September 1991

Crisis, Conflict, and Constituting the Self: A Lacanian Reading of The Deepening Stream

Joan G. Schroeter

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact mfkelly@colby.edu.
Crisis, Conflict, and Constituting the Self: A Lacanian Reading of The Deepening Stream

by JOAN G. SCHROETER

For most of the first half of this century, the humanely optimistic voice of Dorothy Canfield Fisher was heard in America's popular press. In the pages of magazines like Good Housekeeping, Woman's Home Companion, Harper's, and The American, in fiction and nonfiction, she expressed her conviction that human beings are essentially good, that education is the means to self-realization, that a new world committed to the ideals of justice and peace should be the goal of human endeavor. These attitudes and values also found indirect expression through her twenty-five-year service as a member of the selection committee of the Book-of-the-Month Club. In tribute to her role in forming the American character, Eleanor Roosevelt named her one of the ten most influential women in America. But since her death in 1958, Fisher has passed into undeserved obscurity. Her “liberal” philosophy has been obliterated by the winds of political change, and her fiction has not followed that of her good friend Willa Cather into obscurity. Her “liberal” philosophy has been obliterated by the winds of political change, and her fiction has not followed that of her good friend Willa Cather into the American literary canon. It has been suggested that her values were “too humane to be fashionable in a hard, modern age full of scorn and restlessness” (Hatcher, 99). It has been further suggested that her decision to fulfill her responsibilities as “woman, teacher, publicist and official” caused her to sacrifice “the possibility of the highest place as an artist” (Overton, 62). Neither explanation gives a just estimate of the quality of her literary legacy.

One reason Fisher is undervalued may be her moral earnestness, an inheritance from her father—chancellor of the University of Nebraska, president of Ohio State University, librarian of Columbia University—whose populist sympathies made him a controversial educator. Indeed, Fisher’s work often has a rhetorical quality and shows a greater preoccupation with clarity of content than with formal innovation. Accused of “never [having] recovered from the teacher’s point of view” (even though she never taught in a classroom), Fisher in fact intended her works as moral instruction (Phelps, 5). At least one member of the academic community testified to her success when he described The Deepening Stream as a book “to satisfy the moral urge which every student has in common with every teacher” (Firebaugh, 284). Yet it is not valid to dismiss Fisher’s work as mere moral pabulum. Her work often offers a tougher, harder-edged look at life than that. As witness to this aspect of her work, Joseph Lovering urged that Fisher be recognized as having “made an important contribution to the development of realism in the American novel” (Lovering, 238). In an even stronger
statement, Elizabeth Wyckoff combatted the prejudices of “the men who write criticism of fiction” and their labeling of Fisher “a popular woman’s magazine novelist, and little more”; for a strong dose of realism, Wyckoff suggested “they should read the last half of The Deepening Stream” (Wyckoff, 44). Thus one may start with this novel in order to revaluate Fisher’s career and her place in American fiction.

Regarded as the best among Fisher’s ten novels, The Deepening Stream first appeared in serialized form in the Woman’s Home Companion in 1930. Although written for a popular audience, the novel shows an unremarked sophistication in both its conception and execution. The work has four sections, the first two of which are set in America and the other two in France during World War I. The critics who reviewed The Deepening Stream upon its publication all commented on this split in the novel. Most seem to express greater interest in and approval of the second half, an attitude that can be epitomized by Fanny Butcher’s description of the novel in the Chicago Daily Tribune as moving “from a rather flattish beginning to a superb climax” (Butcher, 13). Only Dorothea Lawrance Mann, who reviewed the novel for the Boston Evening Transcript, focuses her comments almost exclusively on the first half because she finds that it raises important questions of parental responsibility; for this reason, she predicts “it is inevitable that The Deepening Stream will arouse controversy in American households” (Mann, 3).

None of the critical appreciations, contemporary or later, sees the novel for what it really is—an exposition of modern Freudian theory as to how the individual evolves psychologically throughout life. Neither a documentary on child rearing nor an eye-witness account of World War I experiences, the novel reveals instead the process by which the self is constituted, and its very title expresses this dynamic of development by means of its natural image. In a general way, this focus on the psyche in Fisher’s novels has been noted several times. Elizabeth Wyckoff remarked that there was “much sound modern psychology behind the story” of Fisher’s second novel The Squirrel Cage which was serialized in Everybody’s in 1911. Confirming Freud’s influence, Bradford Smith wrote that “she was one of the early students of Freud” and quoted Fisher herself: “I’d been reading him [Freud] a good deal—his own works, not those about him. I began reading them as soon as they appeared” (Smith, 234). The same Professor Firebaugh who valued the book for its moral instruction commented about The Deepening Stream: “The new awareness of Freudian psychology during the first third of the present century is of course apparent . . . throughout the novel” (Firebaugh, 289). Thus, contrary to the image of “popular woman’s magazine novelist,” Fisher—who received a Ph.D. from Columbia University in 1905—not only emerges as a woman of advanced intellectual interests but a writer who utilized those interests to teach her readers a psychological understanding of themselves.

For the post-modernist reader, Fisher’s work has another dimension of interest.
Although it is unlikely—but not entirely impossible—that she would have known the work of the controversial Freudian Jacques Lacan (already at work in Paris in the 1930s), there is nevertheless a close similarity between her own ideas and those of Lacan as to how the self is constituted. Neither of them recognized in the self, or subject, a fixed entity that could be identified as the Cartesian “I.” Instead, each saw the self developing continually as the result of a dynamic process that opposed Law and Desire, Nature and Culture. Because Freud did not achieve a definitive explanation of the origin and function of the ego, his successors were left to explore a variety of solutions to this knotty problem. Lacan’s position was to reject the notion of the ego as an innate and essentially stable entity giving definition to the psychic self; instead, he saw the human subject acquiring a sense of self through observation of objects exterior to itself—in the pre-Oedipal stage the “(m)other” and in the post-Oedipal stage the “other”—much as a child achieves self-identification through seeing itself reflected in a mirror. Just as the child begins the process of self-identification with an observation of itself as a collection of body parts (le corps morcelé) that it must assemble into a visual whole, so the subject embarks upon the integration of the self from a series of psychic reflections from “others.”

Because there is nothing identifiable as an “I” within the subject around which to organize the self, the subject is driven at first to seek recognition of itself by attempting to satisfy the “(m)other.” If left uncontrolled, this psychic motive power may actually destroy the self by obliterating the separation between the subject and the object from which it is seeking to constitute its identity. In the majority of cases, the individual is prevented from consummating this process of self-oblation by the intervention of a third element, the “father” or the “Other” representing the laws of the human society in which the individual’s psychic development occurs. This process of severing the subject from the “(m)other” is called the Oedipal crisis; it is accompanied by the subject’s sense of a “castration” that has two aspects: one, the child’s recognition that it cannot found its identity on the “(m)other” because it does not possess that (the phallus) which she wants and, two, the child’s sense that the mother does not possess the phallus either. Accompanying “castration” is a sense of powerlessness resulting from the subject’s awareness of a force outside of and superior to its own that is capable of limiting and controlling its ability to achieve recognition. This awareness of separation and limitation is essential, however, if the individual is to live within the rules of human society and accept an appropriate sexual and social identity. Seen from the perspective of its role in constituting the self, the Oedipal crisis is the most important step toward the development of individual identity because of the sense of difference it introduces. The accompanying “castration” leaves the subject, however, with a continuing sense of deprivation or “lack” that expresses itself in desire for a succession or “chain” of “others,” a desire that is limited in its satisfaction by the “Other” or the Law imposed in the Oedipal crisis. The drama of this conflict occurs within the Unconscious, that part of the divided subject in which Desire and awareness of the Law are both repressed, but from which evidence of their conflict continues to irrupt.
To describe the difference between the pre-Oedipal and the post-Oedipal stages, one might say that before the Oedipal crisis, the subject exists in a state of "nature" with an unlimited sense of its potentiality to satisfy and be satisfied; after the crisis, however, the subject enters into a state of "culture" in which its powers are limited by social controls. Lacan sees the Oedipal crisis occurring in the child at the same time he is learning language so that after the crisis the subject's desire is expressed symbolically in words which do not possess the full potency of the object or "other" itself. Thus, because of this discrepancy, language itself becomes a limitation on the power of the subject to achieve its desire even while the subject experiences an illusory sense of mastery over the "other." Moreover, although the process by which the self achieves identity is couched in sexual terms—and the achievement of sexual identity is a part of the process—the implications of these terms are farther reaching. For example, Lacan transforms the Freudian "father" into "name of the father," a more generalized and abstract term that signifies the power and authority of law rather than purely sexual potency; the "father" in Lacan thus is sexually neutralized by transformation into a phallic signifier. Lacan's extension of Freud's analysis of the psycho-sexual-social significance of the triad—mother, father, child—thus allows for great flexibility in the understanding of human behavior in both life and literature.

This "Lacanian" process of constituting the self through the mirror phase and Oedipal crisis informs Part One of The Deepening Stream in which the heroine Penelope "Matey" Gilbert develops from age four to age nineteen, that is, from early childhood through adolescence. The novel begins with Matey's memories of an old woman in black standing among blooming tulips, a woman who reflects to her the beneficence of maternal love and the wonder of life itself. Part One ends with the death of Matey's feared and disliked father whose death gives her (as his life could not) the insight into the nature of human relationships she needs in order to assume her normative place in the social order as wife and mother. Thus the dynamic of Part One is from "(m)other" to "Other," to use the terms of Lacanian analysis.

As seen by those outside the family circle, Matey's life as a daughter of a professor of foreign languages appears to be full of advantages—"a perfectly lovely home... a fascinating father... a wonderfully young-for-her-age mother" (The Deepening Stream, 23). But for Matey the tensions of a family life characterized by verbal duels between her parents in private and public are oppressive; the continual struggle for power between her parents causes her to live in a state of generalized anxiety. Having failed themselves to introject the meaning of the "Other" and therefore without a clear understanding of their respective social roles, Matey's parents are incapable of providing their children with emotional security. The fate of the Gilbert household appears to Matey to have been manipulated capriciously by her ambitious father who, in his pursuit
of his career—primarily to satisfy his vanity, not the needs of his family—has not hesitated to uproot his wife and children in a succession of moves from one university town to another. In order to assert her own importance and establish her individual identity, Matey’s mother has pursued a variety of interests—art appreciation, dramatics, women’s suffrage—outside the home and apart from her family. Deprived of the full maternal attention she needs and acutely aware that she cannot satisfy her mother, Matey remarks philosophically that she had “to wait the usual moment until Mother could get her mind on what you were saying” (DS, 31). Consequently Matey must develop a sense of herself from several surrogate “(m)others.”

The first and perhaps the most profoundly introjected of these surrogate “(m)others” is Aunt Connie who is present at the beginning of the novel where Matey is speculating about two kinds of memories—the kind that faded and “didn’t seem any more real than a story in a book” and the kind that became a “living part of you at any moment when they come into your head” (DS, 3). In the latter kind of memory Matey seems to be referring to the Unconscious, that part of the divided self which is indeed buried memory capable of irrupting into the conscious life unbidden. Such a memory is that of Aunt Connie here. The elderly aunt becomes Matey’s surrogate “(m)other” when illness in Matey’s nuclear family causes her to be placed temporarily in Aunt Connie’s care. From this childless woman Matey receives the undivided attention she has never received from her natural mother, and thus with her Matey exists for the first time in something resembling what Lacan calls the pre-Oedipal state of “plenitude” in which all the infant’s needs are satisfied by the mother: “The hand which held her little fingers always gave her what she wanted” (DS, 4).

Aunt Connie, however, is more than a “(m)other”; she comes to represent for Matey the “Other,” that is, a system of belief involving respect for the past and tradition as well as the beauty and value of life, the moral imperative to be of service to one’s fellow men. Aunt Connie’s age, described through a series of sensory images, emphasizes her connection with tradition and the past. Matey remembers her “dim . . . old voice . . . her cold, soft old hand . . . her billowing black, camphor-scented skirts” (DS, 3). In addition, she is the matriarch of the family, has inherited the family wealth, and inhabits the ancestral seat of Rustdorf (“resting place”) to which Matey significantly returns as an adult to claim her inheritance from Aunt Connie and in which she remains to marry and establish her own permanent home. All of these characteristics of antiquity make Aunt Connie the most significant of the Lacanian “ego ideals,” or models establishing the subject’s identity, that Matey will introject into her self.

Aunt Connie inhabits the moment in Matey’s Unconscious in which four-year-old Matey observed tulips forcing their way out of the dirt to blossom in an Eden-like garden. Struck with wonder at this miracle of nature, Matey searches for words to describe her experience, language to help her gain mastery over the world of her perceptions: “She still could think of no word which fitted the tulips” (DS, 4). In her need, Matey calls out to the aunt whose authority she has learned to rely on: “Oh, Aunt Connie! . . . Oh, Aunt Connie!” Matey is not disappointed,
for the wise old woman knows “at once a word to say. She cried out, ‘Incredible!’” (DS, 4). By her ability to confer the gift of language, Aunt Connie’s function as the “Other” is reenforced. The word “incredible” given to her by Aunt Connie, along with its contextual imagery, will rise up out of Matey’s Unconscious throughout the novel whenever she is in need of an antidote to despair.

An older, school-age Matey learns about the limitations that the laws of her society have imposed upon even this authoritative source of the “Other,” for Aunt Connie shares with Matey’s natural mother the condition of social castration. Just as her mother’s desires for self-realization have been thwarted by her husband’s career, so Aunt Connie’s desire to become a doctor and thus serve humanity was frustrated by her family’s refusal to provide her with the money necessary “to carry out her wild ideas” (DS, 26). Instead, the family advised Aunt Connie to “get herself a husband and some babies” (DS, 26), advice which she refused to follow. Matey’s father unsympathetically identifies this frustration: “Aunt Connie was one of those amiable people who had it in for the world because it hadn’t given her what she wanted” (DS, 26). The sole exception to Aunt Connie’s misanthropy is Matey; consequently, her greedy parents attempt to use the child in order to obtain Aunt Connie’s fortune. To impress the old lady with Matey’s intelligence and suitability as heir, Matey is asked by her parents to show off what she has learned in school by spelling “cat.” But Matey not only has learned the expressive power of language from Aunt Connie, she has also observed her parents’ use of words to establish dominance; she refuses therefore to turn the weapon of language upon her aunt and resists her parents’ efforts to get her to spell “cat.” In this incident Matey’s identification with Aunt Connie, rather than her parents, as “ego ideal” is made clear. Of course, the old lady’s “gimlet eyes” (DS, 27) see through the gold-digging machinations of the parents, as long ago they recognized the sensitivity and intelligence of the child. Having frustrated the desire of the parents, Aunt Connie nevertheless secretly leaves Matey a legacy which she will use to empower herself: to establish the financial independence necessary both to full self-realization and service to society in obedience to the commands of her “Other,” Aunt Connie.

Matey has a second surrogate “(m)other” in her sister Priscilla. Equivalent in function to the memory of Aunt Connie and her garden in Rustdorf is Matey’s memory of Priscilla on Izcohebie Hill in the Basque country in southern France. The settings of these two memories are in contrast with one another both geographically and thematically: Rustdorf is the ancestral “resting place” while Izcohebie Hill is one of the places of “exile” to which her father’s ambition has led them. The children have been left in France with a Basque family while their parents travel in Italy. In the course of an excursion into the countryside, the children wander astray from the path through the wild broom and become lost on Izcohebie Hill. Unlike Aunt Connie’s cultivated garden where Matey had felt secure, Izcohebie Hill is a wilderness and place of terror, according to popular lore the rendezvous of demons. Matey turns to Priscilla for moral and physical support; she clings to her sister’s waist in order to feel secure against the imaginary demons and eventually rests her head “on what small lap was made
by Priscilla’s short cotton skirt” (DS, 9). Matey finally falls asleep thinking, “What could the powers of hell and the demons of all evil do against a Priscilla? Nothing. Nothing . . .” (DS, 10). Thus, for Matey the image of Priscilla as protective “(m)other” substitutes for the image she should have received from her natural mother; it is this image that Matey introjects into her self to be called forth when she herself has become a “(m)other.”

As Matey grows up, however, Priscilla’s role with regard to her development changes. Increasingly, Matey attempts to constitute her social self in Priscilla’s mirrored image. “All during the early part of her life, when Matey didn’t know what to do, she consulted her older sister; not in words . . . but by noticing what Priscilla did” (DS, 28). In particular, Matey learns from Priscilla the formulaic language of polite society with neither meaningful content nor emotional expressiveness. Meanwhile, Priscilla’s own growth, in particular her sexual development, becomes stunted as a result of the unhappy home environment. She comes to view marriage as an institution calculated to “castrate” the wife and remains unaware of any satisfaction to be derived from the sexual relationship. Because she has thus introjected the image of her mother as frustrated and impotent, Priscilla rejects all suggestion of beaux and marriage, laughing off suitors and parents’ efforts alike. Instead, she creates an “unfeminine” identity for herself as a self-supporting professional woman, a teacher of French in a girls’ school. For a while after finishing her education, Matey continues to follow her sister’s example by also entering the teaching profession. But Aunt Connie’s legacy interposes itself and keeps Matey from introjecting Priscilla’s unfeminine image. Matey’s development as a woman brings about a change in the sisters’ relationship, and Priscilla begins to look at Matey as a mirror. Seeing Matey’s satisfaction in the role of mother, Priscilla can no longer repress her latent desire for motherhood. Because she still fears the marital relationship for its castrating consequences, she satisfies her desire for motherhood by marrying a tired old widower with a ready-made family of girls. In this marriage without the sexual relationship, Priscilla is able to satisfy her need and theirs without risking the dangers that accompany a full marital relationship.

Matey has the experience of still another “(m)other” who, along with Aunt Connie, becomes firmly introjected into her self as the “Other.” This woman is Mme. Vinet, a Parisian with whom she lives during her thirteenth year while her father spends his sabbatical in France. In Matey’s Unconscious (which, according to Lacan, is structured like a language) Mme. Vinet will come to be a figure standing for France; and the love that she feels for Mme. Vinet is a part of the love she feels for France, a love rivaling her feelings for her native country. In Fisher’s novels, France usually stands in the position of the “Other” with respect to her American heroines who, until they encounter France, or “Culture,” exist in a state of unformed “Nature.” In The Deepening Stream, the dichotomy between French “Culture” and American “Nature” is particularized in two contrasting attitudes toward the process and purpose of education. To illustrate, as Matey grows up in America, she learns nothing important in school except “how to hide and dim and dull her natural wonder” (DS, 15). Once released from the dungeon of school,
however, “life ran free and full” for her (DS, 15). “From her sixth to her twelfth year this life of play made up the vital part of Matey’s existence” as well as that of her agemates (DS, 18). But while their bodies strengthen and grow in vitality, their spiritual and intellectual development remains embryonic. Once the children reach adulthood, however, they are constrained to stop playing and go to work at hard and unremitting labor. For this reason, adults in American culture look back wistfully on childhood as the happiest, most “natural” time of their lives.

When Matey comes to live with the Vinets, she learns new definitions of youth and adulthood, work and play, freedom and constraint. For one thing, the Vinets, like true French bourgeois, do not engage in physical work as Matey has seen it performed by adults at home. Instead, their work is intellectual: “The Vinet life was one of incessant effort, but almost wholly disembodied. No part of any Vinet body was active save his fingers, in handling pen or piano keys” (DS, 41). In her daily routine Matey lives with the Vinet children “a life of taut, driving activity” compared to which her former life appears to her “a sprawling dawdling vacation” (DS, 41). Not only do French children, unlike American, have to work hard at learning, but French adults, who like Americans have to earn a living, can look forward, unlike their American counterparts, to “new vivid interests and pleasures that children knew nothing of” (DS, 41), pleasures and interests that could not be enjoyed by those not rigorously fitted for them in youth—appreciating music, understanding politics, discussing philosophical questions. Hence, in America youth takes on the appearance of a time of constant recreation while adulthood is a long wasteland of work. By contrast, in France youth is a time for application and intellectual effort, the fruits of which are enjoyed in adulthood. In this way, America’s position on the side of “Nature” and France’s on that of “Culture” are illustrated in the novel. Matey’s reaction to this reversal of cultural values is to approach her new intellectual work with the furious determination she has learned while playing youthful games in America. At the same time, her own image of physical vitality is reflected back upon the Vinet children, who adopt her “immoderate Americanized play” (DS, 46). In this way Matey introjects the best of both cultures while projecting the image of her own.

Unlike the images of womanhood projected by her natural mother, Priscilla, or even Aunt Connie, Mme. Vinet shows the characteristics of the normatively constituted self and so represents a more attractive “ego ideal” for Matey. In addition to rearing three children of her own and tutoring Matey, Mme. Vinet practices the profession of musician, teaching piano to supplement her husband’s income as lycée professor. Not only does she provide Matey with an ego ideal, but her marriage, which is a full and active partnership between husband and wife, presents the image of the ideal marriage upon which Matey will model her own. Moreover, it is from Mme. Vinet that Matey, who has defined conversation to herself as “talk intended to cover up what you were thinking about” (DS, 30) and consequently distrusts speech as a form of communication, learns a new and “full” language, that of music. Mme. Vinet nearly always talks from the piano with her children; she explains to them that “music is having something to say
and not saying it in words" (DS, 47). Because language must make use of words, music, which does not, can speak more directly from both heart and head. Under Mme. Vinet's tutelage in this new language, Matey's embryonic emotions, stifled by the oppressive atmosphere of her home and stunted by the emphasis on the physical in American culture, are at last liberated. Matey emerges from her year and a half in France with those aspects of her conscious self—her intellect and her feelings—developed out of the dormant state found in American youth. Within her Unconscious, France has assumed its place in the "Other," from whence it will summon Matey to come to its aid in World War I. As she constitutes her ego, Matey introjects her ego ideal, the image of Mme. Vinet, whose rigorous self-discipline, intellectual application, and emotional understanding are behaviors of value to the self and society.

IV

In the latter half of Part One Matey returns from France an adolescent. Having shown her introjecting "ego ideals" from several "(m)others," the novelist now allows the figure of the father to assume greater prominence in her psychic development. In his role as economic provider Matey's father has been able to make decisions of importance to the life of the family, mainly the decision as to where they are to live. In making these decisions he has, of course, been operating within the norms of American culture where mobility and the pursuit of economic opportunity and professional status are important values. Thus in keeping with the pattern of his past behavior, almost at once after the family's return from France, Professor Gilbert, lured by a larger salary, moves the family to another university town. For Matey, who has begun the process of acculturation to the values of stability and permanence after the French model, the uprooting is especially traumatic. She finds her only solace in the music of the classical composers in whose language she has been instructed by Mme. Vinet. It is the language of the "Other" that speaks to her in their works, and that language gives her a sense of some stability in this period of physical and psychical dislocation: "But Beethoven and Schubert, and Bach—Bach most of all—were still there, unchanged, unchangeable" (DS, 59).

Professor Gilbert's relocating the family has also heightened his wife's feelings of competitiveness and confirmed once again the adversarial nature of their relationship. Indeed, his wife's failure to acknowledge his position in the social order has all along contributed to the environment of unrest in the home and the feelings of insecurity in the children. The struggle for power between the parents had heretofore been uneven, with Matey's father achieving control by means of his superior mental and verbal skills: "Up to that time Father had come out on top much more often than Mother because he was—Matey knew this very well—much stronger and cleverer than Mother" (DS, 61). In this newest phase of their rivalry for power, however, Matey's mother allies herself with Mrs. Whitlock whose clever verbal sallies have the effect of undermining Professor Gilbert's position of superiority. Matey sums up her mother's achievement:
“This time Mother was on top” (DS, 63). Any satisfaction that Matey or her mother might have taken in this reversal of positions in the family power struggle is shortlived, for Matey’s father brings his sexual resources to bear and disarms the formidable Mrs. Whitlock by becoming her lover. At the same time, of course, he defeats and humiliates his wife. When Matey inadvertently learns of her father’s sexual infidelity, she is devastated because of her identification with her mother. Her attitudes toward sex and the marital relationship become colored darkly by her sense of her mother’s humiliation, and she attempts to repress the guilty knowledge she has gained: “... that year was something that Matey tried in vain to push down into the black hole in her mind where she kept the unbearable things out of sight” (DS, 69).

Unphased by the suffering he has caused, Matey’s father resolves the situation to his entire satisfaction by accepting a professorship at another university. Not only does he succeed in uprooting the family once again, but he rids himself of the liaison with Mrs. Whitlock. As Matey sees her father, he “went out, with a light conquering tread, facing new worlds” (DS, 77). But Matey’s development toward selfhood is frustrated, and she remains identified with her mother’s condition. In terms of the central image of the novel, the stream of her evolution fails to deepen, and Matey becomes “a dry young woman” (DS, 84).

The incident that finally precipitates the Oedipal crisis for Matey is the fatal illness of her father. In his new professorial post he had “scored the success of his life” (DS, 79), but his triumph was brief. Tripping and falling, Professor Gilbert gashes his ankle and develops blood poisoning. Seeing him in his hospital bed, Matey is shocked to observe her egotistical father reduced to dependence on the physical presence and emotional support of his wife. She is equally surprised to see the tenderness and solicitude with which her mother cares for him. Stripped of his professorial rhetoric and reduced by fear to the simple eloquence of the dying, Matey’s father speaks in language that announces Matey’s liberation into selfhood: “Jessica, you haven’t gone? ... Jessica! Don’t go away!” (DS, 89–90). Observing the exchange of mutual love between her parents, Matey, for the first time, sees her parents not as rivals or contestants for family control, but partners, husband and wife, whose bonding has been achieved through years of mutual need and support. As she stumbles from the hospital room, Matey’s mind is “bursting, crashing, all but crushed under the immensity of this new knowledge of more between Father and Mother than she had ever guessed—Why, in some way of their own ... they belonged to each other, and knew it ...” (DS, 90). For Matey this insight is indeed momentous, for it initiates the Oedipal crisis. By recognizing the mutual dependence in her parents’ relationship, she is liberated from identification with her mother and is free to constitute herself as a subject with her own sexual and social identity. She realizes that her perception of her parents’ relationship has been partial: “That is not all ... the little girl had grown up thinking that was all” (DS, 90). By realizing that each of her parents has what the other desires, Matey accepts her separation from them and becomes capable of assuming her own place in the social order.
Although the Oedipal crisis at the conclusion of Part One may have enabled Matey to separate herself from the dual relationship with her mother, any fuller constitution of her self cannot take place because recognition of the role of the father has not been accompanied by the introjection of the commands of the “Other.” Those values which her father has projected—personal ambition, pursuit of wealth and power, rhetorical skill, insensitivity to the needs of others, restless mobility—stand in direct contradiction to those values Matey has already introjected from Aunt Connie and Mme. Vinet; and Matey has long ago rejected her father’s value system. Consequently, at the beginning of Part Two Matey is still seeking a place in the social order and an “Other” from whom she can take direction. At the same time she is seeking a meaningful “other” with whom she can establish a relationship that will satisfy the “lack” she feels, an “other” to substitute for the parents she has lost and the sister from whom she is separated.

While she is experiencing this profound sense of “castration,” she comes to Rustdorf to claim the money she has inherited from Aunt Connie, that is to say, she returns to the “resting place” rejected by her restless parents to reclaim the values of Aunt Connie—the importance of family, tradition, roots, service to her fellow human beings, and the respect for life. Aunt Connie’s legacy has been left in the guardianship of Adrian Fort, Sr., whose name is clearly expressive of his function. Because the Forts and Gilbersts are distantly related and Mr. Fort and Matey’s mother were childhood playmates, the guardian of Matey’s inheritance stands almost in a parental relationship with Matey, almost a father. This potential fatherhood will become actual when Matey marries his son.

Freed by Aunt Connie’s inheritance from having to return to her teaching job, Matey stays on in Rustdorf, where slowly she recognizes in Adrian Fort, Jr., reflections of her self which draw him to her. Not only does she share with him a common American ancestry, but they both have had experience living in France and share a love for that country and its people. Gradually he becomes the “other” for her, and, when she realizes that Adrian too has a need for her, she commits herself to making him happy: “It was the first time he had asked anything of her, the first time—was it not?—that anybody had asked anything of Matey. Up from unknown depths in her heart came a flood of tenderness such as she had never felt. She flung her arms open to her husband. ‘Ah, Adrian, if I can only make you happy!’ ” (DS, 156–57). In the role of wife, and later mother, Matey establishes not only her sexual identity but also her place in the social order. As a result, by the end of Part Two, Matey has progressed in the constitution of her self and, as both “other” and “(m)other,” finds herself in a state of acceptance: “She had enough. Everything was all right” (DS, 196).

In her father-in-law, Adrian Sr., Matey finds a proper source of the “Other,” and the “Law” that she introjects from this second father reenforces those commands she has received from the other two sources of the “Other” in her earlier experience, Aunt Connie and Mme. Vinet. Unlike her natural father,
whose pursuit of wealth and fame brought no happiness to him or to his family, Adrian Sr. prescribes a life of moderation: “You get harmony and equilibrium in life as in everything else by keeping what you have in proportion, more than by having such a lot. And harmony and equilibrium are maybe what last you best, in the long run” (DS, 169). In response to this prescription Matey finds contentment in the simple lifestyle of Rustdorf. As director of a small savings bank in Rustdorf, Adrian Sr. is guided more by the needs of his depositors than by the desire for profit: “To be in a business that doesn’t make profits for anybody, only just decent wages for work done, I’ve found it tranquilizing” (DS, 118). His commitment to the welfare of the whole community has echoes of the frustrated hopes of Aunt Connie; this same ideal will impel Matey to put Aunt Connie’s money at the service of her French family during World War I and will direct the choice she makes on her return home. Again unlike her natural father, whose facile speech had the quality of rapier-swift rhetoric, Adrian Sr., a Quaker, is a man given to silence though his slow and infrequent speech is honest and direct. Matey furthermore remarks the difference between her father-in-law’s speech and that of her social acquaintances, including her sister Priscilla; their speech is “masked to uniformity by their formulas. Formulas were what Adrian—what all Quakers—lacked” (DS, 169). Matey herself remarks on the similarity between Adrian Sr. and Mme. Vinet, thus connecting the two sources of the “Other”: “on Mme. Vinet’s thoughtful face... there was nothing but the clarity of her realistic sight of things as they are. In its very different and Gallic setting this sometimes reminded Matey of her father-in-law’s honesty, which she had often found unsparing and bald” (DS, 349). The nickname “Padre” that Matey gives her father-in-law epitomizes the extent to which he represents the “Other” for her; for it is the name often given to the most significant representative of the moral law in certain communities, and, of course, it is the “Name of the Father.”

VI

Even though Part Two concludes with Matey’s expression of satisfaction in her personal situation, all is not well with that of the world community. Parts Three and Four are set, for the most part, in France during the First World War, and Matey, accompanied by her husband and children, shares the agony of her beloved second home. Matey is fortified in her decision to go to France by her father-in-law, she is sustained in her relief efforts by Mme. Vinet, and she uses up Aunt Connie’s inheritance for her war charities. Clearly, all the moral imperatives that Matey has introjected from the various sources of the “Other” converge in this second half of the novel to point to the necessity of constituting the self in the widest of all social orders, that of the world community, by service to humanity.

Yet, upon the war’s conclusion, Matey, instead of taking satisfaction in the victory or even in her own contribution to the war effort, is profoundly disillusioned. Sickened by what they have seen of man’s inhumanity to man,
both she and her husband make the mistake of confusing the behavior of men with that of the universe in which they operate. Once again, Adrian Sr., the old Quaker who had supported their participation in the war, speaks with the authority of “Law” and puts their experience into the proper perspective: “Adrian thinks the war is an indictment of the universe. Instead of a mistake men make” (DS. 388). Thus he projects a view of a world that is essentially benevolent and one of man as a fallible creature in need of improvement—and forgiveness.

By the conclusion of the novel, the excitement of the war gone and its lessons absorbed, Matey and her husband have begun to settle once more into their roles in the more limited society of Rustdorf, Matey as wife and mother and Adrian as provider. But Adrian Sr. continues to act as guardian of their welfare and, for Matey in particular, as a “father” pointing her toward a fuller constitution of her self. When he relinquishes control of the bank to his son, Adrian Sr. encourages Matey to assist her husband in the bank. Thus she will be able not only to share the experiences of her husband but to be of service to the community. As the novel concludes, Matey is about to begin another phase in the constitution of her self. From the mirrored image of her husband—“other” she will learn the role of small-town banker; the humane values she has introjected from her father-in-law. “Other” will enable her to use her newly developed skills for the good of her society.

Thus, the psychodrama implied in the relationship between the “subject,” “(m)other,” “other,” and “Other” is acted out in the story of the development of the heroine of Fisher’s novel, The Deepening Stream. Ending on a note of new beginnings as the “subject” continues to seek her self in the “other,” the novel successfully projects the Lacanian message that the self is constituted through an endless chain of “others,” the subject driven by Desire though limited by Law.

Works Cited


