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*The Mapp of 1922*

*“The” Mapp of 1922*

At the end of *Miss Mapp*, E. F. Benson’s 1922 comic novel, the protagonist Elizabeth Mapp looks out her window onto the tranquil scene of her garden:

It was a warm, bright day of February, and a butterfly was enjoying itself in the pale sunshine on the other window, and perhaps (so Miss Mapp sympathetically interpreted its feelings) was rather annoyed that it could not fly away through the pane. It was not a white butterfly, but a tortoiseshell, very pretty, and in order to let it enjoy itself more, she opened the window and it fluttered out into the garden. Before it had flown many yards, a starling ate most of it up, so the starling enjoyed itself too.<sup>1</sup>

I open with this closing scene of pleasure and predation because it seems in some way to illustrate the relation between Benson (or books like Benson’s) and modernism. Benson, the comic novelist, might be the butterfly, “very pretty”; the starling, faster, sharper, more acute, stands in for modernism and/or the New Modernist Studies. In his day Benson was an established name, and *Miss Mapp* a raging success. But in literary history, the modernist starling *has* fairly well devoured Benson the butterfly (or “most of” him, anyway), whose tortoiseshell delights seem to have been proved short-lived. Born in 1867, with a long career spanning the Victorian, Edwardian and modernist periods until his death in 1940, Benson’s strongest claim to modernist relation hitherto has been domestic: he lived in Henry James’s former home, Lamb House, in the village of Rye on the Sussex coast.<sup>2</sup> Benson used Rye and its surrounds as the model for Tilling, one of

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<sup>1</sup> E. F. Benson, *Miss Mapp* (1922; White Press Kindle Edition, 2013), 177. Subsequent quotations are cited parenthetically.

<sup>2</sup> Benson recounted how he asked his mother Mary (who as wife to the Archbishop of Canterbury played eminent hostess to a range of exciting literary guests) to ask Henry James to “cast a professional eye” over his first novel in manuscript, *Dodo*. James responded with “the most careful and kindly of letters,” that the young Benson should “remember that a story is, essentially a form, and that if it fails of that it fails of its

the two main village settings of the *Mapp and Lucia* series. Michael North notes in *Reading 1922* (1999) that contemporary writers in 1922 might have seen the year as a “generational dividing line” and “time of open generational conflict.”<sup>3</sup> North quotes the critic and journalist A. G. Gardiner that “England Today is England in an unprecedented moment of transition.” North continues: “What connections might have been made in the mind of [a reader of *Ulysses* or *The Waste Land*] between literary modernism and the other innovations of the same year?”<sup>4</sup> North’s question, and indeed his approach in *Reading 1922*, collapsing the divide between literary modernism and its “popular analogues”<sup>5</sup> in film, music, and advertising, prompts me to ask what connections might have been made between experimental literature and other, not so innovative works of fiction? Though Benson’s publisher Hutchinson’s were in 1922 responsible for bestsellers such as Ethel M. Dell’s *Charles Rex* and Philip Gibbs’s *The Middle of the Road*, that year they also published Rebecca West’s *The Judge* and May Sinclair’s *Anne Severn and the Fieldings*, demonstrating the ways in which publishers were networks of relation between “literary” and popular writing.<sup>6</sup> Benson’s consistently good sales would mean that the general reader might have been more familiar with his Elizabeth and Lucia than T. S. Eliot’s Elizabeth and Leicester. Modernism’s associations with youth and intellectualism seem to put Benson and his bourgeois, middle-aged characters at odds with it.<sup>7</sup> But how might we think about 1922 (or modernism) differently if we revise the criteria for what counts as a representative or exemplary text for that year?

Benson is not usually read as modernist. I am being deliberately facetious in using the definite article in the title of this essay, because the only way that Benson’s is “the” map of 1922 is if we think not of cartography but of character—and add an extra “p.” The *Mapp and Lucia* novels seem cautious of modernity, and

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mission... For the rest, make yourself a style. It is by style we are saved.” E. F. Benson, *Our Family Affairs 1867-1896* (London: Cassell and Company, 1920), 280, 282.

<sup>3</sup> Michael North, *Reading 1922: A Return to the Scene of the Modern* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 4.

<sup>4</sup> North, *Reading 1922*, 6.

<sup>5</sup> North, *Reading 1922*, 29.

<sup>6</sup> “Hutchinsons Advertisements,” *The Times*, 12 December 1922, 8.

<sup>7</sup> For modernism’s young intellectuals, see North, *Reading 1922*, 142-44.

modernism's intellectual, aesthetic and social revolutions—though not unaware or closed to these revolutions, as Tilling's queer modernist artist Quaint Irene demonstrates. Taking cues from the novels themselves, critical work on Benson often classes him as a middlebrow writer (acknowledging the fraught and tenuous history of the “brows” and the shifting categories of high-, low-, middle-, and no-brow).<sup>8</sup> Good work has been achieved to this end by Nicola Humble and Victoria Stewart, among others. Unlike many (though of course, not all) canonical modernists, Benson presents apparently politically and socially conservative work, which puts him out of step with the avant-garde. However, Benson's fleeting appearance in the notes to Marsha Bryant and Douglas Mao's special section forum of *Modernism/modernity*, “Camp Modernism” (2016), is indicative of the New Modernist Studies' critical revision of the hard lines between modernism and everything else (mass culture, pop culture, middlebrow, camp, whatever).<sup>9</sup> As Bryant and Mao write, such revision has resulted in a productive questioning of the “gendered hierarchies between the individual and the masses, high and low culture, and hard and soft art.”<sup>10</sup> Reading camp as, in Allan Pero's words, a “symptom of modernism” may provide critical ways of approaching Benson as simultaneous with, or adjacent to, modernism.<sup>11</sup> Benson's episodic

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<sup>8</sup> For the “no brow,” see Peter Swirski, *From Lowbrow to Nobrow* (Montréal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2005), and Peter Swirski and Tero Eljas Vanhanen, eds., *When Highbrow Meets Lowbrow: Popular Culture and the Rise of the Nobrow* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Marsha Bryant and Douglas Mao, “Camp Modernism: Introduction,” *Modernism/modernity* 23, no. 1 (2016), 32.

<sup>10</sup> Bryant and Mao, “Camp Modernism: Introduction,” 2. “Camp Modernism” is one of many “-modernism” modifiers seen appearing since the acceleration of the expansion begun under the New Modernist Studies. As Marianne Thormählen notes, the danger of such modification and attenuation of the critical “seams” of modernism is that we render modernism as a critical category “next to meaningless.” Thormählen argues for a restricted *chronological* rather than aesthetic category of modernism in relation to English poetry (and, one assumes by extension, other imaginative writing), as designating the period between 1910 and 1939. Marianne Thormählen, “Reassigning ‘Modernism’: The Case for Adopting the Concept as a Period Designation in the Study of British Poetry,” *English Studies* 100, no. 2 (2019): 193.

<sup>11</sup> Allan Pero, “A Fugue on Camp,” *Modernism/modernity*, 23, no.1 (2016): 29. For my thinking about the usefulness of being “adjacent to” modernism, see Naomi Milthorpe, Robbie Moore, and Eliza Murphy, “Modernism-Adjacent,” *Modernist Review* 15 (2019): 1-9.

novels largely work through a structured “play of repetition” which is also central to camp: the more times the chapter ends in the same way, the funnier it gets.<sup>12</sup> However, this all begins to seem like an attempt to make Benson out to be more of a modernist than he was.

Inspired by Matthew Levay’s work on seriality in Galsworthy’s *The Forsyte Saga* (1906-1921), I want to echo the question: “what might we learn about modernism’s usefulness as a critical descriptor when we situate it alongside texts that simultaneously court and defy such a classification?”<sup>13</sup> Benson’s work is neither formally experimental nor narratively conventional, though these need not be the only means by which his work is assessed for inclusion or exclusion from consideration by modernist studies. Andrew Frayn has recently argued that to “return to 1922 must be to recognise the terrain of popular culture among, and often against which, the iconic works of that year sit. The dismissal of such works on aesthetic grounds misses, or at best misplaces, their value.”<sup>14</sup> Likewise, Levay notes the practical importance of working out an approach to literary works that, “despite their chronological and, occasionally, formal affinities with modernism, still do not fit within an expended conception of the field.”<sup>15</sup> Much like Mapp’s village home of Tilling, within reach of London by train or car but only partially congruent with metropolitan modernity, Benson’s relation to literary modernism is, to borrow Judith Scherer Herz’s term, “eccentric.”<sup>16</sup> He is remote from the centre of the modernist “boom,” not orbiting precisely around the modernist sun, but neither entirely outside the system. If we want to rethink 1922, this essay offers one attempt, using *Miss Mapp* as a test case. Re-situating Benson and *Miss Mapp* in “the” (or “a”) map of 1922 allows us to move more eccentrically about that year as the centre of modernist studies’ critical orbit, as well as about the diverse literary environment of the first half of the twentieth century.

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<sup>12</sup> Bryant and Mao, “Camp Modernism: Introduction,” 4.

<sup>13</sup> Matthew Levay, “Modernism’s Opposite: John Galsworthy and the Novel Series,” *Modernism/modernity* 26, no. 3 (September 2019): 545.

<sup>14</sup> Andrew Frayn, “Modernist Centenaries, Anniversaries, and Commemorations,” *Modernism/modernity Print Plus*, 15 December 2022, <https://doi.org/10.26597/mod.0242>.

<sup>15</sup> Levay, “Modernism’s Opposite,” 545.

<sup>16</sup> Judith Scherer Herz, “Stories by E. F. Benson,” *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 36, no. 1 (1993): 82.

### *A Saga Indefinitely Unveiling Itself*

*Miss Mapp* is the second in what would come to be a six-novel series. The first, *Queen Lucia* (1920), is centred on Emmeline Lucas, who dominates the Tudor village of Riseholme with her charm and her airs towards continental cultivation—including ersatz Italian and endless playing of Beethoven. *Miss Mapp* shifts to the seaside village of Tilling and focuses on the ferociously petty Elizabeth Mapp, who schemes and spies on her neighbours from the superior vantage point of her house on the corner of the street. In the third book, *Lucia in London* (1927), Benson returns to Lucia, who goes to London and behaves much as she does in Riseholme. The fourth book, *Mapp and Lucia* (1931), puts Lucia and Mapp together, as Mapp lets her house to Lucia during Tilling’s traditional summer house-swap (Mapp does not leave Tilling for a holiday but rents a cheaper house nearby, pinching vegetables from her garden and spying on Lucia). From this book onwards through the next two in the series, Lucia and Mapp both live in Tilling and seek social pre-eminence, giving each the antagonist the other deserves: Lucia charming, dynamic, and hugely theatrical, Mapp seething with bitter fury and strategizing knock-out social blows. The fifth book, *Lucia’s Progress* (1935), sees Lucia playing the stock market and getting rich while her neighbours lose their money; the sixth and last in the series is *Trouble for Lucia* (1939), in which she becomes mayor of Tilling. Most scholars seem to agree Benson would have kept going with more novels if he hadn’t died in 1940, twenty years after bringing Lucia into the world.

*Miss Mapp* introduces Mapp as a character. She’s a wonderful comic object. Quarrels are her “meat and drink,” and she likes nothing better than to spy on her neighbours from her house on the corner of the street. She has fine, long teeth and frequently smiles exaggeratedly, baring them all like a wolf (“not snarling, but amazingly smiling”) (144). Mapp’s intrigues include manipulating her neighbours, Major Flint and Captain Puffin, who she discovers have both run away from a duel to which they challenged each other whilst drunk; attempting to catch the secret lovers, Susan Poppitt and Algernon Wyse, in what she imagines to be *flagrante delicto* before their engagement is announced; and scolding her rival, Diva Plaistow, for hoarding coal against potential rationing measures, while herself simultaneously hoarding food. Benson later wrote in his autobiography *Final Edition* (1940) that he had no clear idea of a series when he first imagined Mapp, “an elderly atrocious spinster,” “the centre of social life, abhorred and

dominant,” observing the High Street from the windows of his own home “like a great spider.”<sup>17</sup> In this account he suggests the possibility that he could one day bring Lucia into contact with Mapp:

I began to invent a new set of characters who should revolve round these two women, fussy and eager and alert and preposterous. Of course, it would all be small beer, but one could get a head upon it of jealousies and malignities and devouring inquisitiveness. Like Moses on Pisgah, I saw a wide prospect, a Promised Land, a Saga indefinitely unveiling itself.<sup>18</sup>

Many of Mapp’s longest-running plots involve her competing with Diva. They are often told they look alike, though both scorn the comparison (Mapp is older, Diva is fatter). When both get the same dress made from a picture in an illustrated paper, both Mapp and Diva are horrified to be described as a “[p]air of exquisite sisters” (110). The joke of unintentional and maligned intimacy is repeated again—piece for piece—when Mapp and Diva get identical dresses made again, thirty pages later, again assuming that they will outshine the other, again to be described as sisters. Benson’s use of repetition, elongation, and delay to magnify the joke will be discussed further below, but it is notable that his comedy recognises that such occurrences are in fact *recurrences*, iterations in what unfolds as a long-form saga of social life.

Benson’s description of “a wide prospect, a Promised Land, a Saga indefinitely unveiling itself” proffers a comic inflation of what most would consider novelistic “small beer,” and shows his awareness of the aesthetic and commercial opportunities of serial fiction. Mapp’s fictional birth, in this account, also heralds Benson’s turn from the unit to the series. Eliza Murphy argues that Benson’s novels broadcast “the value of the serial and the popular,”<sup>19</sup> in which “readerly pleasure” emerges from “the standard structure that is repeated across the texts, creating a web of overlaying social skirmishes that build upon each other.”<sup>20</sup> This

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<sup>17</sup> E. F. Benson, *Final Edition* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1940), 171.

<sup>18</sup> Benson, *Final Edition*, 171-72.

<sup>19</sup> Eliza Murphy, “Parties and the Comic Novel in Interwar Britain” (PhD diss., University of Tasmania, 2020), 205.

<sup>20</sup> Murphy, 207.

type of pleasure is also primary within the individual novels, which as Judith Scherer Herz notes, depend on “the cumulative effect of [...] repetitions, [and] deferrals of climax.”<sup>21</sup> For instance, in *Miss Mapp*, a repeated and recognisably lame joke is the Tillingites’ use of the punny farewell “au reservoir.” A lot of this joke works on readerly recognition that it is, indeed, *not funny*, that the jostling of the characters to get this phrase out first as they say their farewells, *as though it is a witty innovation*, is bathetic. (Mapp claims it as her own invention, after having picked it up on a visit to Riseholme.) The social fortunes of the characters can be tracked by whether they are using it or not, and indeed, the more Mapp and co. fight to be the one to say it first, as though it is new, the funnier this bad joke and its reception becomes.<sup>22</sup>

The pleasures of repetition, continuation, and familiarity are established features in critical work on serial forms. The series, as Murphy comments, following from Bede Scott and Umberto Eco, is energised by the tension between predictability and innovation.<sup>23</sup> Laurie Langbauer argues, “[t]he formal properties of the series represent a cycle of perpetuation and revitalization of the status quo.”<sup>24</sup> It is difficult for us to think about serial fiction as innovative in the same way as modernist innovation, and for writers and readers of the twenties, serial forms were likely not viewed as such, especially given their association with Victorian commercial publishing.<sup>25</sup> Levay argues of Galsworthy’s *The Forsyte Saga* that “critics’ ambivalence towards the novel series stemmed from the form’s prominence within the marketplace, coupled with a fundamental

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<sup>21</sup> Scherer Herz, 82.

<sup>22</sup> One more of Benson’s tenuous connections with modernism, this pun is also used in *Ulysses*, in “Oxen of the Sun.” James Joyce, *Ulysses*, edited by Jeri Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 404. This was not, however, the first instance: the earliest use of the pun listed in the OED appears in 1839, in John Poole’s comic novel of village life, *Little Pedlington and the Pedlingtonians*. “au reservoir, int.,” *OED Online*, December 2022, Oxford University Press. My thanks to one of the essay’s readers for pointing out this history of the phrase.

<sup>23</sup> Murphy, 208.

<sup>24</sup> Laurie Langbauer, *Novels of Everyday Life: The Series in English Fiction, 1850-1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 12.

<sup>25</sup> Levay, 551.

misunderstanding of its narrative properties.”<sup>26</sup> I’m not arguing for Benson’s status as an avant-garde novelist, but I am intrigued by Levay’s argument about the kinds of sustained experiments with narrative temporality, plot, and characterisation offered in the novel series. Benson’s resistance to character development, for instance, cocks a snook at the explorations of interiority being undertaken by many modernist writers. Levay writes that the novel series challenges a modernist aesthetics—especially as outlined by Virginia Woolf—that values a singular revelation of character, and completeness or resolution. Benson’s *Mapp and Lucia* novels—as one contemporary critic said of *Queen Lucia*—“just stop.”<sup>27</sup> In this, they oddly parallel Dorothy Richardson’s *Pilgrimage* (1915-1938), a novel sequence that likewise often stops, as well as starts, *in medias res*, and which refuses conventional novelistic resolution in favour of foregrounding the present experience of its protagonist Miriam Henderson (though Richardson, of course, is very interested in interiority). Though not published precisely contemporaneously, two of Richardson’s chapter-volumes sandwich Benson’s *Miss Mapp: Deadlock* was published in 1921 and *Revolving Lights* in 1923.<sup>28</sup> Closer to (Benson’s) home, Margaret Oliphant praised Henry James for just this quality as well. James, she wrote, “abandons the necessities of dramatic completeness, [...] going through all the anguishes and excitements, which ought to bring a conclusion of one kind or another, but always breaking off, never attaining, beginning again in endless and listless renewal.”<sup>29</sup> While these works could not be more tonally different, there is a kind of sympathy between them in that they are interested in something other than narrative resolution. As Langbauer comments, Oliphant’s praise is directed towards James’s “attempt to capture [the] endless circulation” of real life in narrative form.<sup>30</sup> Richardson, as Lorraine Sim has noted, sought a literary form appropriate to the “new structures and forms of daily life.”<sup>31</sup> The *Mapp and Lucia* novels resist

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<sup>26</sup> Levay, 546.

<sup>27</sup> “A Fearful Spectacle,” *Literary Digest* 66, no.12 (18 September 1920): 102.

<sup>28</sup> Benson himself, with his passion for ice-skating, makes a guest appearance in Richardson’s *Oberland* (1928), when Miriam goes on holiday in the Swiss Alps.

<sup>29</sup> Margaret Oliphant, “New Books,” *Blackwoods Magazine* 129 (July 1879): 101, quoted in Langbauer, *Novels of Everyday Life*, 62.

<sup>30</sup> Langbauer, *Novels of Everyday Life*, 62.

<sup>31</sup> Lorraine Sim, “Dorothy Richardson’s *Pilgrimage* and the Society of the Street,” *Pilgrimages: The Journal of Dorothy Richardson Studies*, no. 6 (2013-2014): 66. See,



closure because of their commitment to comic extension, as well as their structural allegiance to the social principle of gossip.

As Esther Fritsch describes, gossip is “a complex and multifunctional social practice that uses, distributes, produces and perpetuates social knowledge.”<sup>32</sup> Gossip, Benson recognises, doesn’t conclude but stretches, connects, and mutates social knowledge into fresh narratives. Indeed, if the modernist dictum is “Make It New!,” then Mapp & co.’s is “Make it news!” One of the novel’s longer-running plot points is the supposed duel fought between Major Benjy and Captain Puffin. The plot begins in Chapter 5, when a late-night whisky session in which one man’s whisky is depleted by the other leads to Captain Puffin calling Major Flint a hippopotamus. The Major, insulted, sends the Captain a note demanding satisfaction at dawn. In the cold and sober light of morning, both men chicken out and attempt to leave town by the first train. Puffin forgets Benjy’s note of challenge on his chimney-piece and despairs that the “whole story” of his cowardice will soon be spread through the town via the servants’ whisper network (81). When he discovers Major Benjy also running away, the Captain tells him that the Major’s own cowardice will be “a fine story for tea-parties” (82). They reconcile, but then the Major forgets his bag on the departing train. As it turns out, the Captain is right, up to a point. While the “conundrum” of the duel is circulated with remarkable speed (why the two notes in the Captain’s house? whence did the Major’s bag go?), the Tillingites cannot solve it: though they know a duel was challenged, they also all witness the Captain and Major departing on the 11:20 tram to play golf together. The Padre (Tilling’s vicar) follows them with the aim of preventing any potential duel from occurring. While all three are absent at the golf course, in the vacuum of resolution the narrative possibilities flow as the collective imagination of Tilling imagines a “variety of *dénouements*” (87). Mapp has “glorious idea[s]” (83) that the duel may be fought on romantic grounds (for her honour); the Padre, as he departs to intervene, relishes the “sense of adventure” it prompts (85); Diva pays four shillings for a crab to entice the returned Padre to

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also, Bryony Randall’s work on *Pilgrimage in Modernism, Daily Time and Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 59-91.

<sup>32</sup> Esther Fritsch, “Serial Gossip: Gossip as Theme and Narrative Strategy in *Sex and the City*,” in Gaby Allrath and Marion Gymnich, eds., *Narrative Strategies in Television Series* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 154.

tell what he witnessed over lunch (91). Mapp, meanwhile, fantasizes about the social caché made possible by being the subject—as well as the originator—of gossip:

She had, too, been so discreet about it; she had not come within measurable distance of asserting that the challenge had been in any way connected with her. [...] Thus, very presently, all Tilling would know exactly that which Miss Mapp had not said to the dear Padre, namely, that the duel which had been fought (or which hadn't been fought) was "all about" her. And the best of it was, that though everybody knew, it would still be a great and beautiful secret, reposing inviolably in every breast or chest, as the case might be. [...] even if under further promises of secrecy they communicated their secret to each other, there would be no harm done... (95)

Here, gossip as a form of communal knowledge is simultaneously spoken and unspoken, a source of social capital which, like much symbolic capital, is invisible (and, as Benson's ironic language shows, is also not real). Indeed, the social fortunes of many a Tillingite stand or rest on their accumulation of this capital over the course of the next fifty pages as they return, endlessly, to the problem of the duel.<sup>33</sup> Yet Mapp is incorrect (or perhaps disingenuous) in supposing that the gossip cannot occasion harm, for she herself uses gossip as a social weapon, to vanquish her foes and win prestige on the social battlefield. She even thinks metaphorically in these terms: "Whatever attack she made on this mystery, the garrison failed to march out and surrender but kept their flag flying, and her conjectures were woefully blasted by the forces of the most elementary reasons" (96).

As Fritsch notes, quoting from Michel de Certeau, gossip is a "'practice of everyday life' [that] provides an archive of knowledge and thus a 'repertory of

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<sup>33</sup> Christopher George Takacs has written about narrative capital among college students as the means to "become interesting": this symbolic capital is "the library of a person's experiences capable of being turned into interesting stories, and their skill at constructing and deploying these stories to signal social status." Christopher George Takacs, "Becoming Interesting: Narrative Capital Development at Elite Colleges," *Qualitative Sociology* 43, no. 2 (June 2020): 255-70.

tactics of future use.”<sup>34</sup> Mapp’s hoarding of secret knowledge against future need—as well as her jealous guarding of her own slips and *faux pas*—means that apparently trivial social details, well-worn stories, and stock phrases (as in the case of *au reservoir*) are incorporated into her armoury and deployed as both offensive and defensive measures. The matter of the duel continues to occupy her conjectures—and the Tillingites’ increasingly wearied conversation—for fifty or so pages from its commencement. One night Mapp discovers Major Benjy and Captain Puffin drunk; threatened by both with being gossiped about as drunk herself, Mapp realises in a flash of inspiration that they had both run away from the duel. She devises a “new and delightful strategic campaign” to expose these two military men as cowards and thus to derail any potential false gossip about herself (125). Her first (and indeed only) move is to effectively spread rumour, using her erstwhile rival Diva as “incomparably the best disseminator”: “[Diva] walked so fast, and her telegraphic style was so brisk and lucid. Her terse tongue, her revolving feet! Such a gossip!” (126). Diva here becomes Mapp’s news machinery, her body associated with automobilism, her speech with telegraphy; elsewhere she’s noted for her “prodigious speed” (17). Using Diva as a technology of gossip, Mapp works first to shake up, then to remake Tilling’s social environs: “they plunged together into the maelstrom of the High Street, riding and whirling in its waters.” Mapp and Diva here counterpoint the individual modernist *flaneuse*. The *flaneuse* might absorb the street’s stream of sensory data input, but Mapp rides atop the wave, using information to form islands of malicious sociality: “every permutation and combination of Tilling society [...] had to be formed on the pavement with a view to the amplest possible discussion” (127).

de Certeau’s suggestion of gossip as implicated in the tactics or strategies of everyday life is presaged by Benson, who makes frequent use of the “strategic” position of Mapp’s house in the opening pages of the novel (5, 6). As de Certeau argues, *strategy* is associated with place and with the “mastery of places by vision.”<sup>35</sup> Mapp’s primary power is of seeing (or spying) on her neighbours, a fact made possible by the position of her front window at a particular vantage point in the street, where it commands “uninterrupted view” of the High Street (5). She is

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<sup>34</sup> Fritsch, “Serial Gossip,” 154.

<sup>35</sup> Michel de Certeau, “On the Oppositional Practices of Everyday Life,” *Social Text* 3, no.3 (Autumn 1980): 5.

disturbed by the Major's and Captain's closed curtains; that she can see there is something going on behind them, but not know what that something is, unsettles her sense of mastery. However, where visual mastery affords her strategic power, she also makes consistent use of tactics, which de Certeau defines according to "their stress on time as such," "in order to seize the possibilities that a moment offers."<sup>36</sup> Mapp takes advantage of the fact of her early rising between six and eight in the morning (34), which enables "ample time" to plot (Benson calls these "chaste meditations") prior to the regular beginning of the social day around 10:30 (7). Her constant return to the window enables her to stay "alert" (to use Benson's word, from his description in *Final Edition*) to the happenings in the street: she observes the movement of the curtains, if they open or shut to schedule, clocking every deviation from regularity as potential social information. She pivots and manoeuvres in relation to the fresh intelligence she uncovers as she moves through the shared social space of the High Street, as in her calculating equivocation over an invitation to her neighbour Isabel Poppitt's bridge party, which Mapp only accepts when she (incorrectly) surmises that in accepting she will spoil the party and thus wreck Isabel's plans. In this instance, Mapp's equivocation stretches over a period of a morning and afternoon, as she was a last-minute inclusion for the party; this occupies around twelve pages of narrative. Mapp's tactics extend the structure of the joke, as well as the narrative space occupied by such seemingly trivial events, well beyond the expected horizon of punchline or conclusion, and in so doing Benson celebrates the narrative possibilities of social comedy. It's small beer, but as Benson recognised, it has a frothy head on it.

But even Mapp realises the limits of gossip's currency: almost as soon as she has uncovered (and extensively aired) the truth about the duel between the Major and the Captain, she primly departs from the social group with "a little cooing laugh": "The curtain had to come down for a little while on so dramatic a situation. Any discussion, just then, would be an anti-climax" (128). Gossip's power lies in the capacity for the secret to be communicated—that is, the process of the hidden becoming visible. This is why, repeatedly, Benson shows Mapp and Diva and the rest competing to be the first one to tell the news (or to say *au reservoir*). Steven Connor describes the twentieth century revival of the novel series as "an effort to assimilate the processes of historical duration in its own form," and while Benson

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<sup>36</sup> De Certeau, "On the Oppositional Practices of Everyday Life," 7, 6.

may not be thinking about time and history in quite the way Connor is, his awareness of duration in relation to social life is acute.<sup>37</sup>

### *Trimmings*

Upon *Miss Mapp*'s publication in 1922, a reviewer in the *Bookman* wrote that "Mr. Benson has made a narrative out of what are usually regarded as the trimmings of a novel, [...] the everyday conversations, the hourly happenings of ordinary people."<sup>38</sup> "Trimmings" describes what is decorative, ornamental, additional (in relation to fabrics), or, in relation to meals, or joints of meat, what accompanies the main dish. But *trimmings* also (paradoxically) implies that which is cut. What the critic who described this novel as made from "trimmings" seems to suggest is that Benson has picked up the scraps most novelists set aside, an interpretation of the novel's *content* that has extended into estimation of the *novel itself*. For Benson's novels more broadly to be the "trimmings" implies that they are at best attractive and delightful, but not particularly nourishing and, at worst, unnecessary. Another way of saying this is that the novels are frivolous, a word which carries with it moral and aesthetic opprobrium. In his study *Frivolity Unbound* (1990), Robert Kiernan identifies in Benson's *Mapp and Lucia* novels a camp sensibility and suggests that what camp affords is "an alternative to" and "psychic relief" from "the morally correct laughter of satire, parody, and all other shame-begetting forms of humor."<sup>39</sup> Kiernan's point is valid: though they are satirical, they aren't really satire, so Benson's method perhaps runs as counterpoint to what Jonathan Greenberg identifies as a central mode of modernist writing.<sup>40</sup>

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37 Steven Connor, *The English Novel in History 1950-1995* (London: Routledge, 1996), 136.

38 M. S., "Miss Mapp," *Bookman*, December 1922, 156.

39 Robert Kiernan, *Frivolity Unbound: Six Masters of the Camp Novel* (New York: Continuum, 1990), 16.

<sup>40</sup> Jonathan Greenberg, *Modernism, Satire, and the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

James Phillips argues that Benson’s metier—like Lucia’s—is the trivial and the surface.<sup>41</sup> Unlike Woolf’s maligned Bennett, Wells, and Galsworthy, though, I would suggest that Benson is not interested in making “the trivial and the transitory appear the true and the enduring.”<sup>42</sup> The big plot points are the plot points of everyday village life: the death of a neighbour (Captain Puffin drowns in his oxtail soup after suffering a stroke), a drunken spat on the street, the social embarrassment of finding you’re wearing the same dress as your friend. As one illustration, there is the sequence in which Mapp discovers that Irene Coles, “suffragette, post-impressionist artist [...] socialist and [...] Germanophil” (19) is painting a work called “Adam and Eve.” “Quaint Irene,” as Mapp nicknames her derogatorily, has already painted her servant Lucy as Eve, nude. Mapp happens to call when Irene’s model for Adam is in the process of undressing. She is curious about who it is, but also scandalised by the idea it could be one of her fellow Tillingites:

The screen fell flat on the ground and within a yard of her stood Mr. Hopkins, the proprietor of the fish-shop just up the street. Often and often had Miss Mapp had pleasant little conversations with him, with a view to bringing down the price of flounders. He had little bathing-drawers on...  
[...]

Miss Mapp had not imagined that Time and Eternity combined could hold so embarrassing a moment. She did not know where to look, but wherever she looked, it should not be at Hopkins. (58)

Here the passage oscillates between the poles of social triviality (“little” conversations) and social scandal (“little” bathing drawers), both of which spring from similarly small units of measure. In the yawning gulf of embarrassment what is little becomes gigantic, bigger indeed than “Time and Eternity,” capable of rendering the social actor both sightless and speechless (“...”). For Benson, small

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<sup>41</sup> James Phillips, “The Rules and Politics of Storyworlds: Fictionalizing the Everyday in E. F. Benson’s Mapp and Lucia Novels,” *Philosophy and Literature*, vol. 44, no. 1 (April 2020): 56.

<sup>42</sup> Virginia Woolf, “Modern Fiction,” in *The Collected Essays of Virginia Woolf*, 2 vols. (London: Hogarth, 1966), 2:105.

slights and inconsequentialities are, as Phillips remarks, magnified and invested with “the glamour and stimulation of fantasy.”<sup>43</sup>

This is not to say that Benson is uninterested in major events: remarkably prolific, he wrote over ninety books, including works of history, political and cultural analysis, biography, and memoir. In 1918, the year he moved to Rye, he published commentaries on the division of Poland (*Poland and Mittel-Europe*) and on Germany’s influence over Turkey (*Crescent and Iron Cross*). In 1922, the same year as *Miss Mapp*’s publication, he also published the standalone novel *Peter*, which begins in a middle-class drawing room at teatime, over a discussion of prices and wages and the ongoing coal crisis (this same matter appears in *Miss Mapp*, in the episode about Mapp’s hoarding). What such productivity shows is that Benson was deeply aware of just how far you could make a little bit of material go.<sup>44</sup> He draws on this literally and repeatedly in *Miss Mapp*, in jokes about dressmaking, in which trimmings often go very far indeed.

Mapp begins the novel fighting with Diva over worsted (medium-weight woollen yarn used for embroidery and handknitting); Mapp is furious that the draper had promised this beautiful rose-madder coloured worsted to Mapp and then sold it to Diva, who knits it into an ornamental stripe on a winter scarf (9, 43).<sup>45</sup> The feud continues as a sub-plot in their rivalry, popping up much as Diva pops in, whenever Mapp is reminded of scarves, knitting, or colour.<sup>46</sup> Benson embroiders this madder-ness with further plot furbelows. Mapp discovers the thrifty Diva secretly cutting roses out of her old chintz curtains to sew as a decorative border for a new dress. Both inspired and chagrined by Diva’s ingenuity (“she could trim a hat with a toothbrush and a banana in such a way that it looked quite Parisian till you firmly analysed its component parts” [45]), Mapp in turn pulls an old set of

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<sup>43</sup> Phillips, “The Rules and Politics of Storyworlds,” 57.

<sup>44</sup> Simon Goldhill has written that Benson and his family were gripped by graphomania—that is, a desire and compulsion to write—to the extent that they were a “family that wrote itself.” Simon Goldhill, *A Very Queer Family Indeed: Sex, Religion, and the Bensons in Victorian Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 11.

<sup>45</sup> My gratitude to one of the essay’s readers for inviting deeper consideration of this plot point.

<sup>46</sup> “She paused on the pavement, and remembered that Diva had not yet expressed regret about the worsted, and that she still ‘popped’ as much as ever” (43).

curtains from her cupboard. These are printed with poppies, not roses, but the action is the same: Mapp (or rather, Mapp's servant, Withers) cuts the flower print from the old curtains and sews them at top speed to a yellow dress, precisely in order that her debut in this dress overshadows Diva's in her rose-trimmed dress. When Diva, hip to Mapp's scheming, counter-schemes to humiliate Mapp by making her servant Janet wear the rosebud dress, she exposes the social dynamics of Tilling's dress code, which require that the wearer be both elegant and thrifty, both original and within the rules of convention. Overlaying these plots is a further verbal embroidery of puns, rhymes, and wordplay. Diva's rosebuds pick up on the rose-madder of the worsted and Mapp's much-vaunted rose garden, as well as on their continuing conflict (they are worsted by each other by turns). Mapp's loathing of Diva's "*pop*ping," as well as her neighbour the *Poppitts*, is ironically echoed in the *poppies* of her dress and in the bursts and explosions of her hoarding cupboard when Diva opens it. Diva herself tries to sew all these puns together in an effort to best (or worst) Mapp:

She would have to frame some stinging rejoinder which would "escape her" when next Elizabeth used that stale old phrase ["au reservoir"]: it would have to be short, swift and spontaneous, and therefore required careful thought. It would be good to bring "pop" into it also. "Your reservoir in the garden-room hasn't gone 'pop' again, I hope, darling?" was the first draft that occurred to her, but that was not sufficiently condensed. (89-90)

Diva's "careful thought" to create a "spontaneous" and "condensed" response, like her hat trims, reflects Benson's awareness of the artifice of the apparently artless construction. Diva's "ingenuity" in both hats and stinging rejoinders seems to intersect with the avant-garde (bananas), even the Imagiste (condensed). Benson's economical play with social, verbal, and narrative offcuts counterpoints the modernist concern with the everyday, making new and strange (or at least, comical) the trivialities that others might throw away.

### *Wide Prospect*

Where the saga denotes the possibility of temporal stretch opened up by the structuring principle of *news*, and the trimmings denote an awareness of the narrative possibilities afforded by what another writer *eschews*, Benson's other



terms, “wide prospect” and “promised land,” describe a third principle at work, which we can also read in the scene in which Mapp is confronted with the nude Mr Hopkins: the significance of *views*. Benson found, with the fictional birth of Miss Mapp and the extension of his novelistic world to Tilling, an expanded spatial and visual field of play, which allows him to explore the comic possibilities of the strategies and tactics of everyday life. *Miss Mapp*, both novel and character, are aware of ways of representing and being represented (or mis-represented) and of seeing and being seen. Mapp’s most characteristic habit is to spy on her neighbours from her garden window (indeed, at one point she’s described as an “all-seeing eye” [137]). The word “view” is used thirty times in this novel, both in its noun and verb forms, and to denote both the act or occasion of looking (“in full view” [22]), particular focal points or sights (“the view from the top of the hill” [21]), and personal perspective (“That’s my view” [131]).

*Seeing* and *looking* are even more insistent verbs for Mapp, who is aware of the value of display. In a key scene of contrition from Major Benjy after he insults her while drunk, Mapp parades with him around Tilling while she shops, precisely in order that her neighbours can see his submission:

Sometimes she took him into a shop in case there might be someone there who had not seen him yet on her leash; sometimes she left him on the pavement in a prominent position, marking, all the time, just as if she had been a clinical thermometer, the feverish curiosity that was burning in Tilling’s veins. (136)

The economy of witnessing is essential in this town, ruled by social conventions and by gossip. Gossip’s narrative, temporal, and spatial dimensions “map [...] the social environment,” according to Gary Alan Fine and Ralph L. Rosnow.<sup>47</sup> Mapp has a long memory, and her social life is imagined as a series of bellicose campaigns (Benson makes particular use of militaristic language: *manoeuvres*, *tactical*, *strategic* are used throughout). The social world as a battlefield is hardly world-shattering in its originality but Benson’s commitment to wringing the joke

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<sup>47</sup> Gary Alan Fine and Ralph L. Rosnow, “Gossip, Gossipers, Gossiping,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 4, no. 1 (Winter 1978): 162. Fine and Rosnow may not have intended this pun, but I did.

out is notable. Phillips notes the novels' interest, in this way, in the "interpersonal domain of 'society'":

On crossing the threshold of their respective homes, Benson's characters step outdoors into the public arena of their collective undertaking in make-believe. What counts is that which, with a little pushing from the participants, comes to *seem* important.<sup>48</sup>

Benson shows that what comes to seem important is that which is established by convention and replication. The picturesque Tilling is a weekend haunt of amateur artists, and Mapp's house, on the corner of a cobbled street, the favourite spot for sketchers. The sketchers have standard views which they are replicating: the church porch, the crooked chimney beyond the garden wall, the view of the downward street "which, in spite of all the efforts of the artist, insisted, in the sketch, on going up hill instead" (22). Mapp speciously takes part in these activities, too, especially by posing "artlessly" in the garden window in full view of those sketching it. Benson shows us the performative and collective nature of this activity, as well as its capacity to be hijacked by the cynical—none more so than Mapp, who occasionally joins the sketchers for an "extempore" afternoon of drawing: "She had already drawn in the lines of this south porch on her sketching-block, transferring them there by means of a tracing from a photograph, so that formed a very promising beginning to her sketch" (22-23). Mapp's efforts at seeming neighbourly, seeming friendly, seeming innocent, or seeming original shows her cynical adherence to the principle that the price of social liberty is eternal vigilance. In the novel's final pages, Mapp uses this power when she looks out the window to wait for the Major, sees the opportunity of being connected romantically with him through making thrifty use of some leftover snowdrops from her garden for his buttonhole, and ensures that they are seen together by Diva (and thus gossiped about).

While Mapp uses seeing and being seen to confirm her social domination, Benson shows the ways in which this same visibility can be undercut through parody and mockery. This might be obvious to state, given that *Miss Mapp* is a comic novel, but Benson also embodies parody in the figure of Quaint Irene. Irene's

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<sup>48</sup> Phillips, "The Rules and Politics of Storyworlds," 59.

characteristic affect is to laugh (usually directly at whatever Mapp is doing or saying), while her “awful” and “wonderful” mimicry provoke laughter in others (57, 58). Her nickname reflects ironically on the picturesqueness and tradition supposedly enshrined in village life.<sup>49</sup> Her introduction in the novel’s opening chapter means that readers are alerted to heterodox (indeed, modern) points of view, to the possibility of seeing and valuing social life differently to the furiously conventional Mapp. Irene (whose name, notably, includes a rhyme with *eye*) provides an opportunity to see modernism’s infiltration into village life and to relish its capacity to mutate social and aesthetic values through satire.

To return to the butterfly and the starling (but not to my original emblemizing), Mapp’s enjoyment of the prettiness of the butterfly is quickly subsumed by her enjoyment of the starling, who in gobbling the butterfly enjoys itself so much: “She forgot about the butterfly,” the narrator comments, “and remembered the starling” (177). This scene requires the reader to likewise shift sympathetic allegiance from the rare beauty to the common predator, for no other reason than joy in its unexpected and delicious triumph (it might be noted here, as aside, that Benson was a birder and *Final Edition* makes many fond references to starlings). 1922 viewed with Benson at its centre is simply another year—or another novel—in a series. That he created his Mapp in the same year as *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land* and *Jacob’s Room* is not a signal that we should stake strong a claim for Benson’s modernism. Instead, I think it shows we should be working harder to see the works that are eccentric to, adjacent to, neighbourly with those landmarks of modernism (even if they’re hostile neighbours, like Mapp), not in order to understand it or them better but to see a wider prospect.

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<sup>49</sup> For the intersection of the rural and the modern, see Kristin Bluemel and Michael McCluskey, eds., *Rural Modernity in Britain: A Critical Intervention* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018).