Decadence, Sexuality, and the Bohemian Vision of Wallace Thurman

Granville Ganter
St. John’s University

Despite his dynamic output as an author and critic of the Harlem Renaissance, Wallace Thurman has not often inspired critical admiration. Several generations of scholars have lamented the alcoholic excess of his lifestyle and the indecent content of his writing. From the beginning of his career, Thurman’s disinclination to celebrate his black heritage caused considerable anxiety among leaders of the New Negro movement. In his review of Thurman’s first novel, The Blacker the Berry, W.E.B. Du Bois expressed his regret at Thurman’s apparently “self-despising” racial outlook and complained that Thurman seemed to “deride blackness” (250). Although later critics have acknowledged Thurman’s energy and promise, Du Bois’s verdict is still echoed today.¹

The moralistic tones of the case against Thurman tend to invoke puritanical assumptions about sex and race that continue to have powerful influence in the twenty-first century. Because assessments of the Harlem Renaissance have been often shaped by parochial—and laudable—beliefs that oppressed races, classes, and sexual orientations should celebrate their communities as a matter of pride, the bohemian aspirations of Thurman’s role in the Renaissance have been underappreciated, if not outright rejected. Although Thurman broke many social taboos during his short brilliant career, one of his most challenging characteristics was his acerbic intractability. Thurman was neither a picture of heterosex-
ual virility nor was he exclusively gay. Combined with his lukewarm interest in promoting African American identity, Thurman has not found a comfortable place amidst the progressive identity politics of post-1960s literary scholarship. In contrast to gay Richard Bruce Nugent, who has been welcomed by contemporary gay scholars, Thurman remains a wallflower, neither self-consciously black enough, nor gay enough, to serve as a Renaissance poster-boy, although his literary output dwarfs Nugent’s. As George Hutchinson has argued persuasively, several recent generations of scholars have balked at the complex interracial and interethnic politics of the Renaissance for lack of an adequate American discourse about hybrid identity (6-26). As a result, writers like Thurman, who actively sought to challenge the nationalist, racial, and sexual isolationisms of his day (and regretably, ours), have yet to receive kindly treatment for their iconoclasm.

As many of his literary peers recognized, Thurman looked to Europe for aesthetic inspiration, not just America. Culturally stifled while growing up in Salt Lake City and Boise, Thurman apprenticed himself as a young writer to European artists of the Decadent movement. Identifying with figures such as Baudelaire, Huysmans, Wilde, and Gorky, Thurman imagined himself as part of an international avant-garde devoted to exploring the creative possibilities of the modern, the artificial, and the prohibited. In 1928, he wrote to a friend that he saw his generation as “Columbuses. . . discovering things about themselves and about their environment which it seems to them their elders have been at pains to hide” (Van Notten 141-42). One of Thurman’s patrons, Alain Locke, recognized the decadent, Frenchified spirit of the 1890s behind Thurman’s work, but he did not think it black enough, or decent enough, to advance the political goals of the Renaissance (Locke 563).

In particular, Thurman’s omnivorous sexuality, an important facet of many writers associated with the decadisme in Europe, has not yet received a sympathetic examination. By most accounts, Thurman was bisexual, if not homosexual. He also had white and black lovers of different sexual orientations. There is no shortage of complaint about Thurman’s behavior. Dorothy West, a younger contemporary of Thurman’s, suggests he was a homosexual tortured by simultaneous desires to be a full-blooded “male” and a
father (West 80). Although West seems unable to conceive that healthy bisexual or homosexual people could want to have children, most of Thurman’s peers were also perplexed about his sexual conduct.

Recently, however, scholars interested in the homoerotic aspects of Harlem life have begun to explore the ways in which queer sexuality inflected the literature of the period, both in terms of content (homosexual characters and themes) and style (writing techniques that seem characteristic of queer sensibilities). Thurman may have been queer in the strictly erotic sense of the term. He engaged in homosexual behavior. However, Thurman’s sexual conduct was also queer in the sense that he didn’t operate by the norms of strictly homosexual or heterosexual culture. Whether Thurman was hetero or homosexual is difficult to say. He was, however, indisputably bisexual. Thurman’s resistance to easy characterization, usually invoked as an impediment to his personal development or genius as a writer, is a key to his work. Thurman was an explorer. As I shall argue, Thurman’s bohemian sexuality may be seen as a metaphor for the breadth of his imaginative vision as a writer and artist.

Despite her concerns about his complex sexual identity, Dorothy West acknowledges that Thurman often claimed he wanted to do everything once before he died (81). In his literary criticism, Thurman asserted that the artist’s duty was to be polymorphously open to all forms of human experience. He felt that the genius of literary artists was documented in their openness to the unusual. Bisexuality was another facet of Thurman’s polymorphous imaginative sensibility. For Thurman, writers’ imaginative queerness lay in their cosmopolitan ability to pass comfortably into another identity, be it sexual, racial, or cultural. Thurman sought to materialize this transgressive imaginative sensibility in both his fiction and non-fiction.

The intimate relationship between Thurman’s sexuality and his art is apparent in a letter he wrote to a friend and literary collaborator, William Rapp, in 1929. Thurman was going through a divorce at the time and his wife, Louise Thompson, had accused him of homosexuality. He wrote to Rapp to explain a story that Thompson had circulated among his friends concerning a homosexual proposition Thurman accepted when he first came to New York City.
Although the letter’s exculpatory remarks can be read as divorce propaganda, both its content and its stylistic shift from third to first-person narrative bear a striking resemblance to Thurman’s short story, “Cordelia, the Crude.” In his letter to Rapp, Thurman writes,

In 1925 a young colored lad anxious to make a literary career came to New York. He had little stake which was soon gone. He found no job. He owed room rent and was hungry (not offered in extenuation of what is to follow but merely a statement of the facts.) One night he got a job as relief elevator operator, just for one night. He worked. The next night he returned hoping to work again. Failing he returned homeward. At 135th St. he got off the subway, and feeling nature’s call went into the toilet. There was a man standing in there. The man spoke. He did more than speak, making me know what his game was. I laughed. He offered me two dollars. I accepted. Two plainclothesman, hidden in the porter’s mop closet rushed out and took the two of us to jail. Night court. I was fined twenty-five dollars or three days. The man got six months. He was a Fifth [A]venue hair dresser. He had been picked up before, and always of course as the aggressor. I gave a fake name and address, then sent a special delivery letter to the only friend I had in New York. He borrowed money, gave it to a minister friend who came down and got me out after I had spent 48 hours in jail. Only two people thus knew it. The minister took great interest in me. And to my surprise I discovered that he too belonged to the male sisterhood and was demanding his pound of flesh to keep silence. I cursed him out, told him he could print it in the papers if he dared and saw him no more. Meanwhile of course he had told his scandal. By some quirk of fate it reached Louise just at the time she was fighting me for a money settlement. She told Ernst. He verified the story, and they threatened to make charges that I was homosexual, and knowing this and that I was incapable of keeping up my marital relationship [and] had no business marrying. All of which Louise knew was a lie. The incident was true, but there was certainly no evidence therein I was a homosexual and Louise also knew that tho there had been sexual incompatibility it had been her fault not mine.\(^3\) Tues May 7 [1929]

One of the most significant aspects of the letter is that Thurman refuses to have his sexuality defined by someone else. Thurman confesses to engaging in an act of homosexual prostitution but denies that it is “evidence therein” of his homosexuality. Like
James Baldwin, he admits to homosexual practices but not necessarily to being identified as a homosexual (Ross 505). Rather, he describes himself as a young man who is unusually open to new experience. He laughs at the thought of bargaining sexual favors for cash. The homosexual element of the situation does not seem to faze him, either. Upon hearing the terms of the proposition, Thurman inscrutably writes, “I accepted.” Whether motivated by physical desire, financial need, youthful curiosity, or some combination of incentives, Thurman doesn’t explicitly say. Throughout the letter, however, he seems concerned about his reputation and anxious to prove that he had heterosexual desires as well. Although the letter could be interpreted as evidence of Thurman’s closeted homosexuality (and most Thurman scholars have tended to summarize the letter’s contents in this way), it is also explicit documentation of Thurman’s sexual polyvalence.

In literary terms, the letter is also significant because it suggests the close relationship between Thurman’s life and fiction. Later in the letter, he asks Rapp if his story sounds like a novel. The question is not merely rhetorical. Three years earlier, in his short story, “Cordelia, the Crude,” he had told a similar tale. Both Thurman’s letter and short story begin with a tone of objective realism, apparently adopted from Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*, which shows the matter-of-fact transformation of an urban ingénue. As in his letter, Thurman’s short story begins with little in the way of judgement of its protagonist, describing Cordelia Jones from an objective, third-person point of view as a restless girl who desires to escape the restrictions of her homelife. She goes to a theater where she is dimly aware that women are being propositioned by young men. Halfway through the story, the narrative shifts to the first person when a young man takes up the story as he meets Cordelia in the theater. Cordelia takes the man to a flophouse, but the narrator suddenly loses his nerve, shoves two dollars in her hand, and flees. At the end of the story, the narrator meets Cordelia again at a rent party where it is apparent she has become a prostitute. The similarities of Thurman’s autobiographical letter to the story are probably explained by Thurman and Rapp’s recent collaboration on the play, *Harlem*, which was an adaptation of Thurman’s story “Cordelia,” and which had just debuted a few months earlier.
One of the curious things about the resemblances among the three narratives (Thurman’s letter, “Cordelia,” and the play, Harlem) is that Thurman wrote the fictions first. In his letter to Rapp, his life conforms to his art. What makes this connection doubly interesting, however, is that Thurman initially wrote the autobiographical fictions from a woman’s viewpoint.

Thurman’s use of a female protagonist to represent his own experience in “Cordelia” and Harlem is particularly significant because the protagonist of his first novel, The Blacker the Berry, is also a woman. There are several explanations for why Thurman was drawn to female protagonists in his early work. On one level, Thurman seems to have wanted to write a black Sister Carrie or Madame Bovary, both of which focused on the plight of women to illustrate the curious modern collision of urban reality with sentimental fiction. In The Blacker the Berry, Emma Lou Morgan’s first name evokes Flaubert’s tragic protagonist, Emma Bovary, whose discomfort with provincial life, brought on by reading too many fanciful romances, leads her to stray from her marriage. Chasing a desire “to live and to die” in Paris, and unable to find spiritual redemption, she eventually drinks poison. Emma Lou’s life experience also suggests the plot of the first half of Sister Carrie, where Carrie ingloriously becomes the mistress of a salesman while wandering the streets of Chicago looking for respectable work. Secondly, it seems likely that Thurman’s ill-fated heroine was a direct reply to Jessie Fauset’s hard-working protagonist, Joanna Marshall, in There Is Confusion (1924). If Thurman felt that Fauset’s brand of realism had erred by attempting to normalize the victories and defeats of black middle-class experience, Thurman’s Emma Lou Morgan was a study in what might happen to an earnest Fauset character in the hands of an unkind god. Finally, on a third level, Dorothy West speculates that a female protagonist allowed Thurman to distance himself from his novel’s autobiographical material (79).5 At the same time that Thurman attempts to separate himself from Emma Lou’s experiences, however, he also identifies with them. As Thurman declared in both his fiction and non-fiction, the imaginative burden of artists is to investigate the broadest domains of human thought and feeling. Thurman’s use of female protagonists is both a deliberate test of his artistic
powers and an attempt to envision the world from another person's point of view.

Thurman's identification with women's experience is suggested in part by his reference to homosexuals in *Infants of the Spring* as "uranians" (114). The term, coined by the German jurist Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, refers to homosexuals as people with women's souls trapped in men's bodies, or the reverse. In a series of pamphlets written between 1864 and 1870, Ulrichs proposed that the human embryo could develop a female soul at the same time its physical development took a male path, or vice versa (Symonds 162). This theory explained why some women seemed to have a masculine temperament and some men a feminine one. Although Ulrichs sketched a complicated sexual taxonomy from this premise, he referred to people who experienced hybrid development in the egg, *Urnings* or *Uranians*, from the term "uranos" in Plato's *Symposium*, meaning "heavenly."*6* Uranianism was a popular theory among turn-of-the-century homosexuals because it did not explain gay or lesbian sexuality in degrading language.

Thurman's use of the term uranian is also revealing in light of Edward Carpenter's claim that uranians made great artists. Along with John Addington Symonds, Carpenter was a key English popularizer of Uranian theory. Carpenter's book, *The Intermediate Sex* (1906), argued that uranians were often society's great artists and teachers because their hybrid nature made them much more sensitive to the entire spectrum of human emotions. Thurman's choice of female protagonists may indicate his belief that he could feel as women felt, and that a female persona heightened the sense of marginality he wished to explore in his characters.

As a journalist, Thurman had long voiced his belief that fiction writers were obliged to reach beyond the boundaries of their own personal lives in choosing characters for their art. In a book review of I.A.R. Wylie's *Black Harvest*, Thurman applauded the white female author for successfully portraying the psychology of the male mulatto protagonist, Jung Siegfried. Although Thurman regretted that more blacks had not chosen to write about their own experience, his review steadfastly upheld the right of literary artists to cross all sexual and cultural boundaries in the pursuit of their craft.
Thurman’s defense of a writer’s act of imaginatively *passing* into the experience of a different person gives an additional significance to the concept of racial passing in his work. Part of Thurman’s defense of authorial freedom was rooted in a specific debate carried on in the columns of the *Crisis* between February and November 1926 about how black Americans should be represented in fiction. Rejecting the propagandist philosophy of Du Bois’s program of racial uplift, Thurman’s literary journal, *Fire!!*, took an avant-garde approach toward fostering social equality. Rather than describe black culture as it ought to be, Thurman felt it should be described as it really is (Van Notten 118-19). For Thurman, documenting Harlem life meant describing rent parties, discrimination among blacks, unusual sexual choices, and, in some cases, people’s dissatisfaction with their own skin color. In the middle of the *Crisis* debates, May 1926, Thurman chided Walter White for the moralistic conclusion of his novel *Flight* where White’s passing protagonist, Mimi, decides to give up passing and return to black culture (154). Not only did White miss the opportunity to explore the tragic potential of his main character, Thurman argued, but such behavior was not always the truth. As if in response to White, a black artist in Thurman’s later novel, *Infants of the Spring*, declares that “thousands of Negroes cross the line every year and I assure you that few, if any, ever feel that fictional urge to rejoin their own kind. That sort of nostalgia is confined to novels” (162). Another of Thurman’s characters in *Infants*, Aline, later decides to pass for white, moves downtown, and never comes back.

Thurman’s strong views on the issue of passing rankled his race-pride patrons, and they also explain why he has been largely eschewed by queer-friendly literary scholars interested in identity politics. For example, while Amy Robinson’s study of the linkage between racial and sexual passing in Harlem Renaissance literature is ostensibly committed to working toward a more inclusive society, her essay ironically categorizes people as simply homosexual, white, or black. She argues that both types of *passes* (passing for white; passing for straight) are best understood as practices of reading and performance rather than indications of ontological essence. The title of her essay, “It Takes One to Know One,” refers to a triangular relationship between the passer, the
hetero/white community, and the homosexual/black insiders, where a successful *pass* requires the consent of the underprivileged group, which has the eyes to *see* such a performance take place and to take pleasure in that silent knowledge. On one hand, Robinson’s performative schema of *identity* is an attempt to move away from homophobic and racist ideologies which mark often hetero- or white-normativity. However, by invoking reductive communities of interest (black is Black and homo is Homo), Robinson reproduces two grave problems of identity politics for literary analysis. First, she extrapolates the experience of *some* members of subordinated groups who share *some kinds* of primary interest in their own community for the community’s identity as a whole. This logic of representation is highly necessary for the success of political movements. As a literary credo, however, it tends to promote a conformist ethos, which is precisely what Thurman objected to as a writer concerning the variety of sexual and racial differences. And second, her emphasis on *properly reading* performance celebrates a climate of scrutiny and surveillance no less intrusive than the oppressive ideologies she is ostensibly trying to dismantle (723, 733). To her credit, Robinson concedes the dangers of her thesis toward the end of the essay when she admits that the pleasures of detecting a pass have always been “qualified” at best (736). She does not, however, elaborate on the important aesthetic yield of her dramaturgical analysis: the question is not simply whether one has been detected; it is whether the performance of passing was any good.

For Thurman himself, the main question with passing was not moral (ie: should it be done? what would it mean for our community?)—it was aesthetic: was it done well? As an artist, Thurman believed that the desire to play with alternative identity was one’s ticket to *pass* the bounds of social conformity and proceed into the creative world of the mind, an artistic activity as rewarding for the writer as for the drag queen. Unfortunately, many critics of *The Blacker the Berry* have found Thurman’s portrait of Emma Lou Morgan unsatisfying (Williams; Perry). Even one of Thurman’s closest friends, Richard Bruce Nugent, asked Thurman why “he had made himself into a woman in the novel” (Van Notten 224). Nugent told him that he did not know enough about women to be successful. According to Eleonore Van Notten, Thurman’s biogra-
pher, "Thurman’s reaction was an ineffectual attempt to evade the question. He replied that few people were aware of the autobiographical links between himself and [Emma Lou] Morgan" (224).

Reviewing The Blacker the Berry for examples of authentic femaleness creates its own dubious value system, but Thurman works hard to convey the details of a dark-skinned woman’s experience, focusing on her restricted employment opportunities and her heroic attempt to stay looking pert on the interview trail (Blacker 64-65). In many scenes he also draws attention to Emma Lou’s sense of social claustrophobia and physical confinement (76-84). Interestingly, Thurman evokes a sense of enclosure which Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have associated with novels authored by women, and which also figures prominently in the conclusion of Nella Larsen’s Harlem Renaissance novel, Quicksand. Assuming that Nugent was right, and that Thurman’s characterization of Emma Lou draws extensively upon Thurman’s own dark-skinned experience, Thurman is envisioning his life in terms of women’s literary history as well as contributing his own ethos to that tradition.

Thurman even frankly addresses Emma Lou’s awakening sexual desire as she spies men on the street corner: “She began to admire their well formed bodies and glared in the way their trousers fit their shapely limbs, and in the way they walked, bringing their heels down so firmly and noisily on the pavement” (121). When Emma Lou first falls in love, Thurman spends two pages describing her attraction to her lover’s physique and her appetite for the touch of his tongue (50-51). It is difficult to say whether these images of desire are feminine or gay. In either case, however, the feelings are closeted, either from the perspective of Thurman’s autobiographical reticence, or Emma Lou’s reluctance to acknowledge her “clashing” sexual desires (51).

Thurman’s portrait of Emma Lou’s suppressed desire on the street may be related to the kind of queer sensibility Joseph Boone has described in his study of gay urban modernism, Libidinal Currents. Examining the relationship between literary form and homosexual content in Richard Bruce Nugent’s Harlem Renaissance short story, “Smoke, Lilies and Jade,” Boone argues that there is a fusion of urban space, sexual desire, and modernist syntax in Nugent’s work. The text itself begins to manifest the
lifeworld of gay Harlem or Greenwich Village, the narrative taking on tropological elements of “cruising”: taking abrupt turns, pausing, circling, and coyly showing off (205-32). Thurman’s novel makes similar thematic use of the city around Emma Lou, but, as a dark-complexioned female, her subaltern desires are thwarted by social prohibitions of a different sort. Emma Lou’s employment and housing opportunities are dependent upon keeping up proper appearances, a sense of confinement which is the inverse of Nugent’s unceremoniously desire and simultaneously a reflection of Thurman’s desire to control his own public image.

In his second novel, *Infants of the Spring*, Thurman’s primary characters are male but his concern with the imaginative *passing* of the artist is even more explicit. Aside from being a record of the social climate of the Harlem Renaissance, *Infants* is Thurman’s diagnosis of the art the period produced. As many scholars have remarked, Paul Arbian represents one of the more talented figures of the novel, but the novel is also filled with several different examples of bad artists. One of the novel’s artists is Bull, whose central trait is a primitive virility. Although no one expects Bull to have any talents above the waist, he surprises the clan at Niggeratti Manor by showing off his portfolio of women’s portraits. His sketches are “painstaking, vigorous, and clean-cut”:

> But Bull’s women were not women at all. They were huge amazons with pugilistic biceps, prominent muscular bulges and broad shoulders. The only thing feminine about them were the frilled red dresses in which they were all attired. (40)

As an artist, Bull’s problem is that he can’t see beyond his own masculine identity. Thurman credits Bull with better talents than Pelham Gaylord, whose aesthetic shortcomings are expressed in his twofold abuse of his subjects: not only does Pelham symbolically abuse the young girl who lives upstairs by drawing a misshapen portrait of her, but he later violates her physically and is accused of rape. In contrast to Pelham, Bull is technically capable (both as a lover and a draughtsman), but he lacks the ability to imagine something that isn’t himself, what Keats once described in a letter as Shakespeare’s “Negative Capability” (862). Bull’s sexual and artistic talents are too egotistical. For example, when Bull muscles in on one of Raymond’s girlfriends, Lucille, Ray-
mond is shocked that she could be attracted to such a “cave man” (Infants 116). For Thurman, good artists and lovers share a sensi-
tivity to others’ experience.

The most talented artist in Infants of the Spring is the openly bisexual Paul Arbian, a dramatization of Thurman’s real-life friend and alter-ego, Richard Bruce Nugent. Like Nugent, Paul’s wide-
ranging sexual tastes are reflected in his multiple talents as painter, performer, and writer. When asked to explain the paintings of brightly colored penises that decorate his walls, Paul responds:

That’s easy. I’m a genius. I’ve never had a drawing lesson in my life and I never intend to take one. I think that Oscar Wilde is the greatest man that ever lived. Huysmans’ Des Esseintes is the greatest charac-
ter in literature, and Baudelaire, the greatest poet. I also like Blake, Dowson, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Poe and Whitman. (11)

When his companion answers, “That’s not telling me anything about your drawings,” Paul replies, “Unless you’re dumber than I think, I’ve told you all you need to know.” Although several of the artists that Paul cites are well known for their nonconformist sexuality, he is also declaring that he prefers artists who question the boundaries of the acceptable. Identifying with Blake’s attack on the mind-forged manacles that bind human desire, with the grotesque limit experiences of Poe, and with the visionary utopian-
ism of Whitman, Paul situates himself within an artistitic legacy famous for its iconoclasm as much as its technical expertise.

Paul’s invocation of the unholy trinity of Wilde, Huysmans, and Baudelaire also points to a specifically decadent modernism based in exploration of the supra-natural or abnormal world. Baudelaire describes decadence as a perverse aesthetic of going against-the-

grain: “To apply to pleasure, to the sensation of being alive, the idea of the hyperacuity of the senses, that Poe applied to pain. To effect a creation through the pure logic of contrarity. The path is already marked in the opposite direction (‘a rebours’)” (qtd. in Weir 85). Paul Arbian thrives on this decadent aesthetic of contrar-

ity. As Paul’s friend, Raymond, remarks, the bare decoration of Paul’s room, painted in shocking red and black, is doubly perverse. On one level, the colors are a garish choice, very much like the colors with which Huysmans’ Des Esseintes decorates his own home in A Rebours (Huysmans’ tribute to Baudelaire, variously
translated as Against the Grain or Against Nature). On another level, Paul’s gaudy taste deliberately mocks bigoted expectations that blacks will “go in for loud colors” because his flamboyance both flaunts his racial identification and burlesques it at the same time (Infants 1).

Like Huysmans’ Des Esseintes, the denizens of Thurman’s Niggeratti Manor take pleasure in what they ostensibly should not. The crucial point, however, is not that Thurman’s decadents are truly corrupt; they simply appear to be so from the perspective of staid Victorian morality. The purpose of their unorthodox pleasures is not a celebration of evil, but the discovery of new forms of art, which, after all, is a fundamentally romantic quest. Decadents strive for rarified forms of beauty that others cannot yet see. The experience, as Wilde puts it, is like awakening to a dream. After Dorian Gray reads Huysmans’ A Rebours, he feels that “Things which he had dimly dreamed of were suddenly made real to him. Things of which he had never dreamed were gradually revealed” (qtd. in Baldick 5).

The scene in which Paul recounts his romantic dream explicitly links these visions of decadent aestheticism with sexual enlightenment. In the dream, apparently modeled on Nugent’s “Smoke, Lilies and Jade,” Paul declares that he became

aware of a presence. An ivory body exuding some exotic perfume. Beauty dimmed my eyes. The physical nearness of that invisible presence called to me, lured me closer. . . . I reached out and clutched a silken forelock. Involuntarily my eyes closed and I was conscious of being sucked into it until there was a complete merging. For one brief moment I experienced supreme ecstasy. (45)

Paul shocks the more conservative members of Niggeratti Manor with this story because he cannot remember whether his lover was male or female, and he does not seem to care. The specific sex is of no importance to him; all that matters is the pleasure of merging. When they ask him which sex he prefers, he replies: “I really don’t know. After all there are no sexes, only sex majorities, and the primary function of the sex act is enjoyment. Therefore, I enjoyed one experience as much as the other” (25).

Paul’s sexual freedom, however, also has a specifically racial significance. As none of the novel’s characters seems to notice,
Paul’s story also describes an interracial union: his dream lover is ivory white. The dream appears to anticipate the consummation of the interracial affair between Raymond and Steve Jorgenson, Raymond’s Scandinavian bedmate, both of whom also pursue heterosexual affairs. As in real life, where Thurman had a long term love affair with Harold Jan Stefansson and yet married Louise Thompson, the fluid sexuality of Thurman’s artistic protagonists gestures toward an idealized sphere of affiliation that transcends the political and social prejudices of race and sex.

The contrast between Paul’s sexual utopia where artists, sexes, and races merge, and the segregated realities of American life is brilliantly demonstrated in another dream sequence toward the end of the novel. Distressed by the flight of his lover, Stephen, and the imprisonment of Pelham, Raymond collapses in the street. He drifts into a soothing, womb-like dream of kisses, undulating waves, and billows, very similar to the erotic utopia dreamed by Paul Arbian. As his consciousness returns, he hears a voice callously mutter, “How’s the coon?” A female voice responds, “He’s coming out of it. Must be epileptic” (129). This passage grimly suggests that Raymond’s interracial ideals may remain out of reach in the near future. The last laugh, however, evoked in the dark-humored, dramatic irony of the scene, belongs to the decadent artist, Thurman. As in James Baldwin’s novel Another Country, which proposes that the interracial and bisexual affairs of its bohemian characters take place in a literal and metaphoric other country, Thurman’s novel puts his artists in stark relief to the world around them.

Thurman’s urbane awareness of the disjunction between bohemian idealism and racial prejudice in America is similar to the work of Maxim Gorky, whom Thurman invokes in one of the novel’s two epigraphs. There are two sides of Gorky that appear in Thurman’s work. The first is the polemical author of Mother (1906), the champion of Russia’s rural poor and the principles of socialist realism. In Mother, Gorky’s characters often represent, and speak for, Ideas. Some of the dialogues in Thurman’s Infants manifest Gorky’s soapbox tendencies. The second Gorky, less well known, is a stylist of striking imagery and economy. Inspired by the originality and “weird creativity” of the Russian Decadents and Symbolists (Dewey vii), Gorky’s descriptions of his rural upbring-
ing are spellbinding and grotesque, such as the blood foaming from his foundling-brother’s mouth after an accident, or the fascination with which he watches his grandparents’ house burn in My Childhood.\textsuperscript{11} Gorky drew on such autobiographical memories in his 1925 novel, variously translated as Decadence or the Artamonov Business. Available to Thurman in English translation by 1927, the novel chronicles three generations of the Artamonov family textile business leading up to the Bolshevik revolution. Like Thurman’s Infants, Gorky’s novel becomes more and more cynical toward the end, reflecting Gorky’s growing disillusionment with the communist ideals of 1917. At its conclusion, Gorky seems to celebrate neither the triumph of the revolutionaries nor the achievements of the industrialists; the blood of the parents seems to have been shed in vain. Similarly, Paul’s suicide at the end of Infants does not fulfill his promise as a writer, nor does it provide the Negro Renaissance with a masterwork. All that is left is Paul’s blood-soaked drawing of the spectacle of Niggeratti manor, crumbling at its foundations and ablaze with the white searchlights of America’s expectations.

It is not known whether Thurman read Decadence, but Infants of the Spring also has clear similarities to Gorky’s portraits of himself as a bohemian student. In both My Universities and Fragments from My Diary Gorky focuses his narratives around the eccentric tramps, writers, and peasants who inspired him. Encounters with these bizarre characters constitute the tissue of Gorky’s autobiographies. As Thurman reminds us in the epigraph to Infants, Gorky identifies with people “not quite achieved, who are not very wise, a little mad, ‘possessed.’” It is such people “on the lunatic fringe.” Infants’ central character Raymond asserts, “who take the lead in instituting new points of view, in exploring slightly known territory” (123). In both these authors’ work, the value of eccentricity is the attempt to assay the unknown, and it results as often in inspirational failure as in practical success.

Thus, in Thurman’s work (and in the decadent writers he admired), failure can carry the positive value of having gone to the limit. Modern scholars of the Harlem Renaissance complain that Infants has not much of a plot and ends with an un instructive nihilism (Perry). Robert Bone goes so far as to claim, “it was the canker of Bohemianism, in Thurman’s eyes, which threatened to
nip the new Negro movement in the bud” (93). These assessments tend to misrepresent both Thurman’s literary pedigree, as well as his sexual and artistic aspirations. First, Victorian measurements of plot development and self-culture are inappropriate measures of Thurman’s decadent and early modernist sensibility. Paul’s suicide must be pathetic and nihilistic: anything less would be a concession to the moralistic literature Thurman was at pains to criticize. Second, as the novel emphasizes several times, the genuinely bohemian characters are the only ones whose work promises to amount to anything: Raymond declares that “it’s going to be Pauls we need, not Pelhams” (31). Ultimately, the destruction of Paul’s magnum opus in a deluge of blood and bathwater is an eloquent tribute to Huysmans’s decadent romanticism, not its rejection. In Thurman’s eyes, the problem with the Renaissance was not that artists like Paul died young or that their work did not last: it was the inability of their immediate followers to live up to the promise of those vanguard talents.

Thurman’s transgressive sexuality thus provides a framework for understanding his fascination with liminality and passing in a context which does not ritually condemn him for self loathing or racial sedition. Rather, it allows us to see that indeterminacy is what makes Thurman’s work so rewarding and challenging. As Langston Hughes memorably described him, Thurman was “a strange kind of fellow, who liked to drink gin, but didn’t like drinking gin, who liked being a Negro, but felt a great handicap; who adored bohemianism but thought it wrong to be a bohemian” (377).

Second, acknowledging the European and decadent aspects of Thurman’s work puts him in literary company where his value as a writer is not judged solely by his contribution to the advancement of black American racial dignity. Thurman may not have been a race leader worthy of NAACP approval, but his work continues to be read both popularly and in the academy.

Finally, Thurman’s decadence highlights the inadequacy of approaching his work from a rigidly national framework. Given the content of his writing and his mentors, it is important to situate him in a transforming, international bohemian literary movement, stretching from the Romantics, to the Decadents and the Beats, and to rap music. This is a crucial point for getting beyond nationalist
discussions of the Harlem Renaissance as a failure (or Thurman’s place in it). As George Hutchinson argues, by imagining American culture as both white and black (and among other things, not necessarily wholesome), we can begin to see the lasting contributions of the Harlem Renaissance without faulting it for failing to rapidly overturn the effects of centuries of racial discrimination. Perhaps, by returning to writers like Wallace Thurman, the legacy of the Harlem Renaissance is just unfolding.

Notes

1. For censure of Thurman, see Bone (92-94); Perry (89-93); Bell (145-49); Davis (108-13); and Walden (205-10). Moses, in his recovery of “tasteful” black intellectualism of early-century Washington DC, Boston, and Atlanta, argues that the bohemianism that Thurman represented was merely a new-age minstrel show of black exoticism for white audiences (73; 64). For a more appreciative assessment, see Huggins, Gaither, and especially Singh’s forward to Infants of the Spring, which focuses on the importance of love and affection in Thurman’s work. Singh’s chapter on “Race and Sex” in his The Novels of the Harlem Renaissance, though mentioning Thurman only briefly, is very important for its treatment of the positive aspects of human sexuality.

2. Resistance to acknowledging the gay aspects of the Harlem Renaissance is discussed by Nelson. See also the special issue of Callaloo 23.1 (Winter 2000). Germane to gay readings of Harlem Renaissance writers are essays by Diggs, Woods, and Reimonenq. See also Flannigan-Saint-Aubin, Garber, and Cobb. Van Notten discusses Thurman’s homosexuality but includes little on Thurman’s lover, Harold Jan Stefansson (236-37; 261-62). Boone’s recent Libidinal Currents, helpful for drawing connections between urban space and modernist texts in general, attempts to identify a specifically urban queer literary syntax based on Nugent’s story in Fire!!, “Smoke, Lilies and Jade.”

3. The letter continues: “She had to have an operation in Salt Lake. . . remember . . . in order to make an entry possible, and because by that time I had lost all sexual feeling for her and tho there was consummation of the sexual act I was blackmailed thusly. The alibi being that she had been so upset by this vile disclosure that it had ruined her life. And such is my tale of woe. Doesn’t it sound like a novel? You can understand now what a mental state I was in during those last few weeks in New York, and why I had to get away. And you can also imagine with what relish a certain group of Negroes in Harlem received and relayed the news that I was a homo. No evidence is needed of course beyond the initial rumor. Such is life.” For more on Thurman’s relationship to Thompson, and her insistence that Thurman never admitted to her that he was homosexual, see Van Notten (201-11).

4. The play Harlem ends with Cordelia, her gambling lover killed, brazenly continuing her wild life in Harlem. If there is a close relationship between
Thurman and Cordelia, Thurman declined to script her with an unkind fate. The play opened on February 20th, 1929, and ran for 109 performances between 1929-30 (Burns Mantle 1928-29 472-73; 1929-30 426-27). Apparently, Thompson and Thurman's divorce was in the making the night of the play's opening when Thompson didn't accompany Thurman to the performance (Klotman 266).

5. Van Notten, among the best scholars of Thurman's work to date, agrees with West (224). Van Notten points to Thurman's likely appropriation of H. L. Mencken's idea of the urbane artist-iconoclast who criticizes society from a detached point of view (107-18). For Mencken's effect on black writers of the period in general, see Scruggs.

6. According to Symonds's chapter on Ulrichs in A Problem in Modern Ethics, Ulrichs' developmental model of the embryo explained several different kinds of temperament: the Dioning is heterosexual; the Manning is an effeminate male; the Weibling is one who prefers adult homosexual lovers; the Zwischen-Urning likes young boys; the Uranodioning is bisexual; the Uraniaister participates in homosexual behavior by chance or circumstance; and the Virilisirt is a homosexual who marries. Thurman might resemble several of these types, but I argue that his polymorphous behavior resists these kinds of categorization.

7. As Ulrichs intended, Symonds and Carpenter appropriated his work as a means of defending homosexuals from prosecution under the English Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 on physiological grounds (Summers 19; Bergman 19, 99-102). Associated with these writers, Timothy D'Arch Smith has identified an English literary group which he calls the "Uranian poets," which existed from the 1880s to the 1930s. See also Dowling on the Uranian poets in the context of the cult of Hellenism at Oxford. The group's literature is mainly characterized by portraits of man-boy love, an appropriation of the Uranian concept not necessarily shared by Symonds and Carpenter, whose use of the term generally applies to liaisons between people of the same age. Watson reports that in Greenwich village parlance, homosexuals were known as "intermediate sexes" or "uranians" (144).

8. For more on the details of this debate, allegedly started by Carl Van Vechten as a publicity stunt to increase sales of his forthcoming Nigger Heaven, see Kellner (53-54), and Van Notten (47-49).

9. The conclusion of The Blacker the Berry seems closely related to Quicksand: both suggest a kind of failure. Just as Helga settles for the humble rewards of religion, sex, and home, Emma Lou's final act of self-reliance, her refusal to accept life with Alva, is described as a "Pyrrhic Victory." Both heroines experience the tragic recognition that even the most noble human actions cannot provide unalloyed satisfaction.

10. Nugent and Thurman were very close until 1929, after which the friendship seems to have broken over questions of personal status, finances, and mutual accusations of plagiarism. Because Nugent lived until 1987, there exist several taped interviews bearing on his relationship with Thurman, held by Dr. Thomas Wirth (Van Notten 64). Van Notten incorporates much of this valuable informa-
tion in her book. In many of the excerpts that Van Notten provides, Nugent seems anxious to distinguish his own contributions to the Renaissance. See also Charles Smuth.

11. Presiding appropriately enough over Thurman’s mordant satire in *Infants*, Gorky took his pen name from his dead brother and father, Maxim, and his last name from the Russian word meaning, “bitter.” For critical biographies of Gorky, see Dan Levin, and especially Borras.

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