began in the earlier sketches. The nurse becomes a shell of her former self, so lost that she considers herself lifeless. Regarding a fellow nurse, she observes: “She is no longer a woman. She is dead already, just as I am—really dead, past resurrection” (63). Gender confusion and the resulting internal and interpersonal tensions will continue to be a theme throughout *The Forbidden Zone*.

Without traditional roles of masculinity and femininity, sexuality becomes another source of fragmentation in the book. In “Moonlight,” men are not capable of sexual activities, and women are not interested. Sexual longing, frustration, and fulfillment become manifest in the persona of Pain: “she is insatiable, greedy, vilely amorous, lustful, obscene—she lusts for the bodies we have here” (58):

Pain is the mistress of each one of them.

Not one can escape her. . . . Their hideous wounds are not protection, nor the blood that leads from their wounds onto the bedclothes, nor the foul ordour of their festering flesh. Pain is attracted by these things. She is a harlot in the pay of War, and she amuses herself with the wreckage of men. She consorts with decay, is addicted to blood, cohabits with mutilations, and her delight is the refuse of suffering bodies.

You can watch her plying her trade here any day. . . . Even when she has exhausted them, even when at last worn out with her frenzy they drop into a doze, she lies beside them, to tease them with her excruciating caresses, her pinches and twinges that make them moan and twist in sleep. (65-6)

Borden fetishizes the soldier’s wounds and eroticizes their vulnerability. She reveals and exploits their weaknesses, perpetrating a further violation after pain’s ravishing. They are victims several times over: the war has injured them, pain abuses them, and the nurse-narrator displays them. Ironically, Borden deforms them further with her words.

At the end of “Moonlight,” there is no place left for the wounded soldier: his only hope is death: “[T]he earth is trembling, and the throbbing of guns is the throbbing of the pulse of the War; world without end” (69). As in “The Beach,” the only certainty for the endurance of life resides in the relentless continuity of the war. This bleak and despairing outlook contrasts with the lyrical quality of Borden’s prose which, even in her depictions of pain’s sexual appetites, approaches the lilting cadences derived from traditional poetic devices and forms. The juxtaposition of her diction with the grotesque abuses of war is another way in which the modernist mode is manifest in *The Forbidden Zone*.

Two stories, “Enfant de Malheur” and “Rosa,” complete “Part One: The North” of *The Forbidden Zone*. As Borden notes in her introduction, unlike her sketches composed between 1914-1918, these stories were written recently: “[T]hey recount true stories I cannot forget.”⁵⁴ Both are deep psychological studies of wounded and dying soldiers and their relationships with the nurses who care for them in the hospital. Borden’s depiction of these men from the perspective of her nurse-narrator reveals an uncomfortable mixture of intimacy and detachment, a mode which pervades the remainder of the prose pieces in the collection. Juxtaposition of simultaneous, seemingly contradictory, planes is an aspect of Borden’s cubist experimentation which facilitates her exploration of the conflict of moral perspectives that she experienced during the war (Higonnet, “Cubist Vision” 160).

A young nurse, an elderly Catholic orderly, and a critically wounded patient struggle for spiritual and physical supremacy in “Enfant de Malheur.” The third-person narrator, a nursing supervisor, objectifies the wounded soldier, naming him according to her prejudices. As in “Moonlight,” she fetishizes the patient as an object of sexual desire:

[T]his young prince of darkness. He had race, distinction, and exquisite elegance, and, even in his battered state, the savage grace of a panther. The long deep gash in his side made his torso seem the more incredibly fair and frail. The loss of one leg rendered the other more exquisite with its round polished knee and slim ankle. (71)

The nurse’s eyes dwell on his body, ascribing feminine attributes to his complexion and his figure. Her gaze diminishes and transgenders him in a manner more subversive than the injuries to his body.

⁵⁴ Margaret Higonnet argues in “Ellen La Motte and Mary Borden, A Nursing Couple” that Borden’s ability to write these stories from memory may be because of their striking similarity to pieces by La Motte in *The Backwash of War* (1916): “Borden’s ‘Rosa,’ for example, directly echoes La Motte’s ‘Heroes,’ and ‘Enfant de Malheur’ is a dark reprise of La Motte’s ‘Pour la Patrie’ and ‘A Citation’” (96).

She assigns his care to the nurse-orderly team, then watches and relays to the reader their efforts to comfort and heal their patient. His pain is unrelenting and incurable; multiple operations fail to reverse his decline. Fearing for the soldier's soul and recognizing his terror as he faces his mortality, the orderly, an ordained priest, attempts to convert him to Christianity before he dies. Borden thus compounds the violence done to the soldier by adding an additional site of conflict. After succumbing in combat on the battlefield, and facing impending death in the hospital, he is forced to engage in a spiritual contest instigated by the priest. After an intense, all-night struggle, the morning appears to bring divine salvation and bodily release for the suffering patient.

The nursing supervisor views the struggle between the priest and the "Enfant de Malheur" with detachment, interested only as a spectator. "I was devoured with curiosity," she confides, as she repeatedly makes her way back to his room. "I could not keep away. . . . I must not miss the last act of the drama" (89). The conflict between the adversaries excites her, not concern for the soul of the soldier. As dawn breaks, she reports, "Yes, yes, he [Guerin] had won," then abruptly, and cruelly dismisses him: "He did not look at all like a man of God. He looked like a bookworm, a bit of a prig, and insignificant little man" (96, 97). In the guise of a religious conversion, Borden delivers a caustic criticism of the futility of religion in war, revealing it as a vapid, impotent, and hypocritical crutch unable to withstand the greater force of the war.

In "Rosa," Borden uses a suicidal patient to criticize the illogical nature of war, questioning the assumption that the only legitimate death is one suffered for one's country. The arrival of a patient with a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head interrupts the routine of the hospital and disturbs the staff: "There was something queer, out of the

ordinary, about it, shocking to the surgeons and orderlies. They were ashamed, worried, rather flustered” (102). When the nurse learns that the surgeons intend to operate to save his life so that he may go on to face a court-martial and then the firing squad for his offense, she objects stridently. ““Don’t do it!’ I shouted suddenly. ‘Leave him alone.’” (103). Appalled at the indifferent and inhumane approach of the medical staff, she appeals to the General. His explanation is brutal:

Madame, we have epidemics of suicides in the trenches. Panic seizes the men. They blow their brains out in a panic. Unless the penalty is what it is—to be court-martialed and shot—the thing would spread. We’d find ourselves going over the top with battalions of dead men. (108)

His circular logic reveals the absurdity of military regulations: although simpler, quicker, and requiring no effort to let the suicide die, the army demands the expenditure of resources to save him, so that they may kill him themselves. The underlying irony is that, regardless of suicides, the military must contend with “battalions of dead men” because that is what happens in war. This bizarre reasoning baffles and infuriates the nurse.

Miraculously, the soldier survives, but his will to die is stronger than his will to live. An obedient patient during the day, every night he determinedly rips the bandages from his head. Determined to save him, each morning the medical staff replace the bandages. The nurse, having overheard him cry out, “Rosa, Rosa!,” has named him after the mysterious woman. Infantilized, feminized, and turned into a fictive presence by the nurse, the mute patient, previously described as “a felled ox, a bull mortally breathing” and “an enormous brute,” becomes a “monstrous baby” (99, 109). Having endowed him with a personal identity affects the nurse. She asserts her humanity; empathetically defying the medical and military establishments, she directs the staff to ignore the torn bandages, allowing his infection to spread, and enabling him to die.

The glimpses of compassion that Borden slips into her sketches and stories, usually through a nurse narrator or character, contribute to their disturbing ambiguity. These small signs of compassion amid the startlingly dehumanizing portraits and desolate landscapes contain their own caustic irony. The reader accepts the nurse's satisfaction at her suicidal patient's success in "Rosa," forgetting briefly the morbid circumstances of her triumph. These respites from the misery of the war diminish in frequency and effect as the narratives in the book become increasingly intimate, soul-wrenching, and hopeless. "Part Two: The Somme" contains more personally invasive and revelatory prose about life in World War I front-line hospitals than Part One.

Borden's first sketch in Part Two of *The Forbidden Zone*, "The City in the Desert," returns to the landscape motif of the early sketches from Part One. The narrator, a "small white figure of a solitary woman . . . slipping in the mud," finds herself lost in an unfamiliar place (115). It is a desolate, forbidding, unknown landscape: "There's not a tree to be seen, north, south, east, or west, nothing but mud glistening. It's very queer, I say" (118). The narrator is disoriented by what she sees: a new city built only of sheds, and men working furtively, moving bundles from place to place in the mud. Borden draws the reader into the narrator's confusion and disorientation: "Queer isn't it?" she asks: "What does it mean?" (117, 118). As the significance of the bundles becomes clear, the narrator implicates the reader in the clandestine activity: "What do you mean? . . . What do you mean by telling me that they are men?" (120). Her questions become more direct and challenging, interrogating for motive as well as seeking to understand. Borden's readers discover the answer along with the narrator, making her assumption of their knowledge and obscure implication of guilt by association increasingly confusing.

Borden compounds the misapprehension of place and action in “The City in the Desert” with the situationally inappropriate language of commerce. Observing the activity, the narrator struggles to understand the workers’ activity. “Some strange industry, some dreadful trade is evidently being carried out. . . . They may be smugglers. Certainly some shameful merchandise is being smuggled. . . . You can see from the way they move that the stuff is valuable and breakable” (119). Bodies of dead soldiers are treated as goods, and hospital staff are implicated in a perverse market-making in life. Horror arises from the impersonal, industrial process of restoring life to these “lost men, wrecked men” in order to recycle them out to an unrecognizable world to face the same destructive force again.

The sketches that follow, “Conspiracy,” “Paraphernalia,” and “In the Operating Room” amplify the irony of the moral dilemma inherent in front-line nursing exposed in “Rosa” and “The City in the Desert”: the practice of healing soldiers only to send them back into the line of fire. In these pieces, Borden’s prose strengthens and augments the gender inversions, descriptions of trauma, and lyrical prose that distinguish her writing in *The Forbidden Zone* from that of contemporaries. The conspiracy in Borden’s sketches extends beyond the illogical and futile process of repairing and returning wounded soldiers to war. Her feminized writing lulls the reader into a secondary conspiracy with the author. By manipulating language and form, Borden creates an alternate theatre of war around domesticity and poetics. In accepting this obfuscation, the reader becomes complicit in Borden’s scheme as well as the larger machinery of war propagation.

“Conspiracy” straightforwardly condemns the military’s medical system, mocking the absolutism and absurdity of the practice of rehabilitating and recycling

wounded men back to the battlefield. The anaphora of a simplistic, static refrain derides the process: “It is all carefully arranged. Everything is arranged. It is arranged. . . . It is all arranged” (124). Extending this prose technique to near-versification, the nurse-narrator recites the injury-healing-redeployment cycle perpetuated by the hospital: “Ten kilometers from here along the road is the place where men are wounded. This is the place where they are mended. . . . It is only ten kilometers up the road, the place where they go to be torn again and mangled” (124, 128).

Borden emphasizes the cruel inhumanity of this practice by comparing the country’s soldiers to pieces of laundry:

You send your socks and your shirts again and again to the laundry, and you sew up the tears and clip the raveled edges again and again just as many times as they will stand it. And then you throw them away. And we send our men to the war again and again, just as many times as they will stand it; just until they are dead, and then we throw them in the ground. (124)

Her cadenced delivery and repetitious phrasing mock the military’s deployment process. The metaphor of domesticity demeans the troops by feminizing and trivializing them in life and, breaking a strict taboo, in death. Further, her use of the second-person pronoun incriminates the reader as a participant in these belittling actions.

As well as diminishing the combatants, Borden inverts traditional gender roles in “Conspiracy,” elevating the female nurses and reducing the status of the male soldiers. This technique pervades many of the pieces in *The Forbidden Zone*, and contributes significantly to the book’s subversive, disorderly, and modernist tone. It is more prominent in “Conspiracy” owing to the brevity and plural first-person narration of the sketch. The nurses, a collective “we,” assume masculine positions of power, exercising their knowledge and authority in assessing injuries, mending bodies, and pronouncing

readiness for redeployment. Controlling partners in the patient-caregiver relationship, nurses are voyeuristic, maternal, sadistic, and omnipotent. They objectify the soldier, staring at his injuries, experimenting with his body, feeding him, and cleaning his wounds, all in preparation for readying him for return to the war theater:

We conspire against his right to die. We experiment with his bones, his muscles, his sinew, his blood. . . . We plunge deep into his body. We make discoveries within his body. To the shame of the havoc of his limbs we add the insult of our curiosity and the curse of our purpose, the purpose to remake him. (127)

The sketch represents the soldier as the singular “he”; an everyman combatant, but representative of the corps in his passive and submissive relationship as a patient: “He is only one among thousands. They are all the same. They all let us do with them what we like. . . . [O]ften they apologise for dying. They would not die and disappoint us if they could help it” (128). Complacent, obedient, and helpless, the wounded soldier acquiesces to the will of the nurses, grateful even in death.

Descriptions of the soldiers’s injuries in “Conspiracy” rely on poetically crafted clinical language to reinforce the dehumanization wrought by the war and the resulting disruption of traditional gender roles. The story disassembles each soldier into one of a collection of body parts, femininizing their wounds as “yawning mouths” and “helpless openings” (127). The nurse’s gendered surgical view, “He pours out his blood . . . red blood is spilled and pours over the table,” overwhelms the reader with provocative imagery that is overwhelmingly female—menstruation, childbirth, intercourse—and transgressively sacrilegious. These interpretations invert male and female genders and elevate women in a position of relative and actual superiority.

In form, “Conspiracy” endows Borden’s modernist technique with a lyrical quality. Like many World War I works, Borden’s fragmentary writing reflects the social

upheaval and psychological instability resulting from the war. Her iteratively patterned anaphoral phrases—“They carry their knapsacks . . . They wear their caps jauntily . . . They smile and call out”—are iambically melodic as well as repetitiously droning (125). These incantations produce contradictory effects; while their cadence conveys the relentless cyclicity of war, their poeticism softens and feminizes the story. The unexpected allusions to youth and health oppose conventional war-glorifying propaganda as well as Borden’s own brutal and grotesque depictions of injuries and destruction.

“Paraphernalia” offers a respite from the accumulating study of injuries, abuses, and suffering of *The Forbidden Zone*. In this brief sketch, a solitary nurse offers a disjointed interior monologue as she goes about her work in the hospital. Her thoughts move erratically, considering an idea, meandering through unconnected thoughts. Occasionally, she interrupts herself to jump to an unrelated subject. Borden complicates this stream of consciousness technique by alternating between first- and second-person pronouns, having the nurse query and then answer herself. “Why do you do it?” she asks, answering herself: “Yes, I know that you understand all these things” (131). The subjects she considers—hospital equipment, death, the noise of rustling skirts, a hand’s graceful movement—are rendered inconsequential by their random juxtaposition. The fragmented form of “Paraphernalia” becomes the central theme of the piece, reflecting in its technique the broken and contradictory exterior world of the war.

Borden experiments with a different form in “In the Operating Room,” presenting a sketch as a play. After an introductory paragraph, it proceeds as a scene of dialog among three patients, three surgeons, and several nurses. The characters are identified by a number or, in the case of the patients, by their injured body part: “Nurse: Here’s the

lung. Are you ready for it?” (139); “3rd Surgeon: Take this dead man away, and bring the next abdomen” (142). The surgeons simultaneously examine and operate on multiple patients. Threads of medical dialog are interspersed with nurse’s interjections, stage directions, and complaints of the wounded soldiers.

1st Patient: Mother of God! Mother of God!

2nd Patient: Softly. Softly. You hurt me. Ah! You are hurting me.

3rd Patient: I am thirsty.

1st Surgeon: Cut the dressing, Mademoiselle.

2nd Surgeon: What’s his ticket say? Show it to me. What’s the x-ray show?

3rd Surgeon: Abdomen. Bad pulse. I wonder now?

1st Patient: In the name of God be careful. I suffer. I suffer. (134-135)

It is often unclear to whom any of the characters are speaking due to frequent interruptions; responses delayed by several lines appear detached and irrelevant. The fractured conversations contribute to a disorienting atmosphere, compounded by the alternating shouts and muted expressions from the wounded men and the sympathetic, but emotionally detached responses of the medical staff.

The scene is minimalist. Borden focuses the reader’s attention on the spoken exchanges by eliminating a detailed setting, minimizing exposition, and situating the scene in media res. Unlike in other pieces in *The Forbidden Zone*, no nurse or narrator intermediates or interprets. The play format constrains the potential chaos of opening and closing doors, rattling instrument trays, wound descriptions, amputations, writhing pain, and moaning delirium. Speakers are distinctly identified, dialog is stilted, and surgeons function as stage managers, directing the flow of patients as well as the attention of the reader. Borden’s control seems overdetermined because the dialog to which she directs the reader is elementary, trite, and unremarkable.

Hazel Hutchinson compares Borden's technique in "In the Operating Room" to Herman Melville's use of a similar approach in sections of *Moby Dick*:

In both texts, the lack of a narrating voice is countered by the controlled section of dialogue, the juxtaposition of characters and events, the "stage" directions, and by the powerful impression of the observing consciousness of the scene. In each example, the effect created is an odd mix of involvement . . . alongside an oddly comic sense of alienation as the reader is reminded by the visual cues on the page that what they are experiencing is only a text. ("Theater" 145)

The seamless, sterile, and mechanical process of the surgical unit corresponds to Borden's tightly structured format of the play. The affect is not, as Hutchinson asserts, comic, but tragic. The accomplishments of this single operating room are miniscule compared to the immense scope of pandemonium and destruction occurring all around it. In this context, no individual has a voice or control, not even the writer.

"In the Operating Room" ends as it begins, in media res. The last words in the scene reflect the futility and insignificance of every exchange in this drama: "3rd Surgeon: Give me a light, some one. My experience is that if abdomens have to wait more than six hours it's no good. You can't do anything. I hope that chap got the oysters in Amiens! Oysters sound good to me" (143). Within the microcosm of the operating room this comment appears irreverent and disrespectful. The irony is that 3rd Surgeon is not responding inappropriately; in the brutal and traumatic battlefield of *The Forbidden Zone*, where codes of conduct have been overthrown, his frivolity is a rational response.

Borden's stories "Blind," "The Priest and the Rabbi," and "The Two Gunners" complete the prose section of "Part Two: The Somme." These stories express a marked change in focus from the preceding pieces in the collection which depict the war's brutality through intimate sketches of wounded soldiers. These last pieces illustrate the extent of the war's devastating effects beyond those experienced by combatants.

In “Blind,” Borden’s portrait of a wounded soldier frames the conflicted role and reactions of the nurse-narrator who is charged with his care. In her book-length study, *The Great War and Women’s Consciousness*, Claire M. Tylee cites “Blind” as “one of the most significant pieces of literature to have come out of the war” (98). The title of the story is a metaphor for the all the ways in which noncombatants fail to recognize or understand the effects of the war, even as they describe the soldier’s affliction. The nurse-narrator’s reaction to her new patient echoes previous horrifying descriptions from sketches in *The Forbidden Zone*, offered with similar impassiveness.

While in charge of the ward, the nurse is also “busy with something that was not very like a man. The limbs seemed to be held together only by the strong stuff of the uniform. The head was unrecognizable. It was a monstrous thing, and a dreadful rattling sound came from it” (147). Her professional detachment combined with desensitization to the severe injuries she sees results in an attitude that appears careless and indifferent. “There was plenty of time,” the nurse thinks as she prioritizes patients for the operating room: “He would always be blind” (149). Her certitude and the finality of her announcement, while factual and necessary in a triage situation, are startlingly abrupt.

Other staff in the hospital share the nurse’s deadened emotions, and their collective indifference results in an atmosphere steeped in irony. One of the ghastliest scenes in *The Forbidden Zone* occurs in “Blind” when, during a busy period of nonstop casualties, a surgeon enters a staff area where nurses and orderlies are at work, looking for a misplaced limb:

“Where’s that knee of mine? I left it in the saucepan on the window ledge. I had boiled it up for an experiment.”

“One of the orderlies must have taken it,” she says, putting her old needle on to boil.

“Good God! Did he mistake it?”

“Jean, did you take a saucepan you found on the windowsill?”

“Yes, sister, I took it. I thought it was for the casse-croûte; it looked like a ragout of mouton. I have it here.”

“Well, it was lucky he didn’t eat it. It was a knee I had cut out, you know.”

It is time for the old ones’ casse-croûte. It is after one o’clock. At one o’clock the orderlies have cups of coffee and chunks of bread and meat. (162)

This exchange is disturbing and offensive in numerous ways. The surgeon’s casual use of a soldier’s body part for experimentation, his placement of the knee in a common saucepan on the windowsill, like a pie left to cool, and his flippant jest about the orderly mistakenly eating the knee are all grossly disrespectful. The offhand manner of the exchange, as an aside while engrossed in other activities, likewise diminishes the once-vital body part. The deepest irony of the scene, though, is that the medical team are not engaging in a grim mockery of their patients; they have merely become so accustomed to reducing their country’s heroes to body parts that this banter has become unremarkable.

Regarding the hospital as a business provides the staff with a psychological barrier that insulates them from internalizing the trauma that they are forced to witness, alleviate, and heal. “It was the business,” the nurse-narrator repeats like a mantra: “It was a difficult business . . .” (159). This process of compartmentalization, applying a veneer of industry to deflect the horror she witnesses in the hospital, allows her to desensitize herself and disassociate from patients when she encounters their horrifying injuries.

There was a man stretched out on the table. His brain came off in my hands when I lifted the bandage from his head.

When the dresser came back I said: “His brain came off on the bandage.”

“Where have you put it?”

“I put it in the pail under the table.”

“It’s only one half of his brain,” he said, looking into the man’s skull.

“The rest is here.”

I left him to finish the dressing and went about my own business. I had much to do. (151)

The nurse's matter-of-fact discussion, neither emotional nor disrespectful, enables her to maintain her composure, provide the best care possible to the patient, and continue her duties without interruption.

As seen in other pieces in *The Forbidden Zone*, the comparison of nursing to business underscores the dehumanization of the vocation. The subtle shift of perspective on the part of the nursing staff has repercussions for those providing care. In "Blind," the narrator illuminates the effect of this analogy on her role as a nursing supervisor.

It was my business to know which of the wounded could wait and which could not. I had to decide for myself. There was no one to tell me. If I made any mistakes, some would die on their stretchers under my eyes who need not have died. I didn't worry. I didn't think. I was too busy. . . . (152-53)

Studied occupation with task-oriented work enables her to ignore the effects of her decisions. There are other things, as well, that she chooses to block: "Their courtesy when they died, their reluctance to cause me any trouble by dying or suffering, was one of the things it didn't do to think about" (150). The "things" the nurse wants to avoid thinking about are men enduring grave injuries and facing death; there are too many of them for her to individualize, or sympathize with, or grieve in a manner that would allow her to fulfill her professional obligations. In an allusion to the story's title, the nurse selectively shuts her eyes to the uglier aspects of her position. There are two ironical interpretations available: by deciding to recategorize her nursing role as a business function she blinds herself to the humanity of her patients, and by embracing the language of commerce, she commodifies the soldiers in same manner as do the generals she criticizes for managing the war.

Gradually, the nurse adopts characteristics of industrialized machinery herself. When the hospital is functioning at peak capacity and efficiency, she reports feeling "a

sense of great power, exhilaration and excitement” (155). She draws energy from the process, reveling in the hospital’s productivity and delighting in defeating the enemy:

I was happy. It seemed to me that the crazy crowded bright hot shelter was a beautiful place. I thought, “This is the second battlefield. The battle now is going on over the helpless bodies of these men. It is we who are doing the fighting now, with their real enemies.” (155)

“Happy” and “beautiful” are jarringly contradictory adjectives for the scenes she describes at the hospital and her portrayal of the unit as a “second battlefield.” The incongruous juxtaposition of brutal portraits of men and hospital with these positive words strains credulity, hinting that the narrator may be untrustworthy. At this point, the nurse-narrator starts to drift between tenses, and it begins to appear that she is telling her tale as a retrospective reflection on her experiences, not relating a single, linear narrative. Her consciousness interweaves memories with her current thoughts.

As the nurse’s narrative in “Blind” becomes more introspective and reminiscent, she renounces the feelings she experienced and the woman she became during the war. “Looking back, I do not understand that woman—myself—standing in that confused goods yard filled with bundles of broken human flesh” (158). Although she does not entirely abandon the imagery of commodification, she retreats from the harsher allusions used earlier, replacing them with a softer description of the wounded men that acknowledges their “broken human[ity].” The confusion she cites ambiguously applies to the chaos of hospital triage as well as to her reaction, as if she is experiencing the same sense of discontinuity and uncertainty internally that infuses the hospital. She repeatedly reminds herself, and the reader, that the third-person subject of her narration—“that woman”—is the same as the first-person narrator, “myself.” This insistence affirms the instability of a narrator struggling to comprehend her role as a woman among unmanned

soldiers, a nurse charged with healing to deliver soldiers back to the battlefield, a provider of sympathy reduced to accounting for men.

Unable to rationalize her actions, the nurse-narrator grasps for an otherworldly explanation: “I think that woman, myself, must have been in a trance, or under some horrid spell. . . . [S]he moves ceaselessly about with bright burning eyes and handles the dreadful wreckage of men as if in a dream” (160). After an interruption, she returns to this idea, allowing her thoughts to wander, tangling disparate images into a description that mimics the landscape of the gas-infused front lines of the Somme:

It is misty but eternal. It is a scene in eternity, in some strange dream-hell where I am glad to be employed, where I belong, where I am happy. How crowded together we are here. How close we are in this nightmare. . . . I’ve never been so close before to human beings. We are locked together, the old ones and I, and the wounded men; we are bound together. We all feel it. We all know it. The same thing is throbbing in us, the single thing, the one life. We are one body, suffering and bleeding. It is a kind of bliss to me to feel this. I am a little delirious. (164)

Again and again, the reader encounters incongruent images and semantics. Here, in an “eternal” “dream-hell” of a “nightmare,” the nurse reports feeling “happy” and “delirious.” She switches between singular and plural pronouns, shifting in and out of collective and solitary experiences. She smoothly assimilates the phantasmagoria of the hospital as battlefield, workplace, and body, culminating in the “bliss” of religious euphoria: “one body, suffering and bleeding.”

The nurse-narrator truncates her reverie to continue sorting out the men: “No, not that one. He can wait. Take the next one, . . .” until she is startled by the call of the blind soldier, whom she has forgotten. “Like a bell,” she hears his “lost voice. The voice of a lost man, wandering in the mountains, in the night. It is the blind man calling” (165). Angelic, messianic, everyman: the allusions in her description allow multiple, layered

interpretations that compound the complexity of this story. Her response to the blind man's calls echoes the Biblical responses of Old Testament prophets to the voice of God, like Abraham (Genesis 22.1), Moses (Exodus 3.4), and Isaiah (6.8): "'I am coming,' I called to him. 'I am coming.' I knelt beside him. 'I am here,' I said . . ." (166). She whispers lies of assurance to the soldier to hide the truth of her neglect, but cannot escape her guilt: "My body rattled and jerked like a machine out of order. I was awake now, and I seemed to be breaking to pieces" (167). At the end, there is neither respite nor absolution for the nurse: she may be broken differently from the way the blind soldier is, but in an equally enduring manner.

This story, like many in *The Forbidden Zone*, offers a glimpse of a human connection that cannot be trusted because it is too ephemeral and contradictory. "They disturb the automatic workings of the nurse, slip past the logic of statistical casualty, and threaten sanity" (Freedman 121). When reminded of her primary purpose, the nurse's tenuous grasp of the role she plays in the war process fractures. This is the ultimate irony that Borden reveals in *The Forbidden Zone*: only by acceding to and participating in the dehumanizing nature of war can a nurse hope to prevail in treating the grotesque casualties and accepting the senseless deaths that daily pass through her hospital.

In "The Priest and the Rabbi" and "The Two Gunners," Borden complicates her war narratives by raising conceptions of otherness. Themes of religiosity and nationality loom large in Borden's novels in this period, and she incorporates similar subjects into the last stories in *The Forbidden Zone*, with uneven effect. A morality tale lies at the heart of "The Priest and the Rabbi," when a Jewish rabbi completes the last rites for a dying soldier on the battlefield after the Catholic priest is killed by a sniper. Rather than

serving as a unifying conceit, this generous act of compassion merely underscores the futility of religion in the face of the unrestrained cruelty of war. In “The Two Gunners,” the nurse-narrator dwells on the differences between the French soldiers she has become accustomed to attending and two British patients brought to her hospital. Her French poilus demonstrate perfect manners and an “elegance of mind” that she takes for granted until the impassive and unrefined “Tommies” appear (179, 181). “I realized that there are two types of courage, the British and the French,” she explains, “as there are two types of men” (179). This shallow, nationalist note offers a lackluster conclusion to Borden’s otherwise strikingly modernist collection of war prose.

The poetry included in *The Forbidden Zone* comprises four of Borden’s poems published in *The English Review* during World War I and one new poem. Borden places this small selection at the end of the book, following her stories and the sketches. Here, her wartime poetics present a condensed and intense reinterpretation of the themes she introduces and explores in the earlier parts of the collection. The poems contain many of the same images and convey similar sentiments about the war as her prose pieces, but Borden’s modernist poetic techniques result in a harsher, more piercing effect. Her diction choices, vivid imagery, and effective poetic techniques amplify the debasing qualities of warfare and the damage it inflicts on human beings.

All the previously published poems were edited by Borden before their appearance in *The Forbidden Zone*; alterations vary in significance. One visually obvious editorial change Borden made is to her punctuation. As published in *The English Review*, Borden’s poems rely on the liberal use of dashes for caesura and as end stops. In *The Forbidden Zone*, she eliminated most of the dashes, replacing them with periods at the

end of lines, and commas or semicolons internally. Her former style of punctuation is visually arresting; the reader's eye is drawn to the dash. Dashes exemplify the modernist form in her World War I poetry by fragmenting poetic convention, disrupting liner coherence, introducing ambiguity, and providing an alternative expression of the war's cacophony. Although the dashes accurately represented her longhand manuscripts, she disliked their appearance in her final editions. Borden once complained to an editor who returned a typed manuscript with dashes reinserted where she had amended the punctuation: "[I have] spent practically all my life getting rid of dashes" (Letter to Edwin Oliver). This alteration, while seemingly minor, shifts the reader's overall perception and experience in reading the collection of poems. Without the distraction of the elongated dashes, her works appear more polished and less atypical.

Other than shifting away from a reliance on dashes, Borden made only minor changes to two of the poems in the collection; "The Song of the Mud" and "Unidentified." In both poems she rearranged a few lines and substituted words. These changes are inconsequential to the overall form and meaning of the poems. The other two previously published poems, "The Hill," and "Where is Jehovah?", were more substantially altered for inclusion in *The Forbidden Zone*.

Borden heavily revised "The Hill" before its republication in *The Forbidden Zone*, excising language that rendered the landscape in artistic terms. She replaced this imagery with descriptions of the barren and sterile landscape: "There were no trees anywhere, nor any grasses or green thickets, nor any birds singing, nor any whisper or flutter of any busy little creatures." (185). Whereas her prior version of "The Hill" evokes a sublime horror through a dizzying vista, her new edition transmits disgust and repulsion

at the war's "transmogrification" of the natural world—including men—into mechanized objects (Khan, *Women's Poetry* 119). The armies in Borden's revised version are simultaneously, and grotesquely, animalistic and mechanical:

Against the sunset, along the sharp edge of a hill, a strange regiment was moving
in single file, a regiment of monsters.
They moved slowly along on their stomachs,
Dragging themselves forward by their ears.
Their great encircling ears moved round and round like wheels.
They were big and very heavy and heavily armoured.
Obscene crabs, armoured toads, big as houses,
They moved slowly forward, crushing under their bellies whatever stood in their
way. (186)

Men and armies and crabs and tanks jumble together interchangeably in a horrifying image, one substituting for another, fungible and expendable. Borden accumulates the worst features of each into a perversion that is at once primitive and modern. "The Hill" offers Borden's readers no respite from this onslaught, no sense of resolution to the war or hope for return to a civilization in which men can resume their position in the universe.

In "Where is Jehovah?", Borden's changes emphasize the futility with which ordinary men soldier on without respite. Her edits accentuate their loss of humanity by comparing them to animals and extending the power of the battlefield to subjugate them:

A land that was silent, suddenly roaring; wide plains screaming; the slippery grey
valley sweating, heaving in agony.
And men on them; flocks and herds of men, driven over them through the iron
storm—slipping, falling, clutching, fighting as they slip, fall, clutch, are
suffocated, sucked down, buried, tossed again, thrown to the iron winds.
Herds of men, hosts of men, driven to the sacrifice, like sheep, like dogs, like
goats and bullocks;
Driven to slay other herds of sheep-men on the burning altars. (194)

In this passage, the natural spaces occupied by the battle also take on a modern, industrial "iron" character. Borden deletes the lines in the previously published version of the poem

that harshly referred to the soldier as “stupid,” replacing them with a question format that softens the implication that she is judging him:

Why does he stand there? What keeps him standing there?
Is he not a lost sheep? Why does he not turn, run, rush, scramble back through the
rain, wind and thunder of iron, bleating with terror?
Why does he wait to die, and die so quietly, so humbly, with hope still looking
back from his eyes? (197-98).

Borden contrasts the gentle, dumb sheep-like men with the modernist imagery of warring armies in a bizarre hybridization of nature and industrialization. This juxtaposition of the pastoral with the mechanical implies that, given the circumstances under which they are expected to stand and fight, there really is no sane recourse for the men to pursue. Borden’s questions are moot, as the only answer lies not in other men but in something or someone more omnipotent than man or the almost otherworldly techno-nature he has unleashed upon himself.

Borden’s alterations to “Where is Jehovah?” also sharpen her attack on the missing God, and she devotes more lines to asking where He is: “[N]o Lord of Hosts shows himself. / There’s no sign of God, no voice of God” (195). In a final cry of despair for securing any help for her pitiful sheep-men, Borden equates God with Satan. “Bring someone, some mighty God, Baal, Beelzebub, the Powers of Darkness—anything, anyone—anyone who will put an end to this” (198). By asking Satan, who reigns in hell, to come and save men from hell on Earth, she discards any remaining hope for salvation.

Borden added one new poem, “The Virgin of Albert,” in *The Forbidden Zone*. Albert was a key location in the Battle of the Somme. In 1915, the statue of Mary and the infant Jesus on top of the local basilica was hit by a shell and fell to a near-horizontal position, where it hung precariously until the entire church tower was destroyed in 1918.

Borden's homage to the Virgin parallels the imagery and themes of the following, final poem in the collection, "Unidentified." In "The Virgin of Albert," instead of using an anonymous soldier for expressing her despair, horror, and rage, Borden channels and evokes these reactions through the perspective of the dangling statue. She personifies the sculpture as the representative of God on earth: the Virgin's head-first plunge from the tower with the babe in her arms is a metaphor for man's wanton and immoral destruction. The poem also echoes many of the sentiments and tropes from "Where is Jehovah?" The central character's gender is the most significant differentiator, yet Borden fails to do more with this than change the pronoun, dwelling only briefly on Mary's role as the mother of Jesus and her respective role for Christians.

Positioned near the end of the collection, following the brutal prose in her hospital sketches and the mechanized, bestial terror of the earlier poems, "The Virgin of Albert" provides neither a different perspective on the war nor a new mode of engagement with the reader. As a component of Borden's overall collection, the poem reinforces the montage of female perspective, cubist imagery, despairing irreligiosity, and supernatural machine destruction that informs *The Forbidden Zone*, making it one of the most unconventional and powerful writings to emerge from World War I.

Read separately, Borden's stories, sketches, and poems in *The Forbidden Zone* present fragmented glimpses of trauma, pain, empathy, and despair. Together, they create a mosaic of imagery depicting the ravages of war on landscapes, bodies, and humanity. The sinking imagery of the dehumanizing and abstracted landscape is cubist, perhaps reflecting her connection to the modernist painters, such as Wyndham Lewis (Freedman 116). Borden identifies the existence of insurmountable differences that isolate

combatants from civilians, soldiers from rulers, men from women. Although her book appears to strive to address these gaps by creating empathetic portraits and inviting the reader to new understandings, it offers little in the way of hope for reconciliation or redemption. The last line of “Unidentified,” the final poem in *The Forbidden Zone*, describes the anonymous soldier as “Unfriended, unrewarded, and unknown,” suggesting a bleak and despairing conclusion, with no optimism for the future (211).

With each succeeding work in *The Forbidden Zone*, Borden introduces additional, complicating juxtapositions that alienate the writing further from expected patterns of wartime experiences and literature. The resulting dislocation creates a vortex around the only point of stability in the book: “There is War on the earth—nothing but War, War let loose in the world, War—nothing left in the whole world but War—War, world without end, amen” (62). This mimetic free-verse articulation, provided by the nurse-narrator in “Moonlight,” captures the contradictions and fragmentation of the war that Borden represents in *The Forbidden Zone*: comprising strong rhythmic patterns, repetition, textual interruptions, liturgical imagery, a mood of despair, and spoken by a female narrator who has trespassed into a male environment to engage in the senseless process of repairing men to be sent back to inflect and incur more damage.

Critics seemed unsure how to approach or analyze *The Forbidden Zone* when it was published in 1929. “Drops of distilled horror,” Garreta Busey succinctly calls it in *New Herald Tribune Books*. An explicit review in *The Saturday Review* recommends the book because of, not despite, its horrifying depiction of war:

This reviewer has read many war books, particularly during the past year, but not one, even of German origin, which exceeds this in the horror of its descriptive passages. ‘The Forbidden Zone’ is a very horrible book, but as a sketch book of

the war, seen from a particular angle, it should be faced and read, for it is written by one who can not only write, but can nurse and soothe. . . . ("War Book")

A notice in the British progressive weekly journal *New Statesman* describes the pieces in Borden's collection as "necessarily horrible, though not sensational," adding: "[T]here is a painful clarity about them which is often beautiful" (Review of *Forbidden Zone*).

Many reviewers were shocked that a woman should write so frankly about the realities of war, finding her language too graphic, her style too experimental, and the scenes in the operating room "too intense": overall a "painful book to read" (Woodman 9; Fells; Aiken; Review of *The Forbidden Zone*). Some reviewers simply ignored the brutal subject matter altogether, balking at the idea of a woman's book that describes the effects of trauma and explores forbidden subjects (Kaplan, "Deformities" 36). Geoffrey T. Hellman, a writer most associated with the cosmopolitan weekly *The New Yorker*, reviews *The Forbidden Zone* along with several war memoirs, including Helen Zenna Smith's *Stepdaughters of War* and the anonymously-authored *War Nurse*, in the liberal American magazine *The New Republic*: "There is a poetic, 'literary' quality to Miss Borden's writing which, while it keeps her book from having any great force and in some places seems rather out of place in the face of the subject matter, is occasionally very charming" (357). Focusing on small incidents of "inoffensive whimsy" in her sketches, Hellman ignores the horror and brutality of Borden's subject as well as the literary merits of her innovative technique.

The most unusual critique of *The Forbidden Zone* was Lawrence C. Woodman's in *The New York Times*. Appreciatively, Woodman calls Borden's prose "Sandburgian, Walt Whitman-like," but he is unable to "simply" characterize the book. He approves of Borden's modernist technique without being able to explain it well: "Her *Forbidden Zone*

miscellany swims in the ether of fervid, felt imagination as well as wallows like a troglodyte in modern warfare reality – a rare combination and a rather blasting one” (9). Unlike others, Woodman is neither offended nor distracted by Borden’s graphic language and imagery, taking it as a requisite aspect of wartime writing.

Literary novelists who reviewed *The Forbidden Zone* provided the strongest recommendations of Borden’s collection. Using the pseudonym Oliver Way, Elizabeth von Arnim considers it alongside Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* in *The Graphic*, and commends Borden for the “burning truth” of her hospital sketches and her “exquisite mastery over language.” Way values Borden’s pieces because they could only be produced by a woman who was able to witness and record the trauma experienced by the men in the hospital. “I have read most of the war books, but in none of them have I encountered the truth more stark and more terrible than in this one—by a woman,” stated Way, adding: “I would like to see it sold by the hundred millions.” Novelist and professor Garreta Busey reviewed Borden’s collection in conjunction with *War Nurse* for the *New York Herald Tribune*, giving *The Forbidden Zone* a strong recommendation and praising Borden’s writing technique. Busey is attuned to Borden’s imagist mode, a poetic style that was an early sub-genre of modernism:

It is evident that a vivid imagination has taken hold of the material, pulled it into shape and made of it a vehicle for indignation, bewilderment, and a kind of frozen horror. The sketches and little stories are . . . bits of art. Many of them present with the sharp detachment of imagist poetry. . . . They set the object before us with the aid of a striking figure and leave us to draw our own conclusion.

In her review, Busey emphasizes Borden’s “artistic instinct,” explaining and illustrating the contrasts her sketches and stories portray between the business of killing and the business of living. Echoing Woodman, Busey calls Borden’s poetry “Whitmanesque.”

Not all literary reviews were as favorable or generous. An unattributed review in the liberal British political weekly, *The Nation and Athenaeum*,⁵⁵ whose literary editor was Leonard Woolf, recognizes *The Forbidden Zone* as “A Woman’s War Book.” The review admires Borden’s work as “an indictment of war itself . . . written vividly, sincerely, and movingly,” and calls it a “vital and haunting book.” The reviewer finds Borden’s “imaginative interpretations of her own wartime moods” and poems to be “less impressive” than the “simple, object records” of her sketches in Part One (“Woman’s War Book”). There are several hints that the critic deems Borden’s book less significant or serious a war memoir than those written by men. The review emphasizes her gender—“A *Woman’s* War Book” [emphasis added]—noting that she brings “a characteristically feminine touch” to her stories. It accuses her of riding the coattails of the current proliferation of war-related books rather than acknowledging her experiential justification as comparable to that of male writers. As well, the review insinuates that Borden’s affection for the French poilus has affected her esteem for her British countrymen.

Clarice Aiken’s insightful review of *The Forbidden Zone* in *The Saturday Review of Literature* conveys the significance of Borden’s literary achievement, “one of the most poetic contributions to war literature,” and explains the author’s stylistic innovations with examples from the sketches to show how Borden’s experimental form expands and intensifies the meaning of her words. But Aiken misses Borden’s use of irony and shocking imagery as a technique to startle her readers and reinforce her scathing attack on war. Instead, she criticizes Borden for breaching good taste in “ghoulish” scenes that test

⁵⁵ The title of *The Nation and the Athenaeum* changed to *The Nation and Athenaeum* in December 1929.

the reader's "visceral stamina," and disputes the effectiveness of Borden's revelations of the horrors of war, interpreting her critique of war as "documenting the heroisms" of the soldiers. Despite this criticism, Aiken praises Borden's writing: "With a poet's gift of rhythm, beauty, and feeling," she concludes, "Miss Borden has taken the lowest materials of life and turned them into a work of art."

Military historian Cyril Bentham Fells, a veteran of World War I, expresses tempered admiration for *The Forbidden Zone* in his review in *The Times Literary Supplement*. For example, despite describing some of Borden's scenes as "dreadful" and "grim," Fells commends them for their "considerable power." Fells presents the reader with both a justification and a warning about the strong imagery in the book: "It is perhaps right that this aspect of war should be made clear to the public which knows nothing of it," but "there is some risk that the fashion in which the subject is handled will make it appear that the hospital was for the wounded a place of horror." He criticizes the "particularly ugly image" personification of pain as a lascivious woman, preferring the "excellent" stiff upper-lipped English soldiers in "The Two Gunners." Disapproving of Borden's innovative techniques, Fells considers her newer stories superior to the earlier-written sketches, which he believe suffer from "mannerisms" and "repetitions."

Outside of the reviews cited above, critical reception of the book was scant compared to Borden's previous novels. A one-sentence notice in *The Observer* identifies "Virginia Woolf's mothwing essay, *A Room of One's Own*, Robert Graves's *Goodbye to All That*, and Mary Borden's *The Forbidden Zone*" as "rival stars in the firmament" ("Books and Authors"). Many fewer regional and local presses published reviews of *The Forbidden Zone* than of her previous books. A number of papers reprinted Richard

Massock's syndicated article originating in New York which describes Borden's book along with Helen Zenna Smith's *Stepdaughters of War* in a few brief paragraphs. He tersely notes that Borden's narrative is "more subjective [than Smith's], revealing the effect of the hospital scenes on the nurses," without offering any critical insight.

It is difficult to assess with certitude the reasons behind the small number of reviews of *The Forbidden Zone* and the uneven critical enthusiasm for Borden's work. Borden offers one explanation in an article she authored in *The Sphere* in December 1929. In it, she accuses "Professional Pacifists and the few surviving Jingoists" of misguidedly encouraging the public to forget the war ("War"). Borden asserts that it is important to read books like *All Quiet on the Western Front* to understand the "agony" and "hideous experience" so that it may not again occur ("War"). Comparing the reception of *The Forbidden Zone* to that of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Laurie Kaplan attributes the disparagement of Borden's work to European cultural conditions at the end of the decade: "It was as though a decade of distance and healing, as well as escalating political crises in Europe, created a reflective, anti-war, pro-peace readership" ("Deformities" 36).

Some reviews certainly demonstrate antipathy toward the more horrifying imagery in Borden's book, yet few of them object to Borden's anti-war stance. While some critics evinced an understanding of Borden's modernist mode of writing, most praised her poetic and lyrical prose. Several reviews authored by men expressed reservations about Borden's wartime writing that derived from her female gender, in contrast with the female reviewers who praised Borden's gendered perspective. This

distinction points to Borden's gender as a contributing factor in the acceptance and approval of *The Forbidden Zone* within a literary industry dominated by men.

Today, *The Forbidden Zone* is viewed as a significant feminist and modernist World War I narrative, and Borden is widely acknowledged for her heroic personal efforts as well as her literary achievement. Her reputation as a leading literary figure of the period has emerged only in the past few decades. A comprehensive survey of this scholarship is provided in the Appendix.

Borden's literary achievement in *The Forbidden Zone* studied in Chapter 5 went unappreciated for more than half a century after the book's publication. Critical recognition and acclaim emerged slowly, over several decades, as cultural and social changes prompted renewed academic interest in her wartime writing. At the time it was published, the book was not remarkably successful critically or popularly. Borden would continue to integrate modernist techniques into her fiction after this, but she would never again attempt to produce the level of stylistic experimentation and innovation shown in her wartime writing.

Chapter 6

“CHAMELEON”⁵⁶: ADAPTING MODERNISM FOR MIDDLEBROW

Chapter 6 surveys the decade of the 1930s, a period during which Borden’s literary projects diverged from the innovative techniques she had been exploring and refining in earlier decades. Her fiction, which she continued to produce at a prodigious rate, shifted toward more accessible narrative constructions. Modernist elements appear in her novels, but her writing became anchored in realism and genre fiction, including detective fiction, religious novels, and propaganda. She accelerated her pursuit of new outlets for literary expression, delving into the essay format, developing a public identity as an arbiter of manners, and exploring other media, such as radio and cinema. Chapter 6 examines the change in Borden’s writing as well as the likely reasons for it.

While many writers cultivate a distinctive prose voice or aesthetic style, Borden developed a range of styles in which she varied individual components such as structure, tone, diction, syntax, grammar, and punctuation. The most remarkable aspect of this period is Borden’s ability to quickly move among genres, mediums, audiences, and projects, rarely carrying over any topic further than one book or series of articles. Surveying her literary oeuvre after 1929, one gets a sense that Borden was continually appropriating and discarding different authorial personalities.

The unifying theme of Borden’s change of mode may be described as a reorientation from writing as a creative or artistic endeavor to consciously writing as a mode of production. In the 1910s and 1920s Borden viewed her literary efforts as a vocation: she was devoted to practicing and perfecting her writing. After 1929, Borden

⁵⁶ Hallet, *Nurse Writers* 52.

became more interested in being an author: her attention shifted to the benefits accruing from her writing, as measured in contract terms, book sales, and publicity appearances. Although she remained attached to using her personal experiences as the creative genesis of her fiction, her mode of representing them moved away from experimental narrative technique and toward conventional and popular forms. Borden's abandonment of modernism did not pivot on a single publication, event, or date. Yet, unlike her development of increasingly innovative modes of expression, which took place over decades of writing, her shift toward a more accessible manner of writing occurred more rapidly. There are several possible explanations for this change, including financial demands, personal interests, and the waning of modernist literature.

The autumn of 1929 brought bad news for Borden and Spears. The financial catastrophe on Wall Street had wiped out the Borden family's assets. Borden's brother John, to whom she had entrusted management of her fortune, had speculated in the stock market and lost all his investments, including his sister's inheritance. It was a "bitter shock" to Borden when she discovered that he had been drawing a large salary from his oil company while reneging on his repayment of loans to her, and their formerly "close relationship . . . was irreparably damaged" (Conway 181).⁵⁷ Henceforth, without Borden's assets, the couple would be dependent on what they could earn to provide for the family's expenses. To economize, they sold the lease on their house on Little College Street in Westminster and moved into a more modest one on John Street in Mayfair (Egremont 123). Spears, conscious of Borden's disdain for Turner's inability to earn money of his own (Egremont 97), had previously embarked on several business ventures,

⁵⁷ These events inform Borden's 1938 novel, *The Black Virgin*.

which now became more pressing. For Borden, the financial disaster meant that her career as a writer would also become a significant means of support for the family.

Scholars of Borden's life and work cite the loss of her fortune during the Wall Street Crash of 1929 as the motivation behind her decision to pursue publication of *The Forbidden Zone* after the passage of nearly a dozen years (Conway 148-49; Egremont 116; Hallet, *Nurse Writers* 57; McGowan, "Have"). A close examination reveals that this is a mistake. The collapse of prices on the New York Stock Exchange, which started on October 24, 1929, reached an interim low down about fifty percent on November 13, 1929. Borden signed her contract with William Heinemann on November 14, 1929, a date too close to market events to assume causality. The market then recovered for several months, entering a longer, deeper slide from April 1930 until July 1932. During this period prices dropped eighty percent more. Borden's most significant loss of assets likely occurred during the early years of the 1930s, particularly if her brother was attempting to prop up his losses with further cash infusions and speculation, as Conway claims (158, 180). This timeline better explains the couple's occasional extravagant gestures, such as Borden's gift of a charter yacht vacation to Spears for his birthday in 1931. It also explains her measured pivot toward middlebrow aesthetics and content.

In their biographies of Borden and Spears, Conway and Egremont argue that the considerable reduction in the couple's assets resulted in Borden's reconsideration of her writing as a source of income rather than as artistic expression (Conway 149; Egremont 118). This is a more reasonable, and factually supportable, assertion than their claim about financial matters compelling Borden's publication of *The Forbidden Zone*. To meet this new objective, Borden recognized that she had to adapt her style and content in a

manner that would maximize sales of her books, which meant appealing to a mass audience. This resulted in the gradual abandonment of modernist modes of writing in favor of creating fiction and a persona popular with middlebrow readers.

Viewed in conjunction with her financial reversal, Borden's life circumstances and personality may provide other clues to the change in her literary direction. In her discussion of Borden's wartime sonnets, Marcia Phillip McGowan argues that Borden's

abandonment of poetry after the Great War . . . was partly, no doubt, the loss of her fortune in the stock market crash of 1929, but may also have been that the great subject of her poetry—the existential loneliness that she felt during wartime conditions despite a passionate love affair—dissipated with the Armistice and with her eventual long marriage to Major General Sir Edward Spears. (“Have”)

Although McGowan is specifically addressing Borden's poetry, her interpretation resonates with the larger shift in Borden's literary efforts. In 1930, Borden was nearing the age of 45. She had lived an adventurous life. Now, her three daughters were adult women, the eldest two studying at Oxford, and her son was at boarding school. Spears was still politically ambitious and pursuing business opportunities on several continents, often with Maurice by his side. In the general election in October 1931, he stood as a National Conservative candidate and was elected Member of Parliament for Carlisle, a seat which he would hold until 1945. Despite the couple's monetary strain, this was a period of stability and continuity. Without the excitement and trauma of the war, Borden may have experienced a decrease in literary creativity.

Borden cites the role of extreme experience in the creative process in an article in *The Spectator* published concurrently with *The Forbidden Zone* in November 1929:

The real Bohemia of the genuine artist is characterized by a disorder intolerable to the plain man, but vital to the creative temperament, if the artist is to remain sensitive and alert. Genius is often eccentric because it demands freedom from routine and craves the stimulus of accident, and surprise. It would be interesting,

could one find out how much of the best work done in the world was done as the result of some shock, calamity, misadventure or sorrow. I think the sum would be a surprisingly large majority of the total output. ("How to Enjoy" 764)

This counter-intuitive opinion may explain Borden's frenetic appetite for new projects and causes as an artist seeking stimulus and inspiration. (Later in life, Borden embraced the opposing belief that an overabundance of adventure and experience was detrimental to artistic creativity). In her critical assessment of Borden, Christine E. Hallet describes the author as "a chameleon. Changing not only her appearance, clothing, and manner, but apparently her entire personality, to fit into a range of backgrounds" (*Nurse Writers* 52). Borden never demonstrated any hesitation or regret about progressing on to something new. It is to be expected that, at some point, she would end her engagement with the avant-garde, and seek new ways of engaging as an author.

Completion of *The Forbidden Zone* may have drained any remaining enthusiasm Borden harbored for the modernist mode, and sent her searching for a new literary direction. Rereading, revising, and creating new pieces about her wartime activities surely took an emotional toll on the writer as she reengaged with the stories, diaries, and memories of the war and the traumatic events she witnessed. Her concentrated writing habits, including extended periods of isolation as she finished her work, would have intensified her experience. It is unclear whether Borden experienced this process as cathartic or traumatic. Writing about the war at a distance of a dozen years may have removed the immediacy, but not the distress, of those events, or it may have allowed her to exorcise any remaining emotions of the wartime period and achieve a sense of closure. Following publication of *The Forbidden Zone*, Borden would never produce prose fiction or poetry approaching the level of stylistic modernism of her wartime writing. Even her

impressionistic novel which immediately followed, *A Woman with White Eyes*, lacked the technical innovation and experimentation of her World War I collection.

By 1930, modernism's influence was waning. A tangled confluence of political, economic, and social issues suggested that a new crisis was looming in Western Europe, prompting a variety of literary responses. Forced to mediate between moral and political themes or aesthetic complexity, many writers chose the former. Pericles Lewis explains: "The political ambiguity of much modernism, and the increasing politicization of the rest, made modernist concerns with aesthetic form and experimentalism seem less than urgent in the context of economic depression, political radicalization, and approaching war" (211). Many modernist writers turned toward more traditional literary forms.

Throughout the period in which she was honing her modernist literary techniques, Borden continued to write and publish light societal commentary in periodicals. Between 1929 and 1931, she contributed a series of essays to the quintessentially middlebrow American monthly, *Harper's Magazine*. In these three to five thousand-word essays Borden opines on culture from an English perspective, instructing her readers on "Manners: American and English," "Society, English and American" "The Englishman Himself," and "The English Boys Go Off to School," among other topics.⁵⁸ Articles appearing in *Vogue* in 1931 and 1932 criticize the manners of American women. In "The Man Protests Against Organized Gaiety," Borden criticizes cosmopolitan women as uninteresting to their male counterparts who, like Englishmen, do not mistake noise for happiness. A follow-up article, "Sophisticated Ladies Kiss Everybody" explains the social customs of Englishwomen. Her essay in *The Saturday Evening Post*, "Dinner and

⁵⁸ Also "A Defense of French Morals"; "A Defense of the English Climate"; "Chicago Revisited."

the Feudal Spirit,” describes Borden’s first British dinner party and instructs American readers on the nuances of English etiquette and reserve. Her article, “In Compliment to the Englishman,” which ran in the populist British periodical *Cassell’s Magazine of Fiction*, reveals and commends the virtues of Englishmen. She also authored a Preface to the American edition of E. M. Delafield’s novel, *Dairy of a Provincial Lady*.

In 1930, Borden published another modernist novel, *A Woman with White Eyes*. The book blends conventional subject matter with modernist techniques, earning it comparisons to James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (Butcher, “Mary Borden’s Latest Book” 13). Superficially, Borden appears to return to the mode of realist domestic drama familiar to her readers and which had gained her popularity in books such as *The Romantic Woman*, *Jane—Our Stranger*, and *Jericho Sands*. As in these earlier novels, themes of national contrast, class distinctions, and moral choices are seen in *A Woman with White Eyes* through the lives of a group of well-to-do American and English characters. Despite these themes, it is an impressionistic novel, chronologically unmoored and fluidly following the narrator’s consciousness, that bears no resemblance to any of her earlier books.

Telling the retrospective stories of two female friends, the novel details their relationships with husbands, lovers, and family over a sometimes stormy lifetime. The story unfolds through a backward-looking manuscript, written by the narrator, Caroline Merryweather, who is seeking a philosophic explanation from an Abbé: “I simply want to know what it’s all about, who I am, whether I have any identity at all, . . . whether there’s another world, separate, different from this one” (7). Caroline, an heiress from California nearing sixty years old in 1929, relates her life-long friendship with Maggie Travers, who, like her, adopted England as her home for many years: “We lived astride two

centuries and two hemispheres. Our jumping-off place was a new country in an old time; our landing place an old country swinging like a ship towards a new order of things. . . .”

(17). This universal and celestial imagery foreshadows her later existential ruminations.

Caroline’s narrative recounts the details of her and Maggie’s lives from their meeting as young adults in China in 1899. Years later, after multiple marriages, affairs, children, deaths, and divorces for both women, Maggie turns to Caroline for help when she finds herself alone and pregnant. But the abortion that Caroline arranges leads to Maggie’s death from septic poisoning. Shattered by her friend’s death just at the outset of World War I, Caroline spends the war years nursing wounded men during the day and providing sexual comfort to them at night. After the war, she immerses herself in the decadent and seamy side of Parisian life. When her old friend Tawaska visits in 1924 and asks what she is doing to amuse herself, Caroline succinctly replies: “I gamble, I drink, I dance, I make love” (316). He enigmatically suggests: “If you are alone go away and be alone” (318). Caroline promptly closes her Paris house and begins to travel from continent to continent. After five years, she settles into a small cottage in an obscure New England town and begins to sort out and record her memories.

These romantic dramas serve as backdrop to the larger, more essential issues that Borden seeks to illuminate and interrogate in the novel. *A Woman with White Eyes* is neither a domestic romance nor a commentary on trans-Atlantic or European cultural differences, as were many of Borden’s previous novels. It is an existentialist inquiry into the meaning of one’s life presented in a distinctly modernist style. The two motifs that integrate these aspects of the novel most thoroughly are the character of Dr. Tawaska and Caroline’s incessant ruminations on the instability of memory.

Although Caroline addresses many of her questions to the Abbé, she relies upon the mysterious character of Tawaska for answers, an inconsistency that she addresses at the start of her narration.

I call this a letter because it requires an answer, and I fear the little Abbé couldn't answer. His worldly wisdom was celestial, but when it came to a simple final question he would never speak for himself. He would always fall back on his great infallible authority, and I know there is no such thing in the world.

Who is there who could give me an interesting answer? . . . Tawaska the Finn, perhaps. . . . He knows something, but he won't tell it. He's found out something, something deep, queer, hidden. I know this. (7)

Although Caroline first meets Tawaska at a clinic in Switzerland, she confides that “he’s been prowling around the edges of my life for years. He was always just outside it, even when I was a child in California. I just didn’t know he was there then. . . . [A]pparently I just missed meeting him a dozen times” (8). When introduced to him, Caroline responds oddly. “Yes, I know,” she replies at first. “But I hadn’t known,” she adds: “I think that I simply acted on impulse at the sight of his huge figure, or, if you like, was dragged to him by the same magnetic force that makes me feel his presence now in this room” (171).

An experimental psychologist, Tawaska travels the world conducting mental tests. “We are finding out things about the mind,” he tells Caroline when they first meet: “The mind is not important, it is not as important as people think. It’s just possible that it has no existence. Perhaps we shall find in our experiments that it disappears” (173).

Tawaska’s illogical proposal to use his intellect to disprove the existence of the mind is unquestioned by Caroline: “I only half listened. It was all quite beyond me. I went on with my sewing. . . . It was a little like being in a trance when I was with him” (174).

Caroline’s introspective existence precludes her understanding, interest, or participation in science or intellectual pursuits. For the next quarter of a century, Tawaska appears at

random times and places around the world, after intervals of months or years, staying for brief periods—days, a week, or merely minutes—before abruptly disappearing. In between encounters he remains elusive, without fixed address or way to be contacted.

When Tawaska appears, he and Caroline engage in terse but deeply introspective conversations that leave Caroline searching for meaning in life. Their connection is conveyed as almost supernatural in nature. In their single written communication, which Caroline describes as a “love letter,” Tawaska explains their relationship:

I do not care for you in any human sense, or need you or want you, neither your love, nor care, nor sympathy, pity, admiration, nor understanding. I have nothing to say to you. . . . I do not need you in any human relationship that I can imagine, but we belong to each other. It is an absolute relationship. It does not belong to this time and place . . . another place where there is no time and no death, no beginning and therefore no end. (172)

Later, Caroline confesses eerily: “I must always have loved him, perhaps even before I was born. There is a bond binding us together that is final” (259). The last time she sees him, Tawaska advises Caroline to stop wandering the world aimlessly, compelling her to retreat to contemplate her life and write the manuscript. “This thing you call life is not interesting,” Tawaska insists: “It is just a sleep. You are asleep with your eyes not quite closed, slits of white showing. Still you are asleep. All your life you’ve been asleep. You’ve been in a dream world . . .” (11). Their mystical bond allows Tawaska to see and know with clarity how Caroline exists in multiple layers of consciousness.

Allusions to blindness and memory are the most prominent running theme throughout *The Woman with White Eyes*. The novel points to the important difference between not being able to see and not being able to remember, and makes a fine distinction between not being able to see others and not being able to see oneself. For Caroline, these ideas are mixed up in the haze of the past that she is working so hard to

uncover, illuminate, and plumb for meaning. The narrator presents herself from the outset as an unreliable narrator, grasping to remember people and events and failing to even remember herself. As Marjorie Grant Cook notes, the book's title derives from "the look of some blind people . . . because Caroline Merryweather is blind in regard to everything that affected her emotionally" (Review of *A Woman*).

Caroline's response to her missing memories is to replace her recitation of history with a fabricated story from her imagination:

It is very bothering when one is trying to remember, to find out that one cannot see one's self. For I remember in pictures and can never see myself in these pictures . . . I can see the other figures, but never my own. That one person is always absent. . . . It is so unsatisfactory that I am bound to imagine what I am, and from that I go a step farther and imagine that I am what I want to believe myself to be. (16)

Just what or who Caroline wants to believe herself to be is never clarified, and it becomes evident that her story is only a story: "I cannot remember what I want to remember. . . . [B]ut I shall write down the things I remember, and they will make a story, and I will call it mine" (32). She confesses that characters from history and fiction "seem more real to me than many people I have known" (38).

Borden inundates the reader with layers of explanations for Caroline's confusion of sight and memory in a cubist pastiche reminiscent of scenes from *The Forbidden Zone*. "Another of the tricks my memory plays on me, is to suddenly withdraw and let imagination take its place. . . . I remember things that I couldn't possibly have seen" (39). "The girl lying on the bed I have never seen, and I cannot see her now. She is myself, invisible, shapeless, and substanceless" (59). "I can't do it. I can't trust my memory. I don't know what happened. Even when I describe what I know that I do remember, I am not describing a real thing" (91).

Forgotten things and things remembered, the distinction between the ephemeral and the permanent. What is the secret of selection at work in memory to preserve and destroy? Does the fact that I have forgotten things prove that they were unimportant, or is it simply that I am the world's best forgetter, or is it that the ego is a blind and hungry creature, a sort of sucking leech bent upon the destruction of everything it touches? (140)

The ambivalence in Caroline's ruminations suggests that the boundaries between truth, sight, and memory are neither absolute, nor meaningful. More darkly, her Freudian questioning of her ego, the reality function of her personality, reveals anxieties about her sanity and her humanity. The subtle switch from the first to third person voice at the end of her question destabilizes the inquiry's syntax, insinuating that Caroline's confusion may be universally shared.

In an intimate echo of *The Forbidden Zone's* Preface, in which Borden calls her collection "fragments of a great confusion," and admits to having "blurred the bare horror of facts . . . because I was incapable of a nearer approach to truth," Caroline searches her memory, unable to discern what is truth and what is fiction, to separate remembrance from fabrication: "I have read through what I have written, and I find it very confused. But that is the way I remember my life, and I think that I have been as truthful as I can be . . ." (325). Away from the immediate and graphic trauma of war, Borden pushes her exploration of truth and art toward more internal questions of existence.

There is no doubt or equivocation in the strength of Borden's representation of these existential interrogations. Caroline's language of aggression alludes to the ongoing battle that she wages in her attempt to remember or to see the past. Memory may be hazy, but her fight to find it is grounded in very real images. She identifies a larger force, "Life," with which she, and every other person, is actively engaged:

[T]here are two separate things. There is my life and there is Life. . . . But it's the enemy, that's the point. Everyone's enemy. We're all in the same fix. Sleepwalkers, groping blind men, wrestling with a monstrous antagonist. Everything it does to us is an attack. Everything that happens to us is a trap. . . . [E]verything Life, the big brute, gives us, every experience, every pleasure, as well as every disappointment, is a trick to hoodwink us, is a move against us, against our rousing ourselves out of the dream. (26-27)

The conflict in Caroline's self-examination arises from a conviction that her life should be meaningful: "[I]f we had no identity, and no will, if we were merely carried on by life like a couple of bobbing corks in a torrent where did the struggle come in, the sense of frustration, of being baulked, beaten, at grips with an invisible antagonist?" (82). Her unsuccessful quest to understand the failures of her life drives Caroline further into despondence and despair:

What it comes to is that I doubt the validity of experience, of all and any experience. Each event that took hold of me seemed to be something that it wasn't. Life carried me along as I sank deeper into the dream . . . propelled and repulsed by complicated magnetic forces. . . . I went on my erratic, unvolitioned way. (196)

The New York Times critic concludes that, in the end, Caroline's search for the "riddle of living" yields nothing beyond "a frustrated sense of something beyond reality and unattainable, something which could be felt but not perceived" ("Retrospective Novel").

Eventually, Caroline comes to believe that awareness and free will are insufficient, and that her search for meaning is inherently in conflict with the actual lack of meaning she perceives in the world around her. This meaninglessness arises from the debilitating and dehumanizing position which Caroline believes humanity occupies:

I believe we are in a trap, that we are caught in an iron machine. I believe we are blind worms, no more important in the universe than the earthworms in Eliza's garden. I believe that this life is an illusion, I believe that literally. . . . There is something else, I think beyond life, but we can't get to it, we can't get out, we are asleep, and struggling in our sleep, and we cannot awake and so we know nothing, see nothing, hear nothing but the phantasmagoria of our dreams. (225)

The glimmer of hope that Borden offers in this bleak environment comes from Caroline's refusal to surrender to the situation. She accepts the absurdity inherent in the impenetrable conflict arising from her simultaneous acknowledgement of life's meaninglessness and persistent search for meaning. By continuing to engage with the challenges that her memory presents and embracing what life remains for her, Caroline affects a personal rebellion against the futility and hopelessness she believes surround her. This existential perspective is a quintessential quality of modernism: *A Woman with White Eyes* represents Borden's most sophisticated expression of this literary mode.

One of the most interesting characters in the novel is Marcella Mackintosh. A lesbian caricature in Paris during the inter-war period, Marcella was "a new type of adventuress who made capital out of her comically simple ugliness as her forerunners had done out of their beauty . . . like the ten plagues of Egypt she swept over Europe . . ." (86). After Maggie's death, Caroline spends years in Marcella's circle:

All you had to do was to ring up Marcella and say, "I'm bored to death," and your house would fill instantly with people. Negroes and harlequins and clowns would pound on the door; wizards and conjurors would pop out of taxis; barmen would set up a bar in the hall, and an orchestra would set up its music racks round the piano. Princes and grand dukes, cocottes and midinettes, English lords and American millionaires would pour in, take the floor, and Marcella, round as a pumpkin, terrible to behold in her mannish coat and skirt, with her face like a suet pudding and her eyes like currants, would plump herself down on the piano stool and then—well, then madness would fill the room. (84)

Borden is a skillful observer of European society, and again it appears that her fictional characters are derived from real people. In his autobiography, *I Hate Tomorrow*, British journalist Henry J. Greenwall describes Paris in May 1927 as "just a little bit crazy," and affirms that Borden's description in *A Woman with White Eyes* "aptly sums up the Paris scene" (251). As for the character of Marcella, Greenwall states:

“We all know Marcella Mackintosh, of course, and were it not for the law of libel, I would name her. She is graphically described by Mary Borden” (253). An enigmatic item by gossip columnist Gilbert Swan confirms this:

The character is so plainly drawn that there is no mistaking it.

For years she kept ‘open house’ in Paris, dwelling there with another American woman who later married into European royalty. Her hospitality, not so many years back, was almost a legend. She has for many years been identified with artistic and literary matters.

And the portrait drawn of her has crept from tea-table conversation into the society columns where one of the frankest refers to it as ‘vicious libel’—or something of that sort.

Few critics were interested in the experimental aspects of *A Woman with White Eyes*; most confined their commentary to the romantic story, Tawaska’s unusual character, or Borden’s adroit handling of the European social scene. For example, *The Nation and Athenaeum* reviewer criticizes the unremarkable plot, yet recommends the book as “well worth reading” for its “shrewd and interesting observations on English society as seen by an American” (Review of *A Woman*). A review in *The Times* praises the novel for the “great vitality” of Borden’s writing and her “knowledge of the social scene” that leaves the reader “dazzled” (Review of *A Woman*). Marjorie Grant Cook calls *A Woman with White Eyes* “tumultuous and spasmodic . . . a social melodrama that never lacks lively turns,” and describes the enigmatic Tawaska as “a cross between a sheikh and Rochester.” She approves of Borden’s “cleverness in conveying social types, in sketching her background be it country or town, in displaying speed, riches, brilliance contrasted with an authentic nursery or simple New England scene,” but fails to acknowledge the novel’s experimental, modernist form (Review of *A Woman*).⁵⁹

⁵⁹ See also Strong, “Fiction”; “White-Eyed Woman” in *Time*.

Most reviewers who discuss Borden's use of innovative narrative technique and modernist sentiments do so positively. Calling it "perhaps the most complex novel of the year," Fanny Butcher of the *Chicago Tribune* compares Borden's novel to James Joyce's *Ulysses*: "[I]n the sense that the memories are unorganized, unmarshaled, and have no chronological sequence—*A Woman with White Eyes* is done in the *Ulysses* manner. It is not a legal but a natural child, of *Ulysses*" ("Mary Borden's Latest"). Writing in *The Saturday Review of Literature*, Basil Davenport describes Borden's cubist imagery:

The narrator's mind ranges over all her life at once; she constantly interrupts the chronological order to anticipate a consequence; she gives the appearance of every incident from two points of view, as it appeared at the time and as it appears in retrospect and perspective. The method is admirably suited to convey an impression of the hurried, confused emotions she describes, to point all significances and underline all episodes.

Referring to Tawaska's mystical manner of illuminating the falsity of life, and tangentially of the book, Davenport applauds Borden's "attempt to include a genuine philosophy" as "truly brilliant technique." A review in *The New York Times* notes that few authors "would have dared to take such liberties with the conventional form of the novel." It labels *A Woman with White Eyes* "a strange, confusing and apparently formless experiment in fiction writing," and warns that "it may puzzle the reader at times, but it can hardly fail to interest him" ("A Retrospective Novel").

Joe Lee Davis, writing for *The Bookman*, calls Borden's novel "an extraordinarily deft instance of condensed and patterned impressionism." Citing Caroline's dream-like retrospection as "patly modern in its impressionism," Davis maintains that "the novel avoids stylistic experimentation and keeps to a prose that is clear and idiomatic. But otherwise—in its conception of character and in its underlying philosophy—the modernism of the novel is extreme" (415). Davis recommends the book "for its novelty

of method and excellence of style, its amazing range and contrast of character portraits, its acute consciousness of the impact of human lives on one another, and its uncanny insight into American feminine psychology and the English social order” (416).

Not all assessments of Borden’s experimental technique in *A Woman with White Eyes* were favorable. *The Times* reviewer reports that a “wayward, restless depression moves through the book” attributable to the brutish character of Tawaska and Caroline’s disillusionment with “the futility of life and of its cruelty” (Review of *A Woman*). Virgilia Peterson Ross, in *New York Herald Tribune*, finds Borden’s narrative a “somewhat garbled account,” and disparages the “too heightened, dramatic effect.” As many reviewers, Ross is mystified by the figure of Tawaska: “As a sort of psychic reproach, Tawaska is vastly useful to the story; as a human being, he leaves you incredulous. He provides a *motif*, while he undermines your conviction” (“Sleepwalker”).

Borden’s interest in modernist techniques faded from her writing after *A Woman with White Eyes*. Critical reception of the work may have been a factor. As well, the novel, written in 1929, predates in creation the change in financial circumstances which precipitated the meaningful shift in her literary priorities discussed earlier.

The same year, Spears published *Liaison 1914*, an account of his experiences as a liaison officer, with a foreword by Winston Churchill. The book, which vividly describes the horrors of war—from shoeless refugees, to the loss of comrades, and the devastated battlefield landscapes—received “overwhelmingly favourable” reviews. For Spears, the book had two main effects: it confirmed him as an expert on World War I, raising his political profile in a positive way, and it brought him a new source of income, which was becoming more urgent following Borden’s financial losses (Egremont 121, 123).

Borden's writing returned to the theme of domestic romance with her novel *Sarah Defiant* in 1931. The book was published by William Heinemann in the United Kingdom and by Doubleday, Duran in the United States.⁶⁰ Borden's contract was comparable to those for her last several novels, with a larger advance against royalties; terms indicate anticipated sales in the five figures (Memorandum of Agreement 24 July 1931). A congratulatory letter from Noel Coward implies that Borden had tried unsuccessfully to serialize the novel before publishing it in book format.

I've read "Sarah Gay" and thought it superb. No wonder [illegible] didn't accept it as a serial—its [*sic*] *far* too good. But the necessary compressing of it has made it technically the best thing you've done. . . . Your psychology will always be too fine for the magazine mind. . . . [R]ise above the whole thing and write what you want to write—but always with an eye on cerial [*sic*] publication. (23 Oct. 1931)

In October 1931, it was listed as one of the top five fiction titles most in demand by *The Times* Book Club ("During the Past Month").

Sarah Defiant is a novel of post-World War I Paris. In it, Borden returns to themes found in earlier novels, such as *The Tortoise* and *Jane—Our Stranger*, integrating a love triangle with sharp contrasts between the behavioral codes of middle-class England and those of the diplomatic circles in the French capital. On a brief forty-eight hour leave from her duties as a nurse in a front line hospital, Sarah has a brief reunion with her husband, Lord Howick, for the first time in two years. Their reunion is awkward: Howick has just been relieved of his military command and Sarah has left a suitor, John Gay, behind on the battlefield. When she receives a call informing her that Gay has been critically injured, Sarah impetuously announces her decision to leave Howick.

⁶⁰ The United Kingdom edition was titled *Sarah Gay*.

Following Gay's recovery, he and Sarah move to Paris where he has a diplomatic posting. This is not the Paris of *Jane—Our Stranger*, this is the exultant, yet troubled city of the Paris Peace Conferences, replete with diplomatic maneuverings, high-society intrigues, brilliant *soirees*, and seemingly endless policy debates. Howick refuses to grant Sarah a divorce, cutting her off financially and forbidding her access to their two young daughters. She and Gay struggle, growing apart as he becomes increasingly involved in Parisian social circles without Sarah, who is financially unable to keep up with appearances and, as an unofficial partner, remains snubbed socially. Eventually, her daughter's illness compels Sarah to return to England. In her absence, Gay finds romance with a racy Parisian socialite. After Howick's death, Sarah returns to Paris and recaptures the heart of her lover, and the reconstituted couple lives happily ever after.

Unlike Borden's earlier wartime writing, such as *The Forbidden Zone* or sections of *The Tortoise* set near the battlefield, the war is less personal, violent, and modern in *Sarah Defiant*. Only in a scene in which Gay is wounded does Borden's narrative evoke the fragmentary, dehumanizing atmosphere achieved in *The Forbidden Zone*. In *Sarah Defiant*, the soldier experiences his pain alone: there is no female nurse to witness and report on the trauma. The narrative depicts a separation of the sphere of warfare from that of the civilian world along conventional patterns. When the war ends and the narrative timeframe shifts into the "reactionary backlash of the post-war world," the novel falls back on "more traditional codes and the form of romantic cliché" (Smith 96). Sarah's subversive preference for the war, representing freedom over marriage, is undermined by her determined pursuit of a new marriage. Borden's decision to feature romance and drama over the war experience represents a meaningful shift from the powerful and

graphic anti-war outlook of *The Forbidden Zone*. *Sarah Defiant* provides further evidence of a link between World War I and the development of modernisms; “the ways that it *fails* to be innovatory” indicates their strong connection (Smith 96).

Most contemporary reviews of *Sarah Defiant* overlook the war sections of the book, choosing to address Borden’s depiction of Paris during the peace convention or debate the moral permissiveness explored in the book. Marjorie Grant Cook offers a representatively favorable review in *The Times Literary Supplement*:⁶¹ “Mrs. Borden is accomplished enough to maintain the reader’s interest all through. . . . If the love scenes will not wake him to very deep sympathetic emotion, the French drawing-room scenes will not fail to entertain him” (Review of *Sarah Gay*).

Borden’s narrative technique was scrutinized by critics, who disagreed over its effectiveness. Taylor Scott Hardin’s review in *The Saturday Review of Literature* praises Borden’s writing in *Sarah Defiant* as a “dynamic web,” comparing it to that of Jane Austen and Fanny Burney. “Borden writes with lucidity and smoothness and . . . her story has a moving power,” wrote E. E. Hollis, complimenting her “keen penetrative insight and irony.” An anonymous critic in *The New York Times* disagrees, faulting Borden’s “liberties with the conventional form of the novel” as an “experiment that falls rather flat” (“*Return I Dare Not*”).⁶² Lack of attention to or interest in the war scenes supports the growing collective sense that public interest was moving on from war to peacetime, and that Borden, as a writer, was accommodating and embracing this sentiment.

⁶¹ See also Strong, “A Diversity of Creatures”; Quennell, Review of *Sarah Gay*.

⁶² See also V. Ross, “Love Exacts All.”

In 1932, Borden contributed a chapter to a collection of essays on the subject of men, *Man, Proud Man: A Commentary*, edited by Mabel Ulrich. Other contributors included E. M. Delafield, Susan Ertz, Storm Jameson, Helen Simpson, G. B. Stern, Sylvia Townsend Warner, and Rebecca West. Retitled *The More I See of Men—Wicked Portraits of the Male Sex*, the book was also published in the United States with an introduction by Frederick Lewis Allen, American historian and editor of *Harper's Magazine*. This witty collection of essays approached men's behavior in a "teasing rather than polemical" tone that was intended to be "inoffensive and easy to read" (Maslen "Man" 53). The lighthearted approach, and the editorial hand of Mabel Ulrich, a physician, public health advocate, bookstore owner, and writer, who was outspoken on sexual health issues, directly addressed a female, middlebrow audience.

Borden's essay, "Man, the Master: An Illusion," which was the opening chapter, begins as a satirical first-wave feminist critique of patriarchal tradition before developing into a Marxist treatise predicting social upheaval. She asserts that "the moral ascendancy of man over woman has never been a fact in civilized communities, but always an illusion" fostered by woman and men, and resulting in the formation of a "cult of great men" (12). Borden blames industrialization for diminishing man's power: modern amenities have made him weak, "top-heavy, soft and flabby" (34). Women, she claims, have been forced to fill the resulting power vacuum, accepting roles of responsibility and authority they do not want. Childbirth has better equipped them for survival in an unhealthy modern environment, providing them the strength and stamina to guarantee their ascendance. "The future is ours," she proclaims, "it holds endless possibilities and one certainty—an increase of our power" (36). Borden predicts the stealthy emergence of

a new gynocentric, matriarchal society in the future, where women will assume leadership, and “tiresome brainwork” and manual labor will be assigned to men.

In her essay, Borden commodifies men and women: their gender and relative worth as individuals and as a class exist only in relational power dynamics. Her societal critique offers no consideration of art, beauty, morality, or ethics. Vera Brittain promoted the collection in a review for *The Week-end Review*, calling *Man, Proud Man* “the kind of lovely book that most women have wanted to see written” about “the capricious male,” and “very different from the humourless dogmatism” offered in the many solemn treatises written on the nature of women.

In 1933, Borden published two books with vastly divergent contents: a marriage manual and a novelized biography of Mary, the mother of Jesus. These books are a meaningful departure from the novels on which Borden built her literary reputation, but despite their vastly different content, they are unified by their appeal to middlebrow audiences. Religious novels, which were displaced during the prosperity of the 1920s, flourished during the economic depression, and sex-and-marriage manuals proliferated throughout the interwar period. That *The Technique of Marriage* was conceived as a money-making endeavor rather than a serious treatise is borne out by Borden’s disparaging description of the book in a complaint to Noël Coward: “I’m on the last chapter of my domestic pot boiler and am sick of the very thought of marriage” (qtd. in Conway 159). Prior to the book’s publication, seven chapters were published in *Pictorial Review*, one of the largest circulating American women’s magazines of the period.⁶³ This

⁶³ “Are You Engaged?”; “Her Wedding Day”; “The Honeymoon”; “Man—the Untidy Animal”; “The Rights of Wives”; “The Technique of Marriage: Why People Marry”; “When Children Save the Marriage.”

savvy tactic would have assured Borden of more income from the same pieces of writing, as well as garnering free publicity for the book.

In *The Technique of Marriage*, Borden analyzes the modern institution, identifying challenges and offering suggestions for improving the marital experience. As well as explaining her liberal attitudes toward marriage and divorce, the book demonstrates Borden's progressive views about contraception, family finances, and the women's suffrage movement, many issues she had been discussing in interviews, newspaper columns, and magazine articles since the latter part of the 1920s.

Claiming a common-sense approach, Borden draws on her own experiences, and those of others encountered during a lifetime of global travel. She asserts that the purpose of marriage is not to satisfy sexual, familial, or social needs, but to fulfill the desire for a "durable human relationship that will be . . . a partial guarantee against loneliness" (7). With this as her starting point, Borden describes the stages in the marital cycle, from courtship and engagement, through the wedding, honeymoon, adultery, decreasing sexual desire, divorce, and children. "Married life is not a natural life," she asserts: "Mating is natural: desire is natural: fornication is natural. But not marriage" (144). Instead, Borden espouses abolishing honeymoons, making marriage more difficult, and easing the divorce process, ideas "considered quite radical at the time" ("Mary Borden's Discourse").

In contrast to the assured voice of experience Borden conveys in *The Technique of Marriage*, circumstances in her own relationship were neither as settled nor as secure as her public persona or writing implied. In one interview, Borden cites her marriage of "twenty-five years" and parenting three grown children as her credentials as an expert on "happy marriageland" (qtd. in B. Ross). This duration included ten years of marriage to

Turner and fifteen to Spears, relationships that overlapped by at least a year and were formally separated by a scant six weeks. By 1933, Borden was certainly aware of the nature of Spears's relationship with his personal secretary, Maurice, as well as the extent to which she had become his "essential confidante and aide" (Egremont 133). Borden's emphasis on sensibility and maintaining a sense of perspective may be attributable to her own dashed idealism and deepening pragmatic understanding of her marriage to Spears.

The most thorough reviews approached *The Technique of Marriage* from a professional perspective. *British Journal of Inebriety* recommends the book for Borden's "skill and sympathy and real understanding regarding the far-reaching domestic, social, and national ramifications of marriage" (Review of *Technique*). The book was endorsed by Leonora Eyles ("Marriage"), columnist and author of *Commonsense About Sex*, a sex manual written the same year as *The Technique of Marriage*; the American feminist, psychologist, and writer Lorine Pruette ("Chief Concern"); and Jan Struther, creator of the character Mrs. Miniver in a fortnightly column in *The Spectator*.⁶⁴

The American and British editions of *The Technique of Marriage* diverge in Chapter 6, titled "Ceremony and a Dish of Asparagus" in the edition published by William Heinemann in the United Kingdom, and "Cookery Book or Communism" in the edition published by Doubleday, Doran in the United States. The British edition emphasizes maintaining a degree of formality and ceremony in the marital relationship:

However modest my circumstances, I would aim to be an exquisite woman in an exquisitely appointed house, who had a right to exact an exquisite courtesy from the man who sat opposite me every night at table, and I think if my technique were good I would get what I wanted from this man. (87)

⁶⁴ For a lay review see Blanchard; "Honeymoon Abolition Theory Opposed Here"; "Mary Borden's Discourse on Marriage"; Review of *Technique of Marriage* in *Forum and Century*; and B. Ross, "Love Does Not Always Make Marriage Successful."

Specifically, Borden urges wives to follow the French example of making meals together into “rich, satisfying, beautifully cooked and carefully served affairs, which they would enjoy slowly and seriously” (90).

The same chapter in the American edition expands marriage to encompass national security concerns. Blaming “the restlessness and the excitement of the machine age” for undermining marriage, family, and civilization, Borden predicts: “[O]ur whole economic system is going to break down fairly soon . . . private property and the family are going to disappear before another generation is gone, and communal life take the place of what we call our civilized social system” (92). She warns American women that “abandoning the traditional role of food preparation for communal kitchens” at which a wife and her “comrade of the moment” dine together will cause “the Bolshevik systems in Russia”; impose “the State slave of the Russian proletariat” and the “communal organization of the Brave New World Machine”; and result in the demise of the family as a social unit (96, 97, 98). American women must abandon their “high-faluting notions about precious self and learn to cook, sew, and all the rest of it” to ensure the survival of the American family (100). Reviews in the United States critique Borden’s conflation of gender roles and politics as “absurd” (Pruette, “Chief Concern”).⁶⁵

Borden’s second book of 1933, the novel *Mary of Nazareth*, was published simultaneously by William Heinemann in the United Kingdom and by Doubleday, Doran in the United States. Heinemann doubled the advance payment offered for *Sarah Gay*, in expectation of higher sales (Memorandum of Agreement 19 Sept. 1933). Originally

⁶⁵ See also Neuhaus, “The Joy of Sex Instruction: Women and Cooking in Marital Sex Manuals”; Neuhaus, *Manly Meals and Mom’s Home Cooking: Cookbooks and Gender in Modern America*.

intended as the first part of a trilogy, *Mary of Nazareth* relates the story of Jesus's ministry and death from his mother's perspective.

The genesis of what literary critic Cyril Connolly called the "holy family pot-boilers" is unclear (qtd. in Pryce-Jones, 265). Conway claims that Borden's interest in the subject was prompted by a letter from her mother, Mrs. William Borden, who was upset after reading *A Woman with White Eyes*: she felt that book "offered no hope to readers, and suggested that [Borden] consider writing a book based on the Gospels" (Conway 162-63). In a letter to Gordon Selfridge requesting his assistance publicizing *Mary of Nazareth* with a special display in his store for the Christmas holiday in 1933, Borden refers to her mother: "This book was really written for her" (Letter to Gordon Selfridge).

Borden provided a different account in articles, interviews, and her personal papers.⁶⁶ While camping on the shore of the Lake of Galilee in Palestine, either in 1905 or 1914, she experienced an epiphany: "[I]t came to me suddenly that a man had stood on that spot two thousand years ago whose life had changed the world and that I knew almost nothing about him" because no one had ever presented Jesus "as a man of history, against his own background." The passage of time and a lack of interest in the subject kept her from writing about Jesus until, while casting about for a new novel, she realized "that there had never been a drama of Mother and Son as tragic as that of Mary of Nazareth and her son Jesus." Professing a "longing to know the facts about him . . . of frustrated curiosity," Borden alights on his story to illustrate the mother-child relationship that interests her (How I Came to Write" 1, 2).

⁶⁶ See Borden, "How I Came to Write *Mary of Nazareth* and *The King of the Jews*"; Borden, "What Religion Means to Me"; Butcher, "The Literary Spotlight"; C. F., Review of *King of the Jews*.

The narrative of *Mary of Nazareth* follows events described in the Gospels and the Book of Acts, from the beginning of Jesus's early adult ministry through the events leading up to and including his death, related from Mary's perspective. Borden's narration is unadorned, employing simple diction, straightforward exposition, and an uncomplicated, linear chronology. She adds historical and cultural context to this well-known story, embellishing familiar scenes by projecting the emotions and actions of Mary. Borden incorporates historical characters, such as Pontius Pilate, Joseph Caiaphas, and Herod Antipas, and creates an imaginary family for Jesus, including brothers, sisters, and extended relations. With the exception of one conversation between mother and son, Jesus's words are lifted intact from the King James Version of the Bible. Her abrupt insertion of this formal language into her colloquial narrative is criticized in reviews.⁶⁷

The narrative reflects Borden's use of Biblical sources, ancient historical records, and contemporary social studies, as well as her imagination. Although labelled a fictional biography of Mary, large portions of the book focus on the history of Roman rule and Jewish settlement in Palestine, and the figures which dominate this history. In addition to primary sources, such as the writings of Josephus, Justin, and Tacitus, Borden's bibliography reveals the wide historical and scholarly reading that she undertook as preparation for writing the book. Borden never faltered in her insistence that her narrative's veracity rested on the unassailable facts presented in the Biblical Gospel.

In the popular press, *Mary of Nazareth* received overwhelmingly favorable reviews as literary fiction. Writing in *The New York Times*, Percy Hutchinson recommends Borden's book as "a sincere human picture . . . exalted yet restrained and

⁶⁷ See Chamberlain.

reverent.” In a nod to Borden’s historical research, Hutchinson praises her “rapid and vivid sketch of the historical position of Judea at the moment, to convey how seething all is beneath the surface.” Leonora Eyles, in *The Times Literary Supplement*, praises Borden for her “loving” and “scholarly” handling of a sensitive subject: “[She] has attempted one of the most difficult tasks in fiction, by taking as her material a set of characters who have become the centre of world-wide religious controversy and religious devotion” (Review of *Mary*). Noted English writer and critic Peter Quennell reviews *Mary of Nazareth* in *The New Statesman and Nation*, commending Borden for her graceful, learned, and balanced point of view that is “neither that of the sympathetic rationalist . . . nor that of the wholly uncritical believer” (Review of *Mary*).⁶⁸

John Haynes Holmes, a prominent Unitarian minister, positions *Mary of Nazareth* as an academic project, claiming that it is “something more and better than a merely imaginative and sentimental retelling of the Gospel epic. It is a work which commands attention and respect in its own right as a piece of authentic historical interpretation” (“Jesus”). A review by the American academic and religious writer, Ernest Sutherland Bates, in *The Saturday Review of Literature*, identifies shortcomings in Borden’s ambiguous approach to her story, acknowledging the difficulties she faced in presenting historical fiction compounded by “religious reverence or reticence” (“Gospel Story”).

The book created considerable controversy at the time of publication. Catholic readers were disturbed by Borden’s demystifying portrait of Mary, and offended by the description of Jesus as the eldest of several children in a direct contradiction of the *de fide* Catholic doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary. A Spanish translation was cancelled

⁶⁸ See also Ayers; Chamberlain; G. R. B. R.; Review of *Mary of Nazareth* in *The Times*.

after censors in Spain rejected the book for “errors and beliefs that are contradictory to the dogma” of Roman Catholicism (Ediciones Castilla). *America*, a national Catholic weekly magazine published by Jesuits in the United States, warns “against this insidious book which desecrates the memory of Christ’s Mother, renewing the old attacks of the Reformation on her virginity, and trying to establish a hostile relation between the mother and her Redeemer-Son” (“Slips”). A review in *Catholic World* harshly criticizes Borden:

Besides being wrong about her thesis, Miss Borden is mistaken about many details of chronology, about the identity and characteristics of the Apostles St. James the Less and St. John, and about so many other things, that her book is worthless as a biography of Mary of Nazareth, and as a picture of New Testament times. (J. I. M. 501)

The most severe criticism is levelled by an editorial in *Catholic Herald*, which calls *Mary of Nazareth* the “project of a perverted brain,” and scorns Borden’s “ignorance and virulence” in committing “no new heresy” in her presentation of Mary as the mother of multiple children. “Could the Evil One himself do more for his Kingdom,” the editorial asks, “than these ‘courageous’ Protestants, atheists, Jews and pagans do for him? This latest ‘novel’ is a case in point” (“Courage”).

Offended by the editorial, and feeling that her “scholarly integrity was at stake,” Borden sued the New Catholic Press Limited, the printers and owners of *Catholic Herald*, and Charles Diamond, the paper’s editor, for libel, seeking a public apology (Conway 167; R. Taylor, 21 Nov. 1933). Timing of the suit, which occurred shortly after the book’s publication in Britain and preceded the American release by one week, increased the event’s newsworthy appeal, and the story was picked up by wire services on both sides of the Atlantic (“Book on the Virgin”). Borden went to extraordinary lengths to garner ecclesiastical support for the novel, writing personal appeals to religious

leaders in both countries. She received many supportive letters written on her behalf, but none would be admissible in court (Borden, Letter to Major Taylor).

The case dragged on for nearly a year, during which time Diamond passed away and the New Catholic Press Limited sold the paper, leaving Borden with no one left to sue. Eventually, her solicitor was able to secure a meager offer of £40 towards the costs of her legal fees, which were more than double that amount, and a written apology, although not the public letter she was seeking initially (R. Taylor, 9 Nov. 1934).

Borden's interest in writing a religious book appears at odds with her prior literary output, in both form and content. Her previous works fall into three broad categories: literary realism, modernist war writing, and magazine essays. Some of her earlier novels feature characters who display a religious devotion tending toward fanaticism, such as Simon in *Jericho Sands*. Until the publication of *Mary of Nazareth*, Borden's fiction writing raises, addresses, and resolves moral issues outside the confines of organized Christianity, despite the presence of a representative of the Christian church. Her turn to Biblically-inspired fiction is unexpected in the context of her literary history; it is less so in the context of her financial and family circumstances.

Late in 1933, Borden's middle daughter, Catherine, married the publisher Rupert-Hart Davis, and early the following year her eldest daughter, Joyce, published a book of *French and English Poems*. These events were soon eclipsed by a series of crises. The writer's youngest daughter, Mary, suffered through an episode of "nervous debility," while Joyce experienced episodes of depression and suicidal thoughts (Egremont 119). Borden's son, Michael, developed acute osteomyelitis, a disease of the bone marrow, requiring several surgeries throughout the year. Borden pushed to finish her next novel

while he was hospitalized, “writing in her hotel or the hall of the nursing home,” so that she could get the advance because she needed money to pay his medical bills (Egremont 129; Conway 171). At the end of the year, Joyce overdosed on pills and died.

Complicating these tragedies was Borden’s relationship with Spears. The difficulty of Michael’s birth had left Borden with sexual difficulties for which Spears had neither patience nor sympathy. This situation was exacerbated by Spears’s reputation for making advances at women and his intensifying relationship with Maurice. Borden started drinking and smoking heavily, her hands shook, and she gained weight. People noticed and commented on her ravaged appearance and her increasing irritability and impatience, reviving old rumors of drug use (Egremont 132).

Spears was thriving politically and professionally during this period. In 1934, he hosted the first meeting of a cross-party group which would later become the European Study Group, of which Spears became chairman in 1936. The Group would become a focus for MPs suspicious of the European policies of Neville Chamberlain's government. Spears continued to extend his international business dealings in Prague, becoming chairman of the British Bata shoe company in 1934. He became a director of the merchant J. Fisher, which had trade links with Czechoslovakia, and of a Czech steel works. Later, Spears used his role as an MP to bolster support for the young republic in both London and Paris, and violently opposed the 1938 Munich agreement. These foreign entanglements and sympathies caused friction with Conservative MPs. There was an element of self-interest in Spears’s advocacy of the Czech cause, as he stood to lose business interests providing an annual income of £2,000 (Egremont 140). During this decade Spears also took a business interest in a mining venture in Africa, beginning a

long association with the Ashanti and Bibani gold mines on the Gold Coast (later Ghana) which would become his primary professional focus (Egremont 137). This became a destination for solo trips by Spears, eventually extending into an annual months-long sojourn accompanied by Borden or Maurice, or both (Egremont 237).

Despite her personal challenges, Borden maintained an active public presence, giving speeches and supporting charitable causes with her presence and personal appeals. Contemporary accounts in *The Times* report Borden speaking in support of a range of social causes.⁶⁹ On these occasions, she was as likely to talk about her previous war experiences as to present her modern views on marriage or reflect upon recent historical, political, and economic events. On each of these topics, Borden was able to draw on personal experience, either her own or that gleaned from her relationship with Spears, for background and current information. She was also in demand as a literary expert, supplementing her income with speaking fees, giving talks such as “Galsworthy’s Life and Work,” “The Development of the American Novel,” “Integrity of the Modern Novelist,” “The Modern Novel,” “The Novel at the Present Time.”⁷⁰

Finding that Jesus had dominated the story of *Mary of Nazareth*, Borden realized: “[M]y story wasn’t finished with his death, for his effect on the course of events had not ended the day he was executed . . . I had scarcely touched on the revolutionary character of his life or the irony of his death” (“How I Came” 3-4). Her follow-up novel, *King of the Jews* was published in 1935 by William Heinemann in the United Kingdom and by

⁶⁹ See “Cecil Houses”; “Court Circular,” 31 Jan. 1935; “Help for Unemployed in St. Pancras”; “Housing in St. Pancras”; “West London Hospital Ladies’ Association”; “The World Youth Congress Movement.”

⁷⁰ See “Arrangements for Next Week”; “Club Announcements”; “Court Circular,” 10 Mar. 1931; “Galsworthy’s Life and Work”; “Hospitals and Clinics.”

Doubleday, Doran in the United States. Borden began writing *King of the Jews* while her court case with *Catholic Herald* over *Mary of Nazareth* was still in process.

Again, Borden immersed herself in research, searching for background detail and to illuminate her understanding of theological debate. Despite her public insistence that she “did not want to discuss these questions with theologians” (“What” 132), Borden sought out advice from biblical scholar Burnett Hillman Streeter, who she credits in the book’s Preface with supplying an important modern source in his book *The Primitive Church*. In a letter to Canon Streeter, Borden reveals her unrealized plan to “complete the trilogy by a book that (to borrow a thought from your *Primitive Church*) will tell how the spirit of Jesus escaped from doomed Jerusalem and travelled west, to Rome.”

King of the Jews chronicles events following the crucifixion of Jesus. “This book is an attempt to reconstruct the history of what happened in Palestine immediately after and consequent on the death of Jesus,” Borden states in the book’s Preface. In phrasing evocative of *The Forbidden Zone* Preface, Borden explains that her book is historical fiction grounded in the “fragmentary and contradictory” facts of the New Testament. Confining her narrative to the forty-day timeframe, Borden presents the events of the period from the perspective of those most intimately involved with the resurrection story: Mary Magdalene, the high priest Caiaphas, Pontius Pilate, and Jesus’s brother James. The narrative closes with the death of Mary Magdalene in the hills of Galilee.

In form and style, *King of the Jews* follows that of *Mary of Nazareth*; a linear plot related by an omniscient narrator with a heavy amount of historical context and local color. She provides an extensive bibliography of sources, from authors ancient and modern, religious and historical, and draws heavily from the Bible. Borden’s narrative

offers a harsh interpretation of the Roman Catholic Church's revision of Jesus's life and legacy to support their purposes. She accuses Rome of inventing the virgin birth because "the natural facts of conceptions and birth were . . . hideous," concocting the Holy Trinity to avoid the nastiness of "the filthy ways of the flesh," and fabricating the doctrine of transubstantiation: Peter would have been "astounded had it been revealed to him that the flesh of his beloved Jesus was going to be given miraculously to thousands of priests and be eaten by them for thousands of years . . ." (221-23).

King of the Jews was well-regarded in the popular press and, like *Mary of Nazareth*, received many favorable reviews. A review in *Boston Evening Transcript* praises the novel without reservation for its literary and religious qualities, promising readers "literary excellence . . . sympathetic, imaginative, and reverent treatment of her subject—wholly in tune with the Scriptures" (C. F.). Leonora Eyles's review in *The Times Literary Supplement* favorably compares *King of the Jews* to other recent fiction about Jesus, notably Edmond Fleg's *Jesus*, finding Borden's retelling to be as "gripping as any romance" (Review of *King*).⁷¹ Despite the book's anti-Catholic prejudice, Borden receives accolades for her impartiality from Eyles.⁷²

Less enthusiastic reviews critique Borden's writing prowess in her sequel, finding it inferior to *Mary of Nazareth*. *The New York Times* review laments Borden's failure to create a "vivid picture," and accuses the author of relying on "her novelist's privileges" (L. M. F.). Ernest Sutherland Bates finds Borden's second religious novel "written with less intensity and with less imaginative realization" than the first. Bates repeats his major

⁷¹ See also Weigle.

⁷² See also L. M. F.

criticism of *Mary of Nazareth*: that Borden conflates rationalism with romance. “Her book,” he declares, “is a product of the typically modernist desire to eat one’s cake and keep it, too. . . . Miss Borden has reduced it to the level of a pious elegy. . . . [I]t is not the sort of something that we once long ago hoped for from Mary Borden” (“Pious Elegy”).

As was its predecessor, *King of the Jews* was highly lauded in some religious circles. In *The Spectator*, influential Anglican theologian Charles E. Raven compliments the book for presenting “an accurate, reverent and in the full sense tragic treatment of events,” and Borden’s writing as “beautiful without self-display, dignified but never pretentious, poignant but never sentimental.” Unitarian minister John Haynes Holmes praises *King of the Jews* in *New York Herald Tribune Books* as “a work of excellent literary craftsmanship,” although he expresses reservations about Borden’s ambiguity about the resurrection as a “true miracle” or “only a superstition” (“In the Days”).⁷³

Like *Mary of Nazareth*, *King of the Jews* raised the ire of religious leaders in Catholic communities. The Jesuit publication *America* sharply criticizes *King of the Jews*, providing a paragraph-long litany of Borden’s misuse of the Gospels: “Readers will be shocked to find events, recorded as facts in the Gospels, treated by her as so many myths and fairy tales” (Willmering).

Shortly after publication, Borden approached Alexander Korda, the experienced European film director and founder of the London Film studio whose recent release *The Private Life of Henry VIII* had been nominated for the Academy Award for Best Picture, to discuss a film version of *King of the Jews* (Borden, Letter to Alexander Korda, 7 Feb. 1935). The British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) responded “that a film dealing with

⁷³ See also Eyles.

such essential features of the Christian religion . . . may be unsuitable for indiscriminate public exhibition.” It would be categorized as a religious film, a designation that would place onerous viewing and publicity restrictions on it and likely render it financially untenable (Brooke-Wilkinson). Borden suggested a variety of approaches that would enable the film to get passed as a “programme picture,” focusing on the “little people” instead of Jesus and encouraging churches to use their influence with the authorities (Borden, Letter to Alexander Korda, 7 Mar. 1935).

A personal letter reveals the extent to which Borden was financially relying on the cinematic project. She hopes the film will “encourage Little Brown and make them keen to publish it’s [*sic*] successor,” admitting that her new book will have to be put aside to work on the film treatment. Borden confides to her unknown correspondent: “You know how hard-up I have been and will appreciate the immense relief of being able to breathe and, for the moment anyhow, not to have to strain and struggle” (Letter to Unknown).

Borden was successful in convincing Korda to go ahead with the project. The two signed a contract in April 1935, intending to sidestep the religious designation by making a film that focused on the supporting characters and in which Jesus did not appear (“Story of Christ”). Borden advocated vigorously for the film, urging Arnold Gyde, her editor at Heinemann, to publicize the contract signing for the project and providing interviews with the press (Gyde). Notices announcing Korda’s plan to produce the film directed by Victor Sjöström were reported in multiple outlets.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ See “*The King of the Jews*: British Colour Film” in *The Times*; “Screen Notes” in *The New York Times*.

After a year of inaction, Borden received a letter from Korda stating that without assurances from the censors, the Board of Directors at London Film Productions felt “it would be hasardous [*sic*] to undertake the production of this picture” (13 Mar. 1936). Korda insisted that, although he had “spent rather a lot of money on the preparation of this picture,” the film’s cancellation “cannot be helped” (Letter to Mary Borden, 25 Mar. 1936). Borden, who must have taken this news hard, tried to salvage something from the project and her relationship with Korda. Although she was already at work on her next novel, she offered to set it aside should Korda have work script work for her (Letter to Alexander Korda, 22 Apr. 1936). Borden never completed her holy family trilogy, abandoning the project after *King of the Jews*.

As one reviewer notes with hindsight in 1941, Borden’s novel writing during the 1930s shows “the trend of [her] mind during this period” (R. K.). Her next three novels, the critic claims, “all show a dissatisfaction with life, a queer, almost unanalysable [*sic*] suspicion that all is not well in the heart of that charmed circle in which she has become one of the most smartly dressed hostesses” (R. K.). These three books, *Action for Slander*, *The Black Virgin*, and *Passport for a Girl*, return to the British upper-class milieu with which Borden was intimately familiar and had featured in numerous of her earlier works. The moral conflicts revealed in them are less reflections of personal failures than indictments of classes of people.

Action for Slander, a courtroom melodrama, was published in 1936 by William Heinemann in the United Kingdom and by Harper and Brothers in the United States. It went through numerous editions in the United Kingdom, and appeared as a special illustrated supplement in the *Philadelphia Enquirer* as part of their Gold Seal Novels.

The novel takes place in an English courtroom in 1930, where an army officer has brought a case for slander against two Englishmen, one a fellow officer, who have accused him of cheating at cards during a weekend country house party. The narrative follows the course of the trial, interweaving courtroom dialog with flashbacks that reveal the true story behind the original accusation, and amplify the themes of class, honor, and morality that feature prominently in the novel. Along with gambling, *Action for Slander* addresses the vices of adultery, greed, lying, and dishonesty among the British upper classes. As the court case proceeds, it becomes obvious to all involved that the matter has devolved to a standoff between the plaintiff and the defendants. The turn comes in a clever set piece at the end of the book in which the plaintiff's lawyer contrives to force the defendant into a courtroom demonstration of the supposed sleight-of-hand that falls apart as clearly as the extra cards fall out of his clumsy fingers.

The plot of *Action for Slander* is straightforward; meaningful content is found in the character studies which illustrate the questions of morality raised in the book. The main characters comprise the upper crust of England: diplomats, cabinet ministers, military officers, financial tycoons, minor nobility, and their attendant wives and mistresses. Borden balances this socially, politically, and financially aristocratic cast with courtroom functionaries. Mr. Justice Trotter, the presiding court judge, has "special contempt" for the class of people he sees in his courtroom who have come only to witness a "scandal in high society. Excellent entertainment for the idle rich . . ." (20). Miss Milken, a gossip-writer who makes a profession of investigating other people's private affairs, has developed a curious world view: "If a woman was rude she could be sure she was someone worth knowing," and "if another made herself very pleasant . . .

she wasn't" (227-28). The jury, "a group of solid, careful, propertied citizens set up to pass judgment. . . . The backbone of the country," is represented by a spinster who lost a beloved brother, who she recalls once having a small gambling problem, on the field at Ypres, and by Mr. Archibald Brownrigg, a schoolmaster who realizes with a shock that the "case had nothing to do with cards. It was a case of two unpleasantly sexual he-men fighting over a woman" (21, 276). Borden uses these outsiders to provide objective perspectives on the trial's progress and illuminate the differences that undergird the class-based system on trial in this courtroom.

Most critics favorably reviewed *Action for Slander*, singling out Borden's construction of the courtroom scenes and her character development as praiseworthy. "Dramatic, with excellent character portrayal, and effective climax and a good story told," Louise Maunsell Field concludes in *The New York Times* (99). Reviewing the book in *The Times Literary Supplement*, John Davys Beresford calls it "engrossing" and "an exciting novel," noting the vivid characterizations and "dramatic and effective" ending.⁷⁵

Winston Churchill sent a commendatory note: "I read *Action for Slander* with the very greatest interest. It held me from beginning to end. I lent it to several good judges who all had the same pleasurable experience," the statesman writes, calling it a "brilliant book." The English writer Algernon Blackwood wrote Borden a congratulatory note as well: "I must send you my tribute. The book is extremely gripping—intense, breathless. It really thrilled me. And every single character comes to life grandly." Blackwood notes the selection of Borden's novel as the Book of the Month by the *Daily Mail*.

⁷⁵ See also F. B.; Bell, Review of *Action for Slander*"; Burra; Collins; Mann; Marriott; Review of *Action for Slander*, by Mary Borden in *The Times*; G. S.

Victor Saville produced the film version of *Action for Slander* at Alexander Korda's London Film Productions in 1937. It was released in the United States and the United Kingdom in January 1938. Borden adapted the screenplay and shared writing credit. Directed by Tim Whelan, the film featured a fairly powerful cast starring Clive Brook, Ann Todd, Margaretta Scott, and Ronald Squire. Although reviews were tepid,⁷⁶ the film was popular at its release and was re-released several times during the 1940s. Borden also wrote a dramatic adaptation of *Action for Slander* with Felix Felton that was produced by Charles Leffaux as a radio drama. It aired on BBC in 1961 (Felton).

Scarcely a year after signing her contract for *Action for Slander*, Borden had another novel ready for her publisher. *The Black Virgin* was published by William Heinemann in 1937; it was published with the title *Strange Week-End* by Harper and Brothers in the United States in January 1938. *Strange Week-End* was a best-seller in the United States, reaching fourteenth place among fiction titles on *The New York Times* list of Best-Selling Books for the period January 17 through February 14, 1938, according to Baker and Taylor ("Best-Selling Books" 6 Mar. 1938).

In *The Black Virgin*, Borden again takes as her subject a study of life amongst the upper class in contemporary England, examining the social, political, and economic changes experienced by this segment after the war. The central figures are transparently autobiographical: Jock, a Conservative MP; his wife, Sarah, endowed with a substantial inheritance; and her financially unscrupulous brother. Over the Christmas holiday, the couple host a party at their country house, possibly for the last time. Death taxes,

⁷⁶ See Review of *Action for Slander*, by Tim Whelan in *The Times*; Everson; Greene; Low; Maltin; White.

unrestrained spending, and dwindling incomes have exhausted their fortune, and Jock is considering selling the estate. After nearly twenty years of marriage, the pair remain tenuously tied to each other only through their children. Sarah has decided that she will seek a divorce after the holiday, taking what remains of her fortune and marrying her American suitor. It is difficult to avoid reading some of Borden's own experiences in Sarah's exhaustion with the continual election process: "[W]hat she hated was the humbug, this everlasting business of keeping votes, getting votes, watching your step because of the farmer's vote, the Nonconformist vote, the Catholic vote . . ." (107).

The crisis in *The Black Virgin* is precipitated by Sarah's brother, to whom she has blindly entrusted management of her financial affairs and who has accumulated a large debt in her account as the result of leveraged margin trading. He has invited himself for the holiday in hopes of acquiring information from their other house guests that will enable him to recoup his losses. His scheme fails, and the revelation of his duplicity and deception shocks Sarah. When the party goes hunting the following morning, she stands silently and watches as he dies of a self-inflicted gunshot wound. Sarah realigns her loyalties to her husband and, bolstered by the sale of a valuable family painting, "The Black Virgin," with very few words the couple determine to remain together.

In the novel, Borden insightfully portrays the effect that the changing political climate and shifting economic conditions were having on the upper class. Men are "harassed" by the conflation of "old houses and new taxes, their old traditions and their modern children, their old notion of chivalry and the new defiance of their women" (68). Borden elevates the tension between old and new by employing some of the modernist techniques honed in *The Forbidden Zone*. Imagery in *The Black Virgin* compares the

carnage wreaked by financial havoc with the destructive force of war, and Borden manipulates and fragments the linear progression of the narrative with continual interruptions. Borden's "interiority" was acknowledged in Clara Marburg Kirk's repudiation of middlebrow literature in the *Survey Graphic*:

[W]riting is no longer an "art" (the interpretation of spiritual values by the rare and gifted), but has become a "trade" (the manufacture of literary materials by artisans for social and political ends). The life of the "interior" is discredited because we are caught by a pragmatic philosophy which looks only at the daily round of "exterior" life. (238)

While Kirk rightly identifies Borden's inclusion in the emergent middlebrow literary tradition, her description of "interiority" is a nod to Borden's modernist tendencies and a testament to the overlapping modes of modernist and middlebrow literature.

Critical reception for *The Black Virgin* in the popular press was consistently favorable; most reviewers cite Borden's mastery of literary technique and skillful development of compelling characters. Jane Spence Southron's review in *The New York Times* is representative:⁷⁷

Her latest work of fiction not only strengthens her reputation as a novelist who has mastered the technique of her art, but establishes her as one of the major English-writing interpreters of character able to plumb beneath the surface and bring up unsuspected treasure. She is cognizant of the mud; but her realism has wings. (90)

Borden's depiction of the British aristocracy's waning relevance drew both applause and condemnation. For example, Lisle Bell, writing for *New York Herald Tribune*, admires Borden's "frank and unflattering" portrait of the upper classes' "shrunk incomes, lost illusions and spotty moral standards" (Review of *Strange Week-End*). Conversely, the

⁷⁷ See also Bell, Review of *Strange Week-End*; Boyd; I. W. Lawrence; Reid, Review of *Black Virgin*.

American intellectual historian Howard Mumford Jones attacks the novel as “a reflection of a decaying fictional genre. . . . [It is] neither candidly a novel of political intrigue nor strongly a social study of a particular class,” noting that “a Marxist critic could have a lot of fun with this book.”⁷⁸

Borden’s last novel before the outbreak of hostilities leading to World War II was *Passport for a Girl*, published in 1939 by William Heinemann in the United Kingdom and by Harper and Brothers in the United States. The book quickly went through multiple printings. *The New York Times* listed *Passport for a Girl* as number six on its list of Best-Selling Books for the period of May 15 through June 12, 1939 (“Best-Selling Books” 9 July 1939). Although Borden sold the movie rights to *Passport for a Girl*, plans for filming were never realized (Borden “Correspondence”).

In *Passport for a Girl*, Borden politicizes her fiction, targeting the racial persecutions and military aggressions of Nazi Germany and leveling criticism at British apathy and governmental inaction. Spears was deeply involved with international events and had strong opinions about Hitler’s increasingly aggressive stance toward neighboring countries; he was a vocal opponent of Chamberlain’s appeasement policies. Borden was a close witness to the failed attempts of Spears and his colleagues to affect political outcomes during the Munich crisis in September and October 1938, keeping an hour-by-hour, day-by-day diary of events. As a result, *Passport for a Girl* provides a historically accurate depiction of the expanding Nazi regime across Europe and a strong condemnation of European indifference and willful ignorance in the face of this advancing menace in 1938. It is astounding that Borden was able to have a completed

⁷⁸ See also A. G.; Review of *Black Virgin* in the *Times*.

manuscript published in June 1939, just three months after the actual events and acts of German aggression mentioned by characters in the novel's final chapter.

Set in the year following Nazi Germany's annexation of Austria in March 1938, and concluding just prior to the occupation of Czechoslovakia in March 1939, *Passport for a Girl* dramatically relates the struggles experienced by a young Englishwoman and her Jewish Austrian boyfriend attempting to escape the Nazi regime. When Hitler invades Austria, April and Hans flee Vienna for her home in London. As the pair attempt to evade German authorities, they are hampered by his Jewish heritage and his expiring passport. April's stepfather leverages government connections to get a British visa for Hans, but when Hans learns that his mother, Greta, has been picked up by the Gestapo in Vienna, he returns to Austria, where he is interred in Dachau. After her release and transfer to Czechoslovakia, Greta dies. Soon after, Hans is inexplicably released from Dachau. A visa is arranged, allowing him and April to immigrate to America.

The straightforward plot of *Passport for a Girl* features characters and place which provide the theme of the book. Although it appears to be a simple boy-meets-girl story, the novel's greater purpose is an alarm call to rouse the English-speaking world to the dangers posed by the Nazi regime. Borden's passion for her subject emerges in her narrative digressions into political and societal assessments and criticism. The story shifts back and forth—and this is critical to her success in conveying the horror and tragedy unfolding across Europe—between the dinner parties, society life, and Parliament in London, and the slowly intensifying terror and torture on the streets of Vienna.

While reviews for *Passport for a Girl* were generally positive, more unfavorable commentary surrounds this than any of Borden's previous novels. For example, Kate

O'Brien, writing in *The Spectator*, faults the book's resolution for failing to personalize "present-day brutality" and the London scenes as "too exclusively upper-class . . . and too enamoured of that cozy atmosphere." In *The New Statesman and Nation*, British author and critic Anthony West protests Borden's treatment of the refugees' plight and the terror in Europe as "props to a mild little romance," and concludes that she has capitulated to middlebrow expectations: "[It] raises major issues only to scratch lightly at their surface . . . and ends by being a readable story for those who have time to kill."

A more positive review in *The Times* recommends the book for its depiction of refugees' suffering and English anxiety during the Anschluss, without connecting the two (Review of *Passport*). Conversely, noting the function of literature is to "translate the recent crises into intimate human terms . . . to tell us how lives were affected," Edith H. Walton praises the novel in *The New York Times* for revealing "the total incomprehension of even the well informed . . . one sees what it has taken to rouse England at last."⁷⁹ Numerous critics opine that the Nazi plot has become too commonplace in literature, or that current events render fictionalized accounts obsolete. A review in *The New Yorker* dismisses *Passport for a Girl* as "another Nazi story . . . likely to be less interesting than the daily newspaper" (Review of *Passport*).⁸⁰

Spears also published a book in 1939, a second historical work on World War I. *Prelude to Victory*, which tells the story of the doomed Franco-British Neville Offensive on the Western Front in 1917, was forwarded by Winston Churchill. As with *Liaison 1914*, the book was well-reviewed and went on to become required reading in military

⁷⁹ See also Dowd; Pruette, "Hearts Among the Headlines"; Review of *Passport* in *The New Yorker*; Rhodes; Stevens.

⁸⁰ See also Charques; Stevens; Weiss.

circles (Egremont 150). Despite this, Borden's literary career was more financially successful than her husband's. In 1938, Borden earned £1663 from writing to Spears's £396, with 1939 showing £1662 for Borden and £504 for Spears (Egremont 130). Spears also had income from executive and board-level affiliations and a portfolio of financial and manufacturing interests in England and central Europe, primarily Czechoslovakia.

According to his biographer, Spears "was never much of a success" as a Member of Parliament, where his business enterprises, rumored foreign or Jewish origins, aggressive manner, and pro-French views made him unpopular and earned him the sobriquet "Member from Paris" (Egremont 137; Borden, *Journey* 11). Spears became a member of the so-called Eden Group of anti-appeasement backbench Members of Parliament, a group which formed around Anthony Eden when he had resigned as Foreign Secretary in February 1938 to protest Neville Chamberlain's opening of negotiations with Italy. Given his long-standing friendship with Winston Churchill, it was not surprising that Spears also joined the latter's group of anti-appeasers, known as The Old Guard. Both groups called for rearmament in the face of Nazi threats.

International conflict was once again to force a dramatic change in Borden's life that would affect her literary career as well. Although largely precipitated by financial matters, the 1930s presented numerous opportunities for Borden to reinvent herself as an author, and she had vigorously availed herself of these. In concert with her turn toward literary realism and a middlebrow approach, Borden gradually relinquished the modernist mode, demonstrating an extraordinary ability to change and adapt her writing style, and achieving popular and critical success.

Chapter 7

“BLIND BURROWING PROGRESS”⁸¹: WORLD WAR II AND AFTER

During World War II, both Borden and Spears took active international roles; for Borden, this resulted in temporary abandonment of her writing. Chapter 7 explores her wartime activities and post-war literary works, which include an autobiography and five more novels. In these books, Borden continued to relinquish the modernist mode. The selection of *You, the Jury* by a Book-of-the-Month Club recognizes Borden’s success in adapting her style for middlebrow audiences. In her later years, Borden often reflected on the choice she faced between living life and creating art, denying a connection that is explored in this chapter as well. Chapter 7 follows her life through her death in 1968.

The autumn of 1939 found Borden and Spears spending evenings alone together in the blackout, discussing the political and diplomatic missteps of the past decade and feeling “useless” (Egremont 146). Borden’s children were independent: Catherine and Rupert were living in London with their two young children; Mary, was married and settled in Maine, in the United States, with a baby and another on the way; Michael was in the United States, on vacation from Oxford (Egremont 146). Money remained a concern: Borden wrote to her publisher in October asking for amounts owed to her from *Passport for a Girl*. “My immediate need is money for myself. . . . Now instead of later,” she pled, adding “Louis has no army job yet” (Letter to Cass Canfield, 16 Oct. 1939).

Hoping to organize another field hospital, but lacking the fortune she possessed in 1914, Borden settled for a job with a local ambulance unit, but she found herself spending most of her time sitting in an A.R.P. garage in Fulham (*Journey* 11). Spears felt

⁸¹ Borden, *Journey* 5.

unwanted as well, his dual status as a Member of Parliament and retired military an apparent liability (Egremont 146). During the Phoney War, Spears favored a hawkish policy: he urged active support for the Poles and wanted to bomb Germany. Although he participated in and led several missions to France in 1940, both in a parliamentary role and as a representative of Churchill, Spears lacked a clearly defined role in Chamberlain's government and felt "impotent" (Egremont 153). Circumstances would soon present both with unimaginable challenges.

In September, Lady Francis Belt Hadfield, wife of British steel tycoon Sir Robert Hadfield, approached Borden with an offer to donate the funds necessary to equip a 100-bed mobile hospital, similar to the one she had run during World War I. By early 1940, Ambulance Chirurgicale Légère de Corps d'Armée 282, known familiarly as the Hadfield-Spears Unit, was equipped, staffed, and on its way to France. The unit was a unique cooperative formation, staffed by British nurses, drivers from Britain's Mechanised Transport Corps and the American Field Service, orderlies from the British Friends' Ambulance Service and Middle Eastern and African nationals in Free French locales, and French doctors attached to the 4th French Army. The hospital, which would grow to 200-bed capacity, was completely mobile and self-sufficient with ambulances, multiple operating theaters equipped for all types of surgery, an x-ray truck, and dentistry, pharmacy, and bacteriology departments, all transported in a sixty-vehicle convoy. Borden served as the director of the Unit, overseeing the ten nurses and fifteen MTC drivers who affectionately referred to her as *Madame la Générale* or "the Gee" (Millet 7).

During the Battle of France, the Hadfield-Spears Unit operated out of the convent of St. Jean le Bassel in Lorraine, where they remained until the announcement of

France's armistice with Germany in mid-June 1940. In her autobiography of World War II, *Journey Down a Blind Alley*, Borden reflects on the unit's time in St. Jean le Bassel with professional pride: "Our results were good. Not only did an exceptional proportion of our patients get well, they were happy, the hospital was a happy place" (32). Borden admits that the Hadfield-Spears Unit did not see much action during the Phoney War: "there was no war that could be called war in our sector" (35). Like many in France during this period, she was lulled into a sense of complacency. In retrospect, Borden understands the extent of her naïveté and ignorance during those early months in France:

Looking back on those peaceful sunny days, I observe myself standing at the window of my room gazing quietly into the deep garden. . . . [W]asn't she frightened, that woman standing in her convent window? Yes, sometimes. But it was only at moments that she felt a flash of vivid fear. For the most part she seems to have been in a trance.

The German hordes crash into Holland and Belgium, break through at Sedan, divide the French armies, drive the British and French of the North into the sea at Dunkirk, . . . while she stands there like a fool looking across to the faint silhouette of the hills and murmurs to her idiot self—"Oh lovely world." (39-40)

Writing with the advantage of hindsight, Borden seems most distressed about her inability to comprehend the implications of what little information she did have. "Why, I ask myself, had I no inkling of what was about to happen, no suspicion of the fate that was awaiting the French Army? I was given the hint again and again" (20).

What become so glaringly obvious to her in retrospect—that this war in France differed significantly from the First World War because the French people were different—was not apparent to her at the time: "It was all there for those who had eyes to see and ears to hear. The defeatism, the corruption, the treachery that had been eating away the foundation of France . . ." (21). Her unit was so isolated that when Borden receives orders for them to move on June 7, 1940, she was unaware of how quickly the

Germans were closing in on Paris, which they will enter on June 14. As late as June 9, Borden still believed the unit would stop and set up another hospital, not understanding the magnitude of the retreat underway by military and civilians across the country.

In her autobiography, Borden relates the unit's harrowing fortnight-long flight through the chaos of the French countryside from Lorraine to Bordeaux just ahead of the advancing German army, often escaping by mere hours (74). The hospital becomes separated from the French Army and is left to find its own way across France:

Staring at the white dusty road I had a sensation of blindness. I had no idea where the road led. . . . We had lost touch with the IVth Army. It was in retreat somewhere beyond the sunny fields, green thickets and wild rose hedges, but where? The road was empty. Were we already left behind? . . . There was in fact no one who had the faintest idea where we were. We were on our own. . . . (81)

Again and again, Borden describes her failure to understand the significance of what she sees during the retreat, in journal entries that are clearly written retrospectively. "The war, to be sure, was being lost for France just up the road," she writes on June 12, "but we were so preoccupied with the immediate problems of shelter for the night and food that we didn't notice it" (85). On June 13, she notes: "The Germans were to enter Paris next day. . . . [W]e knew and suspected nothing. Even when suddenly we came up against the flood of refugees at Auxerre we failed to understand the meaning of that horrifying human torrent" (86). A few days later, Borden purportedly remains unconcerned: "None of us were frightened. We thought, well, if they don't make a stand on the Loire, that's their business. They'll stand somewhere else" (96). Borden's protests about her inability to understand and anticipate the impending French surrender are relentless, a profusion of excuses that begins to appear artful instead of ingenuous.

Abruptly, the Armistice on June 22 changed everything for the unit, which was still far from safety in central France: “We, the British, were no longer allies. . . . [T]he change came so quickly. I was the great benefactress and friend in the morning, by evening I was an enemy in their midst and was looked upon not only with detestation but with the gravest suspicion” (105). Soon after leaving their headquarters, about ten miles behind the Maginot Line on June 15, the Hadfield-Spears Mobile Ambulance Unit was reported missing (“Anxiety”). Borden, her British nurses, and drivers had detached from the French hospital unit and continued wending their way toward Bordeaux on their own.

Borden’s autobiography conveys the author’s deep distress at the juxtaposition of their perilous situation with the beauty of the French countryside and the blasé attitude of the French populace: “Our last days on the road throb in my memory, they have a harrowing beauty. . . . I feel once more the old poignant mingled emotions of dismay, apprehension and bitter regret. For the tragedy of France was taking place against a glorious background of splendid summer” (106). The women finally arrive in Arcachon on the French coast and wait. Night after night, plans to evacuate them are cancelled.

They are stunned by the behavior of the French populace who are cavorting on the beach, neither concerned nor inconvenienced by the escalating war around them: “The sands were swarming with holidaymakers. Lovely ladies in maillots lay under gay striped umbrellas, children were busy with spades and buckets. It was like Deauville at the height of the season.” But her tone turns bitter: “Suppose they had refused to lie in the sand with their husbands and lovers? Suppose they had been even a little different, even a little more determined not to accept the defeat that had been agreed to in Bordeaux?” (125). Borden aims her ire at the women, who she objectifies as “elegant creatures,” defined by

their beauty and marked by the vanity afforded only to women of a certain class who have both the means and leisure to acquire “varnished toenails.” Borden’s nurses and drivers have just driven hundreds of miles across France, through battlefields, under cover of darkness, scrounging for food and shelter.

Borden and her staff were finally picked up in the pre-dawn hours of June 22, 1940, by a convoy of sardine boats that ferried them through rough, submarine-patrolled waters. Borden recalls the few hours anxiously awaiting the arrival of the British Navy cruiser *Galatea* as “the worst of all,” agonizing that they might be forced back to France (126). The ship arrived shortly after dawn and took the women to St. Jean-de-Luz. There, they transferred to the liner *Ettick*, the last British transport ship to leave France as part of Operation Ariel’s evacuation of Allied forces and civilians.⁸²

Borden was reunited with Spears in London at the end of June (“Miss Mary Borden Home”). Shortly before the Armistice, Britain’s new Labour Prime Minister Winston Churchill had appointed Spears as his personal representative to French Prime Minister Paul Reynaud, with the rank of major-general. As the Germans enclosed Paris, Spears worked tirelessly to craft a diplomatic solution that would avoid a French surrender to no avail. When Reynaud’s government collapsed to be replaced by Pétain’s Vichy regime, Spears left for Britain, bringing with him General Charles de Gaulle. From London, de Gaulle would direct organization of the French resistance efforts; British support was led by Spears (Egremont 196).

⁸² The *Ettick* also transported several thousand British troops, a collection of French women fleeing their villas on the Riviera, a Polish battalion, and King Zog of Albania (*Journey* 127).

In 1941, Spears and Borden directed their wartime efforts toward the Middle East, Spears as head of the British mission to the Free French and Borden with her field hospital. Borden explains her support of French resistance efforts as humanist in nature:

My will to continue to serve was a result of the creed I live by, of my faith not in Englishmen or Frenchmen or Americans but in human beings. I don't mean that I believe them to be fundamentally noble or good. I have come to no simple conclusion on that. I merely mean that they are for me the only reality, the one bit of the world that I can hope to understand and I know that for good or bad I am joined with them. I need them, in other words. My solidarity with them is my reason for being. (*Journey* 136)

Borden also confesses some selfish reasons: "Vanity, curiosity, sense of adventure, the will to keep young, defy time, distance, all these vague discreditable reasons come into it and muddle up the decent impulse to do what one can in this bloody war" (*Journey* 148).

The Hadfield-Spears Ambulance reformed as part of the 1st Free French Army under a *note de service* to Borden from General de Gaulle. Borden secured funds to re-equip and staff her hospital from the British War Relief Society in New York with the condition that her unit serve the Free French Army (Borden, *Journey* 143). Comprising a fleet of thirty-three vehicles, tent wards, operating theatres, pharmacy, laboratory, field kitchen, and a staff of fifty-two drivers, nurses, orderlies, and medical professionals, the unit was outfitted with supplies sufficient for six months of deployment ("Mobile Hospital"). Over the next four years, the Hadfield-Spears unit would travel more than 200,000 miles and take part in campaigns in Syria, Libya, North Africa, and Italy before returning to England after the conclusion of hostilities in the European theater in 1945 (Borden, *Journey* 161).

Journey Down a Blind Alley describes the Hadfield-Spears Unit's movements in detail. Their first posting in the Middle East was in Syria, during the battle for Damascus,

after which they relocated to Beirut for the latter part of 1941 (177). In addition to her other duties, Borden also took on the presidency of the Red Cross in Syria and Lebanon (183). In 1942, the Hadfield-Spears unit was ordered to move with the Free French Brigade into the Western Desert (187), where the field hospital remained in Tobruk, fleeing just ahead of Rommel's troops. From there, the unit was sent to Cairo, then back to Tunis after the victory at El Alamein (218).

During the Middle East campaigns the Hadfield-Spears Ambulance Unit saw much more action than it had seen in France: they were closer to the battlefield, took in many more casualties, and often came under direct shelling. For Borden, the scenes she witnessed were reminiscent of the horrors of World War I, with one difference:

When I call to mind those suffocating, fly-infected schoolrooms smelling of blood and gangrene and sweat and disinfectant, the beds crowded so close . . . I feel again, not the physical suffering of the men's mangled bodies . . . but the festering pain of their minds. And as they tossed and writhed in their beds, as they raved in delirium, as they died, I know that one thought tormented many, namely, that this had been done to them by their own people. (*Journey* 156)

Borden believed the betrayal of the French government, military, and civilian population to be more horrifying than the grotesque injuries and dehumanization wrought by war. For the rest of her life, she would never again hold the French in the same regard she had before the surrender, and she never understood how they could turn on each other so quickly. "It never made sense again," Borden recalls, "neither that day nor the next, nor at any time during and after that bitter campaign" (162).

In 1942, when the independence of Syria and the Lebanon was recognized by the United Kingdom, Churchill appointed Spears first British minister, with ambassadorial status, to the two countries, a post which he held until the end of 1944. As a result, for the next few years, Borden would lead a bifurcated life, "involved in two distinct spheres of

activity with two centres of gravity”: that of official hostess at the British legations in Beirut and Damascus, and field hospital director responsible to the British War Relief Committee in New York. She spent the remainder of the war “continually on the move,” attending conferences in Cairo and Jerusalem, setting up house with Spears in Damascus, shopping and visiting in Palestine, rejoining her unit in Tobruk and later, Tunisia (*Journey* 229, 249).

In Syria and the Lebanon, Borden developed a number of mobile clinics which carried medical supplies and medical treatment to the country districts in Syria and the Lebanon where the people had no medical facilities at all. These clinics treated many thousands of Syrians and Lebanese; after the Spears’s departure they were taken over by the Syrian and Lebanese Governments as a State Service. For her services, Lebanon awarded Borden La Médaille d’Honneur du Mérite Libanais in 1942 and Commandeur De L’Ordre National Du Cèdre in 1944 (Mary Borden Collection Box 25). Her indefatigable energy in moving with ease between these dramatically different locations and situations was remarkable, particularly considering the logistical difficulties she would have encountered navigating intercontinental travel across multiple theatres of war, to say nothing of the stark environmental, social, and cultural contrasts she would have experienced between these locales and roles that she was expected to assume.

Borden was immensely popular with the British nurses and drivers in her unit. Rachel Millet, one of the unit’s drivers, wrote a book about her experiences titled *Spearette: A memoir of the Hadfield-Spears Ambulance Unit*. Millet describes Borden with both affection and admiration:

I admired her more than anyone else I knew and she was fond of me. She was rather strange in appearance . . . heavily made up with mascara smudged down

her eyes and lipstick smudged over her mouth. She had a wavering husky voice and a slight head tremor. . . . [A]nd she still had beautiful grey eyes. (7-8)

Millet's recollections humanize Borden. "[S]he liked to be driven very fast," Millet recalls, and "she proved to be the perfect passenger – as long as she was firmly ensconced in the back seat where she would happily bounce up and down over the potholed roads engrossed in the latest detective story" (15). Millet provides a unique insight into Borden's expertise running a multinational hospital in an international war zone while balancing the diplomatic requirements of her husband's position:

The whole Hospital missed Lady Spears when she had to return to the Levant. . . . We knew that she had a great deal of important work to do there as the wife of the British Minister to Syria and the Lebanon. Not only did she have to entertain the endless stream of officials and cabinet ministers who generally stayed at the Residence during their visits, but she also took a great interest in the Spears' missions and clinics which were dotted about the Levant. . . .

She had time for everyone and everything and accomplished more in twenty-four hours than anyone else I have ever known. Her brain worked like quicksilver and her conclusions and decisions were invariably right. She was afraid of no one and quite prepared to beard the Commander-in-Chief of the Eighth Army and did so on more than one occasion when her Hospital was threatened. Her prestige in the French Brigade was enormous and she was admired and esteemed by everyone. (21)

There was one battle from which Borden would not emerge triumphant during the war, a personal one that followed her halfway around the world. Despite the circumstance of a war raging around Borden and Spears and their distance from home in Britain, Maurice's presence continued to hang over their marriage. For Spears, his personal secretary and mistress had taken on a larger role both personally and professionally, and he "worried about Nancy whom I need badly and who would help and relieve me greatly – but who is the only person I can rely upon in England to inform and guide me and look after my interests" (Egremont 235). Borden was aware of, and accepted Maurice's role in Spears's life. After her first visit to Beirut in 1941, Borden wrote in her diary:

The gossips will say I have left him . . . whereas the truth is that he neither needs me nor wants me when she is at hand. . . . Now she comes back—presumable. That at any rate is what she and he are determined will be—and I go. So once again I have made a beautiful house for her to enjoy with him. (qtd. in Egremont 234)

It is impossible to discern from Borden's autobiography to what extent her travels back and forth between Spears's residences in Beirut and Damascus and her hospital were driven by demands on her presence in either locale or her desire to flee one for the other. Although she takes pains to avoid personalizing her account of World War II, hints of the personal strain that the war took emerge:

If I were to tell you of all the love affairs, the engagements made and broken, the wild trips across deserts to find husbands or brothers or sweethearts, they would fill a book and you would get a picture all out of focus. For the work of the unit was the thing that mattered, and the life of the unit in the midst of war; our little personal lives had to go on as best they could, inside and alongside the exciting, grueling task given us to do. (Borden, *Journey* 168)

Borden never acknowledges this tension publicly or allows anyone else to see that Spears's relationship with Maurice has affected her.

Spears's tenure in the Levant was complicated and fraught with personal and political complexities. In a break with diplomatic custom, he was permitted to keep his directorship, which allayed financial worries. His new position as Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary brought with it a KBE, but he found himself in the awkward position of reporting to both the Minister of State and the Foreign Office (Egremont 236-37). Lebanese and Syrian politicians regarded Spears, a representative of the British crown and personal friend of Churchill, as a "powerful ally" and looked to him to "lead the rebirth of a free Arab world." Vichy France regarded him suspiciously as an agent provocateur (Egremont 238). But most disturbing, and ultimately fateful for Spears, was his open dislike of de Gaulle, which was apparently mutual (Egremont 236). Tensions

among the Syrian and Lebanese governments, the Free French and Vichy French forces, and the occupying British army exploded in November 1943, after overwhelming victories for the Nationalist parties in elections in both countries. The French, led by de Gaulle, identified Spears as the primary agitator responsible for instigating nationalist sentiment, interfering with the elections, and fomenting violence (LeMotte).

The animosity with which the French viewed Spears greatly affected Borden; her daily routine in Lebanon required additional security precautions, severely curtailing activities. Borden claimed that Spears was the object of an assassination plot (*Journey* 286). Like Spears, she felt betrayed by the French people for whom she had a deep affection and for whom she believed she and Spears had done so much:

[Spears] will get no thanks, whatever happened, for what he has done here. . . . [A]nd the French of course . . . are out for his blood. . . . He did love France, and when France went back on us, there was De Gaulle and the Free French, but now De Gaulle has done this and there is no one. (*Journey* 287)

In this passage, Borden conflates herself and Spears, nimbly changing the subject of her rumination from Spears to herself, and then to the collection “us.” Her self-perception as an individual is entangled with an identity of partnership with Spears, perhaps explaining her patient acceptance of his relationship with Maurice.

Following Spears’s recall from the Levant in 1944, Borden returned to the field hospital, now located in Alsace, France. She found conditions there shocking: “Pitiable France, miserable France; hungry, cold, torn by dissention. Cities without fires, farms and fields without cattle, men without regret” (*Journey* 343). As the war in Europe began to wind down, the unit moved south, toward the Mediterranean, to provide support for the last campaign in the Alps. Here, Borden was moved by the contrasts she saw:

A heartless country. The road ran down the valley of the Var into Nice. I would leave behind me in the mountains a scene of carnage, a squalid building filled with stretchers, a dingy room where men were dying, Kelsey swaying on her feet, her eyes staring with fatigue, young Hélène Rousseau holding down a delirious man in bed, the surgeons cutting into mangled flesh, and suddenly, there was the sea grinning at me and a promenade crowded with dark sleek young men in flannels, peroxide blondes with varnished toenails, cafés filled with American troops on leave, flashy sports cars tearing down the road to Cannes. (351)

In these autobiographical snippets, reminiscent of her sketches in *The Forbidden Zone*, Borden reveals a deep disillusionment with both the war and the French country that she loved and called home for many years. This may reflect, in part, her belief that Spears, a lifelong Francophile and ardent supporter of the Free French movement, had been betrayed by General De Gaulle at the end of the war (LeMotte; Borden, *Journey* 356-58). De Gaulle's dissolution of the Hadfield-Spears Mobile Hospital Unit, apparently made in anger after seeing ambulances flying the Union Jack in the commemorative procession in Paris on June 18, 1945, along with his denial of Borden's offer to transfer her unit to the Pacific theatre following the cessation of hostilities in Europe, sealed her opinion of the General ("British Ambulance Unit Disbanded"). "A pitiful business," she muses in her autobiography, "when a great man suddenly becomes small" (362). Borden would carry a grudge against de Gaulle and the country of France for the rest of her life.

Borden returned to England in 1945, where she had "a husband, a son, a damaged home to repair—a private life" (*Journey* 354). She resumed her writing career with her World War II autobiography, *Journey Down a Blind Alley*, in 1946. Covering both her work as director of the Hadfield-Spears Ambulance and her tenure as Lady Spears, wife of the British Minister in the Levant States, the book is a personal account of her participation on the military and diplomatic war fronts. *Journey Down a Blind Alley* was published by Hutchinson in the United Kingdom and by Harper and Brothers in the

United States. It did not sell well in either market. In the United States, sales were only 3,429 copies, of which 1,640 were remaindered (Hamish Hamilton). Borden blamed poor sales on a “boycott by a number of pro-French papers and the lack of enthusiasm of my publishers,” and subsequently terminated her contract with Hutchinson (Letter to Cass Canfield, 10 Jan. 1947; Field Roscoe).

Journey Down a Blind Alley differs significantly from Borden’s World War I collection, *The Forbidden Zone*. Whereas the earlier work, a fragmentary fiction-memoir hybrid, is remarkable for its experimental, modernist style, the later book takes the form of a conventional, chronological first-person narrative of events. Although Borden clearly kept a diary during World War II, which informs her autobiography, the book was written retrospectively. No part of *Journey Down a Blind Alley* was written, as were portions of *The Forbidden Zone*, during her wartime activities. The universal despair, graphic trauma, and modern technique of her first war book are replaced in her second with a personal rancor directed at de Gaulle and Borden’s once-beloved France.

Harold Macmillan, the Conservative statesman who would succeed Anthony Eden as Prime Minister in 1957, wrote a congratulatory note to Borden after reading *Journey Down a Blind Alley*. “It had a fascination for me, since I knew so many of the French personalities involved,” Macmillan writes: “You have certainly a wonderful story, admirably recorded.” Other friends were not so approving. Countess de Chambrun, the former Clara Longworth, a wealthy American heiress married into the French aristocracy and whose close family members held prominent roles in the Vichy regime, expressed her dismay in a long letter to Borden, concluding: “My heart is sad.”

Reviewers were unimpressed with *Journey Down a Blind Alley*. Their primary, nearly unanimous, criticism arises from Borden's biased presentation of political events in the Levant. Mary Mian's review in *The New York Times* offers a balanced critique, praising Borden's "masterly" characterizations and "sharp and memorable descriptions," but challenging her interpretations of events: "She derived her understanding more from what she was told than from what she observed or thought. . . . Perhaps a less personal account would have done more justice." A review in *The Christian Science Monitor* is more straightforward: "Lady Spears has allowed herself to be unduly influenced by personal resentment" of de Gaulle (R. H. M.).⁸³ Some reviews castigate Borden for historical inaccuracies or the omission of major historical facts, such as the Holocaust or the involvement of other countries in the war.⁸⁴ Despite Borden's politicization in her memoir, critics cite the actions of the Hadfield-Spears Unit as admirable, "worth pursuing," and, as recorded by Borden, "rewarding" reading (Fergusson 486; R. H. M.).⁸⁵

Recent criticism of *Journey Down a Blind Alley*, historically advantaged by the clarifying passage of time, considers Borden's memoir as a hybrid blend of autobiography and fiction. "This autobiographical book is actually a romantic novel," explains Lia Moran in an article in *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (168). Writing in *War, Literature and the Arts*, Marcia Phillips McGowan notes the "novelistic license" Borden takes in her characterization of de Gaulle, and situates the text as a postmodern memoir that "blurred the boundaries between fact and fiction" ("Nearer Approach" 204, 208). Comparing Borden's World War I collection, *The Forbidden*

⁸³ See also Endore; Ure; Fergusson.

⁸⁴ See Fergusson; Moran.

⁸⁵ See also Peterson.

Zone, and her World War II memoir, *Journey Down a Blind Alley*, Max Saunders proposes that “the different roles in cultural memory of the two Wars” may explain the differences between the two books (“War Literature” 180).

Borden confirms the validity of these interpretations in the opening pages of *Journey Down a Blind Alley*: “It is fascinating and instructive to contemplate in retrospect one’s minute blind burrowing progress through the dark night of events which we imagine to have been vivid and luminous” (5-6). Gone are the “fragments of a confused memory” to which she confessed in the Preface to *The Forbidden Zone*, replaced by an insistence on fact: “I like the truth. I like to get at it and I like to tell it. I have struck to it in this narrative and I mean to tell it now in so far as I am able” (276). Borden’s awareness of how past experiences are reshaping her interpretation of events during the Second World War, just as events in the latter conflict are now affecting her impressions of the earlier war, suggests the unreliability of her historical narrative.

Spears lost his parliamentary seat in the 1945 General Election, which saw a general swing against the Conservative Party. That year he accepted the position of chairman of Ashanti Goldfields, the largest gold producer in the Gold Coast; in 1950, he took on the joint role of managing director and chairman. Spears’s tenure at Ashanti was plagued with political and economic challenges as the West African country underwent multiple revolutionary upheavals, yet he maintained his position with the enterprise through independence. From 1948 to 1966 he was chairman of the Institute of Directors, an organization of company directors, senior business leaders, and entrepreneurs in the United Kingdom. Spears was created a baronet, of Warfield, Berkshire, in June 1953.

During the post-World War II period, Spears published several more books, including *Assignment to Catastrophe* (1954), a two-volume memoir of his experiences as Winston Churchill's personal representative to the Prime Minister of France from August 1939 to through the Fall of France in June 1940; *Two Men Who Saved France* (1966), a book on Petain and De Gaulle; *The Picnic Basket* (1967), a book of autobiographical sketches ranging from his childhood through the First World War; and the posthumously-published *Fulfillment of a Mission* (1977), which recounts his time in the Middle East.

For Borden, domestic life after the war was no more settled than before. Maurice remained a steadfast presence in Spears's life, becoming "involved in every facet of his post-war business life" (Egremont 280). Borden, who knew that Maurice travelled on business and occasionally holidayed with Spears, worried about the relationship and discussed a possible divorce in her correspondence (Egremont 289). Further stress was created by the recurring illnesses of their son, Michael. Despite these distractions, Borden and Spears continued to carry on quite an active social life, entertaining "politicians, diplomats, journalists and businessmen" at their house in London (Egremont 290).

Despite the turbulence in her marriage, Borden maintained a vibrant intellectual curiosity and an active political, philanthropic, and professional life. She actively campaigned for St. Pancras Home Improvement Society, publishing a fundraising pamphlet, "A War to Be Proud Of," in 1947. In 1948, concern for "the troubled story of Palestine" led to her involvement in establishing an Anglo-Arab Relief Fund to help Palestinian refugees (qtd. in Conway 293). She had taken up painting during Spears's tenure in the Levant, and pursued this with enthusiasm: her work was exhibited at the Trafford Gallery and auctioned at Christie's, and an undated portrait she painted of

Spears hangs in the National Gallery of Art (“Marlborough Gallery”). Conway states that Borden continued to produce a “prolific journalist output,” during this period, reporting on international events for two daily newspapers (293).⁸⁶ She traveled frequently to the United States, using publicity tours for her books to visit her family in Chicago, Illinois and Camden, Maine (Beauman “Borden” 2). On one visit, she arranged a visit to Albert Einstein at his home in Princeton, New Jersey, where she queried him about his spiritual beliefs (“I Found Dr. Einstein at Home”). She developed a close relationship with her nephew Adlai Stevenson, advising him during his Presidential campaigns and his tenure as the United States Ambassador to the United Nations.⁸⁷

After an interval of ten years, Borden returned to fiction writing with *No. 2 Shovel Street*, which was published by William Heinemann in the United Kingdom in 1949. An increase in her advance payment, likely attributable to inflation, was accompanied by a reduced royalty schedule that anticipated top end sales approximately half of those achieved by her novels in the 1930s. *No. 2 Shovel Street* was not published in the United States because Borden’s publishers there, Harper and Brothers, declined it. “It is an ambling, rambling thing that seems to have been written without plan as the mood of the moment struck” Beulah Hagan wrote to Cass Canfield, editor at Harper and Brothers:

It is told rather as an exercise in exposition, with only infrequent recourse to dramatic scenes that bring the reader in first-hand contact with the characters. For those willing to be patient with the British it has its moments of genuine charm and story interest. But it remains an offhand performance that almost certainly will not lift the Borden sales.

⁸⁶ Borden appears to have abandoned her interest in social commentary: an essay in *South Atlantic Quarterly* on “The Unpredictable British” offers a wordy, unfocused character study of Englishmen and women. It was her last published piece in this genre.

⁸⁷ The Adlai E. Stevenson Papers in the Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library at Princeton University contains correspondence between Borden and Stevenson that includes her suggested edits to his speeches.

Set in London in the years immediately following World War II, *No. 2 Shovel Street* relates the ongoing travails of a widow, Mrs. Barrington Pryde (Millicent) and her daughters, Sarah and Dinah, as they navigate England's changing social landscape. Prior to the war, Millicent sold the last of the art and jewelry left by her late husband to finance her daughters' years abroad and coming-out seasons. Dinah made a successful marriage to a minor member of the aristocracy, but Susan remains unattached at the outbreak of the war. The sisters take positions with the Red Cross Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) and the Ministry of Information, while Millicent waits out the war in solitude at home.

After the war, the young women return home, Dinah's husband having been killed during the conflict, to find their mother nearly destitute but still living in their bomb-damaged house teetering on the edge of a blast hole. Both Susan and Dinah struggle to find work. Dinah, who had dreams of breaking into show business, becomes pregnant and undergoes an abortion. Susan suffers from lingering illnesses contracted while nursing as well as from war trauma. She considers rekindling her romantic pre-war relationship Sir John Frobisher, a cabinet minister, but instead befriends his dying wife. At the end of the novel, Dinah elopes to Ireland with a horse-coper, while Susan inherits a small fortune from her new friend and remains at home with Millicent.

A novel of manners, *No. 2 Shovel Street* presents a study in contrasts of pre-war and post-war genteel society as reflected in the attitudes and behaviors of the upper-class characters that populate Borden's novel. Pre-war London is described as a place where everyone had a prescribed position and knew what that position was, but the war revolutionized societal boundaries, throwing men and women of all classes together, creating a new social fluidity which continues in post-war England.

The character sketches in *No. 2 Shovel Street* resemble stock characterizations,⁸⁸ including the unhappily married John and Ann Frobisher who approach marriage as an occupation of entertaining in support of his political position: “They had gone on their separate ways and had continued to count on each other for a certain type of loyalty, the kind that mattered in the world since it ensured security for the children, good manners in private and a decent public dignity” (97). Their marriage appears modeled on that of Borden and Spears. Frobinger’s parliamentary role mirrors Spears’s: sitting on the Opposition bench, he “commanded respect on both sides of the House . . . popular on neither” (112). His mistress is portrayed as a mean-spirited, gold-digger, salivating at the thought of marrying him once Ann is dead. “He would hate Mona once they were married,” Ann thinks: “A pity she couldn’t find a more suitable successor before she herself disappeared” (98). These thoughts may reflect Borden’s feelings about Maurice.

Despite its middlebrow sentiment and romantically wistful yearning for a return to an idealized conception of pre-World War I norms, *No. 2 Shovel Street* provides an informed and modern illustration of how war trauma was experienced by nurses. Susan’s reflections on her service as a VAD nurse and her post-war memories reveal the complexities of individual reactions. She experienced the war as an escape from her constrained and prescribed life. Her preference for the hands-on theatre of battlefield nursing as a respite from the stresses of English public life is a modernist ideal, as is her quest for the anonymity afforded by the war. After returning from the war, Susan is unable to easily reenter society, and struggles with remembered or imagined trauma. The

⁸⁸ H. F. Rubenstein, solicitor for Borden’s publisher William Heinemann, found the novel’s background so “convincingly factual” that he required the author’s assurance that no living person could be identified with some of the characters (Rubenstein).

return to normalcy is a destabilizing force that causes her disequilibrium. Her feelings are convoluted because she is trying to fit herself back into the pre-war world represented by the house at No. 2 Shovel Street, but she will never rediscover the comfort her home once offered at this old location in the present time—the two cannot coexist.

No. 2 Shovel Street received less attention from reviewers than Borden's pre-World War II novels. This is likely due to the book's limited publication, which reduced its distribution and circulation. Notices were brief, and lackluster. The review in *The Spectator* cautions readers that Borden's novel is "not addressed to those who may not care for it": it has a "hard, bright manner, with a slangy animation of tone" that "makes no bones about its nostalgic scale of values" (Review of *No. 2*). A negative review by Julian Gustave Symons, a crime writer and literary critic, in *The Times Literary Supplement* describes it as "told with a somewhat shallow facility of phrase and style which rarely succeeds in endowing the events with importance."⁸⁹

In the 1950s, Borden's book-length narrative fiction became more philosophical and spiritual. She did not return to the Biblical sources that informed *Mary of Nazareth* and *King of the Jews*, but took on projects that allowed her to interrogate conceptions of morality, explore conflicts between good and evil, probe humankind's essential nature, and query the existence of God. She continued to draw from personal experiences, but her later books no longer centered on the societal and romantic drama that pervaded her narrative writing before World War II. In her post-World War II fiction Borden appears to be seeking to affirm God as a force of good in the world and man as a conduit for that

⁸⁹ See also L. V. K.

goodness on earth. Borden also abandons female protagonists in her last four novels, focusing on male protagonists to channel and test the bounds of moral goodness.

Now in her seventh decade, Borden quickly resumed the writing pace she had achieved before World War II, offering her publisher another novel the same year *No. 2 Shovel Street* was released. *For the Record* was published in 1950 in the United Kingdom by William Heinemann; it was released as *Catspaw* by Longmans, Green in the United States. Her declining contractual royalties reflected her publishers reduced sales projections, again following lower-than-expected sales of her latest novel (Memorandum of Agreement 6 Dec. 1949). Nonetheless, Heinemann again found itself with a large stock of remainders (William Heinemann, Letter to Mary).

Catspaw is a confessional from a disillusioned communist spy, Alex, who has been operating in a small Eastern European country in the years immediately following World War II, a period during which the nation was taken over by the Communist Party. Alex served as private secretary to Louis, a popular prince, war hero, and state minister of the unnamed country. During the formation of a post-war government, the Communists use Louis to drive a wedge between the democratically elected government and the citizens of the country. When Louis realizes his inadvertent role, he commits suicide. *Catspaw* portrays the psychology of betrayal through two lenses: the manipulation of Louis by the Soviet-controlled communists and Alex's soul-searching recognition of his turn from the idealism of youth into tortured disillusionment and self-loathing.

Conway identifies Borden's attendance at Pope Pius XII's Easter Sunday speech to the crowds outside St. Peter's Basilica in April 1949 as her source of inspiration in

writing *For the Record* (Conway 297). Pope Pius's rousing attack on communism spurred Borden's imagination:

I had a sensation of such stimulus that I could almost hear and feel the curious part of my drama rushing together in my brain. . . . Since the end of the war I have been obsessed by the struggle of these two ideologies on the one hand to capture, on the other to set free the minds of men. There in the great throng outside St Peter's I realized anew that the issue would be decided by the faith of Christendom. (qtd in Conway 298)

Borden acknowledges a different motivation on the back jacket flap of the American edition of the book. She states that she felt "obliged" and "compelled to write this book" after watching "one after another of the small countries that had struggled for independence were swallowed up in the Soviet maw. Because I knew personally many of those patriots who had escaped and those who had died, it required no great effort to imagine living through such a revolution."

Although Borden insistently denies it, *Catspaw* is a fictionalized portrait of Jan Masaryk, the Czechoslovakian diplomat and politician who served as Foreign Minister from 1940 until his death in 1948 (William Heinemann, Letter to Gentlemen). The parallels between Borden's novel and Masaryk's biography and the post-World War history of the country are too striking to dismiss as coincidence. Masaryk's heritage as the son of the principal founder of Czechoslovakia and an American mother, fondness for the piano, reputation as a playboy, World War I military service, diplomatic posting to the United States, marriage to the daughter of a wealthy and influential American diplomat, high level role in Benes's Czech government-in-exile, ministerial role in Czechoslovakia's post-war government, and apparent suicidal death by jumping from a window of his castle home are replicated specifically in Borden's description of Louis. Contemporary Czechoslovakian history, including the establishment of a government-in-

exile in London during World War II, the post-war formation of a multi-party, communist-dominated National Front government, the Soviet-dictated rejection of the Marshall Plan, resignation of the non-Communist Party cabinet members, and the communist coup, are all accurately reflected in *Catspaw*.

Excepting Alex, all the significant characters in the book are closely modeled on real people. The description of Louis's wife, Isobel, mirrors that of Mazaryk's wife, Frances Anita Crane Leatherbee, the daughter of American industrialist, philanthropist, and diplomat Charles Crane. Borden's fictitious rabble-rousing Catholic priest Gabriel Zatec, closely resembles the historical figure of József Mindszenty, cardinal and leader of the Catholic Church in Hungary from 1945 until 1973. Mindszenty's active opposition to communism resulted in his arrest, torture, show trial featuring a confession obviously elicited under extreme duress, and a sentence of life imprisonment, similar to the sequence of events undergone by Zatec in Borden's novel.

Borden's exploration of the political intrigue in *Catspaw* requires an extensive cast of government officials representing competing political interests within the fictitious country as well as influencers from the Soviet Union and the United States. Many are thinly veiled representations of historical figures: Grunbaum favors Klement Gottwald, longtime leader of the Czechoslovakia Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and Prime Minister of the country; Bruno mimics Edvard Beneš, President of Czechoslovakia from 1935-1948; Tula represents Soviet deputy foreign minister Valerian Zorin; and Konitz stands for Czechoslovakian Interior Minister Václav Nosek. None are described with any depth beyond banal characterizations as mandarins, sycophants, political pawns, hardline enforcers, and Soviet puppet masters.

The most compelling of Borden's characters is her original creation, the Communist spy, Alex. A convert to the Party in his youth, Alex is assigned a position as the personal secretary to Louis. From this post, Alex is able to observe, influence, and report Louis's thoughts and actions to the Communists. Alex's narrative also reveals his own development into an active Communist Party member, and his increasing disillusionment after the coup. Alex's final rejection of communism is triggered by the Party's treatment of Zatec, who is tortured and drugged to elicit a confession.

Catspaw was received with mixed reviews by critics who expressed reservations about the quality of her narrative, found her plot lacking in originality, and were unmoved by her characters. As several reviews note, there is little suspense in *Catspaw*, as the reader knows from recent historical events that communism will triumph in the novel. For example, Merle Miller, reviewing Borden's book in *The Saturday Review* judges it "a failure" that "cannot be considered as serious fiction." Noting that Borden's characters, "or people strangely like them have recently appeared on the front pages," and the author "didn't even need to invent a plot," Miller castigates her for failing to create any sort of "entertainment" out of the "preposterous happenings" on which the novel is based (53).⁹⁰ Horace Reynolds gives *Catspaw* a mixed review in *The New York Times*, complimenting the book as a "clear study of the Communist mind . . . written with the urgency of one who sees approaching disaster and would warn those in its path" and the characterization of Alex as "a convincing portrait of a man torn to pieces between two conflicting worlds of belief." But, he also reports that *Catspaw* lost his interest midway through the book because the narrative "lacks motion": Borden "seems to be dragging her

⁹⁰ See also Hauser; Richardson.

story out, marking time until she is ready to spill her climax.” In the *Chicago Sunday Tribune*, Richard Sullivan praises *Catspaw* as “a very fine, sustained, distinguished piece of writing.” Sullivan calls the book “the soundest, the most illuminating novel about communism I’ve read,” finding in it “a terrific timeliness . . . immediate significance . . . basic truthfulness.” Her characters, he says, are “rich and memorable,” and rendered with “deep honesty” that creates a “fierce, precise, and unmistakable” reality in the book.⁹¹

While publicizing *Catspaw*, Borden wrote an autobiographical article for the *New York Herald Tribune Book Review*, discussing her life and writing career. In the article, “Mary Borden: No Regrets,” Borden repeats sentiments about the conflict between life and creativity that she first raised two decades earlier: “Too much change ends in monotony. Too much brilliance has the effect of darkness. I still feel as I felt then.” Borden’s retrospective ruminations touch on her busy life, and her feelings of homesickness for America and her extant “sense of exile,” even after four decades living in the United Kingdom. Insisting: “I don’t regret it. I regret nothing,” she reflects on the effect her “strenuous” and “bewildering” life has had on her writing: “I can’t help feeling that had my life been less exciting my novels would have been more so because I would have understood better what I was writing about.” Borden does not lament this circumstance, proposing it with equanimity.

Maintaining a brisk writing pace, Borden’s next novel, *Martin Merriedew*, was published by William Heinemann in the United Kingdom in 1952. It was published the same year with the title *You, the Jury* by Longmans, Green in the United States. It was a joint Book-of-the-Month Club selection for September 1952, along with Ernest

⁹¹ See also Norman; Sandrock.

Hemingway's novel, *The Old Man and the Sea*. It was also that month's Book-of-the-Month Club selection in Canada.

Fanny Butcher, literary critic for the *Chicago Tribune*, describes *You, the Jury* as a novel that answers the question "If Jesus of Nazareth were to be born today, how would He be judged?" An inquiry which, Butcher reports, Borden answers with "great fictional skill" ("Literary Spotlight"). In an interview with Rochelle Girson, literary critic for *The Saturday Review*, during a publicity tour in the United States, Borden discussed her inspiration for *Martin Merriedew*:

I have always been very impressed—fascinated—by the drama of the life and death of Christ. The human side of that drama is so enthralling. . . . And I thought supposing someone tried to follow out not only literally but completely the same principles—what would happen to him in the modern world?

Borden's placement of her protagonist derives from her experiences with Quakers in her hospital: "[T]hat question of pacifism, conscience in wartime, was very much a part of my life during the war." She clarifies that the book is not intended as a "pacifist argument. It's just the idea that we have all got everything wrong" (qtd. in Girson).

In her novel, *Merriedew*, a medical doctor, establishes a clinic in his home village where he combines traditional medicine with a pastiche of hypnotism and faith healing. His unorthodox treatments and affinity for collecting outcasts alienate him from the villagers and create fodder for gossips. Over time, his beliefs and behaviors become more extreme. Certain that he is carrying out the will of God, *Merriedew* follows the teachings of Christ in their literal rather than metaphoric meanings, intending to "bring in the Kingdom of Heaven" on Earth (175). Labelled a "dangerous social agitator . . . a charlatan and an anarchist, whose one aim was self-glorification," *Merriedew* is barred from practicing medicine (207). At the outbreak of World War II, he attests his

conscientious objection, and is posted as a medical orderly to a front-line surgical station. At the front, Merriedew continues to live out his interpretation of God's will, becoming an object of the soldiers' scorn and hostility for his compassionate treatment of wounded enemy combatants.

Following an incident on Christmas Eve 1944, in which he encourages a group of soldiers to drop their arms, Merriedew is charged with treason and sent back to England to stand trial. Taking the stand in his own defense, he asserts that he was "commanded to do it by the spirit of God" (328). Upon further questioning by the judge, Merriedew states, in words reminiscent of God's declaration to Moses, "I am who I am," adding enigmatically: "If I told you [who I am], you would not believe me" (328). After the jury returns a guilty verdict, the judge sets aside Merriedew's death sentence and commits him to an institution for the criminally insane, where he dies several years later.

You, the Jury is narrated retrospectively by an intimate childhood friend of Merriedew's. As the sister of Merriedew's closest friend, and wife of the presiding trial judge, Barbara provides a keen window into Merriedew's youth and his prosecution as a traitor. The first part of the book details his early family life and his reception in the village recounted from Barbara's personal memories; the second half relies on trial testimonies and her conversations with villagers. As the book progresses, so does the fragmentation of linear time and physical place; the narrative jumps among the post-trial present-day, 1914, and points in between. The temporal obscurity is further confused by Barbara's entanglement of her own childhood memories with villagers' reminiscences, second-hand gossip, and courtroom testimony. The result is a confusing jumble of

impressions that exist out of fixed time or place. Rather than clarifying or explaining Merriedew's behavior, the disjointed narrative enhances his elusiveness.

You, the Jury may have been Borden's most popular book, with its selection as the Book-of-the-Month Club offering boosting review profiles and sales figures. However, critical reviews were uneven. Fanny Butcher, who admired many of hometown-writer Borden's previous novels in the *Chicago Tribune*, profusely praises *You, the Jury*, calling it a "deliciously penetrating" and "gripping novel," containing an exciting courtroom scene "of tense emotional pitch" and an "excellent picture of contemporary England." It is "one of the most discussed novels of the year," she claims, "causing a furore [*sic*] in England, both as a powerful novel and because of its theme," and predicts it will be "sensationally popular" ("Is This Man Guilty?").

Writing with slightly more restraint in *The New York Times*, Charles Poore quotes T. S. Eliot in recommending *You, the Jury* as a book "to trouble midnight and the noon's repose, and haunt the imagination many days." Poore cites Borden's "excellent skill" in her convincing description of the British Army's campaigns in North Africa and Italy, the "psychologically insightful" storytelling of the narrator, and the "details of village and manorial life in England . . . set forth in lavish amplitude." The book's high point, Poore asserts, is the courtroom scene, "the most disturbing and compelling trial I have seen in a new book," in which Borden covers "just about every idea that can be raised on either side" while leaving the reader to answer the ultimate question of truth.⁹²

The novel's Book-of-the-Month designation notwithstanding, most reviews of *You, the Jury*, even those positioned in newspapers and periodically catering to a

⁹² See also Canby; Hignet; Hughes; Scott.

middlebrow audience, offered restrained recommendations accompanied by critical reservations. For example, in *The Times Literary Supplement*, Alan Ross describes it as written in “popular, but not undramatic or unconvincing” fashion. Ross’s ambiguous review notes a combination of skillful, yet occasionally “blurred” narrative, concluding dubiously that “what Miss Borden loses in universality she gains in melodrama.”⁹³

Margin of Error, Borden’s penultimate novel, was published in 1954 by William Heinemann in the United Kingdom and by Longman’s Green in the United States. Despite the popular success of *You, the Jury*, Borden’s contractual terms continued to decline (Memorandum of Agreement 8 Mar. 1954). Set in late 1948, *Margin of Error* describes events surrounding the crash of a commercial airliner in the Sahara Desert.

At the time, the 3,500-mile flight from London, England, to Damba, the capital of a fictional British colony on the coast of West Africa, took twenty-four hours. The aircraft carries nine passengers, each an upstanding representative of the British establishment, three cabin attendants, and a crew of five men on the flight deck. On the second leg of the trip, the plane loses communication with ground control and, for unexplained reasons, wanders 800 miles off course. Out of fuel, they make a forced landing in the Sahara Desert, crashing with an impact that kills the entire cockpit crew. All the cabin occupants survive the impact, although one later succumbs to his injuries. Drawing on their knowledge of geography and navigation, and bolstered by traditional English stalwartness, the remaining passengers and attendants set out to find civilization.

⁹³ See also Holligan; Review of *You, the Jury* in *America*; Scott; “Vision and Martyrdom” in *Time*; Weaver.

They soon encounter a group of native hunters who efficiently ensure their safe return from the desolate wilderness of the Saharan outback to the civilized colonial capital.⁹⁴

Like many of Borden's earlier novels, *Margin of Error* dramatizes events through a cohort of upper-class characters representative of England's wealthy and politically influential classes. The senior colonial official in the British Colony's capital, James Pilgrim, is a well-bred English civil servant who serves with patience and accepts the native populations' agitation for self-rule with equanimity. His wife, Rose, is "serene," "graceful," "very lovely," and blandly "happy and excited" in the knowledge that her young son James is due home from boarding school for Christmas (13). In addition to young James, the doomed aircraft's manifest comprises a roster of upstanding citizens:

Three members of the British Parliament, Mr. Chalk, Mr. Flower and Mr. Finkelstein; the Colonial civil servant John Fenton, recalled in haste; a noble lady, Emily Fitzgubbin, who prefers dumb animals to human beings; her friend Professor Pettigrew who is an authority on food and forests and looks forward to a day when the human race will starve; Mrs. Bradshaw, an idle woman at a loss for something else to do; and an old man, a priest called Father Michael, who has spent more than forty years in the bush and is going home to his Mission. (13-14)

Typical of characters that populate Borden's works in the preceding four decades, these socially and politically prominent and privileged figures contrast dramatically with the native African culture and personalities she portrays in this colonialist narrative.

In *Margin of Error*, Borden draws on her personal experiences in the Gold Coast of western Africa, locating the novel in a colonial setting and deriving foundational plot points from tensions between native and settler populations. During her annual visits with Spears, lasting six to eight weeks each January and February, Borden became familiar

⁹⁴ William Golding set up the same plot situation in *Lord of the Flies*, published the same year, but his stalwart English boys descend into barbarism. Golding's book won the Nobel Prize.

with the company's mining operations, as well as the culture of the native people and the colony's escalating political struggle for independence (Egremont 281). In an interview in the United States on a publicity tour, Borden admits that Spears did not like the novel, because the route the airplane flies before crashing is the same route that her husband and she took every winter when they visited the Ashanti mines (Rogers).

In her novel, Borden develops the foreign locale as a distinct character, similar to the manner in which she portrayed India in her short stories and novels in the 1910s. She emphasizes the alien attributes of the African nation, depicting Damba as unremarkable, unfamiliar, and exotic: the British administrators and their families struggle to acclimate to and tame the foreign country, importing supplies and customs from home. In contrast to the staid enclave of expatriates, native life "bubbles in the gay, ragged, untidy centre of the town" where every day "it's as if there were a fair going on with everyone in gala attire, . . . the streets are a riot of colour" (12). "Life is fun" for the African residents of Damba: "Rich, glowing, irrepressibly gay, inevitably comical, noisy, greedy, friendly, careless, prolific and kindly, with children swarming everywhere, fat, jolly naked children doing just as they please" (13). This depiction shifts in the book; Borden's paternalism reflects a colonizer's perspective, portraying natives that dare to question imperial authority as devolved from simple, happy children to animalistic brutes.

Margin of Error is set in a period during which previously peaceful tribes are at war with one another and the British administration is struggling to control political fallout and increasing tension with the native population. Borden's novel is critical of the British government, which she describes on the opening pages of *Margin of Error* as "afraid of giving offence to the backward people of the earth" (4). Her sarcastic

explanation of the British government's handling of an impending murder trial reveals her irritation with what today would be disparaged as political correctness run amok:

Had they been white men, the brutes would have been tried and condemned and promptly hanged on the evidence. But they were not. They were black—or as a Member of His Majesty's Labour Government had put it, they were 'non-white pigmented people', and that gave them a distinct advantage in this British Colony. (24)

She accuses the government of acting out of weakness and fear, and implies that the Africans have calculatingly exploited these allowances to their advantage. While one would like to credit Borden with taking a progressive stance toward racial equality by lampooning the British government's oversensitivity to the topic of skin color, her decision to characterize native Africans as either naïve children or brutish savages, manageable by English administrators of middling expertise, contradicts this reading.

Margin of Error resolves neatly with the crash survivors returned to civilization and the murderer's confession. For the Anglo characters, life continues uninterrupted after the accident. After his reunion with his parents, James opens Christmas presents, gives a quick summary of events, and then casually asks: "Can I go out now, Mum, with Aidoo and spot some lizards?" (246). The continuation of the status quo extends to the native African community as well, as the confessed murderer descends into madness akin to savagery: "The babbling, blubbery hysteria of the wretched creature had been most painful. The warders had had difficulty in keeping him from beating his brains out on the floor. All they could gather from his ravings was that this was juju! . . . This was juju" (247). Although the events in Borden's fictional African colony appear to be progressing towards self-rule, the native population remains animalistic. This designation is compounded by the invocation of "juju," a reference to an African fetish or magical

object, a component of a pagan belief system incompatible with Christianity that defines practitioners as both alien and heathen.

The most common feature of reviews of *Margin of Error* is their brevity. Fanny Butcher, a long-time advocate of Borden's at the *Chicago Tribune*, penned a neutral review that carefully avoids either endorsing or disparaging the novel ("Mary Borden's Skilfully Contrived Tale"). Even reviews offering positive notices are remarkable for their abbreviated length.⁹⁵ Critics appear either unwilling to criticize the novel or hard-pressed to develop insightful or meaningful interpretations for their readers, yet nonetheless seem reluctant to ignore a book by a well-established literary figure.

Some found Borden's protracted digressions on colonial policies in *Margin of Error* tedious and biased. Rose Feld, writing in the *New York Herald Tribune*, concludes that the novel's "good storytelling" is irritatingly overshadowed by "overt criticism of a government for which Miss Borden has little respect." In *The Spectator*, John Metcalf objects to the book's "editorializing" about colonial problems, and compares it to a "battered, pre-war Morris . . . chugging down a provincial avenue of lending libraries."⁹⁶

Unsurprisingly, critics sympathetic to Borden's political views offered more positive assessments of her novel. Olive Dean Hormel, Book Editor of *The Christian Science Monitor*, commends Borden for her ability to portray the "more sinister aspects of the African scene," that she identifies as the "problem of . . . kind, pagan primitives with a superstitious gloss of ritual Christianity." She applauds Borden's "memorable novel" for its "genius characterizations," providing "high dramatic potential," "almost

⁹⁵ See also Haverstick; Jackson; Metcalf; Review of *Margin of Error* in *The New Yorker*.

⁹⁶ See also Haverstick; Review of *Margin of Error* in *The New Yorker*.

unbearable suspense,” and “an intelligently happy ending.” In a nod to her middlebrow audience’s aesthetic that equates literary excellence with popularity and accessibility, Hormel concludes “the author’s particular triumph is that she has accomplished all this in just under 250 pages—a masterpiece of poignant brevity.”⁹⁷

Borden’s last novel, *The Hungry Leopard*, was published in 1956 by William Heinemann in the United Kingdom and by Longmans, Green in the United States. Set in London in 1952, *The Hungry Leopard* reveals the tragic end of a love affair between Amanda, the American-born wife of English foreign servant Gilbert Dewhurst, and Jacques, a mysterious and reclusive writer who holds an important position in a shadowy resistance movement in a country behind the Iron Curtain.

The novel begins just after Amanda’s suicide; the narrative unfolds around a quest to locate a missing packet of letters that Amanda saved from her years-long correspondence with the now-absent Jacques. Told through a series of flashbacks, *The Hungry Leopard* is presented in two parts: Part I is narrated by Sophie, Amanda’s closest friend and the wife of Jacques’ publisher, Arnold Bonnibrook; Part II is related by Dewhurst’s mistress, Eloise Hunt. Though the book strives to discover the causes and circumstances surrounding these events, both Amanda and Jacques remain shadowy figures.

The title, *The Hungry Leopard*, comes from Jacques’s proposed future literary work: “[A]n essay on the human animal—the animal inside each of us. I shall call it *The Hungry Leopard*” (130). Many of these animal urges emerge in the supporting characters. Eloise, who has heard Jacques speak of his proposed book title, self-referentially invokes

⁹⁷ See also Barkham; Poore, Review of *Margin of Error*.

it describing her avaricious plan to use Jacques's letters for extortion: "[H]is letters had fallen into the hands of one [Hungry Leopard], and she knew what she was going to do with them" (269). A sexualized beast resides inside Sophie, who inhabits her bedroom "like an animal seeking its lair. . . . The room was a den, the lair of a greedy feline . . ." (84). Bonnibrook's voracious passions are books and food: "Passion or vice, he had continued to give himself up to [reading] . . . had shut himself up here in this room, browsing, munching, savouring the printed word, aware often, as he read some favourite passage, of the saliva rising in his mouth" (112-13).

Aside from their animalistic behaviors, Borden's characters lack dimension. She attempts to bring a political slant to her narrative by positioning Jacques as a "Buchan-style Central European writer" (Quigly), but her characterization of the protagonist fails to emerge as more than that of a romantic and dashing hero. Amanda manifests as another in Borden's long string of fallen, tragic heroines that can be traced back to Barbara Witherow in *The Mistress of Kingdoms* in 1912. Otherwise, *The Hungry Leopard* is populated with formulaic characters familiar to readers of Borden's previous novels: a troupe of self-indulgent society women, hard-working government mandarins, languid minor aristocracy, and egotistic business titans.

In many ways, *The Hungry Leopard* may be read as a successor to Borden's 1930 modernist novel, *A Woman with White Eyes*. In both books, she focuses on issues of personal identity, objective truth, the ephemerality of intellect and art, and the search for meaning. In her study of *Political and Social Issues in British Women's Fiction, 1928-1968*, Elizabeth Maslen sees *The Hungry Leopard* as a study of the "problem of identity, exploring the impossibility of creating a complete picture of another person." Citing the

book's fragmented linearity and alternative consciousnesses, Maslen proposes it as "a strikingly postmodern work" (51). But Borden's fictional treatment does not deny the existence of an objective reality: rather, it relies on reason as a construct to frame and probe for the answers to these questions.

Despite Borden's marked changes in literary style during the more than four-decade interval since the publication of her first novel, *The Hungry Leopard* deviates only narrowly in theme from other book-length fiction in her catalog. Most notably, it adheres to her penchant for championing romantic love over approved moral codes, straining, yet never completely abandoning or subverting, societal conventions. Borden's offering of vicarious indulgence in risqué or taboo behavior may have garnered her popular success in the decade following World War I, but by mid-century this formula had lost its allure for readers exposed to the rapid liberalization of social mores in the ensuing decades. Not only was the fallen woman trope less scandalous, but generations of readers who had survived two World Wars and the Great Depression were not likely to view the societal dramas of society matrons, politicians, and entitled lesser nobility with much sympathy. Borden keeps her work fresh by drawing on contemporary political issues, current events, recognizable characters, and up-to-date society milieu.

British reviews for *The Hungry Leopard* were lackluster. Ben Ray Redman, writing for *The Saturday Review*, offers a representatively ambiguous assessment: "Miss Borden had a good story to tell," he writes, but "one must dig for that story, not only through layers of mystification but through quite a bit of second-rate writing." In *The Spectator*, Isabel Quigly describes the book as a "likeable, literate" romance, "heartfelt,

but overlong.”⁹⁸ A favorable review by Mary Danvers Briton Stocks, herself a minor member of the British aristocracy, in *The Times Literary Supplement* cites Borden’s “skilfully smooth construction” in building “a structure of suspense around an insistent puzzle.” “*The Hungry Leopard* is a sort of psychological thriller without a crime,” Stocks writes admiringly, “a polished and fascinating piece of work.”

In contrast, American reviews of *The Hungry Leopard* were more generous. Fanny Butcher, Borden’s longest-running critic and an unremittent fan of the native-born Chicagoan—a connection she notes in each review—praises her latest book in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*: “Borden creates a suspenseful story. . . . [T]o make plain to the reader the innate character of those affected by that death as the story progresses and at the same time build up and then solve a mystery without revealing the solution to those in the story takes rare narrative skill” (“Suicide”). Writing in *The New York Times*, Charles Poore, who previously compared Borden’s writing to Cather and Faulkner, claims to find “Whistler’s brush as well as [Henry] James’ touch” in her latest book (Review of *Hungry Leopard*). He commends the author for her “sharp characterizations concerning personalities in Whitehall, the varieties of London fashion and bohemia, and what you might call the surviving half-landed gentry.”⁹⁹

In 1958, Borden’s last work, an essay entitled “Personal Experience and the Art of Fiction,” was published in a collection edited by E. V. Rieu titled *Essays by Divers Hands*. The paper was based on a lecture delivered to the Royal Society of Literature on April 19, 1956. Borden begins her essay by acknowledging the dilemma that faces all

⁹⁸ See also Stocks.

⁹⁹ See also Bullock; Matthews.

artists: that “personal experience broad in scope, rich in variety, crowded with incident and opportunity for action” and “solitude, quiet, and plenty of uninterrupted time” are necessary to produce good work, but that these are mutually exclusive situations in that the existence of one necessarily precludes the other (88).

This predicament—the choice between a wide and eventful life and the seclusion required to produce a work of art—Borden explains, eases as a writer becomes more experienced and skillful. At the beginning of a writing career, an author must necessarily draw from his own life, but the tension between living life and creating art diminishes as a writer becomes more proficient:

The imagination of a writer of fiction develops with use quite as truly as the muscles of a boxer. . . . For the fact is, whereas the novice, or the writer of inadequate imaginative power, is limited for his subject-matter to his intimate immediate world, for the great artist, the fleeting impression of a moment, the flash of light on a stranger’s face, or the sound of a voice heard only for an instant, may be enough to start the process of incubation that will result in a full-length novel, and strangely enough it is often the glimpse of a world most alien to his own that lights the spark and produces that rare jewel, a story or a novel that is a work of art. (89-90)

Borden recalls for her audience the competing claims on her time and attention as a mother of four children, the wife of an ambitious and active MP, and a successful writer trying to juggle many attendant activities and responsibilities. “Life was so enjoyable,” Borden states, “the practice of my profession so hard.” But, when encouraged to give herself up to her writing, Borden reports: “[I] didn’t even consider it seriously. And it was not only because I was fond of my family. I liked the world I lived in. It interested me enormously.” Looking back on her decision to refuse to compromise, Borden believes that had she given up more to pursue her writing “the springs of my creative faculty would have dried up. I can’t argue that or explain. But I knew it was so.” Borden’s

lament is unregretful and unrepentant: “I am haunted by the thought that had I lived less and done less, I might have written better books” (91-92). This sentiment was not a new one for Borden: nearly half a century before, she had criticized her fellow Vassar classmates who, when perusing *The Vassar Miscellany*, “read a bit of verse and wonder what it means in the writer’s experience,” only engaging in artistic criticism as “an afterthought, if a thought at all” (“College Attitude” 188).

Later in her speech, Borden addresses the use of personal experience in writing fiction, contrasting her approach with that of W. Somerset Maugham, who proposes in *The Summing Up* that “every experience in fact of the man is to be used by the author and is experienced with this purpose in mind” (qtd. in Borden “Personal Experience” 92). Her experience has been different, Borden asserts: “I have not sought experience with the ulterior purpose in mind of using it as the stuff of fiction. To have done so, I believe, would have been fatal.” Going further, Borden insists that she has not used her “fundamental experiences” in her writing, explaining: “I have ceased to be a writer while I was in their grip. . . . I can do nothing with them. They are too private” (93).

A catalog of stages and events which Borden claims never to have used in her fiction follows: “My American childhood, in the city of Chicago, my schooldays, college days, a trip round the world, China, India. . . . I have never made use of Chicago, or my father who was my greatest friend, or the hectic religious experience that decided me as a schoolgirl to go as a missionary to the heathen . . .” (93). Borden bifurcates herself into a writer and everything else—wife, mother, nurse, campaigner—claiming that “the woman who ran a hospital during the last war stole five years from the writer”

(94). Her defense of the distinction between these separate spheres is unmitigated, unwavering, unapologetic, and emphatic.

Borden's assertion that she has not used her personal experiences in her writing is not credible. Many of the characters, settings, and events explored in her work clearly reflect incidents in her own life, places she lived, people she knew, and events she witnessed. *The Mistress of Kingdoms* and *Collision* draw on her experiences living in India as the wife of an English missionary, while *Margin of Error* reflects the time she spent in the Gold Coast. Borden's Chicagoan upbringing informs *The Romantic Woman* and *Jane—Our Stranger*. *The Forbidden Zone*, *The Tortoise*, and *Sarah Defiant* contain heart-wrenching and horrifying World War I scenes reflecting Borden's nursing service, while *The Tortoise* and *Sarah Defiant* rework her infidelity during the war and the experience of post-war trauma. The war also features in *Four O'clock and Other Stories* and *Jericho Sands*. The religious zealotry Borden experienced as a child instigates the conflict in *Jericho Sands* and forms the premise of *You, the Jury*, which was also influenced by her work with conscientious objectors during the war. *Three Pilgrims and a Tinker* features a family composed exactly as her own, and includes a passage about her youngest daughter which Borden admits was drawn from a scene she witnessed (Borden "Personal Experience" 93). The marriages in *Jericho Sands*, *The Black Virgin*, and *No. 2 Shovel Street* mirror aspects of Borden's. Credible accounts of libel arose after publication of *Jane—Our Stranger*, *Four O'clock*, and *A Woman with White Eyes*. *Passport for a Girl* and *Catspaw* reflect events and people torn from newspaper headlines. Oddly, Borden identifies *Mary of Nazareth* and *King of the Jews*, novels with the fewest parallels to her own life, as drawn most intimately from her own experiences.

After referring to the lives of several literary notables, as well as engaging in self-reflection, Borden concludes that “the ideal life experience for a woman writer is not rich and varied, but spartan, meagre, and restricted,” and suggests that “too wide and too eventful a life is bad for the woman who aspires to be an artist of fiction” (“Personal Experience” 95). Citing examples from the lives of Jane Austen, the Brontës, George Eliot, and Virginia Woolf, Borden asserts: “It was surely the confinement of these women’s lives, the restrictions imposed on their activities,” she proposes, “that made them creative artists” (95). The contradiction in Borden’s claims resides in her best prose fiction. Aside from her modernist masterpiece, *The Forbidden Zone*, Borden’s most innovative, creative, compelling, and well-written novels are those which arose from her imagination rather than deriving from her experiences: *Flamingo*, *Jehovah’s Day*, and *The Woman with White Eyes*. Rather than written in solitude, these books were composed at a time of frenetic activity and personal stress in Borden’s life, belying her claim.

For Borden, a life of “rich and varied” activity certainly contributed to her literary output, yet it is an equal certitude that the quality of her works was uneven. There is no easy resolution to this contradiction. How Borden measured the success of her novels is unrecorded; we do not know which she appraised more highly, making it impossible to reconcile the inconsistency between the concepts she advances in her essay and her portfolio of novels. Her defensiveness about this issue may reveal a sensitivity to criticism that linked her personal life with that of her fictional characters, or she may be denying these associations to protect the privacy of herself and others, namely Spears.

In 1966, Borden donated her personal papers, including extant book manuscripts, to the Mugar Library at Boston University. Although the University subsequently invited

her to become a Fellow, Borden declined the invitation owing to health issues that precluded travelling to the United States. Instead, she recorded a brief statement via telephone, thanking the University for the honor and for accepting her books: "I have lived a long time it is true, and have written a number of books with pages you now keep safe in your archive. Thank you. They were not at all safe here."

Borden spent most of her life as an Englishwoman, adopting the country, its people, and its customs as her own. Her novels often featured a clash between cultures that pitted staid, tradition-bound England against modern, agitated United States. Her essays in popular magazines advocated the practices and institutions of the United Kingdom as superior to those of the United States, yet she preferred the hospitality found in America. Near the end of her life, her thoughts returned to America:

I'm old now, as England is old, and am often aware of being in exile. But you in Boston or Chicago or anywhere in America are young. And I need youth. I love England and believe in the British people. I know they are stalwart and unbeatable when roused . . . and for forty years they remain to me friends. But the truth is I'm not at home here. My home is on your side of the Atlantic. And I need to come home to renew my youth. (Telephone conversation)

Shortly after, Borden suffered a broken hip in a fall. Her health never sufficiently recovered to allow her to make the trip back to the United States. She died on December 2, 1968, at the age of 82, at her home in Warfield, with Spears and Maurice in attendance (Egremont 304). Her memorial service in January 1969 was attended by ambassadors, government ministers, military officers, and aristocrats ("Memorial Service"). She was buried at Warfield, in the St. Michael the Archangel Churchyard, Berkshire, England. Borden's son Michael died five days after her memorial service. A year after Borden's death, Louis married his long-time companion, Maurice. He died on January 27, 1974, and was interred at Warfield with Borden and Michael.

CONCLUSION

At the time of her death in 1968, Borden was recognized as a successful, if uninspiring writer of middlebrow sensibilities. Her obituary in *The Times* notes:

Miss Borden was a writer of very real and obvious gifts. Intelligent, resourceful, and accomplished, not seldom impressive in their sustained narrative power, most of her novels were nevertheless somewhat narrowly confined to the experience of the very rich and exalted and in the result were stamped by a certain conventionality of outlook. She tried in time to broaden the field of her observation and imaginative sympathy, but continued for the most part to make the best use of her talents in keeping to the type of wealthy and fashionable milieu which for many years she knew best. ("Miss Mary Borden")

The New York Times notice includes a slightly more generous assessment of Borden's literary contributions, noting her best-selling novels, Book-of-the-Month Club selections, and religious fiction ("Mary Borden, Novelist").¹⁰⁰ None mention *The Forbidden Zone*, her remarkable, modernist collection of war-related poems and prose.

Recent years have seen a resurgence of interest in Borden's World War I fictionalized memoir, beginning with republication of the collection by Hesperus Press in 2008. Poetry and prose pieces from *The Forbidden Zone* have been anthologized many times over in recent collections of World War I writing.¹⁰¹ Commemorative events surrounding the hundred-year anniversary of World War I milestones have revived interest in the literature arising from the conflict, including *The Forbidden Zone*. Katie Mitchell's multimedia theatrical production, *The Forbidden Zone*, which debuted at the Salzburg Festival in 2014, takes its title from Borden's work and incorporates pieces of her writing, along with those of other contemporary female writers, to describe the

¹⁰⁰ See also "Miss Borden, Novelist" in *Chicago Tribune*.

¹⁰¹ See Ayrton; Cardinal; Higdonnet, *Lines of Fire*; Kendall; Korte; Sheldon; Smith, *Women's Writing of the First World War*.

devastating effects of chlorine gas on French soldiers at Ypres. Following performances in Berlin, Amsterdam, Rennes, and Sarajevo in 2015, it ran in London in 2016. In 2015, Paul O'Prey edited the first complete collection of Borden's published and unpublished World War I poems, *Poems of Love and War*. Stephen Ives' six-hour documentary, *The Great War*, which aired on PBS in 2017, quotes from *The Forbidden Zone* to illustrate the overwhelming horrors of the frontline hospital. Most recently, Mira Calix and Tom Piper used one of Borden's poems from her unpublished "Sonnets to a Soldier" as the basis for an immersive light and choral work commemorating the centenary celebration of Armistice Day, titled *Beyond the Deepening Shadow: The Tower Remembers*, which ran from November 4 through 11, 2018, at the Tower of London. These events are a testament to the lasting power of Borden's "fragments of a confused memory" that she composed from her frontline hospital.

As this project has demonstrated, Borden was far more than just a middlebrow writer of domestic romances or an innovative literary modernist. Christine E. Hallet's characterization of Borden as a "chameleon" may be the most accurate description of her writing offered to date (*Nurse Writers* 52). Despite Borden's insistence otherwise, it is impossible to separate the woman who moved between worlds and experienced two world wars at first hand from the writer who recorded her impressions. Her life and her fiction are bound together in the production of a body of works that defies categorization by genre, mode, audience, or style.

Borden lived life largely and left a considerable unexamined oeuvre; both present numerous opportunities for further scholarly inquiry. Her belief that a fuller life would

inhibit the creativity of women writers warrants further study into the relationship and friction between life and art.

In demonstrating Borden's emerging engagement with the modernist mode and her subsequent disengagement with those techniques, this study reveals the many ways in which Borden adapted and changed her writing over a long career. Her experimentation with modernism, most evident in *The Forbidden Zone*, is also discernable in her novels, notably *Flamingo*, *Jehovah's Day*, and *The Woman with White Eyes*. The modernist mode Borden practices in these books differs from her World War I collection of poetry and shorter prose pieces. These novels, like most of Borden's non-war related fiction, have not been widely recognized or studied. Written in a period in which the modernist mode was waning in influence, and at a time when the author was pursuing a more commercially-informed awareness in her writing practice, these works should be of interests to scholars of modernism and the relationship between modernism and the middlebrow.

There is still much to discover about the connection between Borden's life and writing. Of most interest is the subject of war and writing. Borden is unusual among writers for having produced memoirs of both World Wars. Despite her role as a battlefield nurse in each conflict, *The Forbidden Zone* and *Journey Down a Blind Alley* present starkly different interpretations of the wartime experience. Certainly memories, personal and cultural, influenced how she experienced the wars, the impressions she collected, and the manner she expressed herself. Comparative inquiry of these works would be of interest to historians and literary critics seeking a better understanding of the role of trauma and memory in war.

Issues of national identity are complicated in Borden's work because of her relationships with both the United States and the United Kingdom, and to some extent with France after World War I. Shifting national allegiances compelled her writing in different ways, and there is an indication that she consciously altered her presentation for audiences in each country. These subtle adjustments indicate a tension between her personal beliefs and the persona she was promoting as an author: interrogating this friction could illuminate the study of transatlantic literary currents in a period when technology was rapidly reducing the importance of geographic differences.

Borden was a woman of expansive contradictions, who expressed apprehensions about the tensions between a fully-lived life and the creation of art. Her early determination to "write something real and therefore worth while [*sic*]," led her to engage with innovative literary modes, resulting in vibrant and unexpected compositions. ("College Attitude" 187). Borden's versatility experimenting with new subjects and forms was matched, and possibly prompted, by a personal compulsion to pursue and experience all that she could in her lifetime, to achieve "something vital . . . to make my life tell for eternity" (Letter to Mrs. William Borden).

APPENDIX

Today, *The Forbidden Zone* is viewed as a significant feminist and modernist World War I narrative, and Borden is widely acknowledged for her heroic personal efforts as well as her literary achievement. Her reputation as a leading literary figure of the period has emerged only in the past few decades. As recently as 1995, scholars were still arguing for the inclusion of women writers in the canon of World War I literature, citing Borden as an exemplifier of modernist writing in this mode (Goldman).

Initial scholarly inquiries examined *The Forbidden Zone* as a feminist and modernist narrative. In an article in *Modernism/Modernity* in 2002, Ariella Freedman explores how Borden navigates the role of the nurse, arguing that her attempts to reconcile the divides of landscape, gender, and genre represent a new mode of modernist literature that is “more imagistic than documentary,” arguing that *The Forbidden Zone* stands as “one of the most powerful and one of the most experimental pieces of writing to have emerged from the war” (110).

More recent scholarship has deeply probed Borden’s wartime narrative, exploring issues of trauma, perception, and historicity, and revealing areas relevant to feminist and modernist studies. It is not uncommon for scholars and critics to refer to *The Forbidden Zone* as an iconic and canonical World War I book (Fell and Hallet 8). The following review of current critical inquiry and scholarship demonstrates Borden’s far-reaching and multi-disciplinary influence and interest.

Feminist critics who pioneered the field of women and the First World war include Jane Marcus, “Afterword: Corpus/Corps/Corpse: Writing the Body in/at War” in *Not So Quiet...Stepdaughters of War*; Claire M. Tylee, *The Great War and Women’s*

Consciousness: Images of Militarism and Womanhood in Women's Writings; Sharon Ouditt, *Fighting Forces, Writing Women: Identity and Ideology in the First World War*; Trudi Tate, *Modernism, History and the First World War*; and Angela K. Smith *The Second Battlefield: Women, Modernism and the First World War*. Each of these scholars includes Mary Borden in their discussions and arguments.

In her study of literary memory, *The Great War and Women's Consciousness: Images of Militarism and Womanhood in Women's Writings, 1914-1964*, Claire M. Tylee cites Borden's writing in *The Forbidden Zone* as challenging the "rhetoric of the purifying crusade" (102) Borden was among a small group of "outsiders"¹⁰² who created a "new linguistic mode and narrative technique" by "breaking the rules of good taste"; by that depicting "soldiers as passive victims," using the "traditional women's weapons of sarcasm and irony to show contempt" for the patriarchy, undermining "the rarified imagery of medieval chivalry and gallant deeds," exposing the financial aspects of the war, and sexualizing the armies (102). In an earlier article rebutting Sandra Gilbert's characterization of Borden's writing in *The Forbidden Zone* as embodying survivor's guilt and "culpable numbness," Tylee demonstrates how Borden's collection contributes to "a new myth for the emotionless support system . . . where human care and concern are outlawed: the Forbidden Zone" (Gilbert 448; Tylee; "Maleness" 202).

In *Fighting Forces, Writing Women: Identity and Ideology in the First World War*, Sharon Ouditt identifies the complex position occupied by World War I nurses, like Borden, who were ill-prepared for the war and unable to express their experiences using conventional language and form. They experienced war as a fragmentation of their

¹⁰² Tylee includes Katherine Mansfield and Ellen La Motte in this group.

femininity, and their resulting works, including *The Forbidden Zone*, are “dominated by images of alienation, dislocation and even madness—motifs of literary modernism” (38). Borden’s sketches and Preface demonstrate the “incapacity of ordinary discourse” by a well-educated woman to convey the horror of her experiences (39).

Jane Marcus makes a similar suggestion in her Afterword to the 1989 edition of Helen Zenna Smith’s wartime chronicle, *Not So Quiet...Stepdaughters of War*, later published as the essay “Corpus/Corps/Corpse: Writing the Body in/at War” in *Arms and the Woman: War, Gender and Literary Representation*. Citing Borden’s writing in *The Forbidden Zone*, Marcus observes that the social dislocation suffered by World War I nurses wholly unprepared and unrecognized for their harrowing efforts in nursing “fragmented men” is reflected in a textual fragmentation that itself resembles the chaos of the battlefield, and that such “fragmentation described as typical of modernists texts has an origin in the writing practice of women nurses and ambulance drivers” (249).

Angela K. Smith opens her study of women’s modernist representations of wartime experience, *The Second Battlefield: Women, Modernism and the First World War*, by introducing her reader to Borden’s writing.¹⁰³ “Borden embodies the central thematic concerns of this book,” Smith explains: “a woman, writing an account of the war, adopting diverse, innovative and modernistic narrative techniques to bring her record to life” (2). Smith uses the wartime writing of Borden, along with those of Enid Bagnold and Ellen La Motte, to argue that nurses active on the battlefield produced “a type of women’s experimental art triggered directly by the war, rather than by any

¹⁰³ Smith’s title draws from Borden’s story “Blind” in *The Forbidden Zone*: “This is the second battlefield” (155).

particular desire to be innovatory.” Smith terms this “accidental modernism,” and identifies this mode of writing as “an important link between the experience of the First World War and the emergence of a wider modernist practice” (71). Of these writers, Smith identifies Borden as “the most aesthetically self-aware,” as distinguished by her sophisticated use of language and literary artistry (84). Acknowledging the differing conclusions about gendered power dynamics that Gilbert, Marcus, Ouditt, and Higonnet draw from Borden’s wartime writing, Smith proposes an alternative interpretation that questions the hierarchical process of power, and credits Borden with using “formulas of female empowerment” to articulate a pressing concern about the inhumanity of war (93).

Margaret Higonnet has emerged as the foremost scholar of Borden’s wartime writing. *Lines of Fire: Women Writers of World War I*, Higonnet’s anthology of women’s writing from World War I, introduces several sketches from *The Forbidden Zone* as exemplars of modernist technique. Her edited collection, *Nurses at the Front: Writing the Wounds of the Great War*, includes excerpted pieces from *The Forbidden Zone* alongside some from Ellen La Motte’s collection, *The Backwash of War*. In the Introduction to *Nurses at the Front*, Higonnet links the war-related writings of the two women, who worked together for a time at Hôpital Chirurgical Mobile No. 1, as “writing in the voice of the nurse” (xx). In addition to pointing out similarities in content and form, Higonnet identifies parallels between Borden and La Motte’s pieces including the irony inherent in the contradiction of nursing during wartime, the definition of heroism, the role of woman in wartime, and the representation of war in art.

In “Authenticity and Art in Trauma Narratives of World War I,” Higonnet’s investigation of the gendering of war-induced trauma, she defines *The Forbidden Zone* as

“a kind of deliberate ‘symptomatic writing’ of the trauma of nursing,” citing its “fragmentation, abrupt juxtaposition, deadpan description, and intrusively vivid images (101). Her interpretation differs from those of Das, Kaplan, and Acton (for all, see below), which identify a correlation between the trauma Borden experienced and the fragmentation in her writing. Arguing against Borden’s writing as “spontaneous truth telling,” Higonnet contends that Borden demonstrates a “more philosophic knowledge” of trauma which she refers to as “second knowing” (101). In “The Great War and the Female Elegy,” Higonnet defines Borden’s elegiac poetry as “especially provocative in its modernist rupture with poetic conventions” (120). Higonnet credits Borden with producing “one of the most explicit experiments in blasphemy” for her depiction of a “world abandoned by God” in the poem “Where is Jehovah?,” and she cites “Borden’s much admired Whitmanesque ‘Song of the Mud’” for the use of irony that both shocks the reader and challenges poetic conventions (“Great War” 131).

Because Borden’s writings depict the realities of war from a woman’s point of view, *The Forbidden Zone* often serves historians and cultural critics for its literary portrayal of war trauma. Santanu Das, in *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature*, cites Borden’s modernist writing in examining how nurses experienced and reacted to trauma. Das esteems Borden as “a highly conscious literary modernist,” and views *The Forbidden Zone* as a “mode of recovering and transmitting traumatic memory” (223). Das contends that Borden’s book differs from those of other First World War women writers by “the sense of *shame*” exhibited by the nurse-narrator: “The trauma [experienced by the nurse] is of the order of both infliction (on soldiers) and victimization (by war authorities)” (222). In a pair of articles, “Deformities of the Great War: The

Narratives of Mary Borden and Helen Zenna Smith” and “Over the Top in the Aftermath of the Great War: Two Novels, Too Graphic,” Laurie Kaplan discusses how Borden’s graphic illustrations of injured and damaged bodies in *The Forbidden Zone* replaces “conventional symbolic or metaphorical suggestions with verbally aggressive descriptions” (“Deformities” 37). Kaplan claims that Borden’s use of explicit language is an important technique in the definition of an anti-war modernist mode of writing.

Carol Acton’s studies of wartime nursing, “Dangerous Daughters: American Nurses and Gender Identity in World War One and Vietnam” and “Diverting the Gaze: The Unseen Text in Women’s War Writing,” draw attention to how nurses’ exposure to trauma informs their war literature. Acton uses *The Forbidden Zone* to demonstrate how the trauma induced by the intimate and physical act of nursing disrupts the author’s identity in terms of gender, sexuality, and role (“Dangerous Daughters” 89). In “Diverting the Gaze,” Acton explores how nurses’ wartime writing simultaneously compels the reader to divert her gaze from the horror, while at the same time exposing or revealing that same trauma. Borden’s allusion in her Preface to experiences shared with the poilus that are too traumatic to write represents a “paradoxical presence of an absent or unseen text” (64). This paradox is reflected in Borden’s fragmentary, incoherent narrative preoccupied with “diverting of the gaze as a form of psychological survival,” and the works become a conduit for Borden’s personal expression of trauma-induced tension and loss of control (65).

Max Saunders takes a psychoanalytic approach in exploring the troubling relationship between suffering and pleasure depicted by Borden in *The Forbidden Zone* in “War Literature, Bearing Witness, and the Problem of Sacralization: Trauma and

Desire in the Writing of Mary Borden and Others.” Beyond the modernist juxtaposition of desire and agony portrayed in Borden’s collection, Saunders sees her “drive to transcend fact; to transmute it into mystery, visionary experience, ecstasy” (183) as a process of sacralization intended to force a cultural memory of pain and grief and suppress the perverse and covert pleasure of aggression (190).

Some scholars have focused their inquiries on Borden’s poetry. Jan Montefiore interprets Borden’s World War I poems as elegies in ““Blind Mouths’: Oral Metaphor, Literary Tradition and the Fantasy of the Mother in Some Women’s Elegies of the Great War”; she shows the similarities of Borden’s poetry to that of Whitman in *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s: The Dangerous Flood of History*. Marcia Phillips McGowan reveals Borden’s unpublished sonnets written to Spears during their wartime affair in ““Have I No Sanctuary to Defend?’: The Great War Sonnets of Mary Borden,” arguing that the “frankly sexual, gendered” poems express love and sex as an anodyne to the grimness of war (200). Borden’s use of sexuality and suicide as instruments of Imagism is explored by Henrietta Goodman in “Mary Borden: Sex and Suicide in Poetry from *The Forbidden Zone*.” Kate McLoughlin looks at Borden’s invocation of mud as a feminist metaphor for desire and repulsion in “Muddy Poetics: First World War Poems by Helen Saunders and Mary Borden.” Nora Lambrecht’s inquiry ““But If You Listen You Can Hear’: War Experience, Modernist Noise, and the Soundscape of *The Forbidden Zone*,” shows how Borden used noise as a modernist communication device.

Two recent monographs treat Borden as a major World War I writer. Christine E. Hallett’s scholarship brings the perspective of nursing history to Borden’s writing. Her book, *Nurse Writers of the Great War*, devotes a chapter to Borden’s l’Hôpital

Chirurgical Mobile No. 1. More historical and biographical than critical, Hallett examines Borden's activities and writing in the context of other nurses who were working and writing in the same place and at the same time. This comparison underscores the remarkable nature of Borden's contributions, both as a nurse and as a writer. Most interesting, Hallett identifies similarities in stories told by four nurses, including Borden, who worked together at the hospital. These revelations verify the necessity of thorough inquiries into issues of authenticity and art, and interrogations of the boundaries between truth and fiction in Borden's wartime writing. In an earlier article, "The Personal Writings of First World War Nurses: A Study of the Interplay of Authorial Intention and Scholarly Interpretation," Hallett looked at the ways in which Borden's "semifictional" writing has been promoted by critics seeking "strong, female, witnessing" voices, while her contributions as a record of nursing work have been largely overlooked (326, 328).

Hazel Hutchinson considers Borden from an American perspective in *The War That Used Up Words: American Writers and the First World War*. Previously, Hutchinson edited a new version of Borden's World War I collection, *The Forbidden Zone: A Nurse's Impressions of the First World War*, published by Hesperus Press in 2008. This edition includes Borden's original sketches and stories from the book, but omits the collection's poetry, an unfortunate exclusion of an essential part of the collection.¹⁰⁴ In *The War That Used Up Words*, Hutchinson identifies Borden as one of a handful of major American First World War writers, considering her literary

¹⁰⁴ A collection of Borden's poetry, including pieces from *The Forbidden Zone* along with selected unpublished pieces discovered by Marcia Phillips McGowan and Jennifer Gromada in the Spears Papers at the Churchill Archives Center, Cambridge University, and the Mary Borden Collection at Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center at Boston University, respectively, was published by Paul O'Prey as *Poems of Love and War* in 2015.

contributions along with those of Henry James, Edith Wharton, Grace Fallow Norton, Ellen La Motte, and E. E. Cummings, and John Dos Passos. Within this group, Hutchinson lauds Borden for her “startling and experimental account,” calling *The Forbidden Zone* “one of the great texts of the First World War (90). “Few war writers,” Hutchinson declares, “have struck such a fine balance between the intensity of personal recollection and the exacting demands of art” (90).

Hutchinson’s argument centers on the formation of the modernist literary mode. “The really creative moment, the ignition spark of innovation, happened *during* the war,” Hutchinson asserts, contradicting claims that the innovative forms of writing associated with Modernism evolved in the postwar period in response to the “despair and disillusionment” brought about by the war (*War* 3, 18). Examining the lives and work of “American observer-participants,” Hutchinson proposes that their roles as volunteers exposed to frontline activities, combined the with “experimental and polemical freedom” afforded as neutral Americans during the early years of the war, led to their invention of many of the stylistic techniques and innovations credited to later writers and artists (3).

Drawing on letters, diaries, and other primary sources, Hutchinson provides a robust biography of Borden, as well as detailed descriptions of her hospital’s activities. Informed by American and Western literary traditions and theory, contemporary criticism, and careful attention to Borden’s interactions with other writers, Hutchinson’s analysis of her writing in *The Forbidden Zone* is the most comprehensive and nuanced produced to date. In addition to identifying contradictions about gender, innovations in technique, and complications of perspective in Borden’s wartime writing, Hutchinson discovers literary connections to Virgil, Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman, Crane, and Stein

(“Theater of Pain”). Her exposure of the confusion, ethics, and artistry of perception in *The Forbidden Zone* provide new insights into Borden’s exploration of the clash between modes of intimacy with the dehumanizing, mechanical operation of the battlefield.

A possible weakness in Hutchinson’s argument lies in her reliance on identifying Borden as an American and as a wartime writer. As the spouse of one British subject with whom she had three children living in London, and, by the middle of the war, intimately entangled with the English officer who was to become her second husband, Borden’s personal allegiances would have been divided at best; labelling her a neutral American, disinterested in the war, is incorrect. Furthermore, Hutchinson’s supposition that, as an American, Borden would be unaffected by British publishing restrictions is contradicted by the author’s explanation that her attempt to have *The Forbidden Zone* published by Collins in 1917 was abandoned due to censorship issues (qtd. in McCommon). Lastly, as Hutchinson points out, Borden wrote portions of *The Forbidden Zone* well after the war, just prior to the book’s publication in 1929 (*War* 177). Differences between versions of the poems and sketches as published in *The English Review* in 1916-1917 and holographic versions in the Mary Borden Collection in the Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center at Boston University with the versions appearing in her 1929 collection demonstrate that Borden was editing her earlier works in the period immediately preceding publication of *The Forbidden Zone* in 1929. While distracting from Hutchinson’s overall argument, none of these issues diminish her engrossing and illuminating analysis of Borden’s wartime writing.

POSTSCRIPT

In addition to the libraries and archives used during the research phase of this dissertation, secondary sources¹⁰⁵ refer to The Papers of Sir Edward Spears at the Churchill Archives Centre at Cambridge University in the United Kingdom.¹⁰⁶ This collection contains writings authored by Borden, as well as those relevant to the author's life and literary legacy. The Archives' finding aid on the Janus website describes twelve boxes of materials pertaining to Borden. These contain personal correspondence, particularly with Spears; papers regarding her divorce from Turner; correspondence concerning her hospital units during the First and Second World Wars; World War II diaries; letters and documents about her death; and press cutting albums. The material is arranged in 34 files of loose pages, three diaries, and five albums of press cuttings.

Conway's and Egremont's biographies of Borden and Spears draw on materials from the Borden boxes in the Archives, using citations and direct quotations to develop Borden's life story. Marcia Phillips McGowan's article, "*Have I No Sanctuary to Defend?: The Great War Sonnets of Mary Borden*," describes and examines a series of Borden's unpublished poems found in the Archive. McGowan's paper includes the complete text of the poems; several exist in typographic manuscript form in the Mary Borden collection at Boston University, where I found and examined them. Based on these references and descriptions, I concluded that the Churchill Archives was not likely to contain new or unknown writings that would contribute meaningfully my discussion of

¹⁰⁵ See Conway; Egremont; Phillips, "*Have I No Sanctuary*."

¹⁰⁶ The majority of Spears's papers relating to the Middle East (1940-51) are held at St Antony's College Middle East Centre, Oxford. The Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives at King's College, London holds the majority of Spears's papers relating to the First World War, literary papers, and photographs.

Borden's evolution as a modernist writer. For this reason, I did not conduct my own research in the Spears Papers, choosing to rely on secondary sources.

After the submission of my dissertation defense copy, I discovered photographic images of some unpublished materials from the Borden boxes in the Churchill Archives on the website for the Bluebirds Project. The Bluebirds were a group of nurses sent by the Australian Red Cross to provide medical support to the French Army during World War I. Five of these women served under Borden in her mobile field hospital. Dr. Irene Rogers, whose scholarship explores the collective and individual life experiences of the Bluebirds, created the Bluebirds Project in 2017 to garner recognition for the overlooked achievements of these women. The Project began with the collection of diaries, letters, and photographs relating to the Bluebirds' service. Because of their link to Borden's World War I hospital, the Project's records include documents from the Churchill Archives related to Borden's hospital. Prior to discovering this website, I had not seen these original compositions, either individually or collectively.

The Borden documents available on the Bluebirds Project website include 700 pages, mainly comprising correspondence between Borden and Spears. Most significant for my project are more than 125 letters that Borden wrote to Spears during their affair between February 1917 and March 1918. Borden composed these letters at the height of the war while she was running her field hospital and during the same period she was writing poems and prose pieces that would be published in *The English Review* and, a decade later, *The Forbidden Zone*. Her letters reveal the rapid evolution of her love affair with Spears: they are raw and intimate. In them, she describes her escalating emotional and physical passion for her lover, which is intensified by their separation and the threat

of war. Her emotions oscillate from ecstatic delight to depression so deep that it affects her ability to work. Despite her joy in their developing relationship, Borden seems compelled by doubt and despair for the future as well as the proximity of death.

Used by Conway and Egremont for biographical purposes, this correspondence also has meaningful literary value. Significant as revealingly private compositions, the letters are of scholarly interest and relevance to my examination of Borden's writing in two manners. These deeply personal letters present an opportunity to reconsider my conclusions about the role of the war in Borden's development as a modernist writer and her later abandonment of this mode. They reveal her love affair with Spears as a compelling alternative motivation for her wartime writing. "It is a long long time since anyone drew poetry out of me," she confides to him early in their relationship: "It's partly the war – but mostly you."¹⁰⁷ The contents of these letters invite further inquiry into the relationship between art and the variety of experiences in Borden's life.

Borden's letters to Spears should also be considered as a major component of her World War I literary legacy, alongside her published works and publicly-shared wartime correspondence. As intimate communiques, her mode of writing in them is less polished and artistic, yet conveys the sense of fragmentation, instability, and ambivalence that begins to appear in her public writing at this time. The graphic imagery and horror that imbue the hospital and battlefield scenes in her published pieces is absent in these letters, and her mentions of the hospital, patients, and bombings lack either urgency or criticality. This distinction invites curiosity and comparison.

¹⁰⁷ Borden, Mary. Letter to Edward Spears. 28 Apr. 1917. The Papers of Edward Spears, Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge, box 11/1, file 1, page 13.

Borden's letters describe events that appear in her fictional pieces, without the drama, irony, or terror of the published versions. Her correspondence also refers to unpublished works; a piece titled "Landscape" appears nowhere in her published writing. A letter from a translator indicates that some of her pieces, including "Landscape," may have been published in France during the war.¹⁰⁸ Each of these instances offers the opportunity to better understand Borden as a writer and reveal more nuances in the relationship between her wartime experiences and her literary creativity.

It is unknown if the Borden letters reproduced on the Bluebirds Project website represent the entirety of her First World War correspondence; they certainly are only a portion of the materials contained in The Papers of Sir Edward Spears at the Churchill Archives Centre. A brief and partial review of these documents confirms their importance in the development of a comprehensive consideration of Borden's literary career and her engagement with the modernist mode. Although these materials do not appear to contradict the findings or conclusions of my dissertation, a thorough examination is required to ascertain their significance and role in understanding Borden's writings and how her experiences influenced her literature. "[T]he 'fond' of ambition is the desire not to be forgotten," Borden writes, expressing her desire to immortalize Spears in poetry.¹⁰⁹ In widening the scope of Borden studies, these materials will add another memorable chapter to her remarkable life and enduring literary legacy.

¹⁰⁸ Letter to Mary Borden. 3 Feb. 1918. The Papers of Edward Spears, Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge, box 11/1, file 3, page 54.

¹⁰⁹ Borden, Mary. Letter to Edward Spears. [Feb] 1917. The Papers of Edward Spears, Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge, box 11/1, file 1, page 30.

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