Modes of Accidentalness and Shock in the Fiction of Mary E. Mann

A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

It is proposed in this investigation that the phenomenon of shock is central to the fiction of Mary E. mann as a premier factor at the heart of its powers of creative constitution. The study highlights Mann's writing as a system of jolts, fits, and shocks lacking intrinsic meaning. The lack of intrinsic meaning in events is not viewed negatively as a mode of loss, existential meaning not having been posited beforehand as standard for measuring the nature of feelings, acts, or lives. The tendency for shocks to lack meaning in Mann’s writing is not seen as nihilistic. Shock in Mann’s writing needs to be elucidated without a prior meaning-frame or nihilistic loss-of-meaning agenda. The study presents the case that Mann’s fiction is devoted to the business of exhibiting the potential horror of human life in a non-metaphysical, non-theoretic way. In Mann’s literary texts lives fall apart without justification or forewarning. Characters walk straight into darkness and pain—but no loss or gain of metaphysical meaning is to be inferred. Disaster does not mean that life is intrinsically disastrous. Nor does catastrophe imply that we live in a universe where meaning is inevitably withheld. When meaning is given or withheld it happens to be given or withheld. This accidentalness is itself shocking. Like happiness, disaster is non-essential. It is to a large extent ruled by chance. Unlike Thomas Hardy, with whom she is sometimes compared, Mary Mann is accordingly not a pessimistic writer who tends to want to let darkness have the final word in order to immerse the reader in a metaphysics of gloom. In her short stories and novels darkness often has the last word; yet that tells us nothing about the intrinsic nature of reality. Negativity is real but extrinsic and non-essential. In Mann’s tales of Norfolk destinies, lives and characters fail simply because times are sometimes hard, and because adversity is central to fiction and existence.
Acknowledgments

During the course of my visit to north Norfolk in March 2010, Patience Tomlinson and Susan Yaxley kindly introduced me to sites and documents of importance to this project. The living presence of a remote-feeling landscape of open skies, humid undergrowth, and tangled, mossy trees brought to mind Mary Mann’s literary texts as strange hideaways embedded in the near-wilderness of an unrefined mystique. At the Larks Press in Dereham, Yaxley has been involved in the re-publishing of texts by Mann and by writers delineating the late nineteenth century agricultural depression that the writer came to know at close quarters as the wife of a landowner in rural Norfolk. The Mary Mann segment of the Heritage Centre at Norwich Millennium Library has been of significant importance for the completion of the present project. The Record Office of the Norwich Archive Centre has been a helpful place for accessing manuscripts, diaries, letters, and photographs. Additional material, as yet not within the Mary Mann archive at the Norfolk Record Office, is currently in the possession of the trustee of Mary Mann’s nephew, Diana Hyde. The Norfolk County Council has given generous guidance to my work. The Eastern Daily Press kindly gave access to their library. Lena Wiorek at Stockholm's City Archives has been most helpful in matters of archive procedure and terminology. Finally, I wish to acknowledge the efforts of D. J. Taylor, who has called attention to the longstanding neglect imposed on Mann’s texts by critics of the Victorian novel. The works of Mary E. Mann were introduced to me by H. W. Fawkner.
This study submits the thesis that accidentalness and shock are central to the fiction of Mary E. Mann (1848–1929) as principal factors of its constitution. Highlighting the underlying complexity of Mann’s seemingly simple texts, the investigation may be seen as an effort to call attention to this writer’s largely neglected literary accomplishment as something worthwhile.

Mary Mann is commonly viewed as a regional writer, of interest mainly to those who are focussed on the cultural history of rural Norfolk. This limited view is arguably a result of analytic neglect. It is also common to see Mann as a writer mainly excelling in the short story genre. The attention given to some of her novels in this investigation is a critique of that assumption.

Like many works of fiction Mary Mann’s narratives feature changes of fortune or turns of fate that are unexpected. In such changes there may be some sense

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2 In his introduction to the 1976 reprint of the short story collection *The Fields of Dulditch*, Ronald Blythe calls attention to Mann’s contribution to our understanding of the life of Norfolk farmers. He maintains that Mann’s work “succeeds in being an uncomfortably truthful witness of their difficult existence” and that the “chief interest” in Mann’s work “is not literary in the usual sense” (p. 7). The writer’s strength supposedly lies in her “reportage of what were then the humdrum affairs of the farming world” (p. 7) in “brilliant eye-witness accounts” (p. 6). “There are many things here which must have shocked the readers of Mary Mann’s day—and which provide a valuable record for our own” (p. 10). *The Fields of Dulditch* (Ipswich: Boydell Press, 1976), pp. 5–10.
3 D. J. Taylor highlights Mann’s literary accomplishment by praising her oeuvre as a “kind of sourcebook of late Victorian rural history” (p. 16). In particular, her short stories “achieve a rawness of feeling and observation quite unlike anything else in late-nineteenth-century English literature” (p. 16). Mann’s novels, Taylor argues, are “probably not worth saving” (p. 16). “Mary Mann Revived,” *Times Literary Supplement*, 14 August 1998: 16; in parenthetical documentation abbreviated MMR.
of forewarning or anticipation. In Mann’s writing this is not usually the case. There is often no way of fitting the manifestation of sheer shock into any frame or order justifying it. Ruling out the notion that shocks are merely there to produce a banal sense of attention-heightening surprise, the study forwards the view that Mann’s accentuation of dramatic accidentalness is part of the realism or even naturalism of her literary art. In so far as naturalism (in the style of Zola) is an intensification of anti-Romantic realism (in the style of Balzac and Flaubert),\(^4\) it tends to forward disaster narratives exhibiting the inability of human agency to transcend the laws and forces of a social milieu. Humans are unable to shape their histories in any decisive way, being helplessly immersed in gigantic event-streams that often doom them to be overwhelmed by a final catastrophe.

In Mary Mann’s stories, accidentalness and shock belong to what manifests itself as the \textit{reality} of existence. In all its powers to horrify, contingency is internal to the nature of reality as something basic to its constitution. Yet if accidentalness is to be authentic, it cannot be ‘tragic’ in an essentialist way. An accident is not in itself something that has a ‘worldview.’ It is physical rather than metaphysical. Since Mann’s level-headed texts resist the temptation to make contingency transcendental-philosophic, what we encounter in her texts tends to be episodic tragedy rather than a Hardyesque doctrine of the tragic.

In Thomas Hardy’s delineation of rural spaces, negativity lurks everywhere. Characters are sooner or later victims caught in a metaphysical tide of misery that allows the author to establish a darkening effect with the feel of a philosophic agenda. In Mary Mann’s texts accidentalness is less predictable and less metaphysical.\(^5\) This increases the sense of shock, for no tragic frame has been put in place to embed, receive, and soften it. In her stories and novels darkness often \textit{does} have the last word, but there is no metaphysical flavour to that state of affairs.

\(^4\) This is a phenomenological study rather than one that seeks to trace literary influences. It is by no means being suggested that Mann’s texts are reducible to the ideas of the novel favoured by late nineteenth-century French fiction. There is a whimsical factor in Mann’s stories that is idiosyncratic, as well as various other personality-features that fail to be likely outcomes of ‘influence.’

\(^5\) D. J. Taylor points out that in Hardy determinism "takes the form of individuals singled out for vengeance by a malign and unappeasable natural force (Tess’s ‘president of the Immortals’). Across the Atlantic, the variant practiced by a Dreiser or a Steinbeck, in whose novels insignificant humans are swept away in the currents of the machine age, is almost biological in its scope. Mann’s sense of unstoppable natural agencies working themselves out is much more matter-of-fact, underpinned by a psychological accuracy that invariably leaves its characters with some kind of recognizable inner life" (MMR, 16).
Putting philosophic pessimism aside we need to nevertheless acknowledge that shocking accidentalness is central to experience. Outrageous and inexplicable changes of fortune keep re-directing human lives. They belong to the life-stream as part of its reality. Random disasters and cruel catastrophes inhere in real life, especially in parts of the world (like late nineteenth-century rural Norfolk) where there is little to protect people from sudden exposure to adversity. Such life-jolts are made peculiarly drastic by Mann’s idiosyncratic art of narration. In the main, these jolts are not there just to entertain.\(^6\)

As we shall see the supremacy of accidentalness over order in Mann’s stories is sometimes perverse enough to be nothing less than diabolical. Yet the writer refrains from presenting her characters as victims soliciting sentimental tears. This restraint has to do with Mann’s disinclination to present human beings as realities less disturbing than the forces contending with them.

Method

In alignment with the phenomenological method introduced by Edmund Husserl at the beginning of the twentieth century, the study puts out of authority everything that is transcendent to what is manifested immanently in the immediate field of inquiry (the investigated text). The investigation brackets non-immediate, extrinsic factors such as the life of the author, literary influences, socio-historical factors operating in late nineteenth-century rural Norfolk, etc. Although I have progressively gathered much information about Mary Mann’s life-world by visiting research libraries in Norwich and other Norfolk places that are of importance to Mann-scholarship, these factors will not be treated here as being of primary importance for text-analysis.

The method of sidelining extrinsic issues does not imply that the text is seen as something isolated from the world.\(^7\) To bracket is not to delete and to sideline is not to put entirely out of view. One can be aware of contexts without letting them get the upper hand. A major error from the Husserlian viewpoint is to let the domain of

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transcendence (that which is beyond what is immediately given) govern the uncovering of the domain of immanence (directly manifested complexities). The currently selected exposition-method desists from the temptation to submit explanatory keys (psychological, historical, sociological, etc). Even if plausible explanations were found, they would not exhaustively clarify inner text-complexities as such. These are not reducible to explanation. In a literary text there are always countless little stylistic nuances and micro-events that require special attention of a descriptive-phenomenological kind. There is no general ‘explanation’ for each of these details, or for the idiosyncratic, work-specific way in which they cohere or fail to cohere.

Explanations of a generalizing, theoretic kind are often forms of objectification. A phenomenon gets reduced and objectified to its ‘cause.’ Husserl’s method for inhibiting objectification is phenomenological reduction, epochê. Here ‘reduction’ is actually a reduction of being-reductive. The epochê resists the reductive desire to ‘explain’ everything. In literary research the phenomenological epochê seeks to facilitate holistic\(^8\) approaches that are hostile to non-holistic, explanatory-theoretical modes of research.

Taken literally, the verb re\(duce\) means to re\(direct\). Phenomenology entails redirecting the analytic gaze. Such redirection is supposed to make it possible for phenomena (e.g., the various features and nuances of a text) to be seen in a light that is not foreign to them. Phenomenology trusts the ability of phenomena to illuminate themselves and to speak for themselves. Again, this does not entail isolation. When somebody is given the opportunity to speak for herself and defend herself, that does not mean that all other voices are excluded. It means that in highlighting individuality one starts by paying attention to that which highlighted individuality has to say. Individuality obviously does not make sense in isolation from its context, but on the other hand it is not reducible to context. If a writer is importantly eccentric in one way or another, the researcher’s fact-collecting about her milieu is of limited use.

The text-specific eccentricity that is being discussed here is personal. It does not fit into any specific ‘theory’ of eccentricity. Phenomenological approaches tend to be cautious about ‘theory,’ since theoretic outlooks often impose frames belonging to a specific theoretic agenda or philosophy. The modest use made in this essay of

\(^8\) See Dermot Moran, Introduction to Phenomenology (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 13; in parenthetical documentation abbreviated IP.
Sartre’s phenomenological ‘philosophy’ is accordingly not there to philosophize the investigation of the object of study. The aim is not to theorize but to facilitate pragmatic conceptualization of specific issues. As Marcus Brainard pointed out a few years ago, the method of Husserlian phenomenology is designed to “steer clear of every theoretical position [. . .] not by arguing with it, but rather by abiding by [. . .] the first commandment of phenomenology, as it were”; that has to do with “the priority of the things themselves over thinking, of respect for them over the disrespectfulness of traditional theory” (BN, 54). This involves the desire “to give faithful expression to what is seen” (BN, 54). Brainard’s summary of Husserl’s breakthrough model for phenomenological procedure is worth quoting at some length:

The statements advanced by theory, however, do more than this; in them theory imposes its opinions, its desires, on the things from on high rather than starting out from the things. As a result it hangs in the air. And precisely on account of this, nothing essential is to be gained by entering into a discussion with the adversary on its level [. . .].

There is no need to argue with the theoretician, then, since for the phenomenologist he is not a true adversary. Rather, on Husserl’s view, the only recourse can be to the things themselves, for they alone offer a firm footing. In fact Husserl’s only reason for addressing a theory is to defuse a prevailing “habit of thinking” and thus to return to the ground. [. . .] The phenomenological refutation and subsequent dismissal of theoretical positions is not the result of a deduction, but of a reduction, a reduction, that is, a return to and restoration of the ground the things themselves offer. (BN, 54–55)

No reference is here made to any ground on which things are assumed to be standing. The things are the ground. When the things (e.g., phenomena in a text) “offer” themselves, this offering or presentation is the ground that the things “themselves” manifest. There are not two dimensions, the things and their ground, the things and their explanation. No foundation is set up. Instead the things as they are offered replace the foundation.

Since Husserlian phenomenology distrusts “the tendency of natural thinking to subject Being to thinking,” with all its “castles in the clouds” (BN, 55), the phenomenological method does not believe that traditional types of analyses “can be eliminated by means of argument.” That would just play into the hands of the traditional attitude with its fear of “the priority of Being over thinking” (BN, 57). As a re/directing of methodological habits, phenomenological re/duction thus means that

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“deductive or inductive” procedures are “passed over” (BN, 57). Instead of arguing about which position to take, one simply gets on with the business of letting Being (the field of phenomena manifestly offered) speak for itself. The change of approach is “attitudinal,” not intellectual (BN, 57).

As Moran points out in echoing a definition supplied by Edmund Husserl’s fellow-phenomenologist Martin Heidegger, phenomenology seeks to “return to what is directly given in exactly the manner in which it is given” (IP, 127). That which is “given” is that which is presented, that which is manifested, that which comes to expression, that which actualizes itself. ‘Givenness’ is anything that immanently reveals, shows, or exhibits itself. The presentation or manifestation that is “given” is simply what, so to speak, is “there in the flesh, in propría persona. I see a tree in a garden. I hear the sound of a violin, and so on” (IP, 128). Yet such direct viewing is not accomplished in any ‘natural’ way, leading to some sort of ideal of ‘natural’ thinking. In phenomenology there is rather an “Umsturz” [overthrowing] of ‘natural’ ‘human’ seeing. This is necessary, since what seems to be ‘natural’ is often just a habit. Seeing-habits may create distortion (IP, 137). The establishment of new theories may be little more than the establishment of new seeing-habits. It is from the viewpoint of phenomenology the error of mainstream science to follow the attitude set up once and for all by the natural sciences. This ‘natural’ attitude is secretly based on a “naïve naturalism” that innocently holds “the laws of nature” to be keys to the understanding of everything that is (IP, 142).

Without being aware of it, the natural sciences (and the sciences imitating them) perform a distorting “naturalisation” of experience (IP, 143). This imitation entails blindness to the fact that the most rewarding path to a field of phenomena is not necessarily a ‘natural’ view of them but a specific (sometimes eccentric) path immanent to (embedded within) that specific field. From this viewpoint a literary text is often a field of manifestations that is capable of throwing light on itself. Literary meaning-spaces are often self-elucidating. The job of the phenomenologist is to bring out into the open the elusive nuances of such self-illumination. Phenomenology lets the text work on itself as it were. This is made possible by the fact that any major literary text strives for self-disclosure, auto-revelation. In his recent discussions of phenomenology as a method for unlocking meaning-spaces Steven Galt Crowell has called attention to the way in which a reality-experience under investigation already comprises the phenomenological attitude. Experience itself is phenomenological
To look for what is immanent in a text is to look ‘with’ the text. In anything that exhibits or reflects conscious life there is beforehand an immanent viewing embedded in its structure (HHS, 131).

Shock as Revelation

We start by looking at the way in which shock in Mary Mann’s fiction manifests itself in differing degrees of complexity, starting with simple shock-actualizations.

One of the first stories of A Sheaf of Corn is “In a Tea Shop.”11 It is the tale of Lucilla, a waitress who has just returned from her annual holiday. During that exhilarating fortnight she has danced with Captain Finch at Workingham Town Hall. Key to everything that follows is that Lucilla has refrained from telling her enchanting dance-partner that her profession is the lowly one of being a waitress. Ashamed of her simple line of work she retreats from view when she one day unexpectedly happens to see Finch entering the tea-shop in the company of a pretty lady (SC, 23). Although she is a real beauty Lucilla fears that the captain would despise her if he came to know her social status. She even pretends that she does not recognize him when they finally meet, pretending that she is someone else. But the real shock at the centre of the story is not the sudden manifestation of Captain Finch, but the later news that Finch has all along had cognizance of her identity as a tea-shop waitress (SC, 29) and, more importantly, that her far less attractive waitress-colleague Miss Dawson is presently going to marry him (SC, 29). For three weeks he has been walking Miss Dawson home—the first week in order to talk about Lucilla (SC, 29). Miss Dawson lets it be known that Lucilla’s great mistake in life has been not to go for something that she really wants (SC, 30). This story brings to light Mann’s technique of building a story around the phenomenon of a series of shocks, but the result is hardly impressive. The tale is rather barren, little being accomplished other than the recounting of the shock-cluster as such and how it comes to affect the people drawn into it.

10 Steven Galt Crowell, Husserl, Heidegger, and the Space of Meaning (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001); in parenthetical documentation abbreviated HHS.
11 Mary E. Mann, A Sheaf of Corn (Teddington: Echo Library, 2009); abbreviated SC. All parenthetical page references are to this edition.
The preceding story, “Clomayne’s Clerk,” achieves more without using a greater amount of shock-material. Here we see that even a simple set of shocks can actualize fairly intricate levels of affective interest. In “Clomayne’s Clerk” a soul-dimension is infused within the shock-system. Peter, a tubercular boy of seventeen, tries to get a job as a clerk at Clomayne, a company that never appoints anybody without a favourable report from their Harley Street physician. In a rare act of compassion for the destitute boy and his sister Cicely, the firm’s doctor makes possible the appointment of a sick person. Knowing that the ailing boy is doomed, the kind doctor is helpfully concerned about his lack of proper clothing. As the boy’s secret new guardian the doctor keeps a look-out for possible signs of further health-decline. He is impressed by the remarkable character, integrity, and diligence of his vulnerable protégé. One day the doctor makes the surprise move of buying presents for him and his sister—a volume of Longfellow poems for Cicely and Sea Lady by H. G. Wells for Peter. But before Peter has the opportunity to tell the physician that he has been promoted at Clomayne the doctor opens a letter in which he receives the shock that Peter has been drowned the night before in the River Lea (SC, 20). Attending the boy’s funeral he is surprised to see that numerous company employees are there at the ceremony:

The physician, who had never time for anything but his profession, made time to go to the funeral of Clomayne’s clerk, paying his poor remains a compliment he had refused to those of many a man of distinguished name and high estate whose fees he had taken. On a Saturday afternoon in the sweetest month of the spring-time, he travelled down to Finchley with Ladell, that manager of Clomayne’s who was his friend. . . .

“They’ve got a wreath as big as a haystack for the poor little man. They’ve made him into a hero; and they’re all here—good fellows! . . . . It was simply silly, chucking away a life like that, of course,” he went on. “A little fellow that could barely swim, to fling himself in, after a casual suicide! A hulking, great beggar who had good reason, no doubt, for wanting to be rid of his life. He probably wouldn’t have thanked the boy, even if he had saved him—which he didn’t.” (SC, 20)

The simple story of a boy who was ready to die for a good cause is moving in several ways. We are shocked into being touched because of the boy’s joie de vivre, because of his faith in the idea of high purposes, because of his willingness to experience humble but intense epiphanies of life—as in the act of reading literature with his sister, as in the act of doing shorthand and arithmetic to perfection, and as in the act of
finding a last “moment of exultation when into the dark waters of greedy Lea he had flung his poor little body” (SC, 21). The Harely Street physician knew that the boy only had one or two years of failing health left to live (SC, 21) but that does not make the glory of the shocking but heroic event less poignant.

As we shall see in a while the device of combining a drowning-event with the sense of noble exultation is a recurring motif in Mann’s writing. Such recurrence is in fact to be found here in A Sheaf of Corn. The remarkable story “Freddy’s Ship” is entirely based on a moment of shock—the news is that HMS Doughty has gone down with all men. The shock is as simple as it is great and can be communicated in a killing way to those who dread it in two simple words: “All lost” (SC, 52). We live the story through the feelings of Flora Macmichel, a newcomer in the area. She is one day astonished to discover that she has been elected by fate to be the person standing between the mother of a young man belonging to the lost ship’s crew and the breaking of the shocking news that his life is lost. Her amazed disbelief at being asked to prevent Mrs Jones from learning that her only child is at the bottom of the sea turns into a sustained state of shocked paralysis. By means of a sequence of uncanny twists things only get worse. Ironically Flora Macmichel happens to be a person who has only felt contempt for the members of the family she is now suddenly forced to frantically support on the brink of a disaster capable of dragging them all down to a level of sustained misery. Flora needs to be frantic because the woman who is supposed to be kept out of harm’s way by being isolated from the public world of fast-travelling news is constantly doing all sorts of things that are likely to break her news-isolation. Right from the moment of her arrival in the parish Flora has felt little but contempt for the rector, for his wife, and for their son; but she now finds herself in the position of momentarily being at the affective mid-point of their existence. The happy family’s sense of unity depends on Flora’s ability to defer the news of their collapse into a state of permanent dissolution.

Flora finds her position to be intolerable. She has taken little interest in the young man. Her indifference has been such that she would not have cared even if the rector’s son had been “drowned fifty fathoms deep at the bottom of the sea” (SC, 52). When she now discovers that he no doubt actually is at the bottom of the sea, and that she has the obligation to keep the young man’s mother unaware of that shattering state of affairs until the rector gets a telegram from Portsmouth confirming this tragic loss,
Flora is catapulted into a set of family emotions that are intrinsically alien to her sensibility.

When the rector goes to the village to find out all the facts by sending a telegram and waiting there for a wired reply establishing his son’s mortal status, Flora Macmichel finds herself in an almost religiously intimate situation of absolute proximity to the innermost soul of a complete stranger. Here she is, sitting quietly in the company of a woman who is at all cost to be prevented from becoming acquainted with the most devastating piece of news she will ever receive, news that by this time may be common knowledge in the whole village. As shielding device, Mrs Macmichel becomes for the duration of an hour like an exceedingly thin membrane between a woman’s life-affirmative soul and its loss of faith in life itself. Life will have no meaning to the mother when she learns that her only child is lost. Yet thanks to Flora’s shielding presence she has still not come to that point of complete loss. While Mr Jones is sending desperate inquiries to Portsmouth, Mrs Jones is still unscathed—fully alive, still fully in the middle of life and all its promises.

Mr Jones cares for his wife with the kind of loving anxiety that she has been pouring over her sea-faring son. Mr Jones does not dare to let his wife see his face, since she would immediately notice the traces of disaster in his eyes. Flora finds herself to be in a situation of shocking liability. She is answerable for not allowing Mrs Jones to fall into a state of shock. Absolutely unexpected, this obligation is itself a completely shocking predicament. It puts Mrs Macmichel in a tight-spot in which she is vicariously exposed to the shocking violence that life can do to humans (SC, 53). Because it would take no more than one or two whispered syllables to ruin Mrs Jones’s peace of mind for the rest of her life, Mrs Macmichel is present there in the domestic tranquillity of the rectory like disaster itself. Yet she is also there in the room as the suspension of disaster, as one who for a moment almost has the occult power to ward off death, loss, pain, suffering, and everlasting feelings of damnation. Immediately sensing this extraordinary pressure, Flora begs the rector to have some other role to play in the drama—but he quickly makes her understand that she, at least for a while, is his wife’s only possible saviour (SC, 53).

Flora Macmichel’s predicament is aggravated by the circumstance that she has for most of her life been allowed to live in a world of leisure and luxury designed to hold all forms of unpleasantness at bay (SC, 53–54). At the present moment, however, everything is just about as unpleasant as it could be. Anything that stirs is suddenly a
living threat to all peace of mind. Mrs Jones must be prevented from leaving the rectory. Visitors must be prevented from entering the place to forward the soul-killing news. Time must as it were be frozen—not for just a couple of minutes but for hours (SC, 53).

Flora Macmichel is drawn further into the emotional nucleus of the Jones family by being unable to keep her eyes from lines in a letter that Mrs Jones had been busy writing to her son. Flora catches hold of word-clusters that suddenly seem charged with disturbingly poignant pathos: “My own darling boy”; “... when you come home again”; “Your last dear letter reached me—” (SC, 56). It is as if, in this domain where all communication must provisionally be suspended, a mode of weird dialogue with the dead is surreptitiously going on. Yet the agent at the heart of this vaguely preternatural conversation (Mrs Jones) does not even suspect her role as a spirit penning affective missives to the dead. By innocently speaking in a lowered voice about the deliciously awesome condition of being the mother of a single child, the clergymen’s wife deepens Flora’s sense of the undeclared bond between the possibility of death and the affective invisibility of emotion as a source of spiritual life (SC, 58).

Having had to use some degree of force to prevent Mrs Jones from getting hold of a telegram brought by a boy from the telegraph office (SC, 59), Flora Macmichel nevertheless finds that she will soon enough be forced to let this lady become acquainted with the significance of that dreaded message. The communication that Flora keeps safely away from Mrs Jones is the one that ought to have come into the hands of her husband. Empty-handed, he returns and now bids Flora read out the dreaded lines. The relief they communicate is shattering enough to itself be a shock: “Not on board the Doughty. Tell mother all right” (SC, 60). The shock to Mr and Mrs Jones of this huge affective reversal is nevertheless nothing compared with the shock done to the reader by the final lines of the story. Exhausted, at the end of her tether, Flora Macmichel has not herself at all taken the communicated news in the expected way. More importantly, there is no easy way of making sense of her feelings, or even of the constitution of human nature that they may imply:

Her husband, catching sight of Mrs Macmichel’s face as she entered, followed her upstairs to her room. She was lying, dressed as she was, on her bed, with her face hidden.
“My dear, what is the matter? What have you been doing with yourself?” he asked.
She had been to the Rectory, to call on the Joneses, she told him.

“Well?”
“The Doughty has gone down. All on board lost.”
“So I hear. Well?”
“It was their son’s ship.”
“Well?”
“Freddy’s.” She sat up and laughed across the sob in her throat. “You stupid! I am crying because Freddy did not go down in the Doughty,” she said. (SC, 60–61)

The lines contain the possible meaning that Flora Macmichel is shedding tears of relief, since the lad after all “did not go down” with all those who did. But I suggest that the lines also contain the faint but shocking suggestion that Flora is disappointed that Freddie is still alive. The fact that he is not among the dead deprives her of the anguish but ecstatic communion that she momentarily has had with the spirit world, with the domain where the dead continue to shape our lives in ways of surpassing affective intensity. There is a pathos in bereavement that is not to be found elsewhere, and Flora had for a while become a vicarious beneficiary of that. During the awesome moments of uncertainty and panic, bereavement and love had been mystically intertwined in a furious epiphany of black excitement. Flora Macmichel now knows that all of that was an illusion. She has somehow been deprived of a passion she had not sought or liked. The deprivation marks a loss of energy, a depletion of the life-energies, a going-away of the spirit world, and a return to the banal concerns of one’s immediate preoccupations in the normality of daily life. In contrast to Mrs Jones, who has lost nothing at all (being now as it were doubly in possession of a loved one), Flora Macmichel has suffered an enigmatic, strange, and absolutely intriguing loss. She has undergone a sequence of shocks that have left her with nothing. Mrs Jones has been spared those shocks and been left with a son glorified by his brief visit to the spirit world. From this we learn, I suggest, that there is, offstage as it were, a promise in shock. Shock is a destructive, but it is surreptitiously also a constituting life-factor.

The spiritual dimension opened up by shock in “Freddie’s Ship” is even more clearly in evidence in the story “As ‘Twas Told Me.” Here again we find a woman with a dearly-loved only child. Mrs Eddington, a widow, is courted by Major Harold Walsh. But the man she has recently been happily married to does not let go of her
mind or feelings. Milly, Mrs Eddington’s little daughter, becomes the medium that keeps the deceased husband present. His haunting figure is mainly a natural, psychological phenomenon, but Milly’s way of seeming to remain in contact with her dead father begins to suggest that something faintly preternatural is going on.

The first shock deployed by the narrator is the event of Mrs Eddington suddenly learning that her daughter was found unconscious after having momentarily become unattended while picking wild primroses in a forest. Missing her picked flowers when waking up from her brief seizure, Milly makes a strange remark: “Milly’s daddy took Milly’s flo’rs, and they died” (SC, 46). The three-year-old child is told that this somewhat shocking notion is absurd, her father being dead. Milly nevertheless sticks to her own conception of the floral event. This causes Mrs Eddington to be reminded of her husband’s very last day. In response to Milly’s call for him not to leave, he had told her that, “later” he would “come and take Milly”; he had then immediately fallen dead while walking across the park (SC, 47). Mrs Eddington begins superstitiously to believe that Milly’s heart disease is more than an inherited flaw, being possibly a sort of punishment dealt out to to the widow for becoming prematurely attached to another man so soon after her bereavement (SC, 47).

Mrs Eddington’s second shock is to hear Milly talking about having danced with her father. The child claims that he had “whirled Milly round and round” (SC, 49). As these little poignant signs from Milly progressively begin to fill Mrs Eddington with intensified awe and apprehension she finds that she is imagining herself doing things with her old husband when in the company of Major Walsh. His looks, words, gestures, and laugh all come back in little units of vivid recollection (SC, 49). With heightened self-reproach, and yearning in remorse for Major Walsh to come home and cheer her, Mrs Eddington one day realizes that the exact sequence of emotions she is going through for her new man is a copy of a previous sequence of feelings for her dead husband. Some weeks before Milly’s birth she had longed for her husband’s home-coming exactly in the way she is now yearning for the return of Major Walsh (SC, 49). Atmospherically the two affective events are fused. Mrs. Eddington is quite shocked to discover the materialization of this uncanny fusion of emotions. There is now an augmenting sense of being “haunted” (SC, 50). Finally all that seems to separate her from the dead man seems to be her lack of resolution to rend a thin veil between them (SC, 50).
The conclusive shock in the story occurs on Milly’s sixth birthday. Holding hands in a play-circle “the two little girls on either side of Milly Eddington felt her hands turn ice-cold in theirs, and slowly slip from their grasp” (SC, 51). The shock is heightened but also softened by what Mrs Eddington thinks she has seen—namely her dead husband come quietly into the hall, slip through the circle of playing children and softly pull Milly dead to the ground (SC, 51). Less psychologically complex and realistic than “Freddie’s Ship,” this story nevertheless deals with the same shock-governed cluster of feelings thematizing (this time more explicitly) the ecstasy of bereavement as a harrowing affect capable of establishing a sense of wistful communion with the dead.

Poverty as Shock

Having discussed shock in terms of its complexity-factor, I now turn to the way in which Mary Mann’s fiction lets shock open horizons of broad negativity. This possibility is mainly developed in tales of widespread wretchedness in rural Norfolk. These short stories feature adverse social conditions in times of agricultural recession. Shaped around the idea of the imaginary village of Dulditch, these Norfolk tales were posthumously assembled in a volume entitled The Complete Tales of Dulditch.12

Dulditch is a fictional name given to the Norfolk village of Shropham. Here rural folks are seen undergoing the pressures of extreme poverty, ignorance, and isolation. It could be said, in fact, that the more or less miserable little village Dulditch itself is the shock. For most people living in this forsaken place there is no way out from the prevailing conditions. I turn first to Mary Mann’s way of dealing with the phenomenon of misfortune.

In times of agricultural depression Dulditch is unable to protect its farming folks from extreme hardship. Extreme adversity is felt to be outrageous even when it can be ‘explained’ by economic factors. In times of extreme destitution the whims of the elements are bad enough. To have all of that aggravated by freak setbacks and human perversities is to get the feeling that there is something malign about the

12 Mary E. Mann, The Complete Tales of Dulditch (Dereham: Larks Press, 2008); in parenthetical documentation hereafter abbreviated TD.
universe. The failure of crops and of investments turn people into speechlessly distraught victims of life, and things do not get better when the dubious ways of human nature are added to the mix.

As part of everyday life in Dulditch, shocking misfortune is a condition of human existence. To survive the parishioners need to adapt. There is a level of acceptation even in monstrously unfair and humiliating predicaments. The so-called “Wolf-Charlie” family lives in the outskirts of the village. For them life is basically an experience of sustained shock. In their derelict cottage, children find amusement in using their broken window-panes to explore heaps of household dust and rubbish. The door has vanished, having been broken up for firewood (TD, 96). With his numerous children and his wooden-legged wife Wolf-Charlie is master of a filthy room with an empty cupboard, a bare table, and three broken chairs. In the bedroom, sacks of straw have been flung in one corner to accommodate the kids. The place swarms with fleas. A gigantic couch smells “abominably” (TD, 100). Once upon a time the four great bed-posts used to run all the way up to the ceiling, facilitating acrobatic feats performed by the children; but now the posts are gone, having been used on a cold day for winter fuel (TD, 100).

The act of seeking to escape from such conditions often only aggravates the situation. A case in point is David Harmer in the story “Back to the Land.” He brags that he has managed to make money in the city but back in Dulditch his appearance betrays the true state of affairs. David’s cheeks have become cavities. His eyes have retreated and become shockingly enlarged in their sad heaviness. The sharpened “anatomy of his skull” has begun to suggest the skeletal contours of death (TD, 224). Our final glimpse of David Harmer is of a dying man pushed to premature death by low-paid road-work. His wife and child have returned to the city. The services he has done for his country have received no fit reward or acknowledgement (TD, 227). Our whole encounter with such wretched lives is a species of sustained shock.

In “The Small Holder” we meet Job Mason, a man who is no better off. The empty reassurances constantly issuing from the mouth of his optimistic wife are unable to prevent the pitilessly incessant rain from drenching his fields and doing further harm to his rotting crops. A small-scale farmer who does not even have the means to protect himself from getting soaked to the skin in adverse weather, Job finds himself on a par with his horse and his destitute land. They are all just naked creatures exposed to an inclement sky (TD, 259). Life is a “misfortune upon him” (TD, 262).
Here the shock-factor comes across as the sense that it is life in general that is shocking, not just specific setbacks like uncut seed (TD, 260) and the inevitable decline from health of his one and only cow (TD, 262).

In the *Tales of Dulditch* the shock of misfortune is almost part of the landscape. The power to shock seems to be a constituting factor of reality as such. The land is disease. The land is misfortune. The land is suffering. The land is death. The land is shock. Mary Mann does not use the landscape as a prop to bring sentimentality to an emotionally barren story. In this territory it is pointless to moan about some sort of felt discrepancy between tragic fate and beautiful scenery, or about the moral anomaly of an evil soul tending a flourishing garden. Such judgements have no power here; the land does not change its mind. Shocking events materializing in a realm of natural beauty are immanently part of primal life. They have priority over any possible sense of the sublime or unjust. Sometimes a life-shattering mishap occurs only to disappear unnoticed even before it gets time to settle into a memory.

In “Ben Pitcher’s Elly” the pain of abandonment overrides all other possible feelings, finally leaving Elly indifferent to the spaces of rural nature through which she travels. With her little infant in her arms, Elly finds herself dumped on the wide surface of a homeless world as the caravan that had been her dwelling is driven away by the father of her yet unborn child. Up to this point Elly has always given priority to the world over herself, letting the well-being of others take priority over her own feelings. At the end of her tether, she now finds that only a last-ditch reversal of this state of affairs gives her any chance of going on breathing from minute to minute. For once, she needs to entirely focus on her own being and blot out all that is not her own semi-expired life. What may shock the reader here is perhaps the lack of effort manifested in the life-movement tracing the act and event of a woman letting go of the life of her child. There is endless evil in the act of forsaking an infant, but this evil is in an absolutely shocking way made secondary to the even more shocking spectacle of the lack of effort that dwells in pure exhaustion as it lets go of the world as such. Suddenly Elly is just a set of atoms and molecules—such as those that, in a certain configuration, constitute the aromatic structure of the natural perfume of thyme. In a most shocking way, a mother is here seen letting go of her infant as silently and quietly as the docile flower of a little plant lets droplets of its scent enter the free air. Elly Pitcher abandons her child and moves away. With effortless docility, no longer capable of the slightest affection for life itself, she moves away. Leaving the infant to
die on the ground she slowly passes away into a newness of existence that is a mere empty airiness rather than a new life. Elly does not have to learn how to live in that wide emptiness of cold existence, any more than the fragrance of a crushed herb needs to learn how to travel in the air:

All about are little hillocks of wild thyme. She crushes the plant with her elbows as she leans back, and the warm, still air is sweet with its fragrance. There is not a breath to stir the harebells growing in a big patch beyond her feet. The sky above is as blue as they. So still she sits, the little rabbits, bright-eyed and wary, look out at her from the prickly covert of the furze bushes, only half afraid. A sorry sight they see: a disfigured face with bruised cheek and cut and swollen lip; great eyes that, looking out sullenly from under the battered wicked hat, keep a watch upon the movements of the earringed man going about the daily business of the caravan without Elly’s assistance.

When the shades of the evening begin to fall once more, and the baby rabbits, grown bolder, scud across the flowers at her feet and she sees in the movement about the caravan the well-known signs of an early departure, a deep fear seizes upon Elly. She is half dead with faintness, having tasted no food all day; she is distracted by the incessant moaning of the child upon her lap.

She hates that cause of all her woe. Why does it lie there, miserably wringing from side to side its thin blue lips? What binds her to such hideous companionship? What is the child to her?

She had had untiring patience with those dragging babies of her mother’s, beneath whose burden her own growth had been stunted; she had loved and wept for the ‘little brawthers’; but it seemed as if all that girlish tenderness of heart had left her with its innocency. Nothing but hardness was in her breast to-night—that and a desperate anxiety not to be left behind.

The eldest of the vagrant children, brown of face, white-haired, was sent to bring in the hobbled horses. She watched each led across the uneven ground, its reluctance met by kicks and blows of the small tyrant of seven summers who had it in charge. She laid the baby beneath the little hillock of wild thyme and, breathless, rose to her knees—rose to her feet, trembling with eagerness, sick with fear. Would he go and leave her so?

He had knocked her about cruelly that morning; he had had no thought of the child she was soon to bear to him, but had half killed her in his stupid, brutal rage, but would he leave her so?

The sun had set. The eastern sky was glorious in crimson and gold, the heavens above her head were flushed through their pearly tints by a divine rosiness. The horses’ heads were turned to the west. She put her hands above her straining eyes and looked and looked, then called the man’s name with hoarse anxiety.

‘John, John, I’m hare! Don’t lave me John.’

But there was no strength in the weakly voice. In the noise of departure it was drowned. The children tumbled one after the other into
the caravan, the man at the leader’s head cut the air with his whip; with a strain and jolt the creaking, cumbrous machine started.

Her hands still shading her eyes, Elly followed, stumbling over the ant-heaps, the hillocks of moss and wild thyme, the prickly gorse catching at the hem of her dress. (TD, 63–65)

It seems that there is no good way of really getting used to the shockingness of life. When shock revisits its victim, its force is undiminished. Pain is just as sharp as it was before. In this sort of intrinsically negative space, the workhouse stands out as the ultimate shock-site feared by all. The workhouse is Hell and everybody knows it. Any living-space whatever is preferable.13 In “A Dulditch Rose” Rosa Weeks saves her orphaned grandson Jarge from the workhouse. He grows up to be a remorseless source of trouble and pure wickedness (TD, 161). Jarge sets his neighbours’ belongings on fire, frightening them till they shake (TD, 163). Wherever he goes he brings shocking disaster (TD, 163). Yet the diabolical nature of her grandson does not diminish Rosa’s love for him. The ‘love’ between them is strung on a thread of shocking animosity: “Jarge, grown tall enough, it was, who used to thrash his grandmother . . . paying back all those chastisements of his boyhood with interest” (TD, 164).

What is truly shocking, however, is not just the specific violence going on but the atmosphere of ineffably shocking filth that everywhere is so noticeable. The shirt that Jarge has to put on “of a Sunday morning was as black as that he ‘t’rew off’ on the Saturday night; so that the bacon dumpling prepared for the young man’s principle meal, made in a dirty basin, boiled in a filthy cloth, served on a table-cloth which had been used by mistake to wipe the floor, was not exactly an appetising meal” (TD, 165). Blind in her old age and abandoned by her grandson, Rosa lives to the end of her days in futile expectation of Jarge’s return, making time pass by virulently accusing her neighbours of stealing things she has never possessed. Yet what is disturbingly shocking here is not immorality or even degeneration but the general quality of human existence:

She loudly accuses them of robbing her linen-chest and her larder. They are poor enough to, those good women, but the slice of perspiring yellow cheese upon which the sugar and the candle-dripping are impartially spilt, the dirty wisps of nightcaps, and the yellow-hued rags appropriate to various uses, could hardly tempt the poorest. (TD, 167)

Misery comes “in battalions” to people in the tales of Dulditch; everyone seems to be “marked by Fate for misfortune” (TD, 231). Those who manage to escape from it all may find themselves persecuted by jealous loathing (TD, 85). For those who make money, prosperity can become an alienating factor and thus a new source of “shame and terror” (TD, 88). It is futile to seek an alternative existence. It is even pointless to be diligently hard-working, and even more damning to be peculiarly gifted or exceptionally sensitive. We learn in “Ben Pitcher’s Elly” that one does not take kindly to a child showing signs of being uncommonly bright. Elly’s teaching-career is abruptly discontinued. She is simply called home to endure a constantly on-going storm of physical blows (TD, 52–53). There is a new baby every year in the Pitcher family, and this is itself a mode of misfortune. Each annual addition diminishes the individual’s share of the limited family-resources that are available (TD, 53). The head of the family is a sullen brute with a fierce temper. Elly and her mother hold Ben Pitcher “in greater dread than anything in earth or hell or heaven” (TD, 53). In this rough milieu, Elly’s delicate sensibility is no asset. Her fragility is a source of additional miseries. Fear accentuates the cause producing it. Elly “maddened her father to greater exertions by yelling lustily before her punishment” (TD, 54). To be a person of feeling is in Dulditch the ultimate misfortune.

Ironically, the place where Elly’s fear is most shockingly real is her home. To be at home is to live in a shocking at-homeness of fear. In this little depraved world of sordid tyranny and everlasting apprehension, Elly finds life to be most bearable. Her father’s unpredictable acts of brutality do not change that. This dependence on negativity entails a species of incarceration.

What is shocking in “Ben Pitcher’s Elly” is not only misfortune, misery, and violence. Even more troubling, perhaps, is the selfish tendency of people to rid themselves of calamity in ways that just bring further disaster. With a degree of shock we behold a refined and sensitive girl self-transfigured into a thoroughly unfeeling woman. The fact that she is incapable of compassion for her own infant reveals the extent of the shocking transfiguration. Elly has given birth to her child in the workhouse. From there she one day returns with the infant. But her home is not a welcoming one. Elly’s father has indeed threatened to kill her if she attempted to return to the overcrowded family cottage (TD, 59). With some shock we learn that the baby is abandoned in this terrible place, Elly giving priority to her own well-being. In an act of upsetting perversity, she has put her own survival before that of the child
(TD, 60). Elly’s knowledge of the fact that her father uses enough strength with his hitting-strap to easily kill a small child does not stop her from exposing the infant to such a grotesque possibility (TD, 60). This inexcusably horrendous passivity is Elly’s first step towards a hard-hearted state of mind entirely dominated by a brutish commitment to personal self-gratification. Here the survival of the fittest involves a mode of life-struggle that comes close to combat with one’s own offspring. During the course of her efforts to survive in an unbelievably tough milieu Elly’s innate layers of softness are peeled away one by one. Each phase entails the birth of accentuated coarseness. As we have already seen she becomes almost more chilling than her hard-fisted father (TD, 65).

What perhaps accentuates the shock-factor is the circumstance that Mann withholds psychological analysis. Life is allowed to show itself as a series of externally-viewed reactions to dreadful events. There is simply a shocked and as it were perplexed recording of the way in which one blow follows upon another. We are shown the distorted little body of Elly’s infant, but the text leaves out its mother’s hidden sentiments, compelling us almost to participate in a lack of feeling that seems at once necessary and fortuitous. *The story abandons the helpless child to its fate as life itself does.*

The overall imprint on the reader’s mind is therefore that of a more or less impersonal ocean of incomprehensible suffering comparable to what we today see in news programmes documenting earthquakes, floods, and other natural disasters. Here survival is either a random event ruled by chance and fate, or the prize won by the individual who has zealously put immediate biological self-gratification before every other principle and consideration. What is more shocking than suffering here is the cool, calmly witnessing attitude of hardened family-members who opt for the position of being mere onlooker and bystanders. Ben Pitcher is not much ruffled by the suffering that comes his way or by the pain he himself authors. The abandoned child’s grandmother is not overly troubled by the spectacle of malnutrition. She even takes pride in the interest taken by villagers in the baby’s abnormal shape and tininess (TD, 61). The infant’s undersized body-deformity is one of the few amusements at hand in a place which, had the weather been less miserably cool, might have been taken for Hell.

Mrs Pitcher has become a hardened soul prone to shocking fits of outrageous self-indulgence. She has no qualms about spending money for baby-milk sent to her
by child-benefactors on beer for herself consumed in the local pub. Her alcoholic self-gratifications are hypocritically proclaimed to be indirectly beneficial to the child (TD, 61). Back home, the milkless infant is living on morsels of bread.

On Wolf-Charlie’s premises, life is the business of coping with poverty. Suffering is great, yet there are still people who wish to gain personal advantages where none seem to be available. These individuals deprive their victims of their last morsels of sustenance. Situations of dependence accentuate this type of predicament. ‘Gran’mawther’ and little Beatrice have conjointly been sucked into an abyss of destitution and robbery deep enough to extinguish the very last traces of any power of humane feeling. They have become little more than watchful animals caught in a circle of fear verging on panic:

The dark, still bright eyes of Gran’mawther open upon Beatrice, watch her as she appropriates the slice of cheese, the tallow candle, the lump of bread, which, with a few variations, is the nightly toll she exacts. She watches that little marauder, but she says nothing. There is something uncanny to the imagination in the picture of the dauntless, small depredator at her nightly work, and the old woman, glib enough of tongue in the daylight, lying there, voiceless, to be robbed of her cherished store. It is almost as if that ugly grandchild in her scant and ragged chemise, barefooted, exercised some spell over the aged parent—as if supernatural agencies were at work.

But it is more the spirit of prudence than that of fear which strangles the curses on Gran’mawther’s lips. She is entirely at the mercy of this abominable child, this unnatural descendant, who must have the elements of a conscience somewhere about her, as, up to the present, she has stayed her hand and left enough in the cupboard to preserve her relation from starvation.

Suppose that, night by night, the thievish imp made a clean sweep of the provender! Suppose, instead of coming with commendable regularity to ‘redd up’ her granny, she slunk out in the fields to play, and left the poor soul to die of dirt and neglect?

In submission, it seems, Gran’mawther’s chief safety lies. Her only chance of deliverance from such outrage is to give up her wretched bedstead, her round table, her couple of broken-seated chairs; to give up all her pride and her lifelong prejudices, and have herself carried to the workhouse. But Gran’mowther—who prays that she may not live long in loud monotonous petitions, which only cease when Beatrice is in attendance, and which are a sound as familiar to the household next door and as unregarded as the soughing of the wind in the broken chimney—would sooner endure ages of lonely, miserable days, centuries of horror-haunted nights, than face that indignity.

So, from year to year the family of which Wolf-Charlie is the head goes on. They are scarcely, one may say, in fortune’s power—they never can be poorer than they are; their cupboard is empty even of the skeleton of fear. (TD, 101–102)
The conjunction of self-gratification and deprivation is thematized in the *Dulditch Tales*. “The Witch of Dulditch” is the story of a man who kills his loyal and kind-hearted housekeeper (TD, 91). George Ganders is locally known as Gentleman George (TD, 74); yet he is nothing of a gentleman. When Queenie one day finally manages to steal away from her housekeeping duties in Ganders’ stuffy home, she does so merely to console one of their neighbours who is dying in great solitude. This unselfish act of saying a few friendly words to a dying person starts a chain of events terminating in a shocking act of suicide (TD, 78). This is a type of incident that is paradigmatic in Mann’s writing. Acts of loving kindness and selfless altruism tend to bring misfortune to the donator or benefactor. When Queenie visits the dying woman, fate is not on her side. In the very split second of her philanthropic materialization on the threshold to the bed-chamber, the sick old woman’s emaciated skeleton of a body turns in her direction and instantly expires (TD, 79). Rumour of this shocking coincidence spreads like fire. The event is seen as being no coincidence at all. Supernatural agency is attributed to Queenie. Soon this good-hearted housekeeper is seen by all as a witch. Her alleged witchcraft has made it possible for her to assassinate the sick woman by simply appearing before her and frightening her to death.

There is some delay, however, before this view becomes fully accepted. At first the widower is quite pleased to be rid of the burden of his ailing wife. He is glad that he did not need to be present as a solitary onlooker at the moment of the arrival of death (TD, 79). Ganders takes pride in being the employer of the housekeeper who has done their neighbour a good service by shocking his wife out of her wits (TD, 80). Things take a nasty turn, however, when Ganders discovers that the widower has fallen in love with Queenie (TD, 83). When he marries her Ganders is filled with indignation. He is now no longer in command of the meek and subservient woman who has constantly been there to facilitate the gratification of every whim or desire. Leaning on his gate he looks with ill-will at the wedded couple as they pass his house: “‘Ongrateful wretch!’ he said, as his own servant looked up and nodded to him. ‘Ongrateful, black-hearted wretch!’” (TD, 84).

The selfish man’s resentment now unleashes an avalanche of shocking slander. Soon Queenie is exposed to downright defamation and persecution. She is seen as being responsible for everything that now goes wrong. No longer there to keep his garden tidy, she is blamed for keeping it under a curse. Queenie is supposedly the
evil agency withering his plants and nipping the life out of the buds of his blossoms (TD, 85). The very sight of the old housekeeper is viewed as life-thwarting. If she can kill a sick woman and wither trees growing in the orchard (TD, 85), she may be capable of anything. What becomes shocking, now, is the manifestation of a pleasure-factor. People are generally speaking thrilled to be able to harass Queenie. Persecution of a scapegoat is a source of widespread self-gratification. The event of making her an outcast is nothing less than a vivid amusement for amusement-starved folks in the tedious, eventless world of the backcountry.

Queenie finds that she is getting pelted by stones. She is blamed for all sorts of mishaps, whether small or large (TD, 86). The corpses of suddenly deceased pigs, cows, and children are placed on her threshold in order to point to the sinister agency of her invisible evil (TD, 87). In her meekness Queenie silently meets all the accusation with a shocking amount of acceptation. With appalling self-effacement she lets the views of her old master prevail. The final shock is to find that the pond in which she finally has managed to drown herself is uncommonly shallow. People see that odd state of affairs as conclusive evidence of witchcraft. The reader is more likely to have been shocked by the amount of resoluteness needed for the act of finding one’s death in waters so shallow. That shallowness itself bears witness to the persecuted woman’s inner suffering. In their backwardness the villagers fail to understand such shocking resolve. They have self-righteously neutralized shock by projecting what is truly shocking in human nature into a superficial fantasy-scenario: “’Tis well she chuse th’ shaller water,’” they say. “’The mawther knowed well enough that sech as har ‘ud never sink. Har badness ‘ud ha’ kep’ har afloat i’ th’ deepest ocean-sea’” (TD, 92).

In Dulditch people just give up hope. Its absence is normality. Such weary despondency is a form of rural stoicism. In “The Small-Holder” Job Mason finds that his wife’s forced cheerfulness only makes things worse. She lives in denial. But how would it be possible to deny the fact that the cow is as withered and ailing as the crops?

‘Tha’s done me!’ Job said. ‘I thought I’d got enough, but tha’s done me!’

‘Hape o’ rubbidge!’ his wife encouraged him. ‘Yew ain’t done while you’ve got ter see ter th’ cow, Job.’

Through the melancholy soak of the evening rain he went out to minister to her; and again through the vapoury turbidity of the night. Looking up at the sickly moon with her wan circle, ‘Kape on a-
rainin’—Job, ironical in his bitterness of spirit, addressed the elements; ‘I wouldn’t lave off if I was you. You ha’ done yer warst. Kape on. Kape on.’ (TD, 262)

Job’s realism involves acceptance of hardship—acceptation, even, of the futility of hope. Life in his times is the art of forgetting—the art of forgetting hope itself. On the following morning, Mrs. Mason finds her husband’s bed empty. With a great “scare at her heart” (TD, 262) she dashes over the straw-yard toward the cow-shed, failing to even notice the ankle-deep black water though which her feet are plunging (TD, 263). In the shed she finds Job asleep beside the cow, his head resting on its side, heaving in sync with the animal’s feverish breathing (TD, 263).

Forgetting is a gift given in sleep. It is also a gift commonly given to children in so far as they are able to get totally absorbed in a game or object of fascination. In places where there is little to keep people happy, there is a passing sense of relief in any object of possible fun whatever. The simplest of toys is enough to keep poverty-stricken children quiet for many an hour—even if their toy happens to be the corpse of their new-born brother. This perfectly shocking possibility is exhibited in “Little Brother,” a story where love only can find expression for itself in grotesque but heartfelt adoration of the inert body of a limp infant. There is, even for a person who only passes a few hours on earth between birth and the grave, a brief communion with family-members capable of loving it (TD, 141). The head of the family is Mr. Hodd, a turnip-cutter. Shockingly, he is so poor that his children are compelled to wear turnip-sacks instead of clothes. The man himself is clad in a dirty sack, head and arms having been pushed through apertures in it (TD, 138). Not at all pleased to see a new addition to the set of thirteen children already needing to be fed, Mr. Hodd stays away from the event of his wife’s current delivery of what turns out to be a still-born infant (TD, 138). Unsurprisingly, the rector’s sister urges him to go home to his waiting wife and family:

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14 As John Cowper Powys observes in The Art of Forgetting the Unpleasant (London: Village Press, 1974), life would be impossible without flight from loathsomeness: “The possibility of horror in the world is so overpowering, the various situations of terror and pain so ghastly, that one can only stare in amazement at the hypocritical effrontery of those who profess that they envisage it. They do not envisage the fringe or margin of it. If they did, they would have lost the rational power of disclosing their unspeakable vision. There is no such thing as a fixed, opaque solid world or standardized objectivity. The most rudimental psychological insight destroys that illusion. There is, however, a floating background of mental and emotional horror, so appallingly imminent that the only way of keeping our reason is to drown ourselves hourly in forgetfulness.” The Art of Forgetting the Unpleasant (London: Village Press, 1974), p. 14.
‘I think you ought to. Mrs Hodd will be wanting to see you.’
Two vicious turns of the handle of the machine which the boy feeds assiduously. Hodd is ‘putting his back into it,’ this morning!
‘She’s borne you many children, Hodd.’
‘A sight too many!’ Swish – swish. ‘The place is chuck full of ‘em. You stamp on ‘em as you walk.
‘They keep you poor, I’m afraid!’
‘Ah!’ Swish – swish – swish.
‘At any rate this poor little one won’t have to be fed; you’re no worse off than before it came.’
‘There’ll soon be another,’ Hodd grunted, savagely prophetic.

In the absent turnip-cutter’s home, where the still-born infant awaits him, life has been reduced to turnip-sacks. Too young to be at school, the sack-clad children are on the floor. Wherever the eye turns it meets the same sight: “again a sack!” (TD, 139). In her stoicism, Mrs Hodd is fairly untroubled by the lack of clothes for her children: “Clothe? I don’t clothe ‘em. I look after their insides. No one can’t say as my child’en look starved. If parson’s folk want to see ‘em clothed they must do it theirselves. My job’s their insides, I take it” (TD, 140).

When we discover that Mrs Hodd newly-delivered but dead infant is being used by her children as a toy that keeps them pleased and quiet for a while, what we find shocking is not just this macabre event act but the fact that it melts into a generalized atmosphere where anomaly has become a new norm: “’Other folkes’ child’en have a toy, now and then, to kape ‘em out o’ mischief. My little uns han’t. He’ve kep’ ‘em quite (quiet) for hours, the po’ baby have; and I’ll lay a crown they han’t done no harm to their little brother’” (TD, 141). Mrs Hodd does not scold her children for using their dead sibling as a doll to be playfully pampered. For her this event is a little epiphany. What is shocking is that she may be right.

In assessing the manifestation of shock in the Tales of Dulditch, I suggest that what keeps being presented is not primarily a batch of sociological commentaries on abominable social conditions afflicting the poorest people in late nineteenth-century Norfolk. I suggest that what chiefly is being offered in these texts is a matter-of-fact conception of human existence in general. The destitute folks of Norfolk are merely expressive of life itself understood as something that strikes at humans with merciless precision and brutality.

As we shall see in our further explorations, there is typically in Mary Mann’s world no way for humans to keep up with the overwhelming firing-power that life sets
in action to bring individuals and families down to a level of radical despondency. Attempts to keep up with the ferocity of life are futile. Yet—and this is the point quietly and indirectly made by “Little Brother”—despondency (the relinquishing of all resistance, courage, faith, and hope) can still sport a little residue of pliability. This odd pliability only materializes at the very lowest stratum of human existence.

The Family as Shock

As we shall see in now exploring some of Mary Mann’s novels, her texts delineate levels of human life where the very possibility of love is shockingly at risk.

Seeming at first to be little more than a somewhat banal story featuring a protracted quarrel between a man and his mother-in-law about a couple of portraits that she selfishly wants removed from his dining-room, *The Eglamore Portraits* turns out on closer inspection to be a work of suggestive subtleties and fine-cut psychological realism. One day Clarence Eglamore needs to begin to come to terms with the shocking fact that, with the help of her pathologically subservient daughter, his mother-in-law is beginning to grossly interfere in his life. Mrs Cummin autocratically and systematically keeps removing or destroying various cherished household items and dearly loved pieces of furniture. Having in a matter-of-fact and self-righteous way tyrannized her husband and her daughter in her own home, this dominant woman now seeks an equally sovereign role for herself in her son-in-law’s new little abode. Clarence is dryly informed that she has taken away things like his round table and box-ottoman (EP, 9). “The room was much too full, Clarence” (EP, 9). As if she were his boss, Mrs Cummin just goes ahead and does what she wants. Clarence does not immediately put a stop to this odd mode of behaviour, keen as he is on avoiding a domestic debacle at the very inception of his married life. When Mrs Cummin starts to tamper with his family portraits, however, he feels that enough is enough. These are pictures of his loved parents. He discovers one day that the portraits simply have been removed, being now replaced by copies of a couple of

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15 Mary E. Mann, *The Eglamore Portraits* (London: Methuen, 1906); abbreviated EP. All parenthetical page references are to this edition.
pictures that Mrs Cummin deems to be of superior taste (EP, 17). The shock-factor is here constituted by the woman’s complete lack of consideration, empathy, and feeling in general:

“Where are the portraits which hung in those places?” he asked.
“Put away with other things,” Mrs Cummin told him glibly.
“There is positively a cart-load of things, Clarence, to go away. I can’t think what you’ll do with them. Such rubbish! Put them in a rummage sale, I should suggest, or let the servants’ mothers have them for the carrying home, or—”
“I see,” Clarence said, slowly interrupting. “But these—the portraits which hung there—happen to be those of my father and mother, Mrs Cummin.” (EP, 16–17)

Mrs Cummin seems to be unable to acknowledge her son-in-law’s affection for his parents. Oddly, and quite shockingly, she never bothers about the possibility that she might be offending Clarence. He does his best to avoid a quarrel, while at the same time making sure that his beloved portraits are restored to their former positions (EP, 19). His gentle but firm resistance does not stop Mrs Cummin in her tracks. Clarence is given to understand that in order to gain her love he needs to be aware of his social inferiority and lack of appropriate wealth (EP, 24–25). He also needs to change his feelings, to simply adjust to this woman’s conception of human emotions (EP, 27). The mere act of loving Juliet is not enough. Clarence is to broaden his concept of affection, directing it to nobler ends than the passing state of marriage-bliss (EP, 29).

The psychological dimension of the novel hinges on the less than supportive role played by Clarence’s simple-minded wife. Highly emotional and easily hurt, Juliet has grown up in the atmosphere of intimidation governing the life of her parents. She has constantly seen Mrs Cummin quash her father. In this new set of conflicts Juliet seeks to use her prettiness and mood-swings to get Clarence on a good footing with her mother. Since the times of her earliest infancy Juliet has realized that the slightest resistance to Mrs Cummin entails psychological retribution of the most virulent kind. Juliet has learned to cope with all of that as part of her love for her mother. This accommodation has always included a screening-device. Juliet cannot see any evil in her mother even when that lady is manifestly vicious. By force of habit, or by force of having to survive in a domestic atmosphere of perpetual hostilities, Juliet has become a person who is unable to bring herself to believe that her mother is ever wrong.
Clarence Eglamore is quite perplexed. He gathers that he is ideally to remain equally blind to a daily display of sustained insult. Like Juliet and Mr Cummin, Clarence is expected to be subservient to Mrs. Cummin. Any possible role other than living in trepidation of this great woman is apparently excluded beforehand as unthinkable. Clarence is to be a slave in his own home as soon as Mrs Cummin turns up.

Juliet, whose conception of love is synonymous with tremulous subservience, is amazed at finding that Clarence does not conform to the domestic paradigm that she is used to. She takes her husband’s powers of resistance as tokens of a lack of devotion. Juliet suddenly starts to see Clarence through the eyes of her mother only. What she now thinks that she discerns is a person in radical need of moral and affective improvement (EP, 26). Clarence will need to reform his ways and thus undergo a severe learning-process directed by his mother-in-law and that fine woman’s immediate agent, his own wife (EP, 29).

To his surprise Clarence Eglamore discovers that his mother-in-law is not only callously pushy and selfishly crude but also physically brutal. He is shocked to find that in putting his family pictures in the servants’ room, she “had stood a fender on the top of them” (EP, 30). Significant damage has been done to his loved possessions (EP, 31). Juliet instantly dismisses the suggestion that Mrs Cummin should apologize for her acts of destruction. In fact Juliet starts to pity her mother as soon as Clarence expresses the slightest feelings of dissatisfaction or dissent (EP, 32–33). She always takes her mother’s side. Clarence will need to promptly hang back the removed pictures of Cousin Anna favoured by his mother-in-law (EP, 32).

Clarence gradually perceives that Juliet’s opinions are really those of her mother, and that having a discussion with Juliet is actually to have a dialogue with his mother-in-law. In a slightly uncanny way the difference between the two women seems to be non-existent. There is in terms of psychological intricacy something like a Doppelgänger effect. The apperception of this odd sense of shadowing is accentuated when Clarence one day hears Juliet order him to put the new set of pictures back. The new shock is that there is suddenly no perceivable tonal difference between the two women: “He had never heard that tone from her before, and he gazed at her in astonishment” (EP, 35).

I suggest that The Eglamore Portraits is a novel based on the shock of perceiving a collapse of individuation. Such disintegration actualizes the issue of
authenticity. When Juliet suddenly ceases to be an individual, becoming little more than her mother’s shadow, she loses the silhouette not only of her moral being but of her existential caliber. She becomes a nothing, an expression of non-being. This non-being is not some sort of transcendental onlooker but a figure fully engaged in practical, social, and moral life. Yet by lacking all real individuation this involvement is shockingly inauthentic. Juliet is not Juliet but a faint non-Juliet, an abstract circuit of intense but completely impersonal (because vicarious) emotions. All her feelings are ultimately expressive of life-responses set in motion by her mother, a creature who is the last analysis is quite alien to Juliet’s personality and to her range of affective possibilities.

As Clarence Eglamore quickly discovers things will only get better by first getting worse. Amply aware of his mother-in-law’s domineering nature and of the fact that Juliet’s docility in her mother’s presence is only a façade of enforced compliance, Clarence nevertheless needs time to recover from the shock of seeing that his wife almost ceases to have a will and mind of her own whenever she happens to be undergoing Mrs Cummin’s identity-erasing autocracy (EP, 36). It is almost with disbelief that he witnesses his wife’s lack of individuation. Juliet is now a sort of second Mrs Cummin, a stunningly exact simulacrum. Forgery is going on in Clarence’s home. The woman before him is not the real thing but an imitation, and this falsification of the woman he loves now speaks directly to him with the mock-authority of one belonging to a supposedly superior race of humans:

16 From Heidegger’s phenomenological viewpoint, a person is no mere social construct. It is not society or culture that chiefly defines personhood but world understood as a meaning-space where the individual qua individual inevitably runs up against challenges in the forms of opportunity, choice, danger, risk, mortality, contingency, etc. Society cannot determine the life of the individual, for the individual, precisely qua person rather than construct, is able to freely challenge and question society and its construct-formation. This challenging is not itself construct-dependent but freedom-constituted. Existence is such that it permits the individual to be something other than conformable to any specific culture whatever. To be a person is to be able to refrain from running with the pack. Individuation is not complete in a person who is unable to step out of mainstream social life. Being close to human existence as such often means not being close to human culture. Liberation from the compulsion to run with the pack is not to distrust simple folks but to distrust those who are excessively tied to a conventional life based on doing what one’s neighbours do (HHS, 212). That sort of fuzzy half-existence involves being absent from existence as such, from authenticity. Simple folks may be authentically alive and alert in the fullness of existence. Conversely, culturally sophisticated people with a conventional mind-set may be far removed from such authentic fullness. In this way authenticity stands for Heidegger in opposition to what he calls the they (HHS, 212). The they are expressive of a collective personhood based on lazy thought-habits and complacent traditions (HHS, 212). From the viewpoint of authenticity-phenomenology as developed by Heidegger what really matters is not the capacity of the individual to transcend her life so as to be able to join others. What really matters is the act in which the hitherto complacent individual shakes off the collective, anonymous they-self so as to freely become authentically individuated (HHS, 212). Authenticity entails rebellion against conformism. The individual is by definition one who is able to make a stand.
He looked at the girl, therefore, in astonishment now, and found himself, for the moment, incapable of doing more than pronouncing her name.

“Juliet?” he said, softly interrogative. . . .

She took up one of the discarded works of art, and held it to him. “Put these back now, at once, will you?” she requested with that new, absurd note of authority. (EP, 37)

In every pressure-situation Juliet wants to be her mother. Failure to be precisely that has in her childhood home been the same as being a “sinner,” as being the scared daughter of a hen-pecked father (EP, 40). Clarence’s dilemma is that he cannot get Juliet out of her mother-in-law’s emotional picture-frame without hanging her in the picture-frame of “the sinner” in the family (EP, 40). To see Juliet oscillate between docility and tyranny is for Clarence to get removed from this new home of his in the little town of Hale to the bygone and utterly miserable home of the Cummin family in the great city of Birmingham. He sees no way out from this dilemma. All that Clarence can do is to avoid becoming an individual appointed by Mrs Cummin as another “sinner” in her family circle. He is not ready to follow the coaxing done by Juliet to bring him into domestic life understood as a gathering of people included within Mrs Cummin’s dream of an extended family ruled in each and every detail by herself:

“Will you, dear Clarence, because I love you so, and because I wish it so much, go down again and hang up those pictures of Cousin Anna’s where poor mother had put them?”

He ceased to smile. “And put my father and mother under the servants’ bed again, I suppose? And the fender on top of them? I certainly will not do that.” (EP, 42–43)

Mrs Cummin coaches her daughter in the art of (supposedly) getting power over Clarence Eglamore. The great lady from Birmingham makes her daughter understand that her husband’s devotion is a soft spot in him, the very factor that Juliet can exploit in order to manipulate Clarence in any way she wishes. Such a set-up will be a copy of life as it shaped itself during all those years back in Birmingham. The fact that Clarence is in love is the weakness that needs to be ruthlessly wounded. In this way love can once again become synonymous with relinquishing or holding power (EP, 60). As we have seen, the first testing-opportunity is the occasion when Mrs Cummin first discovers that there has been a reversal of her picture-replacements. We can all see the shock on her face when she spots the place in the dining-room where her
callous alteration of the order of things has been annulled. The moment highlights Mary Mann’s conception of shock as prime mover of narrative, emotion, and life:

Instantly, as Mrs Cummin took her place, she lifted her eyes to the opposite wall, and they fell on the reinstated portraits.

Juliet was nervously making some remark to her husband, who had been away at his office all the morning. Her voice wavered, almost died away, went on again with a desperate courage. She held her husband’s gaze with her frightened eyes, but she knew, for all that, the exact moment in which the discovery was made. Had it been greeted with the loud ha! ha! of the war-horse scenting the battle, the sound would not have been to her ears more ominous than the silence in which Mrs Cummin, perceiving the portraits, looked away in an ill-boding stillness where even her frock had ceased to rustle. . . . Juliet was aware her mother was silently waving away the lamb rissole . . . Cold beef was the alternative; when that too was declined Juliet’s heart was like lead within her. (EP, 62–63)

Here there is reinforcement of shock by shock. The reader is shocked to see how shocked Juliet is at seeing her mother undergoing the shock of being resisted by Clarence’s fight-back.

Like her husband Juliet is doomed to continue to see Mrs Cummin behave like a war-horse “on her hind legs,” as Clarence sarcastically puts it (EP, 65). During the course of the horrible quarrels between her parents in Birmingham she had never dared to interfere (EP, 72). We understand after a while, as does Clarence, that there is no way in which Juliet’s infantile servitude is going to naturally fade away. Within the penumbra of her mother’s presence or near-presence, Juliet is only capable of dealing emotionally with other people in ways explicitly or implicitly approved by her towering parent. Within the sphere of this affective freeze-up Juliet’s emotional needs appear to mutate into those that come to expression in her mother’s stony semblance of warmth (EP, 63). Absurdly, the prospect of Mrs Cummin returning to Birmingham in a fit of sadness or fury breaks Juliet’s heart (EP, 80). Love, happiness, marriage, home—these are nothing compared with mother’s peace of mind.

We are made to understand that Mrs Cummin is secretly enjoying herself. Despite all the domestic fighting that she causes or gets involved in she relishes the sense of being at the centre of a vivid drama (EP, 110). Having since early infancy been deprived of the measure of individuation granted by most parents to their children, Juliet is unable to existentially confront17 the fact that her mother’s suddenly

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17 From the viewpoint of existentialist or quasi-existentialist phenomenology (of the type promoted by Heidegger and Sartre) Juliet is not just trapped in a domestic-psychological predicament, for the family
materialized states of being heartbroken or offended are theatrical parts of a façade deployed in one-sided domestic power-games. Conveniently, Mrs Cummin always materializes as victorious victim when she fails to materialize as victorious bully.

Once Mrs Cummin has made evident to her son-in-law that she has re-assumed the role as the family-person closest to Juliet’s heart, a configuration of affective forces of an almost incestuous flavour is put in place. The near-pathological proximity between Juliet and her mother moves Clarence offside. Mother and daughter are the lovers—not in the sense that they sleep with each other but in the sense that they form the love-nucleus in the Eglamore family. Clarence is not slow in detecting that this arrangement of affects automatically preserves the status quo. There is no factor internal to the family that can bring about any sort of real change or improvement. An external impulse is therefore required if Clarence and Juliet are ever to become re-united in love and marriage.

The promise of a change one day surfaces in the form of a message in which Mr Cummin declares that he is not feeling well. Mrs Cummin is urged to return to her ailing husband in Birmingham (EP, 146). At this point Juliet does not know that her father’s request for the return of her mother is Clarence’s idea. He has divulged the extent of the interfering damage being done by Mrs Cummin in Hale (EP, 143). Over-reacting as usual to every possible domestic incident, Juliet now takes the announcement of her father’s frailty as meaning that he is on his death-bed. When she soon learns that Clarence has made a move behind her back and that her father’s deteriorated health was a fabrication (EP, 193) she goes into a tantrum. Juliet rushes to the dining-room, pulls down the pictures of Clarence’s mother and father, and hangs in their place the glossy prints preferred by Mrs Cummin (EP, 195). Furious about her husband’s act of deception, Juliet stabs the family portraits with a knife taken from the table, ripping the canvases in all directions (EP, 196). Psychologically this deed no doubt indicates a final symbolic deletion of marriage. The intrusive male and his family-line are removed so that the old family-blood can return to its capsule of self-governing.
Phenomenologically (rather than psychologically) I would suggest, however, that portrait-deletion here opens a deeper and far more interesting meaning-space.\textsuperscript{18} This space is governed by the portraits themselves—by portraiture qua representivity.\textsuperscript{19} What is radically at fault in Mrs Cummin is in the last analysis not her interpretation of feeling as power but her interpretation of feeling as representation. Each affective act has in that insufferable Birmingham home of hers been a feeling-portrait, a picture of this or that feeling. Feelings have been moved hither and thither in Birmingham as portraits are currently being moved around in the house in Hale. What has become transferred from Juliet’s old home to her new one is the notion that feeling is essentially a representation, an affective image ‘representing’ this or that (especially this or that echelon of power). This order of representivity can only be broken when representation as such is toppled from its position of supremacy.

I propose that such an overthrow lies implicitly at the heart of the portrait-massacre carried out by Juliet. The key moment is when she happens to overhear Clarence explain to his uncle Isaac that he is uninterested in the money value of his family portraits (EP, 205). What is at stake for Clarence is really not at all his affection for the portraits of his parents but his affection for his parents. This affection

\textsuperscript{18} I use the word meaning-space in the manner advanced by Steven Galt Crowell in his discussions of Emil Lask as a forerunner for Heidegger in the development of an epistemological outlook denying the primacy of so-called representations. Long before Heidegger, Lask highlighted the fact that what we initially hear, taste, see, or feel does not first offer itself in experience in terms of representivity [Abbildunglichkeit] (HHS, 45). The feature of reality towards which experience is directed is lived-through before it is represented (HHS, 48). Before it is lit up [durchleuchtet] by cognition, the reality-feature that comes to notice is aglow [umleuchtet] in the immanence of a pre-cognitive perception-field (HHS, 48). Prior to a subject/object dichotomy in which consciousness starts facing a representation as an object opposed to it, the thing is absorbed into the flow of consciousness as what Lask calls a “logos-immanent” feature of reality (HHS, 50). Antecedent to the domain of representations there is already offered a raw meaning-space that is constantly unfolding immanently in our lives (HHS, 53). Here the features of the real world materialize whether we like it or not. In every stream of consciousness, reality complexly and pre-cognitively beckons as a space of knowability without marked dependence on a ‘representing’ agency (HHS, 53).

\textsuperscript{19} Representivity [Abbildunglichkeit] is a second-order stratum of conscious life (HHS, 45). Hence phenomena materializing in consciousness on a first-order level can only be adequately accounted for by means of what Crowell calls “a nonrepresentational theory of meaning” (HHS, 51). Accordingly, any theory of representations is always limited. Following Emil Lask, Heidegger and other phenomenologists have felt that the traditionally upheld Western notion of the primacy of the idea of representation needs to be challenged (HHS, 58). The raw material of the stream of experience does not initially and immediately present itself in consciousness as a set of representations (HHS, 54). In its coursing, consciousness at bottom actualizes itself as a fluctuation of brief or sustained pre-representational manifestations. The idea of representation assumes that experience comes in bits and pieces and that human agency has some sort of relation to each of these items. Such an entitative conception of experience-spaces prematurely objectifies experience by assuming the priority of cognitive entity-construction (HHS, 52). The stream of consciousness is holistic rather than entitative. Segments and items of the stream can become meaning-objects; but they do not in general constitute themselves first as entities.
is ultimately in no need of portraits, of portraiture, or of any representation whatever. Whereas Mrs Cummin has been interested in the pictures in terms of aesthetic space and power space, Clarence’s feelings have really not been operative in any space at all.\(^{20}\) They have belonged to the non-space of feeling as such, to the space where the love of Juliet and Clarence had been growing before Mrs Cummin interfered by moving feeling into space.\(^{21}\) This paradigm-shift was signalled at the very moment of her first arrival, a moment that she devoted to the business of complaining about space and about spatial configuration.

I am suggesting, then, that the issue of shock is here upgraded to a phenomenological level of understanding. The shock played out in the material world as mutilation of the portraits is phenomenologically speaking the shock of seeing a sudden ripping-apart of the sphere of representivity as such. Juliet for the first time sees the portraits not as silhouettes of human life representing this or that demeanour but as faces constituted in feeling (prior to portraiture and representivity) as termini for love’s beams of directedness:

Both portraits were as she had placed them on the floor. Now that the mischief was beyond repair she looked at them with new eyes. They were no longer only the ugly daubs which had caused a rupture between her husband and mother; they were the faces Clarence had loved. (EP, 208)

It is the reality of (unrepresented) feeling that now itself is the shock at hand. The brokenness of the picture-frames indicates the rupture of the idea of feeling as something framed by notions of proper (or improper) comportment. The Birmingham

\(^{20}\) As a precursor of phenomenology, Emil Lask suggested that feelings are not to be understood as being constituted in some sort of ‘space’ (e.g., a field of representations). Before they are objectified (re/presented) feelings are in a sense homeless and spaceless. Feeling is originally manifest only in feeling as such. Affective re/presentation is a latecomer. The ‘world’ of feelings is not a space. Once feelings have entered the second-order sphere of representivity, there is a loss of the aletheiological factor (HHS, 45)—highlighted by Lask prior to Heidegger as the driving-force of lived experience (HHS, 54). Understood as aletheia truth is not representational truth. It is not represented. It happens. There is such truth when a veil falls. That fall sets in motion a quickening revelation. In all such events, representation can only be a latecomer. But if representation has gained a monopoly status, representivity can attain a sort of mock-priority. Representation takes the place of truth, in the way that affectivity-portraits rule over feelings in Clarence’s new home. Lask’s aletheiology (with its extensions into phenomenology) promotes the notion of “nonrepresentational” truth (HHS, 37). For Lask the aletheiological space of primitive unveiling is an everyday space of prepredicative life (HHS, 74).

\(^{21}\) From the viewpoint of Emil Lask’s prephenomenological concept of conscious life, we have prejudicative and precognitive familiarity (HHS, 72) with a raw level of direct experience manifesting reality in a sort of hard-definition clarity that is almost shocking in its capacity for direct disclosedness (HHS, 74).
home had been one where Juliet had learned to assume a priority of comportment over feeling.

In the meaning-space governed by her mother, feeling had always pointed back to this or that comportment, as if affectivity were a way for demeanour to show itself. Feelings ‘fitted’ the comportment-mode they were assumed to express. Feeling had no value per se, always instead being actualized as being in accord with specific forms of demeanour. Bright feelings were affective acts conforming with the ‘right’ and expected way-of-being. Muddy feelings were affective acts conforming with the ‘wrong’ or forbidden way-of-being. In that Birmingham home of theirs it had been essential for Juliet and her father to behave in a manner comformable to Mrs Cummin’s sense of fitting demeanour. All feeling rotated around that lady’s conception of right behaviour. I propose that the smashing of the Eglamore portraits breaks the lifelong spell cast by that outlook. Suddenly feeling is no longer understood as being expressive of comportment but as being expressive of itself. Feeling is not seen any longer as being in accord with this or that configuration of exterior ‘truths’ but as needing only to be in accord with itself.

When Juliet looks down on the pictures that she has smashed, the shock of what she sees is the shock of feeling itself disclosed in its uncovered immanence. The negative act of maliciously slashing the canvases was inadvertently also the positive act of liberating feeling from the screening-devices of right comportment. To be sure the destructive act had itself been expressive of a specific comportment; but the feelings apperceived in the faces ‘beneath’ the smashing express no comportment—but rather, as it were, a sort of amazement at it and at its hidden agenda of comportment-driven violence. The Eglamore faces no longer offer themselves as representations of faces or representations of feeling. They are faces, feeling. They are love.

Ironically, it is precisely by treating the pictures as reducible to an image-factor (by treating them as copies of something) that Juliet has uncovered that which in the portraits surpasses portraiture as representation. By callously treating the pictures as mere images, Juliet has unwittingly uncovered what is not mimetic in all showing. By carrying the Cummin paradigm to the extreme limit, she has exposed its lack of life.

A further rending of veils ensues back in Birmingham. Mr Cummin finally summons enough courage to stage a confrontation with his bullying wife. The
incident highlights Mary Mann’s use of shock as a vehicle for demystifying ‘normality.’ Mr Cummin’s words are shocking enough to leave a permanent imprint on his wife’s sensibility:

Standing before her, and speaking in a tone which was destined to ring in her ears for the rest of her life, he delivered himself of a few curt sentences.

“You are not a bad woman. I give you credit for believing in yourself and your own motives. You act, as you always claim to do, for the best; I grant it. Yet you have wrought with your tongue and your temper more harm in my life than if you had been a drunkard, or a vicious woman. I don’t suppose you will pause in what you are doing now; I know you too well to expect it. I have thought it my duty, however, to make my protest. Now go and ruin the happiness of our girl’s home as you have ruined mine.” (EP, 239)

We learn that this is a turning-point in the life of the family. Mrs Cummins is henceforth unable to return to fake, representivity-driven world of ‘normality.’ Mr Cummin’s words “stayed with her” as indelible imprints of a life-changing shock (EP, 240).

As so often in Mann’s fiction, events now move rapidly towards dramatic resolution in a flash-sequence of shocks. Clarence and Juliet have arrived at a stage of marriage-strife where the only outlet for their irresolvable domestic dilemma seems to be the banal event of provoking sexual jealousy. Clarence one day locks Juliet in the bathroom for refusing to abandon the idea of going on a flirtatious journey with Captain Sands, an eccentric old local figure who poses as a rake (EP, 236–237). The first shock comes to Juliet as she finds that Clarence seems to have left the house. He has had the nerve to leave her captive in the bathroom (EP, 247). This is followed by the shock of suddenly discovering that she seems to be choking in the intolerable hot air produced by the sultry, thundery weather. The next surprise is given to Juliet when, standing on a chair to see out of the elevated little bathroom window and shouting hysterically for her husband, the answering voice turns out to be that of her mother. Mrs Cummin has at that very moment arrived in a cab. She beholds her screaming daughter just as the bathroom chair on which Juliet has been standing gives way (EP, 248–50). Infinitely delighted to find herself in the position of being her daughter’s saviour from the forces of evil (EP, 255), Mrs Cummin proudly proclaims that she is taking Juliet back with her to Birmingham. Juliet is to be promptly...

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22 As Heidegger emphasized, a radical shock (war, separation, illness, etc) is often a condition of possibility for knowing existence in its raw truthfulness (HHS, 146). Our comfort-zone needs to collapse for us to experience what is basic (HHS, 146).
delivered from further domestic harassment (EP, 254–255). Yet Juliet is not all that thrilled to find herself back in the embraces of her bullying mother. She takes comfort in the prospect that the journey back to Birmingham will re-unite her with her much-loved father. Upon their arrival Mrs Cummin and Juliet are shocked to discover a note in which he declares that he has decided to permanently abandon his home (EP, 265).

Mrs Cummin is never to recover from the shock of this incident. This vociferous woman is now “strangely silent,” lacking the “capacity to enjoy” what she has been seeking all the time—the privilege of having sole access to Juliet (EP, 270). Mrs Cummin starts to shun even the company of her daughter (EP, 271). Vacations are unable to brighten the lady’s spirits. Even the richly-furnished hotel rooms of Nice or Menton look barren and empty (EP, 273). After some time Mrs Cummin has a stroke. The next one kills her. Her last words are shockingly kind-hearted. Having fought Clarence to the bitter end, she now on her death-bed makes a U-turn, urging Juliet to lovingly go back to the husband she has deserted (EP, 276).

However, life is pretty shocking back in Hale too. Clarence no longer retains the crucial promise of inheriting a fortune from Uncle Isaac. In disbelief he learns from that elderly gentleman that he intends to marry Susy (EP, 291). If Juliet chooses to return to Hale she will not come to enjoy any prosperity whatever (EP, 292–293). The only factor that could draw her back would be Clarence himself as someone worth loving.

We here come to the master-shock in The Eglamore Portraits. It is peculiarly shocking for a reader familiar with Mary Mann’s writings, for in this text what is totally unexpected is not something sinister or crushing but something quite radiant, full of hope and grace. The shock is the simple fact that there is deep love between Clarence and Juliet, and that this hitherto concealed state of affairs has not really at all been profoundly jeopardized by all the calamities, intrigues, accusations, jealousies, quarrels, fights, and misfortunes. Clarence’s feelings for Juliet have in essence not been destroyed by the efforts of his mother-in-law to set her daughter against him. Mrs Cummin has had an agenda. Her destructive activity has followed the rational outlines of a plan. But there are dimensions of life and feeling that are not susceptible to the engineering efforts of reason’s devices: “He loved her without reason, never stopping to ask why; loved her as she loved herself, without thinking; because he must, because he did” (EP, 285). The very fact that Juliet travels to Hale to rejoin her impoverished husband suggests that her feelings are akin to his (EP, 300).
Once back in Hale, Juliet is overwhelmed by her intact home-feelings. Despite
being a site of innumerable domestic fights orchestrated by Mrs Cummin, home still
means home. Juliet understands how much she had secretly longed all the time for its
insignificant but dear familiarity (EP, 301). Having been trained all her life to aim for
complete rational order in every detail of existence, she is stirred by the realization
that much of the charm she now derives from the sight of her home lies in the sense of
the absence of pedantic neatness:

The Virginian creeper was hanging in vivid scarlet streamers
over every window, the lace-trimmed blinds were drawn up awry, the
curtains . . . tucked untidily away. Weeds were on the gravel path, the
grass had not been cut . . . Ah, how delightful it would be to put things
right again—or not to put them right! To sit with Clarence and revel in
the fact that things were not ship-shape at all. (EP, 302)

The sight of Clarence’s ready-packed portmanteau (EP, 302) momentarily leads Juliet
to believe that he has done to her what her father finally did to her mother. But the
portmanteau was really only a token of the fact that her husband had decided to do
what she had done—to undertake a journey of sustained recovery (EP, 310–11).

Existence as Shock

As we now turn our attention to The Cedar Star, the focus will be on a phenomenon
that I shall call ontological shock. The momentum of this novel moves the reader
toward the culminating event of a river-boat accident. It is a tragedy that will haunt
those who survive it. The figure of the drowned woman will not go away from the
lives of those who are directly or indirectly involved in her fate.

Following the pattern I have been calling attention to as paradigmatic for
Mary Mann’s fiction, the river accident is a shock for which there is no preparation.
The event materializes out of nowhere. It lacks all justification. The tragedy is not
caused by anything that logically or atmospherically would seem to be able to account
for it. What happens happens accidentally. Accidents are as it were precisely
that—accidental. We stand at the abrupt interface between existence and contingency.

The contingency-factor does not make its appearance as a means of injecting additional excitement. The production of shock through tragic accident is not an entertainment-device. It is rather the case that the enactment of radical contingency is a feature of Mann’s dedication to realism. Contingency is central to what is ordinary in human life—as Jean-Paul Sartre made evident in Nausea, Being and Nothingness, and other existentialist texts. All humans are exposed to existence as radical contingency.  

With chilling realism, the second part of The Cedar Star abruptly begins with the matter-of-fact news that Reverend Jervois shows “symptoms of an illness from which there could be no recovery” (CS, 95). The sense of the impossibility of recovery materializes in the text as a sustained mood. Betty Jervois and Edward Harringay will make no recovery from the attraction that seals their fate, this sinister passion of theirs being itself a form of illness or disaster from which there is no possible recuperation.

The fatal symptoms of the rector’s illness had one day just “declared themselves” (CS, 95). Such instantiations of declaration—like declarations of war—are central to the fabric of Mary Mann’s texts. When life declares how mercilessly horrid it is in all its brute shockingness the people who manage to cope with severe adversity are humans who, like Betty Jervois, are able to compete with existence on equal terms by being just as shockingly cruel as life itself. Such individuals may be hard-hearted enough to even shock themselves. In the course of her life Betty Jervois accordingly comes to a point where she is awed by the shocking reality of her own sinister nature. She is inwardly disgusted by her affection for a man as detestable, corrupt, selfish, and mean as Edward Harringay: “A horror of herself, that she could endure his neighborhood so calmly, seized on Betty” (CS, 266). Being sinister enough to want to live in the amorous company of a man who has deliberately refused to save his own wife from death by drowning, Betty Jervois carries a photograph of the dead woman “as a talisman to guard her against herself” (CS, 270).

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24 From the viewpoint of Sartre’s existentialist phenomenology, contingency exposes us mercilessly to what is real, and the very cruelty of this exposure compels us to take responsibility for our lives and live in ‘authenticity.’ That means relinquishing the normal sort of comfort-zones in which human existence unfolds complacently in self-deception, escape, fantasy, and lack of faith in the radical challenges and possibilities of our lives. See Thomas Flynn, “Jean-Paul Sartre.” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, edited by Edward N. Zalta (http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2010/entries/satre/); in parenthetical documentation hereafter abbreviated JPS.
It is a shock to Betty that she cannot be anything but shocking. Without some special effort or fetish, her deplorable nature would do a troubling amount of damage—to herself, to her fellow-beings, and to her world.

In *The Cedar Star* the figure gathering into herself all the shocking forces of extreme misfortune is Violet. Her loving but feeble nature somehow unleashes an abundance of disaster. This benevolent woman’s gentleness has an unsettling effect on hard, self-centred people. They tend to love her with a sense of underlying resentment, as if this kind-hearted woman makes their fierce constitutions look like aberrations. When, quite irrationally and almost sadistically, Harringay marries Violet, he may be consciously or unconsciously intending to break her soft-hearted and trusting nature. She seems to be an affront to any mode of vigorous life that is strong-minded and self-gratifying.

In Mary Mann’s texts kindness tends to trigger misfortune. The trusting, well-meaning attitude of good-hearted people seems to attract figures of darkness and forces of evil. A case in point in *The Cedar Star* is William Carlyon. This man seems to harbour a reservoir of limitless belief in the inherent goodness of all humans (CS, 211). Like Violet he is constantly deceived (CS, 205). Noting this sort of paradigm, the reader becomes apprehensive as soon as excessive soft-heartedness is on display. There is, quite strangely, something shocking about complete softness, something more or less abnormal and oddly alarming. Those who are really strong need to have a space that is free from the troubling presence of the meekly soft-hearted. As soon as he has married Violet, Harringay feels compelled to make her profoundly unhappy. He makes a fine show of what he conceives as his superiority by refusing to share her world of delicate and trusting sentiments. Harringay’s universe must be free from uncomplicated, undemanding affection, for in its straightforward loving, simple affection makes the selfish soul look ugly and atypical.

Yet the real cruelty that Violet is to expect from life has not yet materialized. At the beginning of the fourth chapter of the second part we suddenly learn that “a great misfortune had overtaken Edward Harringay’s wife—she was deaf” (CS, 129). There is absolutely no way of being prepared for this piece of news. As in real life this negative novelty is one day just there. The manifestation of Violet’s deafness does not actualize itself as a link in a chain of events cumulatively establishing a current of meaning. As pure contingency the deafness is just there for us (and for Violet herself) as a unit of meaninglessness rather than as a unit of meaning. What arises is an almost
surrealistic sense of disbelief. The question arises: How much suffering must a human being undergo here on earth?

We have already seen in Mary Mann’s short stories that the existence of innumerable misfortunes in no way prevents the materialization of much additional calamity. The person who is ‘down’ gets another kick in the face. There ought to be a fair and just balance between fortune and misfortune but often in life that is not so. Real existence has the capacity to be downright outrageous. In *The Cedar Star* Violet is spared no suffering. There is no limit to what life will compel her to undergo. Pity is of little avail. Pity is indeed itself a ‘loser.’ Violet’s whole personality breathing empathy and commiseration; when she is crushed by animosity and misfortune, compassion and pity seem as such to become cancelled as sustainable, valid life-factors.

The intrinsic cruelty of the world as a place of radical contingency is highlighted by the negativity of Violet’s near-deafness. This socially disfiguring phenomenon is accompanied by a degeneration of speech. Words from her mouth have started to assume the bizarre form of a sort of resonant whispering that sounds ludicrous. Violet’s deafness is a misfortune but so indeed is her discomfited way of coping with it. The impression is given not only that a woman of sentiment is peculiarly vulnerable but also that feeling—once stripped of all style, ornament, elegance, and polish—is itself a sort of misfortune. When Violet completely succumbs to feeling, so that there is ‘more’ feeling than ‘Violet,’ affectivity as such starts to present itself as something almost incongruous. By force of the violence she undergoes, Violet is put in a situation where the state of being completely abandoned to feeling comes across as being more or less grotesque.

Stripped of all expressive elegance by her handicap, Violet comes to view as being akin to the gauche rural folks we have met in many of Mary Mann’s short stories. We witness a generalized state of deformity not only in lives bearing the imprint of destitution and misfortune but also in the lack of grace exhibited in the act of coping with such hardship. Added to the calamity of disfigured bodies, crops, marriages, and infants is the calamity of a lack of style, an inability to suffer in a gracious way. Suffering is accordingly shocking in a double way. It is appalling in its agony but also in its acceptance. There are, to be sure, certain special individuals who endure their life-ordeals with dignity and patience—but they seem to be exceptions to the rule.
Violet’s final degradation is the inelegance of her grotesque death. The news of her tragic misfortune is communicated in a telegram (CS, 231): “There has been an accident” (CS, 232). In a noticeably ugly way the deafness that has exposed her to social ridicule is now also decisively instrumental in bringing this sweetly “uncomplaining” woman to her premature death (CS, 237). Life, being as it were itself deaf to everything intrinsically tender and vulnerable, has allowed Violet’s deafness to play a final and fatal trick on her. Among those who are relaxing in the little river-boat she is the only one who does not hear the oncoming sound of the big steamer’s powerful engine and loud entertainment music. Off guard, and therefore falling instantly overboard into the “crashing darkness” of the river’s killing waters, Violet finds herself caught on the swell of a death-wave bypassing her feeble powers of perception. Floating impersonally away down the river into the grey mists, the great steamer (life itself) is “unconscious” of the havoc it has done; its relentlessly onward-coursing momentum has a limited store of compassion for those who are most “bewildered,” most “frightened,” and most “timid” on earth (CS, 238).

When Edward Harringay sees his wife plummet one last time back to the bottom of the steamer-troubled river-waters we already know that he is a pretty shocking person—“false,” completely “self-indulgent,” and absolutely “unscrupulous” (CS, 237). He is a man who catches “at any happiness he coveted,” whether legitimate or not. Betraying a companion or wife does not worry Harringay all that much (CS, 237). Ruining the lives of those who love him (or try to), he selfishly accepts “the sacrifice of all that was fairest and most sacred to minister to his own pleasure and vanity” (CS, 237). In order to accentuate the fact that there is no limit to the shocking core of Harringay’s inner constitution Mary Mann lets us see him take the life of the person whose undeserved love he continues to enjoy. Violet’s death is his crowning moment of intense life-pleasure. His nature craves such depraved moments of exquisite cruelty. Even a shock-keen person like Betty Jervois is overcome by the sheer evil that this man is capable of (CS, 270).

Harringay is cunning enough to know that Betty is the sort of woman who is attracted by a display of ruthlessness. He foresees that even in the matter of his quasi-murder of Violet she is probably willing to put aside the vestiges of any lingering qualms (CS, 271). Betty is erotically attracted to the spectacle of Harringay’s bottomless powers of self-gratification. There is a certain thrill in seeing how certain hard-hearted egotists permit themselves to “forget everybody” and “everything” but
themselves (CS, 276). For people like Harringay the craving for immediate personal gratification is “too great” to let anything come in its way (CS, 276). Conscience and self-respect no longer have any say (CS, 309). In a chance encounter with a photograph of his drowned wife Harringay keeps his cool. He takes the image of Violet and just burns it. The one who has done such things “hundreds” of times (CS, 295) is not bothered by issues of morality.

Betty’s behaviour may come across as shockingly callous but the hard shell conceals an inner wealth of tender feelings (CS, 17, 135, 223). Even Harringay has one or two passing moments of gentleness. Having betrayed his close friend Carlyon by spitefully courting and marrying Violet he nevertheless manifests a trace of compassion for his friend, the placid, well-meaning curate (CS, 89). It is with a certain amount of shame that he deprives Carlyon of the vulnerable and tender-hearted woman he had set his eyes on (CS, 91). Yet the presence of traces of sensitivity in those who are cold-hearted only accentuates the sense of cruel, measured, and perfectly calculated trespassing that Mary Mann keeps highlighting as a factor that has existential priority. The mere sight of Harringay in the vicinity of someone you love is enough to be a bit of a shock:

The garden of the Beltons’ house was shut from the road by a tall flint wall over which the heads of a copper-beech, an acacia or two, some elder-bushes showed. When Carlyon reached the beginning of this wall, a green door which was set in it opened and a man came out. Before recognition of that figure could be conveyed by the eyes to the brain, the curate knew whose it was. The two men met beneath the over-topping boughs of the copper-beech, a half-dozen yards from Violet’s doorstep. They did not shake hands, nor did any greeting soever pass between them. . . .

“I suppose you can guess what I have to tell you?” Harringay said. His face had paled but he lifted his head and looked at the other fiercely—at Bill with a shamed face and a hanging head.

“Yes,” Bill assented miserably. “I suppose so.” (CS, 89)

The presentation of the identity of the figure to the curate “[b]efore” its imprint on “the brain” draws attention to the antteriority of shock over representation. Shock strikes the pre-reflective dimensions of consciousness where cognition is not yet able
to ‘represent’ to itself what is given. Working pre-cognitively the momentum of raw shock bypasses the cognition-routes governed by human reason (“brain”).

Harringay’s morbid need to place those he loves in the immediate vicinity of the shadow of death stands in alignment with his manner of exploiting situations of separation and departure. He keeps presenting the prospect of his imminent departure as a cloud of negativity terrifying those who are emotionally dependent on his physical presence. Harringay takes pleasure in telling his friend (Carlyon) and his wife (Violet) that he is about to vanish permanently (with Betty) from their lives: “In a month we shall be gone. In all probability we shall never come back” (CS, 90). Predictably, Carlyon is “wounded almost to death,” his life “robbed of its delight” (CS, 91). It will soon be Betty’s turn to be exposed to the same type of move in the same type of game “I shall go away” he suddenly announces, causing a “great darkness” to fall on her (CS, 167). Here Betty is getting a taste of her own medicine, having formerly been unsentimentally cruel to Carlyon (CS, 189).

The use of shocking assertions to maximize a sense of being-downtrodden reaches its climax when Harringay tells Violet that he aims to live without her:

“I am going away,” he said presently. . . . “I am going back to Paris.” He stopped, took the cigarette from his lips, and with the hand that held it, waved away the delicate rings of smoke from before his eyes. “I am going to stay there,” he finished.

Violet’s face twitched painfully, the tears started, smartingly, beneath the lashes.

“I think you are cruel to me,” she said, but so softly, with such an appeal in her whispering voice.

“I am only anxious to teach you, my dear Vi, what you are so slow in learning. I will not—be interfered with.” (CS, 193).

A while later Violet entertains the futile notion that he may have “thought better about running away so quickly”—only to learn that Harringay will hasten his departure, leaving on the very next day (CS, 201). His subsequent, last-minute change of mind

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26 Although “precognitive experience” is part of our everyday, easy-going “familiarity” with things and events around us (HHS, 72), Crowell points out that this in no way means that we automatically and effortlessly understand the inner constituting structures of this natural familiarity in an accurate, scientific way (HHS, 73). We live in things and events without usually feeling any need to “reflect upon” them (HHS, 73).
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is a move designed to accentuate the supposed superiority of free will-to-power over love (CS, 211).

Surrender as Shock

We now turn to the phenomenon of surrender, viewed here as internal to the ontological-existential nexus we have been investigating in *The Cedar Star.*

Violet’s excessive submission to Harringay is a form of surrender, and surrender stands in Mary Mann’s fiction in affiliation with shock. This is due to the nature of surrender, a part of which is its radical unpredictability.

In the *The Cedar Star* we immediately gather that Betty Jervois is an uncommonly fierce, proud, independent, talented, self-willed, and hot-headed woman. It is therefore quite shocking to see her acknowledge the more or less perverse circumstance that she deeply surrenders the whole of her existence and integrity to Edward Harringay’s erotic-artistic magnetism. Betty would like to rid herself of all feelings for this man. She knows that he has more or less taken the life of his loving wife in the meanly passive and cynically dishonorable act of letting her drown. Betty declares that she does not intend to win her happiness “at the cost” of Violet’s life (CS, 271). Yet Harringay retains his morbidly hypnotic spell over her life. He relishes her continued surrender to everything he says. He gloats over the implicit erotic surrender that he is able to solicit whenever they meet: “you belong to me. If you were tied fifty times over to Carlyon I should not hesitate to take you away from him. I don’t doubt my right to do so or my power. Neither do you doubt it” (CS, 271).

Betty Jervois is shocked at her own feebleness. Even more shocking, perhaps, is the discovery that Edward Harringay’s erotic nature courses so naturally through her veins that she can retain her composure in his immediate presence when confronted by him in a chance encounter at an art event. She is shocked by the fact that the shock of his co-presence does not shatter her equanimity. Had her attraction been slightly less absolute she would have been quivering with excitement and awe. But here we find two figures who secretly understand the shock they give each other, who understand the escalation of the shock-factor in any encounter, and who
understand that this state of affairs is natural for them. It is as if shock is something innate for both of them, so that in the reciprocation of shock, shock cancels itself out. Their liaison constitutes a shocking neutralization of shock. Together, they are what is more-shocking-than-shocking. They are at ease with shock, and with each of its possibilities. At the art event, Betty finds her composure to be a source of (shocking) wonder. How is it possible that two people who have become totally alienated by tragic misfortune and horrid scandal can immediately be on cool terms with one another, as if all of the past had never happened?

The whole history of their relations with each other rushed upon her with its ancient force. It was impossible that they two should sit there, side by side, in black silk muslin and swallow-tail coat, listening to selections from Cavallaria Rusticana like any ordinary man and woman between whom no recollection of betrayed affection, of faithless friendship, of wounded love lay; no persistent ghost of a drowned, disfigured face.” (CS, 265–66)

Harringay knows that the understated passion between them is still there, and that it is pointless to go on living in denial. The whole “thing is too strong for either of us” (CS, 276). On the one hand this assertion is expressive of male conceit (her body and her emotions are implicitly at his command). On the other hand his asseveration voices a calm order of things that may as well be acknowledged (they cannot live without each other).

Here, as so often in the writings of Mary Mann, there is a subsumption of destiny. The fortunes and misfortunes of lovers are part of a fatal design. Composure on both sides stems from the mutual intuition that fate cannot be resisted. Affectivity belongs to an order of predestination that leaves those who are drawn into its fatal currents quite tranquil even in the act of bottomless sinking to levels of extreme danger. Shock is woven into all of that. The shared acceptance of surrender implies an almost sad recognition of a level of shocking manifestations. When Harringay and Betty finally join forces there is accordingly little ecstatic rejoicing, the inevitable being the inevitable. There is produced “no sign of rapturous triumph,” of “delighted yielding,” of “joy and thankfulness” (CS, 276). Instead the overwhelming shock of surrender is accompanied by a sense of “foreboding” and absolute “gloom” (CS, 276). When Betty’s powers of moral and personal resistance have finally caved in she decides to write the single word “Come” on a message sent to Harringay in Africa—a decision conclusively amputated by a telegram announcing Harringay’s illness-caused death (CS, 312).
Betty’s act of surrendering to passion has been intertwined with a sense of loathing and self-loathing. I now turn to examine this affect as a factor comprised within the nexus of ontological shock in *The Cedar Star*.

Betty Jervois loathes herself for being attracted to a man she loathes. This self-loathing deepens her loathing of Harringay and hence also her attraction. Attraction and repulsion work according to a push-and-pull mechanism. In pushing something away, the obnoxious phenomenon secretly attracts it. Intensified attraction intensifies the sense of abhorrence.

The heroine of *The Cedar Star* is outlined right from the start as someone who is herself caught in contradiction. She is manifestly enchanting but there is always a shimmer of a capacity for unlimited hatred flickering all over the aura of her enthralling personality. Betty Jervois detests all sorts of people. She loathes her stepmother: “You see, I hate her,” she explains in a moment of candour (CS, 122). Betty’s powers of hatred seem almost to belong to an agenda. Without the shocking negativity of moments of pure loathing life would not be the sort of roller-coaster she wants it to be. She desires a life of tumultuous shocks rather than a uniformly boring plane of levelled feelings and subdued affections. Betty’s preferred way of life is one in which pleasing and intolerable shocks move the heart back and forth between ecstasy and despair. The art of being able to give way to loathing is from this undomesticated viewpoint a condition of possibility for authentic⁷ selfhood: “When you hate a person you’ve got to show it for your self-respect’s sake” (CS, 122). Betty has here contradicted the commonsensical viewpoint supporting the assumption that excessive hatred indeed often goes hand in hand with loss of respect and of self-respect.

Betty Jervois is addicted to loathing. Her fights with her stepmother are forms of life-enhancement. She shocks Carlyon: “If I were not in a position to nurse a big healthy grudge against Caroline I should die of emptiness. My hatred of your sister is a great resource. If I should oust her from her home . . . my chief occupation in life would be gone” (CS, 142). When we see Betty emotionally assault Reverend Carlyon we are shown a woman turning in loathing toward a man she in many ways deeply respects and loves. Noticing that he does “not look his best” on horseback she taunts

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⁷ Even a philosopher like Sartre, with his sustained focus on oppressive power-structures, is keen to tie the issue of ethical authenticity back into the personhood of individuals with names. Authenticity is inclusive of selfhood, for in the moment of moral crisis, ethical deliberation takes place in the irreducible solitude of personal conscience. See JPS (n. pag.).
him. It is unclear, however, whether the man’s poor horsemanship is really at issue here. What seems to be spite may in fact be a token of an urge that is shockingly self-destructive: “‘It certainly isn’t a pretty sight,’ said Betty, following an inexplicable, irresistible desire to be cruel to the man . . . She did not know if it was herself or Bill that she hated” (CS, 207).

In a sick way, the sense of deep, unsentimental affiliation between Betty Jervois and Edward Harringay is based on the shocking amount of loathing they are able to feel for people who are sweet, feeble, vulnerable, timid, shy, inartistic, placid, and plain. Harringay in fact confesses that he loathed life with Violet on account of her pleasing and loving personality: “I despised her for the sweetness and the gentleness you all praised, and I ill-used her to the best of my ability. She never retaliated, and I hated her for that, too” (CS, 235–36). Betty has no difficulty in grasping this type of feeling. It is what she intermittently feels with great force for Carlyon and Violet. In a civilization based on Christian principles (upheld throughout by the presence first of Reverend Jervois and later by Reverend Carlyon) the unrestrained loathing that Betty and Harringay keep expressing cannot be anything but shocking. Their Nietzschean understanding of affectivity (as sheer life-enhancement beyond the supposedly limiting framework of morality and religion) is a disquieting anomaly.

The issue arises as to whether love is at all possible within such a life-conception. The answer to this question, I suggest, is that in the shock-packed and negativity-packed world of Mary Mann’s fiction the ultimate shock is love. Love is shocking in The Cedar Star because it in no way fits into the prevailing atmosphere of human existence as exposure to forms of almost compulsive violence done to life by itself. In a universe where the ‘creativity’ of shock is so agile that some people tend to remain shockable no matter how often their lives have been thwarted by accident, malice, and misfortune, the shock of love presents itself as an anomaly capable of cancelling the overall balance toward a bleak and forbidding apperception of the nature of reality. In The Cedar Star love is inferior as energy and force but superior as shock. It is superior as shock because there is nothing like it. We feel that Harringay’s shocking malice expresses a general negativity-momentum in life, a relentless thrust that keeps shock on stand-by as something perpetually ready to assault humans at short notice. In contrast Violet’s sustained love for those who in different ways forsake and betray her is part of no such generalized ontological propulsion. Love is
not ontological. In Mary Mann’s world it does not belong to the nature of reality. Nor does it bring the nature of reality to expression. Love does not confirm some sort of ontological formula, the meaning of which (in another writer or another universe) would be that love belongs to the nature of reality. It does not. It belongs only to itself. In The Cedar Star love (as selfless loving, deep and lasting affection) is accordingly an outright monstrosity. It is what Harringay, Betty, and other figures belonging to Mary Mann’s ontological typology find upsetting. Love needs to be crushed as an abnormality. It lacks all congruity with the biological and ontological order of things. It is simply ridiculous.

Mary Mann’s writing lacks theological orientation. It presents theological figures such as Reverend Carlyon as intrinsically weak, lacking in true life-force. In The Cedar Star, the meekly loving souls of Carlyon and Violet are exposed to ridicule. The narrator seems to more or less participate in this contempt, apparently being committed to a modernly Nietzschen agenda that programatically subjects the idea of the virtue of meekness to derision. Even the narrator seems to scoff at Violet’s loving nature, love in a Darwinian-Nietzschean world of desire and power being sheepish. People like Violet are as it were not suitable for life, at least not for life among the strong—and certainly not for life lived in brute contexts of shocking adversity and shocking plots.

It could be argued, however, that there is in The Cedar Star (perhaps unintentionally against the grain of the narrator’s directedness) a shocking intensity in Violet’s softly sustained affections, a degree of shock that nothing else can match. Ironically, from this perspective, her lack of Darwinian-Nietzschean life-vitality is an outstanding factor marking her out as possessing a secret inner vivacity that enables her to affirm life in ways that are blocked to others.

Violet’s love for everyone, and in particular for Harringay, is expressive of the Christian principle of loving your enemies. This extreme love-readiness drives Betty and Harringay further into loathing, resentment, and emotional cruelty. Already stricken down by the near-total deafness that gives her a bizarre speech-impediment, Violet discloses her loving nature in the additional pieces of information that she has to reveal about the misfortunes of her life:

“How I loved you all!” Violet whispered on. “I thought little Ian’s death would have broken my heart. You must tell me all about her death some day, Betty.”

Betty’s lips set tighter; she shook her head.
“Did you know that my little girl also died?” Violet inquired after a pause. “Would you like to know her name? ‘Janet, Emily, Elizabeth,’ after you three. . . . I have never had another child, Betty.” (CS, 130)

From the viewpoint of Betty Jervois and Edward Harringay, the problem with people like Violet and Carlyon is their “boundless faith” in love and generosity (CS, 211). The curate is intolerable because he is so ready to let Harringay be “forgiven” for his betrayal (for stealing Violet). To believe that it is not “possible” for Harringay to “so sin again” is as naïve as to believe that Betty has the “faithfullest” of hearts (CS, 211).

But we need to wait for the crowning tragedy of the story to fully understand why a thing like love can be more overwhelmingly shocking than anything else in the world. As the full account of the fatal river-accident emerges, a lurid shift of perspective materializes: Violet had not just drowned; she had “let herself drown” (CS, 236; emphasis added). If this is true Violets last moment was the final and crowning link in her long life-chain of self-effacing love-acts. Seeing that there was only adequate opportunity for one of the two women to be saved from the river-waters Violet had sacrificed her life in order that the man she loved would find the woman he preferred alive and well. Betty acknowledges the reality of the nature of this event: Violet had “let herself drown instead of me” (CS, 236). Noticing that she was impeding Harringays’ efforts to save Betty from the whirlpool of the troubled river-waters Violet had finally “of her own accord released her hold of him and perished” (CS, 239).

The priority given to will-to-power (supposedly life-enhancing) over love (supposedly life-thwarting) in Betty’s mind-set compels her to distort what has happened. Failing to understand worthwhile love as anything other than allure and self-gratification, Betty voices the far-fetched notion that Violet had allowed herself to die in order to take “revenge” on all of them (CS, 236). A later incident reveals the extent to which this re-writing of the course taken by the accident was just a screening device put in place to protect Betty from the phenomenon of undiluted love. Unlike Violet, Harringay and Betty cannot really cope with love. This is another way of saying that they ultimately cannot cope with feeling as such—but only with feeling seen as an expression of power, sexuality, will, strength, etc. The inability of Betty Jervois to handle the drowned woman’s final love-gift materializes when an old photograph of Violet, previously kept in the pages of a Bible, is forwarded to Betty at the very moment when she is preparing to finally enjoy Harringay’s persistent calls
for erotic abandon (CS, 294). The indelible impression left on Betty by the photograph is nothing less than the imprint of the face of love. The return of the drowned companion’s visage constitutes a shock from which Betty is unable to recover. The photograph separates Betty and Harringay for the duration of their wedding night (CS, 294).

The image was shocking in so far as it brought to light the reality of love as a gift that is not reducible to some sort of base motivation associated with taking-possession. Violet’s death had been shocking because it manifested the scandalous phenomenon of a relinquishing of power and of a letting-go of the principle of possession. Through her death Violet had given her husband the freedom to enjoy the passion of a woman he really cared for (CS, 236). Far from being depraved (as Betty had suggested) this act of giving constituted an incident defining itself as standing apart from depravity—the issue I now broach as we near the conclusion of this investigation.

For a while, the manifestation of love’s pure countenance is able to arrest or at least slow down the momentum that all the time has been pulling Betty towards the act of fully giving herself up to depravity (Harringay). The shock of seeing herself caught in negative free-fall is exciting for Betty. From Harringay’s viewpoint Betty’s ultimate surrender to him and to his ways is to be expected. All he has to do is let nature take its course. Eventually the remaining traces of an obsolete but crumbling sense of social decency will fade away. Even “the laws of God” will be set aside (CS, 272). Not even “the tortures of hell” will keep them apart: “I am yours, I am content if the consequence is damnation” (CS, 275). Yet this type of Nietzschean defiance is occasionally undercut by the remnants of a certain fear and trembling. Betty feels a need to confess the “last sin” she has committed against Reverend Carlyon (CS, 278). Harringay’s feeble attempts to joke about the “degraded needs” of “our own fallen nature” do not change the gloomy mood of sinners with nothing left on earth to revere beside their passing and quickly-emptied gratifications (CS, 280).

In the end-segments of The Cedar Star there is still enough light in Betty’s new world of darkness for her to be able to be shocked by new things that she learns about her lover’s corrupt nature. Harringay confesses that he had been actively and intentionally instrumental in finalizing his wife’s death in the river-waters. She had, to be sure, let go of him (and therefore of life itself) of her own free will, but only after he had “told her to let go” (CS, 297). The fact that, out of love for all of them, she
actually “did” let go had been entirely her own choice, but he had himself brought her to the very brink of that awesome possibility. In fact he had finished her off. He had repelled her in an act showing his erotic-vitalistic preference of Betty over Violet as the chosen survivor: “She cut herself off from hope, deliberately, of her own free will. Afterwards, when she rose again, and clung to me, it was mechanical, simply, by no conscious action. She never knew that I struck her off” (CS, 297).

The firmly-contoured reality of depravity is brought to light in the act of understanding that Harringay’s line of chosen action does not fall short of “sin” (CS, 298). For him the event had just been a man’s preference of a strong woman over a weak one. For Betty his “hideous sin” (CS, 298) is nothing less than an act in which he has “murdered” his wife (CS, 299). The amorous hands that she feels on her face are those that had struck his drowning wife (CS, 300).

Surprised that his new wife reacts by abruptly leaving him Harringay feels that “[f]ate had fooled him” (CS, 301). Unscrupulous as ever he does not give up but goes after Betty once more. The ripple of the text’s final shock traverses the page when we learn that Harringay’s deed is not deemed vile enough to put Betty off for long. “Do you think, for one instant that I repent. . . . I have never wished that I had done otherwise” (OC, 307). The words are those of a man who thrives on depravity. Betty Jervois has become a woman depraved enough to find such speech-acts to be endearing (CS, 309).

Betty acknowledges that her most recent departure from Harringay had not been triggered by ethical considerations: “It was feeling, not duty that sent me away from you that night” (CS, 309). When Harringay had disappeared out of her life a long time ago, without her anticipating the possibility of ever seeing him again, the mere glimpse of him reappearing beneath her window as an anonymous stalker had instantly revealed to her the shocking power of feeling itself. Once revived dormant passion is able to throw off all issues hostile to its call:

A man in a blue great-coat passing slowly by the area railings, turned an attentive face upon the house. When he had passed he retraced his steps and passed again, and this time his eyes caught the eyes of the girl looking out.

Betty dropped the curtain and started back into the room, stood there motionless, hardly seeming to breathe, till into an ashen face the blood came rushing again, and the heart that had seemed to stand still bounded on into furious beating. She could not have said as she stood there wrapt in that moment of intesnest emotion if what she felt was simply exquisite pain, or joy so vivid as to be a kind of pain. She only
knew that here was life—life—life once again, and Betty Jervois had existed as one in the torpor of death (CS, 251–52)

Yet feeling is not confined to those who are immersed in passions bordering on depravity. As the jolt of perceiving the Bible-embedded photograph of Violet had made evident to Betty Jervois, the quiet radiance of a serenely loving face can leave an imprint with a power to shock equal to anything that an instant of hot passion can feverishly deliver: “The placid, gentle face smiled up at her from between the sacred leaves with its wistful, strained expression. Betty gripped the Bible in a tighter clasp and stared” (CS, 254). On the hither side of “first aversion” it is shocking to be “fascinated” by the “eyes” of the dead in so far as their gaze is not expressive of power or pleasure but of a nameless feeling without knowable directedness (CS, 254).

Coda

In seeking to elucidate Mary Mann’s fiction from the viewpoint of the phenomenon of shock, I have sought to avoid the widespread tendency to use the idea of the determinacy or indeterminacy of ‘meaning’ as a benchmark for measuring how progressive or sophisticated a literary text is. In The Cambridge Introduction to the Short Story, Adrian Hunter’s mind-set exemplifies this commonplace model of analysis.28 By presenting the withholding, problematization, deferral, or omission of meaning as a narrative virtue, Hunter is able to construct a melioristic history of the short story. This genre supposedly gets more and more refined as writers learn to give us little more than fragments, traces, losses, or absences of meaning. Hunter’s schema celebrates doubt, non-resolution, displacement, provisionality, ambiguity, indeterminacy, absence, precariousness, enigma, irony, uncertainty, and disruption. These factors have the ‘ability’ to destroy, delay, halt, deflect, or cloud meaning. From this type of postmodern viewpoint narration that remains “secure in its omniscience” is aesthetically and intellectually naïve or primitive (CIS, 24). In Hunter’s developmental model of the short story, there is a praiseworthy process in which the superficiality of dramatic story-telling designed for the masses evolves into

28 Adrian Hunter, The Cambridge Introduction to the Short Story in English (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); in parenthetical documentation abbreviated CIS.
the refined art of making mature readers enjoy the text as an array of enigmatic, incomplete semi-structures full or delicate irony and poignant “precariousness” (CIS, 27).

It is the assumption of this prevalent outlook that the art of a story lies in the artiness of the telling. It is assumed that a complex mode of telling—full of omissions and silent “impercipience”—by the same token is the text’s complexity as such (CIS, 22). It is conversely presumed that a simplicity of narrative technique is synonymous with a simple-minded aesthetic structure. The “disturbingly elliptical” telling-procedure is the hallmark of the refined short story (CIS, 22).

Were we to embrace this model of the beneficial nature of “the elliptical austerity of a modern realist narrative technique” (CIS, 23), we would find ourselves scoffing at literary discourse in which the writer still seems to be stuck in “the plot-based intricacy of the traditional tale” (CIS, 23). Such traditionalism would only be redeemed by the unexpected incursions of pleasingly experimental forms of embedded displacement. I suggest that this type of outlook may be challenged by the act of ceasing to be hypnotized by the meaning-factor.

What is vital in Mary Mann’s literary texts is not the issue of meaning in the first place. Accordingly this investigation has not examined her works by asking whether a story or technique presents life or writing as being full or meaning, as being empty of meaning, as being half-full of meaning, or as being half-empty of meaning. In most literary texts, as in most human lives, what is more important than the issue of meaning is the issue of hope, happiness, trust, spirit of adventure. These all have to do with intensity of feeling. Feeling is not itself a form of meaning. It does not ‘have’ any sort of meaning and is not a sign pointing beyond itself to something that it signifies.

What is of most concern to people and what is most passionately felt by literary characters are the broad gulfs between happiness and unhappiness, between moments of faith in life and moments of loss of faith in life, between appreciation of the intensities of the affective life and loathing of these intensities—or indifference to them. In novels and short stories we often see a character arriving at a crisis. At such a turning-point life either goes one way or the other, either out of the light or into it. Such a defining moment is not reducible to any ‘meaning.’ What pushes life one way rather than another may often just be good fortune or the contingency of a mood-swing. Such turns do not mean anything. They just are. Mary Mann’s texts are full
of such moments that just are. That is what, in different ways, is shocking about them. A person or character can be uplifted or devastated in a sustained way by life-episodes or encounters that contribute nothing towards any ‘meaning.’

If the writer (with her readers) is mainly concerned with something totally other than ‘meaning,’ she may not wish to waste time on constructing all sorts of omissions and lapses serving to highlight what has been omitted or deferred. We certainly find plenty of omission and lapses in what transpires in Mary Mann’s texts but such lacunae may simply be suggestive of the way life (rather than any meaning in it) presents itself. Life does not always—or even typically—run smoothly. In Mann’s poverty-stricken rural Norfolk it is rather the case that life often actualizes itself in jolts, shocks, and fits. Life simply breaks down quite often, and—at least for this writer—there is no profound ‘meaning’ in any of that. When a machine or piece of technical equipment breaks down, most people just want the thing fixed or carried away. Hardly anybody looks for a deep meaning in the event. It just happens. I see Mary Mann’s use of shock as being part of the business of acknowledging this ‘simple’ state of affairs. It is a realistic strategy even (or particularly) when the shock at hand is peculiarly gruesome.

In Mary Mann’s Norfolk tales discontinuities and shocks are not charged with the mystique of a negative energy encouraging her readers to find additional fuel for some theory about the intrinsic lack of meaning or presence in life. Her characters move over a chessboard where black squares are black. The act of being forced by life to enter such a field of darkness remains shocking no matter how often the extinction of life recurrrs. Because her characters are compelled to live, and to live more often than not in extremely adverse circumstances, they are compelled to have intercourse with sheer negativity. There is no meaning in that; nor is that lack of meaning itself a species of meaning to be understood on a ‘higher’ level of analysis or literary appreciation.
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