The Philosophy of Marguerite Young's Miss MacIntosh, My Darling

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The Marguerite Young Society
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Contents

Part One: The Claim **3**
Chapter 1. The House Is Full 4
Chapter 2. The Unnamed Guests 8
Chapter 3. How to Read a Sentence That Thinks 11
Chapter 4. Two Utopias and Eighteen Years 14

Part Two: The Trials **17**
Chapter 5. Catherine Cartwheel and the Invented World 18
Chapter 6. Mr. Spitzer, Peron, and the Divided Self 20
Chapter 7. Esther Longtree and Endless Hope 22
Chapter 8. Cousin Hannah and the Life of Action 24
Chapter 9. Miss MacIntosh and the Fall of Common Sense 26

Part Three: The System Stated **29**
Chapter 10. Young’s Own Words 30
Chapter 11. Not One Self 31
Chapter 12. Reality Is Constructed 32
Chapter 13. Grief Doesn't End 33
Chapter 14. Witnessing Is The Core Ethical Act 34
Chapter 15. Build Anyway, Knowing It's Temporary 35
Chapter 16. Unfinished Is Honest 36
Chapter 17. The Margins Reveal the Truth 37
Chapter 18. The Past Doesn't Go Away 38
Chapter 19. Language Shapes What's Possible 39
Chapter 20. The Sacred Is Here 40
Chapter 21. The Crossing Point 41

Part Four: After the Collapse **42**
Chapter 22. The Politics of Distrusting Leaders 43
Chapter 23. The Ethics of Going On 46
Chapter 24. The Ending as Demonstration 48

Part One: The Claim

Chapter 1. The House Is Full

Pillars: Pillar 2 (Reality Is Constructed) · Pillar 8 (The Past Doesn't Go Away)

Chapters discussed: 9, 14, 24, 25, 42, 45, 47, 52, 59, 82

In the twenty-fourth chapter of *Miss MacIntosh, My Darling*, the servants in Catherine Cartwheel's seaside house sit arguing about where and when they are. "One would say that it was Roman in the morning but Greek in the afternoon or that the Duke of Wellington was surely expected." Then the rooms are assigned. "Admiral Peary was to be put into the blue room which was already occupied by Plato's boat, et cetera. Sir Christopher Wren and Jenny Lind were to be put into the rose. Spinoza and Shakespeare and Mrs. Sydington were already in the green." The house, Vera says, "was always crowded to the roof," its bedrooms "filled with famous guests sleeping tier above tier according to rank and station but with little regard for century."

This is one of the few places in a novel of more than a thousand pages where philosophers appear by name, and it is worth noticing what happens to them. Plato does not arrive with an argument. He arrives as a boat, taking up space in a room that must also hold an Arctic explorer. Spinoza shares the green room with Shakespeare and with a Mrs. Sydington whom no history remembers. The phrase "et cetera" does quiet, devastating work. The great systems of Western thought are filed alongside a soprano, an architect, and a duke, and the filing is done by servants who cannot agree on the century.

The same thing happens earlier. In the ninth chapter, Catherine lies in "an unearthly coma," receiving "her distinguished circle which never diminished and which included Pythagoras who had a golden thigh and had discovered heaven's harmony, the symphonious music of the silver-toned spheres." Pythagoras is given his legend and his great idea in a single breath, and then the circle keeps expanding. "The P's were crowding upon her," the passage continues, "planets, Pythian games, polygons, Prussians, petunias, pseudopsias which are the delusions of sight." The mathematician who heard the music of the spheres is one P among petunias, and right beside him stands a medical term for seeing what is not there. The placement is a verdict. The sentence does not say Pythagoras was wrong. It says he is one more guest in the house of illusion, and that the house has room for everyone.

In the fourteenth chapter, Catherine "would ordinarily not ask for the appearance beyond the appearance, mainly because she was aware of it and knew that the dog was Socrates." The joke runs deep. Pythagoras taught that souls pass from body to body, and here the most famous questioner in philosophy has been reborn as a household pet. The phrase "the appearance beyond the appearance" names the move Plato made at the foundation of Western metaphysics, the claim that behind the shifting world of appearances stands a truer world of forms. Catherine does not refute this. She simply declines to ask, because she already knows what she would find. Behind every appearance there is only another appearance, and the dog is Socrates.

Even Copernicus appears, in the same chapter, as “the author of that great celestial revolution which had exiled the dear God to the void and had robbed us of the evidence of our senses.” In a single phrase, the scientific revolution becomes one more event in the long history of illusion. The senses were wrong about the sun, and so the senses cannot be trusted, and so the ground under every realist falls away.

Aristotle visits twice, both times secondhand. Catherine says that “Aristotle had said that the ear was the doorway to the soul” (ch. 41), and Mr. Spitzer half remembers an old legend that “hedgehogs stand with their backs always to the sea—was it not Aristotle who said so?” (ch. 61). Diogenes comes with his lantern, “looking for an honest man,” in Miss MacIntosh’s last chapter (ch. 63).

When readers first meet these passages, it is natural to think Young is arguing with the philosophers, or gathering them up, or trying to illuminate what they meant. The scenes suggest something else. An argument requires two parties standing on the same ground. In Catherine’s house, no one stands on ground at all. Young is not in conversation with philosophy. She is housing it. She gives each system a room, lets it sleep beside the others, and waits to see what happens when the house becomes crowded to the roof.

The Second Door

If named philosophers were the only evidence, the claim would be thin. A dozen mentions in a book of this size could be decoration. But the named guests are only the first of two ways philosophy enters the novel. The second way is quieter and far more pervasive. Young takes a philosopher’s central image, removes the name, and gives the image to a character to live inside.

Friedrich Nietzsche is never named in the novel, but his images run through it. His most famous line warns that whoever gazes long into an abyss will find the abyss gazing back. In the twenty-fifth chapter, Mr. Spitzer, the careful old attorney, walks through the world never knowing “what the next step would bring, whether he would step on nothing, whether it would be a stairway or a dissolving stairway or a chasm filled with the songs of dead birds, whether he would stare at that wild, precipitous abyss which would stare at him.” Nietzsche’s abyss sat before the heroic thinker who dared to look. Young moves it underfoot. It becomes the floor of an ordinary walk to the office. Later Mr. Spitzer fears he has “stepped upon a pulsing cloud where he had thought there was no pavement” (ch. 45), and elsewhere “Every crack might suddenly be the abyss” (ch. 52). There is nothing to stare into from a safe height, because everyone has been walking on the abyss all along.

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the prophet climbs a mountain path with a dwarf, the spirit of gravity, riding on his shoulders, and at the gateway called Moment he first proposes the thought of eternal recurrence. In the forty-fifth chapter of Young’s novel, Cousin Hannah, the old suffragette and mountain climber, lies dying and raves that she is “climbing naked through mountains of snow.” Then she cries out, “Who is that dwarf, a turret on his head, a rose at his collar? It is the rose of consciousness.” The mountain, the climber, and the dwarf are all present. But the dwarf now wears a turret, and the turret belongs to the

novel's own house, which Vera later describes as "the dark house with its golden turrets and towers" (ch. 82). The spirit of gravity has put on the architecture of illusion as a hat.

Eternal recurrence itself appears openly. In the forty-second chapter, Mr. Spitzer, mourning his brother, asks: "Should not eternal recurrence be the one law of life, and should not the great lamp-lighter going his rounds through darkened heavens light that lamp which had gone out and was himself shining through clouds?" The doctrine that Nietzsche offered as the supreme test of a life is proposed here by a grieving man who wants his brother back. And the novel does not leave it there. Five chapters later the idea returns, softened, as "life forever repeating itself as the rain recalls the rain and the star recalls the star," followed by a telling qualification: "This tendency of an image to repeat an image, perhaps with variations, was something to be considered, weighed, taken into account" (ch. 47). By the fifty-ninth chapter it has broken. Mr. Spitzer tries to compose music from the paths of billiard balls, only to discover that "no game could doubtless ever exactly repeat itself. The ivory balls would not roll twice the same." (ch. 59)

Across seventeen chapters, a philosophical doctrine is proposed, qualified, and undone, and it is undone by nothing more than lived experience piling up. No one refutes eternal recurrence. It simply cannot survive the accumulation of one man's actual days.

What Kind of Book This Is

These two doors, the named guests and the unnamed images, point to the argument of this book. Marguerite Young did not write a novel that comments on philosophy. She built a philosophical system and used fiction as its demonstration. Her method is to take a way of understanding the world, place it inside a human life, and then keep adding experience until the understanding gives way. She does this to religious faith, to romantic imagination, to heroic action, to hope, to common sense, and to the doctrines of the philosophers themselves. Every category fails under the weight of what keeps arriving.

A skeptical reader will object at once. If every system fails under accumulation, then Young's system must fail too, and the phrase "complete philosophical system" contradicts itself. This book takes that objection as its center rather than its weakness. Young's system is complete precisely because it includes its own undoing. It is not a set of doctrines to be believed. It is a way of seeing how every doctrine breaks, joined to a way of living after the break. Young said as much, late in her life, to the interviewers Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs (Review of Contemporary Fiction, Spring 2003): "When you have examined all the illusions of life and know that there isn't any reality, but you nevertheless go on, then you are a mature human being."

The chapters that follow set out that system in four movements. The rest of Part One teaches how to read Young's sentences as arguments and lays the biographical ground from which the novel grew. Part Two follows the trials, one lived system at a time. Part Three states the principles that remain once the trials are over. Part Four turns to consequences: politics, ethics, and the novel's ending, which is the system's final demonstration.

The novel itself supplies the book's title. In the fifty-second chapter, Mr. Spitzer searches the forty trunks that Cousin Hannah brought back from forty voyages, trying rusted key after rusted key, and understands at last that "never would that lock open which should open upon all mysteries at once." A few lines later the thought is completed: "There was no master key." Every philosopher in Catherine's crowded house arrived carrying a master key. Young's achievement was to show, one life at a time, that none of them fits every lock, and then to ask what a person does with a ring of keys that only open some doors.

Chapter 2. The Unnamed Guests

Pillars: Pillar 1 (Not One Self) · Pillar 2 (Reality Is Constructed) · Pillar 10 (The Sacred Is Here)

Chapters discussed: 5, 13, 18, 29, 38, 41, 43, 45, 48, 49, 51, 52

The novel names only a handful of philosophers. Many more are in it without their names. Young took an image or a saying from a thinker, put it in her own words, and gave it to a character to live inside, as she did with Nietzsche's abyss. The guests in this chapter never sign the register. They come from Greece and Germany, and from China and India too, and the novel gives each of them as much room as Plato's boat.

Heraclitus and the River

Heraclitus, the Greek philosopher of change, is remembered for saying that no one can step into the same river twice (Plato, *Cratylus* 402a). Young's river runs through the whole novel. "That same stream which a child could wade in was that same river which a man could drown in" (ch. 5). Much later, "all things flowed into all things like water flowing into water" (ch. 52). In Catherine's garden, as Vera sees it, the life-sized chessmen move "as if played by invisible players who could perceive an order in multiple confusions of movements and sounds, a secret plan" (ch. 13), close to his saying that time is a child playing draughts. The Deep Architecture follows him further in The Garden, the Stream, and the Blind God.

Epicurus and the Garden

The same garden holds Epicurus, whose followers met in a garden and taught that the good life is a quiet pleasure, and Anatole France, whose *The Garden of Epicurus* (1894) Young knew. In Catherine's version, "life was only this, a perpetual garden party omitting the tragic spirit" (ch. 13). The garden keeps its pleasures by leaving out grief, and the rest of the novel puts the grief back.

Zhuangzi and the Butterfly

Zhuangzi, a Chinese philosopher of the fourth century BCE and one of the founders of Taoism, told of dreaming he was a butterfly. When he woke, he wrote, "Now I do not know whether I was then a man dreaming I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly, dreaming I am a man" (translated by Herbert A. Giles, 1889, chapter 2). The question comes to Mr. Spitzer almost in Zhuangzi's form: "Did he so much as know whether he was a man or a butterfly, a lost psyche drifting down the wind?" (ch. 38). For him the butterfly question is also the twin question. He sees "a butterfly pirouetting in a cloud, butterfly which had seemed one butterfly but was always two butterflies conjoining over

the suddenly shining wave, one with its image” (ch. 49). The Deep Architecture’s The Butterfly’s Dream gives the full trail.

The Net of Heaven

The Tao Te Ching, the old Chinese book of the Way, says in chapter 73, “The meshes of the net of Heaven are large; far apart, but letting nothing escape” (translated by James Legge, 1891). On the night Vera sees her bald, Miss MacIntosh says it in her own way: “Heaven’s nets are woven very wide,” and then, “but none shall escape them” (ch. 18). The realist who believed in nothing invisible speaks the oldest Chinese wisdom without knowing it.

The Upanishads

The Isha Upanishad, one of the old Hindu teachings on the self and the world, says of the one reality, “It moves and It moves not. It is far and also It is near. It is within and also It is without all this” (verse 5, translated by Swami Paramananda, 1919). Of Catherine, motionless in her bed, the novel says: “She was swifter than her own mind, swifter than her mercurial thoughts. She was far, yet she was near. She was within, yet she was outside” (ch. 41). The opium dreamer is given the language of the oldest Indian philosophy.

The Other Shore

The Buddha taught that freedom is a crossing to “the other shore.” Dying, Cousin Hannah cries out, “A light, a light! I see a light upon the other shore,” and Mr. Spitzer, beside her, has already told himself where he will be: “For he would be upon the other shore” (ch. 43). Nirvana sits in his list of imagined heavens, beside Valhalla and the happy hunting grounds (ch. 29).

Leibniz and the Pebble

Gottfried Leibniz, the German philosopher who died in 1716, pictured the world as made of tiny units he called monads, each one “a perpetual living mirror of the universe” (*Monadology*, section 56, translated by Robert Latta, 1898). In the novel, as Mr. Spitzer hears bells ringing as if all music might be heard at once, “A great city was enclosed inside a pebble” (ch. 49). Two chapters later he gives a voice “even to a city roaring inside a pebble” (ch. 51). Each small thing holds the whole.

Schopenhauer and the Music of the Will

Arthur Schopenhauer held that behind the world we see is a single blind striving he called the will, and that music, alone among the arts, speaks that will directly (*The World as Will and Representation*, 1818). Mr. Spitzer imagines “the beautiful music of the spheres,

filling all space with its sound as of the human will” (ch. 38), music his dead brother heard and he cannot. The Deep Architecture’s The World as Will reads Mr. Spitzer through Schopenhauer.

William James and the Stream

Young named William James’s *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) as a book she studied “as if it were a Bible” (American Audio Prose Library interview, 1983). James wrote that consciousness “is nothing jointed; it flows” (chapter 9). Young keeps the stream and breaks its flow. Mr. Spitzer finds that “Consciousness was ever that which was sporadic, fluttering, not constant even in this life, just as sustained attention was impossible” (ch. 48).

Boethius and the Wheel

Boethius, writing in prison before his execution in 524, gave the Middle Ages the wheel of Fortune, which lifts people up and drops them without regard to merit. The family at the center of the novel is named Cartwheel, and Mr. Spitzer wonders whether “perhaps the smallest things were indeterminate, that only they escaped this wheel of fortune” (ch. 45). The Character Hubs page holds “All the Darlings,” a map of the novel’s people drawn on a Boethian diagram.

None of these guests is named, and none is refuted by argument. Like the philosophers who are named, each is given a room and a life to live in, and each idea is tested by what happens to the person carrying it. The next chapter shows how to watch that testing happen inside a single sentence.

Chapter 3. How to Read a Sentence That Thinks

Pillars: Pillar 1 (Not One Self) · Pillar 9 (Language Shapes What's Possible)

Chapters discussed: 1

Readers new to *Miss MacIntosh, My Darling* often describe the prose as a flood. The sentences are long, the images pile on one another, and the thread of an idea seems to vanish under ornament. The usual advice is to surrender and let the language wash over. That advice is half right. The prose does need surrender, but it also rewards a slower kind of attention, because Young's sentences are not decoration laid over an argument. They are the argument. Each long passage tends to move through three stages: a proposal, an accumulation, and a collapse. Once a reader learns to see those stages, the flood becomes a demonstration.

The clearest place to learn this is the first chapter, where Vera Cartwheel, the narrator, rides a bus through fog into the American interior. Something she sees by the road starts a chain of thought that runs for more than a page. It is worth walking through slowly.

The Setting

The passage begins with an image: "a tall man with a child perched on his lean shoulders, a double-headed man, staring at nothingness or beyond it." Before any idea is stated, the body itself has been doubled. A man with a child on his shoulders is two people who look, from a distance, like one person with two heads. The self that is more than one, which will run through the whole novel, arrives first as a trick of fog.

Then the landscape disappears. "There was now no landscape. There was now no landscape but the soul's, and that is the inexactitude, the ever shifting and the distant." This is the ground being cleared. Outer reality has been swallowed by mist, and what remains is inner reality, which Young immediately describes as inexact and shifting. The stage is set for a philosophical claim, and it is set on unstable footing.

Vera then states the problem her whole life has posed: "All my life I had been reaching for the tangible, and it had evaded me, much like the myth of Tantalus, much as if the tangible itself were an illusion." Tantalus stood in water that drained away whenever he bent to drink. Vera's version of the curse is epistemological. Solid reality recedes whenever she reaches for it.

The Proposal

Now the great proposal comes, and it comes as a question. "What was the organization of illusion, of memory? Who knew even his own divided heart? Who knew all hearts as his own?" The questions lead into a long, rising sentence that asks whether, "in the vision of some omniscient eye," there would be "a web of spidery logic establishing the most secret

relationships, deep calling to deep, illuminations of the eternal darkness, recognitions in the night world of voyager dreams, all barriers dissolving, all souls as one and united?”

This is the doctrine philosophers call monism, the belief that all apparent separateness is finally one reality. It has a long history, from the Upanishads through Plotinus to Spinoza, the same Spinoza who sleeps in Catherine’s green room. Notice how carefully Young frames it. The unity is visible only to “some omniscient eye.” It is held together by “a web of spidery logic,” a phrase that makes the web both beautiful and fragile, and faintly sinister. And the whole vision is a question, not an assertion.

Then the question hardens into four short declarations, the shortest sentences in the passage. “Every heart is the other heart. Every soul is the other soul. Every face is the other face. The individual is the one illusion.”

Here the prose changes speed. After a sentence that has run on for dozens of clauses, these four land like hammer blows. This is the proposal at its most confident. If a reader stopped here, it would be easy to conclude that Young believes in mystical oneness, and many readers have concluded exactly that.

The Accumulation

But the passage does not stop. The very next sentence reads: “I had walked alone, searching, seeing only, though I sought for an ultimate harmony, the fleeting image, the disrelation, the chaos begetting the chaos, the truth as but another illusion, that which must perish, the rose which must fade, the heart which must stop.”

Experience has entered, and it enters as a list. Each item in the list is something Vera actually found while looking for the unity she had just proclaimed. She sought harmony and found “the fleeting image.” She sought relation and found “the disrelation.” She sought truth and found “the truth as but another illusion.” Then come the mortal facts: the rose that fades, the heart that stops. The grammar matters. The monist vision was framed as a hope (“would there not be”). The accumulation is framed as memory (“I had walked”). Hope is set against what actually happened, and what actually happened keeps growing.

The next sentence adds more. “Nothing I had touched but that it had faded like a dream, there being no dream that would not fail, no life which would not cease, no soul which answered mine like deep calling to deep.” The phrase “deep calling to deep,” which a moment ago described the secret bond among all souls, now returns in the negative. No soul answered hers that way. Young has taken the proposal’s own language and turned it against the proposal.

The Collapse

The collapse follows in a single sentence. “That background of illusion from which I always fled like a drowning man who clutches at a straw, it was always that background of illusion confronting me again, even as the foreground, and there seemed no truth but what the erroneous mind provided, another dream which had nor purpose nor bearing.”

The monist doctrine said that the individual was the one illusion. The collapse says that illusion is everywhere, in the background and the foreground alike. The unity has not been disproved by a counterargument. It has been drowned. And near the end of the passage comes the conditional that seals it: “could I have believed in that ultimate harmony, I could have been among them, but there had been only, in my narrow experience, the dream of chaos repeating chaos.” The phrase “chaos repeating chaos” even anticipates the novel’s later treatment of eternal recurrence. What returns eternally, in Vera’s experience, is not the beloved moment but disorder itself.

What Remains

Something does survive the collapse, and it is important for everything that follows. The passage does not end in nihilism. It ends in searching. Vera asks, “Where should I go? Where should I turn?” and the bus keeps moving. The four hammer-blow sentences about oneness are not erased. They remain on the page, true as a longing, false as a doctrine. Young lets the reader hold both. The unity of all hearts is something Vera wants and cannot confirm, and the wanting itself becomes part of what she carries forward.

A Method for Reading

This single passage teaches a method that works throughout the novel. When a sentence begins to reach toward a universal claim, a reader can watch for three things.

First, the frame of the proposal. Young usually marks a large idea as a question, a hope, a conditional, or a thought belonging to a particular character. She rarely asserts a doctrine in her own narrative voice without such a frame.

Second, the point where lived detail begins to pile up. Lists are the signal. When Young starts a list, experience is entering the argument, and the list will usually keep going past the point of comfort.

Third, the turn, often marked by the return of the proposal’s own words in a changed or negated form. “Deep calling to deep” becomes “no soul which answered mine like deep calling to deep.” The eternal law of recurrence becomes billiard balls that “would not roll twice the same.”

With this method in hand, the famous difficulty of the prose begins to look different. The length of Young’s sentences is not self-indulgence. It is the room an idea needs in order to be tested. A short sentence can state a doctrine. Only a long one can show the doctrine failing.

Chapter 4. Two Utopias and Eighteen Years

Pillars: Pillar 5 (Build Anyway, Knowing It's Temporary) · Pillar 6 (Unfinished Is Honest)

Marguerite Young was born in Indianapolis in 1908 and died there in 1995. Between those dates she published two books of poetry, a work of history, a single enormous novel, and a collection of essays, and she left behind an unfinished biography of the labor leader Eugene V. Debs. On the surface this looks like a scattered career. Seen from the angle of this book, it looks like one long inquiry carried out in several forms.

New Harmony

The ground of that inquiry lies in a small town on the Wabash River in southwestern Indiana. New Harmony was the site of two of the most famous utopian experiments in American history. In 1814 the followers of George Rapp, a German religious leader, founded a community there to await the Second Coming. They lived celibate, worked in common, and prospered, and a decade later they sold the whole town and left. The buyer was Robert Owen, a Welsh industrialist and reformer, who hoped to build a new moral world on reason, science, and cooperative labor. Owen’s community fell apart within a few years.

Young’s mother and stepfather lived in New Harmony, and Young spent years there working on the book that became *Angel in the Forest: A Fairy Tale of Two Utopias*, published in 1945. The subtitle is exact. She studied two complete systems for organizing human life, one grounded in faith and one grounded in reason, and she watched both of them fail. Rapp’s faith could not survive the passing years in which the promised end did not come. Owen’s rationalism could not survive the actual people who arrived to live in it, with their quarrels and their laziness and their private dreams.

This matters for the argument of this book because of what Young did next. In 1945, the year *Angel in the Forest* appeared, she began *Miss MacIntosh, My Darling*. She expected the novel to take two years. It took eighteen. She came to it directly from the study of two collapsed utopias, and the novel can be read as that study turned inward. Where the history had examined whole communities organized around a single idea, the novel examines single lives organized around a single idea. The method is the same. Place the system among real people, let time pass, and record what gives way.

The Eighteen Years

The long composition is often told as a story of obsession, and it was that. But it also bears on the argument. A novel whose method is accumulation could not be written quickly. Young worked on it daily, nine to five, for eighteen years, and the book’s size is not an accident of temperament. It is structurally necessary. A system can only be shown failing under accumulation if the accumulation actually happens on the page. A short

novel could state that common sense is an illusion. Only a very long one could let common sense live for hundreds of pages, grow familiar and beloved, and then break.

The eighteen years also placed the novel in history. Young began it in the last year of the Second World War and finished it in the middle of the civil rights movement. Those decades saw the collapse of several grand systems that had promised to explain and order the world, and the rise of leaders who claimed to have the master key. The novel almost never mentions any of this directly. Its politics work at a deeper level, as Part Four will show.

The Political Conscience

Young was clear that her novel had a politics. In the interview with Friedman and Fuchs, she said: “It isn’t that Miss MacIntosh has a social conscience, but the book does. If you understand hallucination and illusion, you don’t blindly follow any leader.” She tied this directly to Mr. Spitzer and to one of the novel’s strangest minor figures: “Mr. Spitzer’s adventures and the passages on the little frog musician investigate the nature of illusion, and if there is no certain reality, the idea of following a leader must be scrutinized.” And she added a sentence that is close to a statement of method: “Some of the poetic writers who insert passages of realism in their texts have no underlying philosophy to uphold them and revert to realism. I don’t believe there can be a poetic novel without political consciousness.”

The phrase “underlying philosophy” is important. Young believed the poetic novel needed one, and she believed she had one. Her charge against other writers was not that they were too realistic but that they fell back on realism because they had nothing else to stand on. Realism, for Young, was not neutral ground. It was one more system, and a writer who retreated into it had simply chosen a comfortable room in the crowded house.

After the novel, Young turned to Eugene V. Debs, the Indiana-born labor organizer and five-time Socialist candidate for president. The Vietnam War years pushed her attention toward labor history and toward the American traditions of mutual aid and common ownership that Debs represented. She worked on the biography for the rest of her life. It was published after her death, edited by Charles Ruas, as *Harp Song for a Radical: The Life and Times of Eugene Victor Debs*. Even at more than six hundred pages, it covers mainly his early years and the world that formed him, and it stops before the strikes and campaigns that made him famous.

There is something fitting in that. A writer whose philosophy honored the unfinished left her last great work unfinished. The book about Debs grew the way her novel had grown, by accumulation, by digression, by the refusal to reduce a life to its headline events. It became another demonstration of her method, applied this time to history.

One Inquiry

Read together, the three prose books form a single line. *Angel in the Forest* tests two complete systems against the life of a community and watches them fail. *Miss MacIntosh,*

My Darling tests many systems against individual lives and builds, from their failures, a way of living without a master key. *Harp Song for a Radical* turns that way of living outward toward politics, toward a leader who, unlike the blind leaders Young warned against, belonged to the people he led. The novel stands at the center of this line, and it is to the novel's trials that Part Two now turns.

Each chapter in this part follows the same shape. It asks what a lived system promises, how the novel loads that system with experience, where the system breaks, and what is left when it does. The order matters. The trials begin with the most openly illusory life in the book and end with the life built to refute illusion, because only when realism falls is the demonstration complete.

Part Two: The Trials

Chapter 5. Catherine Cartwheel and the Invented World

Pillars: Pillar 2 (Reality Is Constructed) · Pillar 3 (Grief Doesn't End) · Pillar 8 (The Past Doesn't Go Away)

See also: Catherine Cartwheel

Chapters discussed: 14, 24, 27, 28, 30, 41, 82

The Promise

Catherine Cartwheel, Vera's mother, lives in an opium dream in a great house by the sea, and she has built there the most complete system in the novel. Its promise is freedom. In her world nothing is fixed by fact, and so nothing can wound her by being true. Vera states the principle plainly: "it was this lack of faith which made all things possible to her" (ch. 27). Where a believer is bound to what she believes, Catherine is bound to nothing. She can populate her rooms with anyone from any century.

Her system also promises knowledge. She has, the novel says, "a third eye in her forehead, the eye of her omniscience" (ch. 14). She knows the comings and goings of her guests, the moods of the dead, the thoughts of people she has never met. And the system promises company. Her favorite companion, Eustace, is invisible, and so he can be anything. "Sometimes he was a mocking bird. Sometimes he was an old woman, and sometimes he was an old man bearded like the cypress," and "he was not confined to any one form by the laws of nature, which had been suspended in his case" (ch. 30).

This is idealism lived all the way through: the view, found in different forms from Berkeley onward, that what exists is what is perceived by a mind. Catherine goes further than any philosopher dared. She is the mind, and the world is what she perceives.

The Loading

Young does not argue against Catherine's system. She fills it. The house becomes "crowded to the roof" (ch. 24). The guests sleep "tier above tier." The P's crowd upon her, planets and petunias and Prussians. Eustace multiplies into "many persons, varying according to her whims" (ch. 30). The more she invents, the more there is to hold, and the house of pure mind becomes a house of pure clutter.

Time loads the system too. Catherine telephones Cousin Hannah for years after Hannah's death, the telephone "ringing and ringing through empty rooms" of a Boston mansion long since torn down for a highway (ch. 30). The invented world has no way to register loss, and so loss accumulates in it unseen, like water behind a wall.

The Break

The break comes from two directions. The first is a real person. In the fourteenth chapter, among all the imaginary guests, “Only Mr. Spitzer aroused, as she did not like to admit, her feelings of hostile doubt, perhaps because he was flesh and blood and real, making her feel that there was that about him which exceeded her comprehension and might be vastly different from anything either she or God had dreamed.” Idealism cannot hold a real other. The one thing Catherine’s omniscient eye cannot see is a living man who comes to sit by her bedside. Vera notes elsewhere that “The real persons were apparently the only persons who were unreal to my mother” (ch. 30). The system inverts reality so thoroughly that it can no longer find the people who love her.

The second break is sorrow. Catherine has arranged her life so that nothing can make her grieve, and the cost of that arrangement finally comes due. In the forty-first chapter, Vera says Catherine “had kept herself, at all costs, vastly amused, sacrificing her life to her amusements, just as she remarked when she thought of the infinite sorrows she had missed.” Then comes one of the most important sentences in the novel: “The lack of sorrow was a sorrow, too.” The system promised escape from grief. Lived long enough, it produces a new grief, the grief of a life that has not been felt. In the same passage Catherine admits she “could not tell whether a thing had been a star or a firefly,” and Vera adds, “Perhaps my mother had never really known anyone.”

At the end of the novel, the invented world is literally destroyed. Vera reports “that the opium paradise had crumbled, that the sea had swept over the dark house with its golden turrets and towers” (ch. 82). But before the flood, something else happens. Catherine, “after many years of sleeping, arose from her bed and walked, not quite sleeping, awake when she died” (ch. 82). The dreamer wakes at the very end. The system that denied death gives way in the one moment that cannot be invented.

What Is Left

Catherine is not simply refuted. The novel says early and plainly that “There was always some right in what my mother said, even when she was wrong” (ch. 27). What was right was her discovery that the world is far more invented than it looks, and that people live inside what they and others have made up. What was wrong was her belief that invention could protect her from what is not made up: another person’s reality, and her own sorrow. Her daughter will inherit both halves of that lesson. Vera never forgets that the world is dreamed. But she will spend the novel searching for the one person she believed was real.

Chapter 6. Mr. Spitzer, Peron, and the Divided Self

Pillars: Pillar 1 (Not One Self) · Pillar 4 (Witnessing Is the Core Ethical Act) · Pillar 6 (Unfinished Is Honest)

See also: Joachim Spitzer

Chapters discussed: 2, 25, 27, 30, 31, 42, 47, 49, 51, 52, 54, 59, 82

The Promise

Mr. Joachim Spitzer, the old attorney who keeps Catherine company, has built a system that looks like the opposite of hers. His is caution. He is “a man so punctual, so unperceptive as himself acting always according to his routines” (ch. 25). He “claimed never to have placed a bet on even that which he had been most certain of” (ch. 2). Where Catherine trusts nothing and so can imagine anything, Mr. Spitzer trusts nothing and so risks nothing. His system promises safety through restraint.

His twin brother Peron embodied the opposite system. Peron was “insolent, a gambler, a spender of borrowed money, a quick suicide” (ch. 2). He bet on everything and lost. Between them, the brothers divide the world into two clean categories: the careful life and the reckless one. It is the old philosophical contest between prudence and passion, reason and appetite, played out by twins.

The Loading

The division does not hold. Cousin Hannah, who disliked them both, always insisted that “they were really identical, not nearly so different as they had supposed” (ch. 30). After Peron’s death, Mr. Spitzer cannot decide what to carve on the tombstone, “never deciding which brother it was, and perhaps he never would decide” (ch. 31). The categories of the careful brother and the reckless brother begin to blur, and the novel keeps adding to the blur for chapter after chapter.

Peron left behind a watch, and Mr. Spitzer wears it. It marks “the recurring years, the unknown flow of time, the backward flow, seasons, days, hours, half-minutes, quarter-minutes, seconds as of a hair’s breadth, every conceivable departmentalization” (ch. 27). The instrument of perfect measurement belongs to the man who lived without measure, and it is worn by the man who measured everything. Time itself, divided into the finest categories, runs backward on his wrist.

Mr. Spitzer tries one philosophical system after another in his grief. He proposes eternal recurrence (ch. 42), as Chapter 1 showed, and watches it dissolve into billiard balls that “would not roll twice the same” (ch. 59). He walks the city unsure “whether he would step on nothing” (ch. 25). He comes to feel that “there was no reality, and there was nothingness” (ch. 54). And in the same chapter he reaches a sentence that could stand as a summary of the whole novel’s method: “Distortions seemed to cause distortions, perhaps because one principle had not been correct.”

The Break

The break is the collapse of personal identity itself. In the forty-seventh chapter, he wonders whether he really knows “which brother he was, for had he not lived on both sides, died on both sides.” By the forty-ninth, the novel states it outright: “he did not know which brother he was, and this was the crux of his mystery.” He asks, “Was it Mr. Spitzer who was dead, perhaps living only by that dream which moved and stirred through a dead man’s thoughts?”

Philosophers have argued for centuries about what makes a person the same person over time. Locke pointed to memory. Others pointed to the body, or the soul. Mr. Spitzer tests every candidate and finds that none of them settles the question. His memories are shared with his brother. His body is his brother’s twin. His soul, if he has one, cannot say whose it is.

And then comes the most radical sentence of all. The answer to his question, as Vera tells it, “would have signified little or nothing, not altering his experience in the least degree or doing so in ways which were unrecognizable” (ch. 49). This is where the category of personal identity truly fails. It is not that the question has no answer. It is that the answer would change nothing about how he lives. The category has become weightless.

What Is Left

What survives in Mr. Spitzer is a stance toward others, and it may be the most humane thing in the book. “Whose illusions could he challenge? He had learned to respect other people’s mirages, especially as he existed only as a mirage himself” (ch. 51). A man who does not know which brother he is cannot sneer at anyone else’s confusion. His own uncertainty becomes the ground of his tolerance.

He is also the one who searches Cousin Hannah’s forty trunks, trying rusted key after rusted key. He could have broken them open, “but he was not violent,” and he proceeded “carefully as one whose own violences were suppressed” (ch. 52). He had “a due respect for damaged properties which should not be further damaged by him.” When he concludes that “There was no master key,” he does not force the locks. He leaves the mysteries their dignity.

His music, which no one ever hears, carries the same lesson. An old piano keyboard mender tells him “that there had always been a missing keyboard. There had always been a string missing in the harp of God,” and Mr. Spitzer wonders if that missing string is his own (ch. 51). The divided self is not a flaw in an otherwise complete creation. It is part of a creation that was never complete.

In the last chapter, Vera reports that Mr. Spitzer finally knew, “for what might seem only a shining moment in the long darkness of time or timelessness, which brother he truly was.” The answer is “the dead.” Even this resolution is framed as a moment, not a conclusion, and it arrives only at the point where identity no longer matters to anyone but the one who dies.

Chapter 7. Esther Longtree and Endless Hope

Pillars: Pillar 3 (Grief Doesn't End) · Pillar 7 (The Margins Reveal the Truth) · Pillar 11 (The Crossing Point)

See also: Esther Longtree

Chapters discussed: 1, 72, 82

The Promise

Late in the novel, in the chapters set in the American interior, Vera meets Esther Longtree, a waitress in a small-town restaurant. Esther is the most alive person in the book. Vera asks, “who could have been more robustly alive than she” (ch. 72). And she is “known for her everlasting pregnancy and her loving heart which knew no lover and her everlasting loneliness” (ch. 72).

Esther’s system is hope. She lives entirely toward the future, toward what will be born. She tells Vera she is “heading toward the coasts of birth where the old ghost babies stand,” while Vera, in her view, is headed “toward the coasts of death” (ch. 72). She promises, “Something will be born. Wait and see.” Her pregnancy is the body of hope itself: a life organized around a birth that is always about to happen.

There is an irony in where Vera finds her. In the first chapter, Miss MacIntosh urged Vera to leave the house of dreams and “see America first, the broad interior, the spacious Middle West,” where she would find “the clear reality of simple things.” Vera follows the advice. And in the broad interior she finds a woman pregnant with nothing that will ever be born.

The Loading

Young loads Esther’s hope with its own history. Esther has had many pregnancies, and all have ended in stillbirth. The salesmen passing through town are “the fathers of her stillborn whom she had hidden everywhere under the leaves and under the buds and under the snow and in the rivers and in the streams and in the still places and in the night” (ch. 72). The list runs on, as Young’s lists always do when experience is entering the argument. “There were as many stillborn as the autumn leaves, the snowflakes, and I could not count them,” Esther says. And she knows what her condition means: “I have been pregnant for an undue long time.”

Hope, lived this way, becomes recurrence. If she laughs too hard, she might lose this pregnancy too, “and then would have to begin it all over again, the great enterprise of her great loneliness” (ch. 72). What Mr. Spitzer proposed as a philosophical doctrine, Esther lives in her body. The eternal return is not the return of a beloved moment. It is the return of the same hope, and the same loss, forever.

The Break

The break comes in Esther's own voice, and it is a break in the most basic of categories. "It is not true that people are either a success or a failure in life. They could be both and me the failure like the stillborn" (ch. 72). Vera notes that "This thought had obviously astonished her." Esther has discovered, in the middle of a conversation about coffee, that the categories by which lives are judged do not divide cleanly. Her hope is both her success and her failure. She is both mother and not a mother. She even says she has the "feeling of not being born myself yet."

This is the logic of the whole novel stated by its least educated character. The categories of success and failure, born and unborn, living and dead, fail not because a philosopher dismantled them but because a waitress with swollen ankles lived long enough inside them to see them give way.

What Is Left

What is left is Esther's love, and it proves stronger than her hope. When she first meets Vera, she crushes her hand and introduces herself: "I am me, Esther Longtree, the passive policeman's only daughter, and you're you," and so, she says, they have "our common humanity" in common (ch. 72). It is a plain and almost comic version of the monist vision from the first chapter, stripped of all mystical language. Every heart is not the other heart. But Esther is Esther and Vera is Vera, and that shared separateness is itself a bond.

At the novel's end, Esther is the last guest named for Vera's wedding, "for she was also our love, all our loves, and she was the mother of the stillborn clapping their hands in clouds, and she loved us all and all things hurt or silent or broken or dead or living" (ch. 82). Hope failed. Love remained, and it extended to everything hope had lost. Then the novel gives her a sentence of her own: "Esther Longtree would come." The woman of endless hope, who waited so long for children who never lived, is coming to the wedding of a woman who now carries a child.

Chapter 8. Cousin Hannah and the Life of Action

Pillars: Pillar 1 (Not One Self) · Pillar 3 (Grief Doesn't End)

See also: Cousin Hannah

Chapters discussed: 30, 31, 32, 41, 43, 45, 52

What Her Life Proposes

Cousin Hannah Freemount-Snowden is dead before the novel opens. She lives in Catherine's memories, at her deathbed with Mr. Spitzer beside her (ch. 43 to 45), and in his search of her house after her death, and her story fills much of the middle of the book. A close reading shows that her life proposes a system distinct from all the others: the life of action. She is a suffragette, an explorer, a mountain climber, a duelist, a marksman. She "had gone by camel into places where no woman had ever gone before" (ch. 30). Where Catherine dreams and Mr. Spitzer hesitates, Hannah acts.

Her system rests on certainty. "She had compensated for her superficial views by a marvelous certainty that was set above the peaks of time" (ch. 30). She lived "by her inscrutable choices as if there had been no alternative, no road except the road she had taken, no ship except the ship in which she had sailed." She "had always believed in being direct" (ch. 31). And her certainty made further inquiry unnecessary. She acted as if she had "already seen into all the dark abysses of human nature," and "so she had had no use for further experience or knowledge" (ch. 30).

This is the philosophy of the deed: the conviction that thought is secondary, that the world is changed by those who move rather than those who wonder. It has noble forms, and Hannah's cause, the vote for women, was a just one. The novel never mocks the cause. It tests the certainty.

The Loading

Young loads Hannah's life with a secret that her certainty was built to cover. Vera hints at it early: "Because of the loss of a skirt, it was known now, her entire life had been perhaps an act of sorrow and redemption" (ch. 30). As Mr. Spitzer's researches continue, the story comes into view. On a mountain long ago, Hannah climbed with a young woman she loved, and in a snowstorm she "had let go her girl's hand, her dove-white fluted hand in a snow storm long ago as in another life" (ch. 45). The girl was lost. The crusade that followed, the forty voyages and the battles against men, grew from that one moment of letting go.

The loading also comes from her own divided nature. Catherine calls her "a soul of vast duplicity" and imagines she could play two hands at cards, being "both herself and a gentleman" (ch. 30). The woman who lived by directness was never simple. And her certainty about the future turns out to be dreamlike too. She was said to have "known of the murder of the archduke at Sarajevo several hours before the news had reached the

rest of the world” (ch. 30), knowledge as uncanny as anything in Catherine’s opium visions.

The Break

The break comes at her death, and it comes twice. First, there is the reported deathbed confession: “that she no longer believed in the glory of these foreign conquests” and that “The greatest battles were fought in the domestic wars by those who had never left home” (ch. 32). The woman of action, at the end, turns against action. But the novel immediately undercuts even this: “it was impossible to know how the great captain could have made this deathbed confession,” since she had not answered her telephone in years. The confession may be Catherine’s invention. Even the collapse of the system cannot be verified.

Second, there is the delirium Mr. Spitzer overhears as she dies, and here the Nietzschean images gather. She cries, “Shall I fall into the great abyss of which there is no floor, no ceiling? Shall I fall into love or death? Are both one?” (ch. 43). And in the forty-fifth chapter, climbing in her fever through mountains of snow, she sees the dwarf “a turret on his head.” Nietzsche’s Zarathustra climbed with the spirit of gravity on his back and, at the summit gateway, overcame it with the thought of eternal return. Hannah climbs with her grief and her lost girl, and the dwarf she meets wears the tower of the house of illusion. The heroic ascent ends not in affirmation but in the question of whether love and death are one.

Catherine delivers the final verdict, and it is devastating in its gentleness. “Cousin Hannah’s life, just like her own, had been largely imaginary, transient, unknown, unexplored, passing like a dream” (ch. 41). Then comes the question that dissolves the whole distinction on which Hannah built her life: “how should action differ from meditation?” The woman who acted and the woman who dreamed turn out to have lived in the same condition. Time and sorrow, Vera adds, were “all she had ever denied.”

What Is Left

Mr. Spitzer’s researches uncover one more image, and it carries Young’s politics. According to an old newspaper story, Hannah once “skied, according to one old newspaper reporter dreaming of her,” with “blind skiers following a leader’s bell, and none had known that which Mr. Spitzer knew, that the leader was blind” (ch. 52). The leader of the crusade was as blind as the followers. This does not make the cause wrong. It makes the certainty dangerous.

What remains of Hannah is her love, which her crusade never mentioned and never healed, and her forty trunks. Mr. Spitzer opens “trunk after trunk” and finds “so many wedding gowns, sheets of silk and veils of lace” (ch. 52), the bride she never became. He never finds a master key, and he never hacks the trunks open with an axe. The life of action leaves behind a store of experience that no single key can open, and a man patient enough to open it gently.

Chapter 9. Miss MacIntosh and the Fall of Common Sense

Pillars: Pillar 2 (Reality Is Constructed) · Pillar 6 (Unfinished Is Honest) · Pillar 9 (Language Shapes What's Possible)

See also: Miss MacIntosh

Chapters discussed: 1, 3, 17, 18, 22, 63, 64, 65, 66, 70

The Promise

Every trial so far has tested a system that a reader might already suspect of illusion: an opium dream, a man who cannot tell himself from his brother, a pregnancy that never ends, a crusade built over a secret grief. The last trial is different. Miss MacIntosh, Vera's nursemaid, is the character the novel builds to refute illusion. She is the realist, and her fall is the decisive case. If realism survives, then Young has only shown that some lives are deluded. If realism falls, then no position is left standing outside the test.

Her doctrine is stated in the first chapter. She taught Vera "that no one must dream of what was not, of what would never be," that Vera must "lead a useful life," that "reality was very good and could be found by those who lived, could be seen even with the naked eye." She had always said that common sense was the finest sense, and that the way of life "was very plain, quite direct. It was a granite road and not the sea road taken by the ships falling beyond a far horizon." In the third chapter, "she did not believe in things invisible." She is the voice of plain fact against the opium house.

Her doctrine has philosophical ancestors. A tradition of common sense philosophy, most closely tied to Scotland and to Thomas Reid, held that ordinary perception gives direct access to the world and that philosophical doubt is a kind of madness. Miss MacIntosh claims descent from Scotland, and her father was John Knox MacIntosh (ch. 65). The novel never names Reid. Young gives the creed in her own words instead: "Common sense is the finest sense, she had always said" (ch. 1). Reid, in *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* (1764), called the state of a man argued out of common sense "metaphysical lunacy."

The Loading

Young loads the realist with small details that do not quite fit. In the very passage that states her creed, her "knitting needles of ivory bone" are "clicking like her false teeth" (ch. 1). The voice of natural fact speaks through artificial teeth. In the storm lessons of the sixty-sixth chapter, she dresses for a sea voyage in the nursery, insisting "that common sense demanded we should be dressed for the gale," although "We were not going anywhere." Her common sense requires costume.

Her theology, too, has a gap in it. She holds that God “had God’s limitations” and “had not created everything. He had left many things uncreated” (ch. 3). On the beach she teaches that God made two mistakes: “The first was to have begun what He could not finish. The second was not to have finished what He had begun” (ch. 22). The realist’s world is not complete. Her creed of plain fact already contains the idea of the unfinished.

Even her ancestry is a romance. She tells Vera she is “descended from a Gaelic prince who was lost at sea and who was bald as she was” (ch. 64), a prince whose golden crown floated away while he washed ashore in Scotland and founded a family of sheep herders and coffin makers. The woman who forbade dreaming carries a legend at the root of her identity.

The Break

The break comes when Vera, as a child, enters Miss MacIntosh’s bedroom and sees her without her wig. “She was only this old man who had only one breast and no hair and no future prospect. Her baldness gave her away, coldly and utterly” (ch. 17). Vera writes, “She was other than herself, and she had deceived me.” The realist was wearing a disguise the whole time.

Then comes the most important detail in the scene. In the next chapter, Vera sees “one breast of milky whiteness lighted even as she tried to explain that what I saw, I did not see, that it would be banished with the honest dawn which should dispell these vagrant, foolish dreams” (ch. 18). This is where realism falls. Miss MacIntosh’s whole creed rested on the reliability of the naked eye. Now, to preserve herself, she must tell Vera that what Vera sees is not there. The doctrine of common sense can survive only by denying perception. The realist has become the dreamer, and the child who was taught to trust her eyes is told to disbelieve them.

In the sixty-third chapter, Miss MacIntosh speaks for herself, and her words complete the collapse from the inside. “Perhaps I have seemed deceiving, but you should have recognized me long ago, just by all that I was not and could not be, just by what was missing from these features!” She reflects on love: “what is the love of one person for another? It is a system of mutual deception.” She regrets: “I should have been an honest woman or an honest man.” And she clarifies her lifelong warnings: “If I warned you against those lies and illusions surrounding us, I meant only those which we ourselves have made. Every man has a porcelain crown like mine.”

Then she says the sentence that may be the novel’s deepest statement of its own philosophy, spoken by the one character who spent her life denying it: “There is one dream we do not awaken from. That, my dear, is life.”

In time she disappears into the mist by the sea and is believed drowned.

What Is Left

What is left is the most surprising thing in the novel. The realist, once exposed, becomes the object of a lifelong dream. Vera spends years searching for her, and the novel's title is her cry. "For there had been no one else so true, so good, and, even in her unkindness, so kind" (ch. 1). In the seventieth chapter, Vera admits that Miss MacIntosh forbade all dreaming, "and then it was of her I dreamed the most when she was dead, in fact, of her only."

Miss MacIntosh did not stop being true when her baldness was revealed. She became true in a different way. Her advice outlived her creed. "Be not afraid of life," she told Vera (ch. 63), and Vera took it, traveling into the broad interior her nursemaid had recommended. The realism fell. The courage it was meant to protect survived. And this, finally, is the pattern of every trial in Part Two. Each system breaks, and something that was carried inside it, love, patience, respect, courage, walks on without it.

Part Three: The System Stated

Chapter 10. Young’s Own Words

Chapters discussed: 1, 14, 21, 22, 47, 51

Before the principles can be stated, it helps to notice the words Young herself returns to. A philosopher’s system can often be read in the vocabulary she cannot stop using. In *Miss MacIntosh, My Darling*, “dream” and its forms appear well over a thousand times, and “illusion” and its forms close to two hundred. These are not decorative words. They are the novel’s basic terms, and a few others gather around them.

Illusion, in Young’s usage, does not mean simple error. It means whatever a person lives inside and takes for solid. Catherine’s opium house is an illusion, but so is Miss MacIntosh’s common sense, so is Hannah’s certainty, and so, the novel suggests, is the separate self. Illusion is the condition of being human, not a mistake that clearer thinking could correct.

The unfinished is Young’s word for the condition of the world. God, in Miss MacIntosh’s beach theology, began what He could not finish. Mr. Spitzer’s music is never completed. Vera, seeing her nursemaid bald in the morning light, calls her “this unfinished thing, that which had no business in creation” (ch. 21).

The palimpsest is Young’s image for time and memory. A palimpsest is a manuscript scraped clean and written over, with the old writing still faintly visible beneath the new. Catherine’s world is “a palimpsest of many hieroglyphic writings which had been effaced” (ch. 14), and Mr. Spitzer keeps a “many-written palimpsest or tally sheet” of everything he has seen (ch. 47).

Deep calling to deep is Young’s phrase, borrowed from the Psalms, for the hope that souls might truly answer one another. It appears in the monist passage of the first chapter, first as a promise and then as a lack.

Other people’s mirages is the phrase for Mr. Spitzer’s hard-won tolerance. Once a person knows that everyone lives inside some illusion, including himself, the only decent response is respect.

The principles that follow are drawn from this vocabulary and tested against the trials of Part Two. They owe a debt to an earlier attempt to state Young’s philosophy in plain language, *Radical Immanence: The Philosophy of Marguerite Young*, whose categories fit the novel remarkably well. But they are stated here as what remains after the trials, not as a frame laid over them. Each principle is something that survived the breaking of a system. None is offered as a master key.

Chapter 11. Not One Self

See also: Pillar 1 Not One Self

Chapters discussed: 1, 21, 30, 47, 63, 72

A person is a crowd, not a single fixed identity. The many selves are not a malfunction to correct. They are the normal condition of being alive.

The novel announces this principle before it states any idea. The first philosophical passage begins with “a double-headed man” by the side of the road, a man carrying a child on his shoulders (ch. 1). From there, the doubling spreads through every major character. Mr. Spitzer cannot tell whether he is himself or Peron, and he wonders whether he “lived on both sides, died on both sides” (ch. 47). Cousin Hannah could be “both herself and a gentleman” (ch. 30). Miss MacIntosh tells Vera, “My elder brothers called me George,” and wishes she had been “an honest woman or an honest man” (ch. 63). Catherine’s Eustace “might be simultaneously many persons” (ch. 30). Even Esther Longtree says she has the “feeling of not being born myself yet” (ch. 72).

The trials showed what happens when a person tries to be one thing. Miss MacIntosh insisted on being plain and simple and had to hide half of herself under a wig. Mr. Spitzer tried to be the careful brother and found he could not say which brother he was. Many selves are what remain when the demand for a single identity breaks.

The principle is also a kind of mercy. When Vera, in the twenty-first chapter, finally sees her nursemaid without disguise, she finds “no identity but the individual stripped bare of individuality and vain pretence.” The individual is still there. What is gone is the pretence that the individual is one simple thing.

Chapter 12. Reality Is Constructed

See also: Pillar 2 Reality Is Constructed

Chapters discussed: 1, 63

Most of what feels like solid reality is built. Seeing the construction is the first step out from under its spell, but seeing it does not mean escaping it. People go on living in what has been made.

The two great images of this principle are the opium house and the wig. Catherine's house is invention on a grand scale, a whole world of guests and centuries summoned from a bed. Miss MacIntosh's wig is invention on the smallest scale, a single disguise worn over a single head. The novel treats them as versions of the same thing. Catherine, who dreams everything, and Miss MacIntosh, who dreams nothing, both live inside something made.

Miss MacIntosh gives the principle its clearest statement, at the moment her own invention is exposed. "If I warned you against those lies and illusions surrounding us, I meant only those which we ourselves have made. Every man has a porcelain crown like mine" (ch. 63). A porcelain crown is a false tooth, and a crown is also the sign of a king. Every person wears something artificial, and every person is, in some sense, crowned by it.

Young's own words give the ethic that follows. The mature person, she said, is one who has "examined all the illusions of life" and knows "there isn't any reality" and yet goes on. Living in the invention is not a failure of nerve. It is the only place there is to live. The difference lies between those who know they are in it and those who mistake it for the granite road.

Chapter 13. Grief Doesn't End

See also: Pillar 3 Grief Doesn't End

Chapters discussed: 1, 31, 41, 45, 54, 63, 72, 82

Grief is not a stage to pass through on the way to recovery. It is permanent weather. Refusing to perform a tidy healing is a way of staying truthful about what was lost.

The whole novel is an act of grief. Vera has spent years searching for Miss MacIntosh, and she describes the loss as “the sudden, terrible shock of that great loss which had divided my heart against my heart” (ch. 1). She does not recover. She searches. The book’s title is the cry of that search.

Every major character carries a grief that the novel will not resolve. Mr. Spitzer mourns Peron through “innumerable years” (ch. 54) and cannot even choose the words for the tombstone. Cousin Hannah built a crusade over the girl whose hand she let go. Esther mourns the stillborn, who come “back to haunt me and tease me” (ch. 72).

Catherine’s life shows what happens when grief is refused. She arranged her whole world to avoid sorrow, and the novel’s verdict is exact: “The lack of sorrow was a sorrow, too” (ch. 41). Miss MacIntosh, at the other extreme, insisted “There is nothing to grieve over” (ch. 63), and her own disappearance became the grief that shaped Vera’s life. Neither avoidance nor dismissal works.

Honest grief is what remains. It does not pretend that the lost can be found. It does not pretend that the loss has been overcome. It keeps walking, and it keeps looking. At the novel’s end, Vera is “in mourning for three deaths” (ch. 82), and she is also in love and carrying a child. The grief has not ended. It has been joined by other things.

Chapter 14. Witnessing Is The Core Ethical Act

See also: Pillar 4 Witnessing Is The Core Ethical Act

Chapters discussed: 31, 51, 52, 72, 82

The hardest and most honest stance is to stay in the room with something painful and complicated without rushing to fix it or wrap it up.

Mr. Spitzer is the novel's witness. He sits for years beside Catherine's bed, listening to her conversations with the dead. He does not correct her. Vera explains that "he indulged my mother's moods so long as they were not of reality, he being profoundly, ever and increasingly convinced that reality would kill her as it had killed her canary" (ch. 31). He is not a believer in her dreams. He simply refuses to be the one who destroys them.

His stance is summed up in a single line: "He had learned to respect other people's mirages, especially as he existed only as a mirage himself" (ch. 51). The witness does not stand above the scene as a clear-eyed judge. He stands inside it, as unsure of his own reality as anyone else, and that uncertainty is what makes his respect possible.

The forty trunks show the witness at work. He opens "trunk after trunk" with the old keys, but he will not hack them open, because he has "a due respect for damaged properties which should not be further damaged by him" (ch. 52). He accepts that "There was no master key." A lesser searcher would have forced the answer. The witness lets the mystery stand.

Vera learns this stance by the end. When she meets Esther Longtree, she listens to the waitress's long story of stillbirths and does not correct her, pity her, or try to cure her. She hears. And in the last chapter she imagines telling Esther all her own losses and hearing Esther reply, "So had not everyone lost something?" (ch. 82). The witness is witnessed in return.

Chapter 15. Build Anyway, Knowing It's Temporary

See also: Pillar 5 Build Anyway, Knowing It's Temporary

Chapters discussed: 22, 59

Since nothing is ever truly final, the honest move is to build anyway, provisionally, and keep revising. The frozen, finished blueprint is the thing to distrust.

The image for this principle comes from the beach where Miss MacIntosh raised Vera. Because God stopped too soon, they refused to rest. “We worked on both Sunday and Saturday as well as all the other days, observing no period of rest” (ch. 22). And their work was strange. On Saturdays they “nailed old boards or unnailed old boards.” Building and unbuilding are the same activity. Nothing on that beach is finished, and nothing is meant to be.

Mr. Spitzer’s music follows the same law. He tries to compose from the movements of billiard balls and discovers that “no game could doubtless ever exactly repeat itself” (ch. 59). The music can never be fixed in a score. It must be made again each time, differently.

Young’s own practice embodies the principle. She expected to finish the novel in two years and kept building for eighteen. The Debs biography never reached its planned end. The construction was left open because the life it described was open.

The opposite of this principle is the utopia. Rapp’s Harmony and Owen’s New Harmony were both finished blueprints, complete plans for human life imposed on real people. Young watched both fail before she began her novel. Keeping the construction open is her answer to them.

Chapter 16. Unfinished Is Honest

See also: Pillar 6 Unfinished Is Honest

Chapters discussed: 9, 21, 50, 51, 62

The unfinished is not failure. It is honesty. Anyone who claims to hold the complete and final answer is usually selling something.

Where the previous principle concerns how to build, this one concerns how to judge. The novel consistently treats claims of completeness with suspicion and treats incompletion with tenderness.

Mr. Spitzer’s unfinished music is the central image. An old piano keyboard mender tells him “that there had always been a missing keyboard. There had always been a string missing in the harp of God” (ch. 51). The creation itself is incomplete, and Mr. Spitzer wonders whether the missing string is his.

The opposite figure appears in the sixty-second chapter: the conductor. Mr. Spitzer gives his sympathies “not to the conductor,” and “not to the mad fellow imagining he could conduct all the music of all the singing spheres.” The music of the spheres was the Pythagorean dream, the idea that the whole cosmos sounds one perfect harmony. Pythagoras was a guest in Catherine’s house in the ninth chapter. Here his dream returns as the fantasy of a despot. Whoever imagines he can conduct all the music is, in the novel’s word, mad.

Where his sympathies do go, the novel says plainly. At the close of the fiftieth chapter they are “freely given to all who had suffered some great disaster,” among them “musicians whose works would never be played although the music which passed into oblivion as when the snow fell on the roof or the rain flooded old porches was more beautiful than any which should be heard.” The chapter ends: “and Palestrina should not be more beautiful than the spotted tree frog, shrivelled and small, sleeping in a tree hollow. For he would awaken. But Palestrina awakened not.” The unheard music is the most beautiful, and even the greatest finished music cannot wake its maker.

Even Miss MacIntosh, the realist, is described as “this unfinished thing, tentative and unbelievable” (ch. 21), and Vera loves her not in spite of this but because of it. Incompletion is not a flaw to be hidden. It is what a real person looks like in the morning light.

Chapter 17. The Margins Reveal the Truth

See also: Pillar 7 The Margins Reveal the Truth

Chapters discussed: 61, 62, 72, 82

The people who do not fit the categories see the categories most clearly. The margins are where the seams show.

The novel is full of people at the edges: the deaf, the mute, the addicted, the unmarried, the poor, the half-mad. Young gives them the clearest sight in the book.

Mr. Spitzer states the principle in musical terms. “The man kicked out of an orchestra knew more about music than any playing in an orchestra, for the player was under the powers of the despotic conductor and could play only his own part” (ch. 62). The one inside the system hears only his part. The one outside it hears the whole.

The frog musician, a derelict who haunts Mr. Spitzer’s city, speaks only in scraps. He asks for a light, and “this simple question” seems to Mr. Spitzer “the real miracle” (ch. 61). The mute who stands with Mr. Spitzer in the rain says nothing at all. Esther Longtree cannot spell. The stone deaf man cannot hear. And in the last chapter it is an old Black woman on a country road, a figure at the far margin of the society the novel describes, who gives the deaf boy the words that could stand as the book’s creed: “life is imaginary, and this be an imaginary world” (ch. 82). Young gives her no name and no story of her own, and she appears only to console the white boy, the pattern of the Magical Negro trope that *To All My Darlings* traces in Chapter 82. Her words are still her own.

In a novel whose memories begin in a New England mansion of inherited wealth and whose present ends among the poor of the American interior, the movement itself is an argument. The truth is not at the center, where the systems are built. It is at the edges, where they fail to reach.

Chapter 18. The Past Doesn't Go Away

See also: Pillar 8 The Past Doesn't Go Away

Chapters discussed: 14, 24, 41, 47

The past is not behind us. It is beneath us, pressed into the present like layers of rock.

Catherine’s house has no single century. The servants say it is “Roman in the morning but Greek in the afternoon” (ch. 24), and the guests sleep “with little regard for century.” For Catherine, “The years collapsed to a moment whenever my mother looked back” (ch. 41).

Young’s image for this is the palimpsest. Under Catherine’s present visions lie “old and precious communications faded or illegible, a palimpsest of many hieroglyphic writings which had been effaced” (ch. 14). The old writing has not vanished. It shows through.

Mr. Spitzer keeps his own palimpsest, a “many-written palimpsest or tally sheet” on which he tries to record every “rose, bird, star, horse, barnacle” (ch. 47). But the tally always leaves someone out, “one lost soul never to be recorded.” Sedimentary time is not a complete archive. It is layer upon layer, and something is always lost between the layers.

The novel’s own structure is sedimentary. Vera rides the bus in the present, but most of the book lies beneath that ride, in layers of memory, and in the memories of others that Vera could never have witnessed. The reader moves down through the layers and back up again. The past does not stay past. It presses up through every scene.

Chapter 19. Language Shapes What's Possible

See also: Pillar 9 Language Shapes What's Possible

Chapters discussed: 63, 72, 82

Words build the world they describe. Nouns freeze things into fixed identities. And any voice that claims to speak from nowhere, in pure objectivity, is hiding where it really stands.

Miss MacIntosh, for all her faith in plain fact, distrusted words. “Words do not harness the winds,” she told Vera. “Love has shut many a woman’s mouth” (ch. 63). The realist knew that language was a construction, even if she did not know that her realism was one too.

Young’s own prose is the strongest demonstration of this principle. As Chapter 3 showed, her sentences do not state ideas and then move on. They build an idea, add to it, and let it collapse, all within the grammar. The long sentence is itself a construction that shows its own seams.

At the edges of the novel, language breaks down into something more honest. Esther Longtree was “learning the alphabet all over again because she was teaching it to the stillborn” (ch. 72). The stone deaf man speaks of words “not in the alphabet of the stars. Flowers spell them out on the earth, and grasses talk” (ch. 82). There is a language older than the alphabet, and it cannot be fixed in spelling.

The novel ends on the misspelled sign Esther “would hang” in the restaurant window: “Owt to luntsch. Bee bak in a whale.” Then Vera adds, “For she could not spell either.” A book of more than a thousand pages of the most elaborate English prose ends on a sign no dictionary would accept, and it is perfectly clear. Language is a construction, and a broken construction can still carry love and a promise to return.

Chapter 20. The Sacred Is Here

See also: Pillar 10 The Sacred Is Here

Chapters discussed: 1, 52, 61, 72, 82

Meaning is here, in the actual world underfoot, not in a promised beyond.

The novel's great systems all point elsewhere. Catherine's dreams point to the dead. Hannah's crusades point to distant lands and mountaintops. Esther's hope points to a birth that never comes. Even the monist vision of the first chapter points to "some omniscient eye" that no one possesses.

Against these, the novel keeps returning to small things. The frog musician's request for a light. Mr. Spitzer's respect for damaged trunks. Esther's crushing handshake. And at the end, the deaf man hearing "the fishes whispering at the bottoms of rivers" (ch. 82).

The final wedding in the last chapter gathers this principle into a single list. The guests are to be "little Johnny-jump-up and little jack-in-the-pulpit and the snapdragon and four o'clock and whippoorwill and bluejay and little jenny wren," the waters and the clouds, "and the old mule that leaned over the fence" (ch. 82). Earlier in the novel, lists were how experience broke systems. Here the list has become an invitation. Nothing is excluded, and nothing is too small.

Chapter 21. The Crossing Point

See also: Pillar 11 The Crossing Point

Chapters discussed: 82

Each person stands where everyone who came before meets everyone who will come after.

The novel ends with Vera pregnant, and the last reflective sentence in the book is a statement of this principle: “I do not know the night in which I conceived as I do not know the night in which I was conceived” (ch. 82). Vera stands between Catherine, whom she has just lost, and the child she has not yet met, and she cannot see the origin of either. She is the crossing point.

The deaf man gives the child a purpose before it is born: “our child will be our ear.” The generation that comes after will supply the sense that the present lacks. And Esther Longtree, “the mother of the stillborn,” is welcomed to the wedding: “Esther Longtree would come.” The woman whose hope never produced a living child comes to celebrate with the woman who is about to have one.

This principle gathers all the others. The many selves of Pillar 1 become many across generations. The invention of Pillar 2 is handed down. Grief, Pillar 3, joins with new life. The construction stays open, as Pillar 5 asks, because a child is coming who will build on it. And the past of Pillar 8, layer beneath layer, turns at last toward what is not yet written.

Part Four: After the Collapse

Chapter 22. The Politics of Distrusting Leaders

Pillars: Pillar 6 (Unfinished Is Honest) · Pillar 7 (The Margins Reveal the Truth)

Chapters discussed: 9, 30, 42, 49, 52, 61, 62

Young insisted that her novel had a politics, and she located it exactly. “If you understand hallucination and illusion, you don’t blindly follow any leader,” she told Friedman and Fuchs. “You must know if the person is sane or insane, over the abyss.” The last phrase deserves attention. In Nietzsche, the abyss was something the solitary thinker looked into. In Young’s interview, it is the place where a leader stands. And in her novel, as Part One showed, it is the floor everyone walks on. A leader who claims solid ground is either deceived or deceiving.

The argument that runs through the trials of Part Two now becomes political. If every system fails under the accumulation of lived experience, then every leader who offers a complete system is offering something that will fail. The danger is not only that the leader might be wrong. It is that followers, trusting the system, will stop looking at the experience that would show them the failure.

The Blind Leader

The novel’s sharpest political image comes from Cousin Hannah’s past. According to an old newspaper story, she once skied “with blind skiers following a leader’s bell, and none had known that which Mr. Spitzer knew, that the leader was blind” (ch. 52). The image works on two levels. On the surface it is simply strange, a feat of mountain daring. Beneath it is a parable. The followers are blind and know they depend on the bell. What they do not know is that the one ringing it is blind too.

Hannah was a leader herself, “the leader of those great armies riding thunderously into war, flying their silken petticoats as flags” (ch. 42), and her cause was just. The novel does not suggest that causes are false or that action is worthless. It suggests that certainty is the danger. Hannah acted as though she had “no use for further experience or knowledge” (ch. 30). A leader who needs no further experience is a leader who cannot learn that the path has changed.

The Despotic Conductor

The second political image is musical. Mr. Spitzer, a musician who never plays, reflects on the orchestra. “The man kicked out of an orchestra knew more about music than any playing in an orchestra, for the player was under the powers of the despotic conductor and could play only his own part” (ch. 62). The player may even be led astray “if the leader should misread the score and turn South instead of North.” Mr. Spitzer gives his sympathies “not to the conductor” and “not to the mad fellow imagining he could conduct all the music of all the singing spheres.”

Here the thread from Part One comes full circle. Pythagoras entered the novel as a guest in Catherine's house, the man who "had discovered heaven's harmony" (ch. 9). The dream of a single cosmic harmony was a philosopher's dream. In the conductor, it becomes a political fantasy: one man who believes he can direct all the music there is. The novel names that belief madness. Young's politics begin here, in the refusal of any total harmony imposed from a podium.

The Frog Musician

Young named the frog musician as one of the passages that "investigate the nature of illusion," and his scenes show how the voice of guidance can arrive from anywhere. He is a derelict who steps from doorways in the fog. He asks Mr. Spitzer for a light, for a nickel, for a coin. Then he begins to give advice. "Watch out for the butterflies. Watch out for the weeds in the garden." Later: "Watch out for the pickpockets. Watch out for the glass-smashers." And later still, he tells Mr. Spitzer to "Put your money on the Robins" (ch. 61).

Mr. Spitzer, "very much agitated," cannot tell what the tip means, and for a moment it is "almost as if he had heard his brother's voice." This is the psychology of the follower in miniature. A voice speaks with confidence out of the fog. It warns of dangers and promises winners. And the listener, lonely and grieving, begins to hear in it the voice of someone he loved. Mr. Spitzer does not follow the tip. He wonders about it. That wondering is Young's politics in its smallest unit.

The Unelected Representative

Against the blind leader and the despotic conductor, the novel offers Mr. Spitzer himself as a model of public life. He was, as Vera tells it, "the pleader of lost causes," causes "of which he had been an unsolicited and unelected representative, a minority representing a majority, a hidden majority like those sleeping in the churchyard" (ch. 49). He represents the dead and the forgotten. He holds no office. He claims no system. He simply refuses to let the lost be erased.

This is close to the figure Young would spend her last decades writing about. Eugene V. Debs was a leader, but a leader of an unusual kind, one who wrote, "I would not be a Moses to lead you into a promised land, for someone would lead you out again" ("A Glimpse into the Future," *Appeal to Reason*, March 10, 1906). Young's long biography of him grew from the same conviction that runs through her novel: that the only trustworthy public figure is one who belongs to the people rather than standing above them with a master key.

What the Politics Requires

The politics of the novel is not a program. It does not tell readers what to vote for. It tells them how to hold their beliefs. Every system is a room in a crowded house. Every leader rings a bell in the fog. The task is not to stop following all bells, which would leave a

person alone on the mountain. The task is to remember that the one ringing may be blind, and to keep listening to the experience that no system has yet absorbed.

Chapter 23. The Ethics of Going On

Pillars: Pillar 3 (Grief Doesn't End) · Pillar 4 (Witnessing Is the Core Ethical Act) · Pillar 5 (Build Anyway, Knowing It's Temporary)

Chapters discussed: 1, 32, 42, 54, 59, 63, 72

The sentence of Young’s that this book has returned to most often is an ethical one. “When you have examined all the illusions of life and know that there isn’t any reality, but you nevertheless go on, then you are a mature human being.” The important word is “nevertheless.” Young’s system does not end in despair or in a triumphant affirmation. It ends in continuation.

Against Two Easy Endings

There are two easy ways out of the collapse of every system, and the novel refuses both.

The first is despair. If nothing is certain, nothing matters. Mr. Spitzer comes close to this. He feels at times that “there was no reality, and there was nothingness” (ch. 54). But he does not stop. He keeps walking the city, keeps searching trunks, keeps writing music no one will hear. The nothingness does not become a reason to stop.

The second easy ending is heroic affirmation, and it belongs to Nietzsche. Nietzsche’s answer to the collapse of all values was the thought of eternal recurrence: the demand that a person live so as to will every moment to return forever. The novel takes this thought seriously. Mr. Spitzer proposes it in the forty-second chapter. But the novel’s experience undoes it. The billiard balls “would not roll twice the same” (ch. 59). Esther lives recurrence as endless loss, beginning “it all over again, the great enterprise of her great loneliness” (ch. 72). Vera sees in her own life only “the dream of chaos repeating chaos” (ch. 1). The eternal return, lived, is not glorious. It is either impossible or unbearable.

What Young offers instead is quieter. If no moment can ever exactly repeat, then each moment is unrepeatable. Going on does not require willing the return of everything. It requires only willing the next step, over the abyss that has always been the floor.

The Virtues That Survive

The trials of Part Two each left something behind when their systems broke, and these remnants form an ethics.

From Catherine comes the knowledge that the world is invented, and the warning that invention cannot shield a person from sorrow. From Mr. Spitzer comes respect for other people’s mirages, and the patience to leave locked trunks unbroken. From Esther comes love that outlives hope. From Cousin Hannah comes the discovery that action and meditation are not opposites, and that the greatest battles may be “fought in the domestic

wars by those who had never left home” (ch. 32). From Miss MacIntosh comes courage: “Be not afraid of life” (ch. 63).

None of these is a rule. Each is a disposition, a way of standing in the world once the world has stopped offering solid ground. Together they describe a person who knows she lives in illusion and treats others with the tenderness that knowledge makes possible.

Going On as Search

Vera’s whole story is the ethic of going on made visible. The novel opens with her riding a bus through fog, searching for a woman she knows is probably dead. She asks, “Where should I go? Where should I turn?” (ch. 1). She has no system to answer. She goes anyway.

The search does not find its object. Vera never finds Miss MacIntosh. What she finds instead are people she was not looking for: Esther, the stone deaf man, a life. This is the shape of going on in Young’s philosophy. The search is not justified by its success. It is justified because it keeps a person moving among other people, where love can happen.

Chapter 24. The Ending as Demonstration

Pillars: Pillar 9 (Language Shapes What's Possible) · Pillar 10 (The Sacred Is Here) · Pillar 11 (The Crossing Point)

Chapters discussed: 1, 82

The last chapter of *Miss MacIntosh, My Darling* performs everything the novel has argued. It is worth reading slowly, in the same way Chapter 3 read the monist passage, as a proposal, an accumulation, and a collapse. But this time the pattern turns in a new direction.

The Inventory

The chapter opens with a list of losses. Vera reflects on what she could have confessed to Esther Longtree: “that my mother was dead, that the opium paradise had crumbled, that the sea had swept over the dark house with its golden turrets and towers,” that “the only property which was left to me was this string of pearls I wore, that I was in mourning for three deaths, that I was in love with an older love than memory provided” (ch. 82).

This is accumulation of the familiar kind. Each system in the novel has now ended. Catherine is dead and her invented world has been swept away. Mr. Spitzer has learned which brother he was, and the answer is “the dead.” Miss MacIntosh is remembered “with her bald head upon the waves.” Everything the novel built has been loaded until it gave way.

Vera imagines telling all this to Esther and imagines Esther’s reply: “So had not everyone lost something? Think, she might say, of those who do not see, those who do not hear!” Loss itself becomes common ground.

The Final Proposal

Then Vera states the novel’s last philosophical proposal. She faces “that reality which had been a dream and which had crumbled, perhaps into reality, perhaps into a dream if nothing was real.” And she offers a thought that gathers all the trials into one: “Perhaps there is always a sense missing, that sense which would make the world real.”

This is a new and precise claim. The novel has shown that every system fails. Here it suggests why. Every person, every philosophy, is missing a sense. The deaf lack hearing. The blind lack sight. But even those with all five senses lack the one sense that would make the world fully real. No system has it, and so every system is partial. The missing sense is the novel’s name for the gap that no master key can close.

The Collapse of Illusion Itself

And then comes the turn that completes Young's philosophy. Vera has spent the night listening to a voice she half believes she dreamed, a man singing of silence and of "the things awakening not." She thinks it may have been imagined. Then she writes: "But I was wrong, for all was real, and he was real. He was the stone deaf man whom I saw in the dim corridor at dawn."

For more than a thousand pages, the novel has tested every category against experience and watched it fail. Here, at the very end, the last category fails too. The category of illusion itself gives way. After all the dreams and mirages, Vera finds a real man. The novel does not return to naive realism. Miss MacIntosh's granite road is gone for good. But neither does it rest in the easy conclusion that everything is illusion. That conclusion, too, is a system, and it too breaks under the weight of a real person standing in a corridor at dawn.

This is why Young's philosophy is complete in the only way it can be. The method of accumulation, applied long enough, undoes even the doctrine that nothing is real. What remains is neither reality nor illusion but a person, met.

What Is Left

The stone deaf man is himself a portrait of Young's ethics. He lost his hearing at fourteen. "It took him a long time to learn to dream. He became a painter, and he was also the artist of his life." He "heard with his eyes." Missing a sense, he built a life from the senses he had. An old Black woman down the road, given no name and no story of her own (see Chapter 17), told him the words that could stand as the novel's last teaching: "life is imaginary, and this be an imaginary world. And the silence had its tongues, and love came before words were or ever will be" (ch. 82).

Vera loves him "as a mother might love a child," "as a woman loves a man," and "for the silences and for all the tongues of silence speaking the name of love." She is carrying his child, and he gives the child its purpose: "our child will be our ear." What one generation lacks, the next may supply.

Then comes the crossing point: "I do not know the night in which I conceived as I do not know the night in which I was conceived." Vera stands between two unknowns, her origin and her child's, and she does not need to know either.

She lets go of her last possession. "My pearls were lost," she writes, "and never would I find my pearls in the morning light, never even look for them." The inheritance from the opium house is scattered over the bluffs, and she does not search. After a whole novel of searching, this refusal to search is itself a form of peace.

The two lovers plan a wedding, and the reason given is disarming: "We would be married, for legality helped." A legal marriage is a construction, and they know it. They will use it anyway, because it helps. This is living in the invention with open eyes.

The guest list follows, and it is the last of Young's great accumulations. Wildflowers, birds, waters, clouds, moon and sun and stars, "and the old mule that leaned over the fence and Esther Longtree, for she was also our love." In every earlier list, experience piled up until

a system broke. In this list, experience piles up and nothing breaks, because there is no longer any system to break. The accumulation has become a celebration. Everything is invited.

“Esther Longtree would come.” Vera and the waitress, the searcher and the one who waits, the woman who will bear a child and the mother of the stillborn, meet at one wedding. Esther is “our love, all our loves,” and “we were all so much like her little children that we might have been the children of her dreams.” It is the monist vision of the first chapter, “Every heart is the other heart,” returned in a new form. Not as a doctrine seen by an omniscient eye, but as a plain promise about two women in a small town: one will marry, and the other will come.

The Last Words

The novel ends with a sign. Esther would hang it in the restaurant window: “Owt to luntsch. Bee bak in a whale.” And then: “For she could not spell either.”

After more than a thousand pages of some of the most elaborate prose in American literature, the closing sign is misspelled. The sign still works. Everyone who reads it will know what it means. And the misspelling opens a second meaning. “Bee bak in a whale” is a joke on “be back in a while,” and it is also Jonah, swallowed by the great fish and returned to the world. The promise of return, which eternal recurrence could not keep, comes back as a waitress’s spelling error. It is a small, comic, human return, not the cosmic cycle of the philosophers.

The word “either” is quietly important. Esther could not spell either, just as the deaf man could not hear, just as Vera could not know the night of her conception, just as every person lacks the sense that would make the world real. Everyone is missing something. The sign goes up in the window anyway.

That is the system’s final demonstration. Every category has failed. Every master key has been tried and found wanting. And a woman who cannot spell will hang a sign that everyone can read, promising to be back.