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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Narrative*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Jan., 1994), pp. 41-52

Published by: [Ohio State University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20107023>

Accessed: 21/11/2011 03:44

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Fortifications of Desire: Reading the Second Story in Katherine Mansfield's "Bliss"

When the heroine of Mansfield's well-known, extraordinary short story discovers her husband's infidelity less than a page before the end, a *second story* untold in the first but necessary to its meaning erupts into the narrative, to devastating effect. The devious second story construction leads, and often misleads, the reader, who interprets clues and applies general cultural competence to "re-tell" the once-submerged second story.¹ Appealing to the reader's cooperation in its complex processes, the story subverts the reading subject, placing her in the position of the unknowing heroine.

"The truth is," Katherine Mansfield wrote in her journal, "one can get only *so much* into a story; there is always a sacrifice. One has to leave out what one knows and longs to use. Why? I haven't any idea, but there it is. It's always a kind of race to get in as much as one can before it *disappears*" (cited in Kobler 112). Suggesting Hemingway's principle of the iceberg, this double-edged observation, both naive and devious, insinuates an interpretive strategy: it challenges the reader to find the disappeared text. If we assume that the sacrificed material of the second story in "Bliss" contained what Mansfield knew and longed to use, still we may not agree on what she knew. Some readers soft-pedal the homosexualities of Mansfield's relations, or eliminate them altogether, while others make them a necessary ingredient in any interpretation of her fictions. I favor neither extreme. Let us recognize, as many have, that Bertha Young and her text are lacking knowledge; they are in the position of the analysand. As the analyst, however, I prefer not to claim to discover a particular referential knowledge behind the text (taken to be the "language" spoken by the analysand), but rather to be *knowledgeable about the functioning of language*. This wording borrowed from Shoshana Felman (81) aptly describes the stance I take in reading "Bliss." I am interested in showing how the text reveals its own strategies for manipulating the reader, while it convinces us to apprehend a character as if she were a

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real person. In other words, I wish to be attentive not just to what Susan Stanford Friedman calls the horizontal axis, the “movement of characters within their fictional world,” but especially the vertical space-time, referring to the “writer and reader in relation to each other,” in particular the “interplay of the semiotic and the symbolic” (14, 18).² “Bliss” is a good example of how the represented events of the story mirror the way language drives the narrative. Furthermore, although the story has an undoubted lesbian meaning that compels us to read out homosexual desire, it is rich enough to enjoy wider interpretations. The second-story construction, whose effects “work” only once, throws up a fortification protecting what Mansfield knew, and this is what guides our interpretive strategy. In question is not so much what hidden knowledge we may reveal about Bertha as what we may know about how the story moves us.

The dazzling feeling of bliss that Bertha Young shares with her “find,” Miss Pearl Fulton, lies mysteriously hidden. At dinner, she thinks she has seen the enigma behind Miss Fulton’s smile: “But Bertha knew, suddenly, as if the longest, most intimate look had passed between them—as if they had said to each other: ‘You, too?’—that Pearl Fulton, stirring the beautiful red soup in the grey plate, was feeling just what she was feeling” (85); Miss Fulton too has swallowed a bit of the sun. The reader will find out, with Bertha, that she is not wrong, but that this should not be cause for joy. Bertha ponders what could make her so certain of this knowledge: “What she simply couldn’t make out—what was miraculous—was how she should have guessed Miss Fulton’s mood so exactly and so instantly. For she never doubted for a moment that she was right, and yet what had she to go on? Less than nothing” (86). Together, they look at the beautiful pear tree in the garden, “understanding each other perfectly” (87). Setting this “perfect” understanding against a backdrop of grotesques taints the shared feeling with both comic and tragic irony. Bertha can hardly wait for her idiotic guests to leave so she can tell her husband in bed about her wonderful feeling. And it is then that she realizes with a shock that the name she must give to her feeling, instead of the euphemistic “bliss,” is desire: “For the first time in her life Bertha Young desired her husband” (89).

Husband Harry, however, professes to dislike striking blonds like Miss Fulton, and the reader has little choice but to interpret his rude behavior as Bertha does. In the last page and a half the narrative takes pains to describe the characters’ movements: Pearl Fulton goes toward the hall to get her coat; Bertha is following her to help, but her husband brushes past, repenting his coldness; as a good hostess, she must then remain in the drawing room to listen to Eddie Warren’s italicized praise of Bilks’s *new* poem, “Why Must it Always be Tomato Soup?” and to fetch the anthology containing it from a table near the hall door—“And she moved noiselessly to a table opposite the drawing-room door and Eddie glided noiselessly after her. She picked up the little book and gave it to him; they had not made a sound” (90). This elaborate staging, insisting implausibly on the silence of both characters, announces to the reader at the very least *that* something is going to happen, if not exactly *what*. As Bertha looks up to see Harry helping Miss Fulton with her coat, the second story bursts upon her like a tornado:

And she saw...Harry with Miss Fulton's coat in his arms and Miss Fulton with her back turned to him and her head bent. He tossed the coat away, put his hands on her shoulders and turned her violently to him. His lips said "I adore you," and Miss Fulton laid her moonbeam fingers on his cheeks and smiled her sleepy smile. Harry's nostrils quivered; his lips curled back in a hideous grin while he whispered: "To-morrow," and with her eyelids Miss Fulton said "Yes." (90)³

With Bertha, we embrace the entire second story in an instant. We feel certain that Harry Young and Pearl Fulton have already become lovers, for he is a proficient reader of her eyelids, and it seems likely that "To-morrow" follows a "To-day." At the same moment, we realize that Bertha, through whose eyes the entire story is told, has been a particularly bad guide for us (leading us down the garden path?). Her understanding of Miss Fulton is far from "perfect," and her reading of her husband's behavior is always wrong. For the first-time reader, who does not know the second story until it surfaces, the second story sweeps away mistaken interpretations and irreparably changes the first. As Mansfield wrote, "[w]ithout [the sense of crisis] how are we to appreciate the importance of one 'spiritual event' rather than another? What is to prevent each being unrelated—complete in itself—if the gradual unfolding in growing, gaining light is not to be followed by one blazing moment?"⁴ The blazing moment, the eruption of the second story into the first, links the spiritual events of Bertha's bliss in a sudden new light, which casts into shadows the "gradual unfolding in growing, gaining light."⁵ Until these moments, our reading is necessarily naive; it becomes devious when the second story bursts into the first.

The exclusive focus on Bertha and the scintillating expressiveness of her discovery of desire also take our attention away from any clues to the threatening tornado. Our second reading finds them. The first story is highly indexical (rather than functional), particularly in its treatment of the sublime bliss. Preeminent among symbols indexing the mysterious and enchanting feeling is the pear tree in perfect full bloom at the end of the garden, which Bertha takes as an icon of her own life (82). She dresses for dinner in a flowing white dress with a jade necklace, and green shoes and stockings, thus uncannily presaging the white-blossomed pear tree against the jade-green sky at dusk (82, 83). Yet this index also serves as an early clue to the reader, if not to Bertha, that the bloom is not her own, for later in the moonlight the tree turns silver, "silver as Miss Fulton" (86) in her elegant dress.⁶ When Miss Fulton asks to see the garden, Bertha takes this request as an enigmatic "sign," and when she sees the pear tree, Bertha fancies she says "Yes. Just *that*" (87). As Miss Fulton and Bertha together gaze at the slender tree, it indexes their "perfect" understanding: "Although it was so still it seemed, like the flame of a candle, to stretch up, to point, to quiver in the bright air, to grow taller and taller as they gazed—almost to touch the rim of the round, silver moon" (87). Symbolic of the fullness of desire, no doubt suggestively phallic, the fantastical tree finally stands as an index not of Bertha's bliss but of Miss Fulton's, which remains undisturbed at the end of the story. With Miss Fulton's farewell words echoing in Bertha's mind ("Your lovely pear tree—

pear tree—pear tree!”), she runs to the window and cries, “Oh, what is going to happen now?” (90). The story thus closes on a question that calls explicitly for a further narrative, and the only answer, in the final one-sentence paragraph, is again indexical and not functional: “But the pear tree was as lovely as ever and as full of flower and as still” (90). Bliss remains—not Bertha’s but Miss Fulton’s.

A second index, which the reader probably ignores on a first reading, is also found in the garden when Bertha first looks out, before the guests arrive: “A grey cat, dragging its belly, crept across the lawn, and a black one, its shadow, trailed after. The sight of them, so intent and so quick, gave Bertha a curious shiver. ‘What creepy things cats are!’ she stammered, and she turned away from the window” (82). The cat is the vulgar counterpart to the sublime pear tree, the defect that dooms the “perfect” symbol. Yet if it passes unnoticed in the first story, it reappears after the second story has erupted. When Miss Fulton leaves after murmuring “Your lovely pear tree!”, Eddie follows her “like the black cat following the grey cat” (90). For Bertha now that the tornado has burst upon her, the silvery, blond Miss Fulton, with her moonbeam fingers, has become the creepy gray cat that slithered snake-like below the beauty of the miraculous tree.⁷ Against a pervasive array of vibrant and compelling colors, in this narrative, black and gray are merely two intensities of non-color.⁸ Not only has Miss Fulton become a sinister, treacherous cat, the devious introduction of evil into paradise, but she has lost her shining silver mystery and taken on a dullish gray—no enigma but a trite, brutal platitude. The gray cat is a distant clue to the second story, but the reader is not allowed to give it a precise interpretation until the second story has shattered the first. Everything was not perfect, after all, in the garden.

There are many other clues, but the most intriguing lie in the very feeling of bliss and the muted mystery of its origin in Miss Fulton. After the shared fantasy of the phallic pear tree, the following paragraph offers, on second reading, an insertion point for a clue addressed to the reader: “How long did they stand there? Both, as it were, caught in that circle of unearthly light, understanding each other perfectly, creatures of another world, and wondering what they were to do in this one with all this blissful treasure that burned in their bosoms and dropped, in silver flowers, from their hair and hands?” (87). The third person plural, the stressed word “both,” the plural noun “creatures” all tell us that Miss Fulton’s case is exactly like Bertha’s. As Judith Neaman believes, “Bertha’s ‘crushes’ on women are nothing new in her life, but her desire for her husband is both new and startling to her” (249). Yet this crush on Pearl Fulton also remains in the second-story mode, leaving us to supply the details: without knowing it, Bertha “found” Miss Fulton because Harry had already become her lover.

This untold story lies buried in such a well-fortified location that the reader’s access to its ramifications leads through many deviations. Let us first see how the story misleads the reader by proposing meanings that turn into red herrings. Given the ironic context, the reader may, during a first reading, assume that the developing point of the story lies in the contrast between the sublime sensation of bliss and the grotesque social mores the story satirizes—between the sensu-

ally poetic internal feeling and the ridiculously ugly external portrayal. Mr. Norman Knight, putative producer of plays, who evolves in a milieu in which writers named Oat write plays called "Love in False Teeth," screws and rescrows a large tortoise-shell-rimmed monocle into an eye and is called "Mug." Mrs. Norman Knight, whose orange coat sports processions of black monkeys and who seems to be wearing a dress made of scraped banana skins, is nicknamed "Face" and is going to decorate a room with a "fried-fish scheme, with the backs of chairs shaped like frying pans and lovely chip potatoes embroidered all over the curtains" (88). Effete Eddie Warren, poet and admirer of poems with "*incredibly beautiful*" first lines about food ("It's so *deeply* true, don't you feel? Tomato soup is so *dreadfully* eternal" [90]), is terrorized by taxi-drivers and always speaks in italics. A very large portion of the story is devoted to the pretentious and inane conversation among these remarkable specimens of the superficial, self-satisfied bourgeoisie, providing a comic backdrop to the seemingly sublime drama within Bertha.⁹ The narrative induces the reader to pursue this contrast even into the relation between husband and wife; although Bertha's tenderness toward Harry does not readily allow us to see him as an utter grotesque, like his guests, we doubt that this blunt, superficial, "extravagantly cool and collected" (84, 90) pasteboard confection will rise to Bertha's sublime heights. His first manifestation in the story already reveals that he is not on Bertha's poetic level. So brusque is he on the phone that she cannot tell him about her new feeling, and she concludes that civilization is idiotic (81). Everything that goes on around Bertha is external and ridiculous except Miss Fulton; when the Norman Knights leave, Bertha feels that "this self of hers" has taken leave of them forever (89); she has moved to a different plane, in the sole present company of Miss Fulton, and in the naively anticipated company of her husband. We predict an outcome that would include a rude awakening, an abrupt fall from the heights of bliss to the new discovery of her husband's mundane reality, and, possibly, Pearl Fulton's.

In this way, or in another, the reader formulates erroneous hypotheses on a first reading which must be rejected or at least significantly revised on a second reading. If, like John Middleton Murray, we see mainly that caricature contradicts pathos, then we will only describe the story as a "sophisticated failure" (cited in Hankin 143). Any failure on our part would consist in not seeing how the story masks and thus reveals its messages by forcing mistaken interpretations. Although it appears that authorial irony is directed only toward the grotesques, and not toward Bertha, it is the story's intentions that are ironic. Little prepares us for the supremely ironic discovery that what Miss Fulton shares with Bertha is also her husband, not just the wonderful feeling of bliss, and that the day when sexual desire finally flares up in her, after several years of marriage, is the very day she will see it destroyed. The knowledge Bertha acquires only shows her that her vision was defective. Thus our reading neurosis takes the form of an interpretive construction or delirium that is simply wrong. While erroneous hypotheses protect the reader from the second story, the second reading forces one back to read and recognize the ironic treatment of the heroine. It is then that the reader becomes as devious as the second story.¹⁰

Bertha founders in a “snare” in the narrative, and the reader with her, when she thinks her husband is “simple” and really dislikes Miss Fulton, and when she interprets the way Miss Fulton refuses a cigarette as an expression of her hurt (“she felt it, too, and was hurt” [88]). For much of the story, Bertha’s desire to explain the mysterious attraction of Miss Fulton, the elusive feeling of bliss, the miraculous unspoken knowledge, only leads to blockage of the enigma (“snare” and “jamming” are Barthes’ terms in *S/Z*). No detective she, the solution explodes upon her unbidden and unwanted. What I now want to show is that shared sexual desire, the essence of the enigma, is the very thing that makes it difficult for Bertha to understand the mystery.

What Bertha catches sight of in the hallway is the tip of the iceberg—the only part of the second story that is visible, momentarily and by accident. Readers’ competence, including Bertha’s, leaves no doubt whatsoever that the rest of the second story has happened just as surely as we know an iceberg lies, as Hemingway said, seven-eighths under water. Bertha is forced to let the entire second story into her consciousness. In this structure there is a kind of internal intertextuality: the text refers not to an intertext outside the story, but to one that lies within—under water, as it were—the familiar story of the unfaithful husband. When Bertha sees her husband embrace Miss Fulton, she learns not only the nature of the secret Miss Fulton contains, but also that there is a *real* secret about mundane events, what one might call a degraded version of the mysterious enigma she had perceived. Until that point the wall surrounding the second story construction can fairly be called a fortification, a product of her own nascent sexual desire.

Chicane and *redan*, both describing deviations in fortified walls, are Lacanian terms for the fortifications characteristic of obsessive neurosis.¹¹ In “L’agressivité en psychanalyse,” Lacan describes the obsessive neurosis as “une décomposition défensive, si comparable en ses principes à celles qu’illustrent le redan et la chicane, que nous avons entendu plusieurs de nos patients user à leur propre sujet d’une référence métaphorique à des ‘fortifications à la Vauban’” [“a defensive decomposition, so comparable in its principles to those that illustrate the *redan* and the *chicane*, that we have heard several of our patients employ with regard to their own selves a metaphorical reference to ‘Vauban-like fortifications.’”] The structure of these bastions is “particulièrement destinée à camoufler, à déplacer, à nier, à diviser et à amortir l’intention agressive” [“particularly aimed at camouflaging, displacing, denying, dividing and deadening the aggressive intention”] (108). When Bertha interprets Harry’s behavior toward Miss Fulton as rude, unkind, or sarcastic, when she concludes that Harry really dislikes Miss Fulton, Bertha is producing a neurotic interpretation that functions, unconsciously, to defend her from a fact that her conscious mind has no purchase on, namely that if the feeling she shares with Miss Fulton is sexual desire, then Miss Fulton too must be feeling desire.

Instead, the entire narrative about Bertha’s shared feelings with Pearl Fulton presents a neurotic, unconscious camouflage, displacement, disavowal, division, and deadening of Miss Fulton’s aggressive intentions, to use Lacan’s terms. Like another bit of the iceberg, the text supplies openings to its own devious struc-

tures. At the revelation of Bertha's indescribable feeling, the text stops just short of realizing the source of Miss Fulton's feeling too. She has been mentally telling Harry: "I shall try to tell you when we are in bed to-night what has been happening. What she and I have shared." A break in the page follows, after which the narrative continues: "At those last words something strange and almost terrifying darted into Bertha's mind. And this something blind and smiling whispered to her: ' . . . you and he will be alone together in the dark room—the warm bed...'" (88). She and her husband had been "such good pals," and she had not loved him "in that way" (89), but now she desires him "ardently! ardently! . . . Was this what that feeling of bliss had been leading up to? But then—" (89), and here the text of her thoughts is interrupted by the pedestrian needs of the grotesque Mug and Face. The attentive reader will come to see that the dash stands for and eliminates (camouflages, displaces, etc.) the repressed thought: *Miss Fulton* desires Harry Young "ardently! ardently!" and loves him "in that way." The story might have erupted at that dash, had there not been the defensive decomposition of Bertha's "perfect" understanding of Miss Fulton. The rhetorical indices of her perfect understanding—for instance, the terms "miraculous," "exactly," "instantly," "never doubted for a moment" (86)—bolster the fortification. Instead, the break in her thoughts is only a clue to the alert reader, who must, I believe, wait for a second reading to fill in the dash with the story of Miss Fulton's bliss—the internal intertext. Although this dash does not represent an ellipsis during which the entire second story takes place (like a famous dash in Kleist's "Die Marquise von O . . ."), by the second reading one probably wonders if Bertha is as naive as she seems. The bulk of the first story, then, can be read as an example of Lacan's *chicane*, the zigzag structures in the wall designed to prevent the passage of enemy forces, or the devious, circuitous, surreptitious formulations of the narrative which lead the reader astray—the erroneous hypotheses about the first story, the false clues or snares, the inadequate, defective, or devious vision of our reader's guide—in all, the failure of narrative reliability hidden behind the walls thrown up by Bertha's apparent self-knowledge, her "growing, gaining light."

We might profitably compare this second story structure to the repetition of a primal scene. In Freud's original formulation, the primal scene portrays the child witnessing the mother and father in sexual embrace. As is well known, however, Freud revised this bald account by claiming the scene could just as well be only a fantasy. Carrying the metaphor into the textual domain, Ned Lukacher writes that primal scenes are *interpretive constructions* (337).¹² Thus it suffices to see the mute scene in the hall; from it Bertha and the reader construct the entire second story. The love affair Harry Young is having with Pearl Fulton could well be described as the forgotten primal scene of Bertha Young's new bliss. Miss Fulton has already had the experience that Bertha's story refers to, and Bertha's sublime feeling is only an ironic repetition, a degraded version of the original, a mere copy. The second story here is thus a kind of primal scene which the first story conveniently "forgot" to tell the reader (or Bertha), thus protecting her new-found bliss, until the fortification is breached.

That moment we may well call a Lacanian instant, the event by which

Bertha learns that her desire is the desire of the other. Lacan's well-known statement that desire is the desire of the other occurs in "La subversion du sujet et la dialectique du désir." Until this moment, Bertha thinks—and the reader with her—that she has reached a new knowledge of her feeling, when she identifies it as sexual desire. Here the narrative is unflinchingly direct: "For the first time in her life Bertha Young desired her husband" (89). But it is also deceptive in its directness; to say that Bertha desired her husband is to mask, by exploiting the simplicity of this phrase, the complexity of the relations of desire that lead to the final moment. Discovering Miss Fulton's desire for Harry, Bertha learns that her new desire for her husband is not simple but complex, for the second story soon demonstrates that her knowledge is rather what Lacan calls "nescience," misrecognition or misprision, found in the structure of the fantasy: "Car là se voit que la nescience où reste l'homme de son désir est moins nescience de ce qu'il demande, qui peut après tout se cerner, que nescience d'où il désire." ["For there is it seen that the misprision in which man remains of his desire is less misprision of what he is asking for, which can after all be discerned, than misprision of where he desires from"] ("La subversion" 814). That is, misrecognition of desire does not come from not knowing its object, which can be and is discovered, but from the fact that the self does not know where desire comes from. "Unknowing" is a misrecognition of the fact that desire is the desire of the other.

In psychoanalysis, unknowing occurs in the family trinity; the girl's desire for the father is the mother's desire. Among others, a reading in this vein emerges from the symbolic structures of the story. Throughout, while Bertha is called by her first name, like a child, and her last name, Young, only underscores her youth, Miss Fulton is never called simply Pearl. The opening segment of the story explicitly opposes maturity ("thirty" and "sensible") to youth as Bertha Young arrives home ("she wanted to run instead of walk, to take dancing steps on and off the pavement, to bowl a hoop" [78]). The next narrative segment concerns an episode I have not mentioned so far, because it seems to have very little to do with the events in the dining room, drawing room, and hall after the guests arrive, events that seem to constitute the entire story. After arranging the many-colored fruit in the blue bowl and the glass dish, Bertha runs upstairs to the nursery where Nanny has just finished bathing and feeding her daughter. Here Nanny is the authority, disapproving of this unwanted interruption, and Bertha is just the "poor little girl in front of the rich little girl with the doll" (80). Even her desire for her daughter is breached in this way. In this scene too Bertha completes a reflection she had begun as she waited on the stoop to be let in, having childishly forgotten her key, a reflection interrupted (as many of Bertha's thoughts are) when the maid opened the door. There she had thought: "Why be given a body if you have to keep it shut up in a case like a rare, rare fiddle?" (78), but had then corrected herself: "No, that about the fiddle is not quite what I mean. . . . It's not what I mean, because—Thank you, Mary," she stops, as the door is opened (78). The dash is later filled in when Bertha begs Nanny to let her finish feeding her daughter: "How absurd it was. Why have a baby if it has to be kept—not in a case like

a rare, rare fiddle—but in another woman's arms?" (80)—a woman who, in this scene, stands in for a mother, and has a visibly but paradoxically greater authority and power. "In another woman's arms" is precisely where Bertha will at last see the reality of her husband. In the triangle relating Harry, Bertha, and Miss Fulton, Bertha stands in the position of the child who discovers her desire for her father, and immediately thereupon discovers that she is merely repeating her mother's desire.

This rather simplified triangle stands for all possible permutations of the relations of desire, which never become fixed. The second story subverts the first story just as the unconscious subverts the subject, splitting it; the story subverts the discourses of the self that produce knowledge and understanding. With its second-story structure, "Bliss" says that a discourse of desire is not sayable; it is among the things that the narrative has to sacrifice (as Katherine Mansfield wrote in her journal), the better to command understanding. For the "*so much*" one can get into a story reveals the traces of what disappears. We demand to know quite little of the second story, and most of what we do know is based on our general competence; the story is "in" the first story in the form of a perverse secret that ceases to be secret for the first story. Rather, it is the very process and structure of hiding (the forgetting of the primal scene, the fortification, the sighting of the tip of the iceberg) that give the story its chilling efficacy; it exists for these structures of hiding, structures that mostly censure saying but allow it to erupt in minimal form ("To-morrow," says Harry Young) to confirm what they have shown by hiding. The narrative with its second-story structure forces us to produce in our reading, as Shoshana Felman writes, an "analysis of the unconscious (the repressed) not as hidden but on the contrary as *exposed*—in language—through a significant (rhetorical) displacement" (45). Connoting both dissertation form and voyeuristic pleasures, the word "exposed" well expresses the ambiguous effectiveness of the second-story structure. In these rhetorical and unavowed (camouflaged, etc.) structures, what Katherine Mansfield knew, and suppressed, lies revealed. She knew how fragile desire is; she did not let on that she knew the misadventure awaiting her heroine. She knew why Bertha was blissful, but kept it in the second-story mode. She knew desire throws up fortifications, and she lent her reader an ample supply of obstacles.

The dynamic of this narrative process is an instance of what Lacan calls *fading*. Originally meaning the weakening of the signal in radio transmissions, allowing intermittent reception of other wavelengths, the term is used in typically metaphoric fashion to describe the situation in psychoanalysis in which the unconscious speaks, intermittently, of things the subject has no knowledge of, because of its subordination to the signifier. The subject is thus subverted and split, and the fading is the point at which the speaker's desire can never be recognized ("La subversion" 816). Rather than force a purely psychoanalytic reading in which the text would be compared to a patient undergoing analysis, I would prefer to take "fading" as a metaphor for a literary structure of significant complexity. That is what Barthes does when he borrows Lacan's concept to explain the plurality of a text, in a section called "Le fading des voix," the fading of

voices, in *S/Z*. Most utterances, in a classical text, speak from a known voice. It happens, writes Barthes, that

la voix se perde, comme si elle disparaissait dans un trou du discours. La meilleure façon d'imaginer le pluriel classique est alors d'écouter le texte comme un échange chatoyant de voix multiples, posées sur des ondes différentes et saisies par moments d'un *fading* brusque, dont la trouée permet à l'énonciation de migrer d'un point de vue à l'autre, sans prévenir. (48–49)

[the voice is lost, as if it were disappearing into a hole of the discourse. The best way to imagine the classical plural is then to listen to the text as a shimmering exchange of multiple voices, posed on different wavelengths and seized at times by an abrupt fading, whose gaps permit the enunciation to migrate from one point of view to the other, without warning.]

Fading subsumes all the double, devious, and ironic mechanisms of the narrative; “Bliss” is plural in intermittently and partially allowing the second story to be heard. In the breaches Bertha’s thoughts make in the story of the grotesques, the second story throbs behind the wall of her fortification, until, with the fading of these inane and ironic voices, one hears the point at which Bertha’s desire can never be recognized. In the lapses of the “shimmering exchange of multiple voices,” the ones in Bertha’s head, another voice is heard, intermittently, as if from a different wavelength—a voice posing questions for the reader. When the story stops, the reader continues, telling herself the story of the adulterous love affair, from its still obscured beginning in female desire to its vulgar exposure among the grotesques. It is a measure of the power of “Bliss” that readers want to go well beyond its ending to say “what happens” next; but does the reader have an answer to Bertha’s question? Harry’s love affair will obviously bring changes to Bertha’s desire for her husband, but how much can the reader say about Bertha’s comprehension of Pearl Fulton? How vast and deep is Bertha’s forced insight?

It is my contention that each reader will answer differently, and the gist of my answer lies in the dynamic of fading. Bertha can never recognize her relation to her self, no more than anyone can. Fortifications remain necessarily in place. Her homosexual desire is revealed only in the structures that hide it and keep it hidden even beyond the end of the story. Bertha is not allowed to recognize the censor that guards the door of insight; that role is strictly the reader’s. We think we have at last understood the mystery, found out the secret, solved the enigma, but we do so only if we think of Bertha as a real person. Are we not deceived when the narrative explains: “Bertha had fallen in love with [Pearl Fulton], as she always did fall in love with beautiful women who had something strange about them” (81)? Is this an excessive, rhetorical expression of Bertha’s enthusiasms, or is the text forcing us to argue that the direct, overt meaning is the disguised one? As long as we affirm that we are knowledgeable about how language—the language of narrative—functions, then reading turns our knowledge to misprision about where our desire to know comes from. No more than Bertha do we know what is going to happen now.

ENDNOTES

1. For an explanation of the term, see Mortimer, "Second Stories," on several stories by Maupassant, and "Second Stories: The Example of 'Mr. Know-all.'"
2. James Phelan's distinction between the mimetic world of characters and the synthetic dimension which puts into play the author and reader is also useful (1–27).
3. Since Mansfield uses ellipses quite often, I use non-spaced ellipses for ones in her text and spaced ellipses to indicate my own omissions.
4. From a review of fiction by Mansfield published in *Novels and Novelists*, quoted in Hanson and Gurr (18–19).
5. The metaphor is strikingly framed in the symbolic language of desire: "What was there in the touch of that cool arm that could fan—fan—start blazing—blazing—the fire of bliss that Bertha did not know what to do with?" (85).
6. Wallace Martin points out that silver suggests a mirror for Bertha (164).
7. According to Wallace Martin, when the "unity based on silver" is destroyed by difference, silver becomes gray (168).
8. Examples of this insistence on bright colors are the fruit arrangement, described in excessive detail, the blue and white bowls and the purple grapes to match the new carpet, tangerines, Bertha's white and jade ensemble, the alluring silver (a color always aligned with bliss), red and yellow tulips, red soup in a gray bowl, a little red jacket; some colors have negative values but insist no less: Face's orange coat with black monkeys, her yellow silk dress that looks like sewn-up banana skins.
9. Oat, false teeth, Mug, Face, banana skins, tomato soup, frying pans, and chip potatoes, all terms connected with the grotesques, also have connections to eating. These are the symbols by which one may characterize the grotesques; the symbols fall into a low register, having to do with a bodily function utterly distant from the intellectual, sentimental, or sublime. Sadly enough, for Bertha's bliss, the symbol of her perfect understanding with Miss Fulton very nearly falls into the same register: it is the pear tree in the garden.
10. Friedman has an admirable, concise formula: "the desire to express and the need to repress force a compromise that takes the form of disguised speech" (17).
11. *Redan* designates a part of the fortified wall composed of two faces forming an angle extending outward. The *chicane* is properly a zigzag structure in a wall. In common usage, *chicane* refers to disputatious, captious, specious argumentation, detouring through minute, trivial details, particularly applied to court procedure and to lawyers.
12. Casting intertextuality into a psychoanalytically-molded analysis of literature, Lukacher shows that forgotten "primal scenes" are repeated in later texts, in a kind of unconscious intertextuality. Bertha's dressing in the colors of the pear tree (white and jade) may be another version of an unconscious repetition of a symbol and thus a primal scene.

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