As Greta Garbo Lay Dying

***Losing the Plot: Film and Feeling in the Modern Novel*. Pardis Dabashi. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023. Pp. 297 (cloth).**

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Pardis Dabashi's highly original and elegantly written book proceeds from a striking premise: that the denigration of plot in modernist literary studies requires root-and-branch reassessment, by way of Hollywood film. In an absorbing introduction, Dabashi identifies and interrogates "one of the articles of literary-critical faith": "that a definitive feature of modernist fiction […] was its devaluation, if not abandonment, of plot" (2). Modernist literature's early advocates and critics agreed on this point, which has remained a given within modernist studies, often freighted with assumptions about the flight from plot's aesthetically and/or politically liberating dimensions. But what if major modernist writers had mixed feelings about this—their own—abandonment of plot? And what if those authors were acutely conscious that even as modernist fiction eschewed plots as reactionary residues of realism, motion pictures were embracing and disseminating them to a rapt public by ways and means not previously imaginable?

Losing the Plot opens with a wonderfully emblematic anecdote: a 1935 exchange in which Emily Coleman frets that Djuna Barnes will pour scorn on her helpless yearning "to tell a story" (1). It appears that Coleman believed even then what many modernist scholars take for granted even now: that the author of *Nightwood* (1936) must have been a plot skeptic, and thus a modernist par excellence. Much like Barnes herself, who coolly replied to Coleman that "I do not recall ever having said I disliked plot," Dabashi disputes the belief that to be a "good modernist" required "losing the plot." Across the book's three chapters, Dabashi argues that though Barnes, Nella Larsen, and William Faulkner recalibrated the role of plot in their novels, they also recognised its enduring appeal. They did so because they were all avid moviegoers and so well aware that "cohesive storytelling" (29), including the Hollywood "happy ending" (14), was proving deeply attractive to cinema's mass audience. At times, too, the nostalgic consolations of plot remained alluring to the authors themselves. The upshot, Dabashi suggests, is that "plot

returns to the [modernist] novel in deeply ambivalent form" (12), remediated by the movies.

Dabashi's attention to this "modern media ecology" (9) within and against which the modern novel developed is one of the book's most welcome—and in certain ways most daring—moves. While a few scholars have noted that *Nightwood*'s Robin Vote bears a resemblance to Marlene Dietrich, Dabashi remarks that "[n]o one has quite known what to *do* with this connection" (92). The same cannot be said of Faulkner's connection to Hollywood, which has received sustained critical attention in recent years. Books by Julian Murphet, Stefan Solomon, Ben Robbins, and Sarah Gleeson-White (with whom Dabashi co-edited 2022's *The New William Faulkner Studies*) have thoroughly examined Faulkner's cinematic endeavors, challenging Faulkner's own sniffy claim that "trash and junk writing" for Hollywood had a "corrupting" influence on his fiction (133). Dabashi, though, takes a different approach: *Losing the Plot* is more interested in the films that Faulkner, Barnes, and Larsen were *watching*—or *may* have been watching. In Faulkner's case, Dabashi considers the films that he might have seen in Oxford, Mississippi, some years before he wrote *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *As I Lay Dying* (1930). In Larsen's case, Dabashi ponders her viewings of the Greta Garbo star-vehicle *Camille* (1936) some years after the novelist's Harlem Renaissance heyday with *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929).

Dabashi is frank that hers is a "partially speculative task" (14); she recognises, too, the risks shadowing "the principle of probable spectatorship" (13). To be clear, *Losing the Plot*'s speculations about spectatorship do not equate to abandoning the archive: Dabashi is the first scholar to research movie programming in 1920s Oxford and to uncover textual evidence that Barnes wrote directly about Dietrich. But because her "speculative critical practice" (39) moves some way beyond archival research, Dabashi invokes Saidiya Hartman's argument in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (2019) that "press[ing] at the limits of the case file and the document" into "specula[tion] about what might have been" is sometimes necessary, especially when it comes to Black working-

class women's culture.[1] Hartman's point resonates particularly with Larsen's life: lacunae in the writer's personal archive (most of Larsen's belongings mysteriously disappeared from her New York apartment immediately following her death in 1964) are both an example of and metaphor for "racialized processes of exclusion in conventional historiography" (48). Consider the dismaying belatedness with which literary historians recognised Larsen as a major modernist, which in turn exemplifies modernist studies' lagging engagement with the Harlem Renaissance. Dabashi makes a compelling case for *Losing the Plot*'s speculative practice and probability principle. Still, some readers will wonder how much critical heft can plausibly accrue to what was until now "merely a curious anecdote" (44) about Nella watching Greta on the silver screen. That anecdote emerged some fifty years after the fact, sourced for a biography that featured some curious, well, speculations of its own (some of them since debunked) about Larsen's family history. In 1982, the son of Larsen's friend Mayme Frye Meyer told Thadious M. Davis that his mother and Nella saw *Camille* together "twice."[2] In Dabashi's telling, however, "we know that Larsen watched Garbo's *Camille* multiple times" (38). Faulknerds, meanwhile, may feel inclined to point out that William spent lengthy periods between 1920 and 1927 away from home—in New York, New Orleans, and Paris—so could only occasionally have watched movies in Oxford during those years.

Chapter 1 considers Larsen's apparent fascination with Garbo. Dabashi notes that *Camille*'s weirdly happy ending deviated not only from its source text, Alexandre Dumas *fils*' novel *The Lady of the Camellias* (1848), but also Larsen's debut. Though Marguerite (played by Garbo) dies during the film's climactic scene, she does so glamorously, coherently, and affectingly. As in *Mata Hari* (1931), Garbo's character expires, but in the non-diegetic realm of star power, Garbo survives and thrives. Literary critics have offered wildly divergent takes on *Quicksand*'s final chapters, but none of them claims that it ends happily for protagonist Helga Crane. Larsen scholars largely concur that Helga restlessly

[1] Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2019), xiv.

[2] Thadious M. Davis, *Nella Larsen: Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994), 423.

seeks but never really achieves a clear sense of self. Dabashi's invigorating variation on this well-worn theme emphasises the inefficacy of plot: by failing to achieve the coming-of-age into selfhood associated with the *bildungsroman*, "Helga does not become a coherent subject no matter how much plot Larsen throws at her" (61). Dabashi makes an excellent related point: that Helga's "desire for stability in life" (46-47) departs from modernism's valorisation of fragmentation as artistically or socially desirable. Modernist studies remains insufficiently attentive to how, for minoritised subjects, fragmentation frequently indexes not exhilarating freedom but "traumatic loss." Stability is far more difficult to achieve—and thus that much more enticing—for victims of "racial subjection" and other, often intersecting forms of oppression (46). In *Quicksand*, Helga—and with her, the narrative—ends up bogged down by the "quagmire" of multiple childbirths within a loveless marriage to a patriarchal philanderer in Jim Crow Alabama.[3] Dabashi argues that Larsen's later fascination with *Camille* illuminates *Quicksand*'s preoccupation with this failure or loss of plot. Whereas Helga succumbed to social death and Larsen herself disappeared from literary Harlem amid professional and personal scandal, *Camille*'s ending merges Marguerite's "morally redeemed" (44) on-screen death with Garbo's star-system afterlife. Such "flaunt[ing]" of Hollywood's "capacity to bend consequences to its liking" (47) stands in stark contrast to *Quicksand*: control over cause and consequence proves beyond Helga Crane, a biracial woman of working-class immigrant origins who remains constrained by rigid social norms.

Losing the Plot's links between Larsen and Garbo are intriguing and generative. One can well imagine Larsen's attraction to *Camille*, though this might have as much to do with Dumas' source text as George Cukor's film adaptation. Like Larsen, Dumas was of mixed-racial, transnational heritage and, as George Hutchinson has noted, both *The Lady of the Camelias* and *Camille* exhibit "the classic motifs of female vulnerability in a male-dominated society that Larsen had always found irresistible" in her own fiction.[4] One can see, too, why Larsen would have been fascinated by Garbo, also in ways that *Losing the Plot* does not fully

[3] Nella Larsen, *Quicksand* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2005), 134.

[4] George Hutchinson, *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line* (Cambridge: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 2006), 445.

elaborate. Dabashi repeats an error common to discussions of *Quicksand* when she conflates Larsen's own Danish "West Indian black father" (51) with Helga Crane's: the "gay suave scoundrel" who sired Helga is identified only indirectly as "Negro," never more specifically as a Black Caribbean immigrant.[5] More notable, though, is the way in which Dabashi mentions that Larsen's white mother was a "working-class Danish woman," but then contains within a parenthesis and double negative that "(not insignificantly, Garbo belonged to the Swedish working class)" (51). This comparison merits more attention: like Mary Larsen (born Pederline Marie Hansen), Greta Lovisa Gustafsson migrated to the United States and entered a society in which racial classification operated differently than it did in Scandinavia. One might then speculate that Larsen's fascination with Garbo's filmic "hyperwhiteness" (63)—especially *Camille*'s "final-close up of Garbo's white(ned) face" during Marguerite's death scene (82)—is another manifestation of Nella's fraught relationship with mother Mary. That relationship figured previously in Helga's hazy memories of her "long dead" mother, the "fair Scandinavian girl" whose maternal "birthright" Helga hopes to reclaim by moving to Copenhagen.[6]

Losing the Plot largely overlooks the chapters set in Denmark, as well as earlier scenes that reference Helga's "Scandinavian" heritage. Instead, Dabashi's reading jumps from Helga's "filmy" (57) appearance in her room at Naxos to her "religious conversion" (58) in a Harlem storefront church. Separating these two scenes are some three years and twenty chapters, during which Helga moves to and through Chicago, New York, Copenhagen, and back to New York again. Dabashi argues that because "Helga finds a version of Naxos whereever she goes," the conversion scene constitutes *Quicksand's* "desperate" but doomed attempt "to effect plot progression consequential of a coherent self" (58). While I find this reading fascinating, it elides significant socio-spatial distinctions that have *some* bearing on how Helga tries—even if finally she fails—to plot her life and identity across lines of race, gender, sexuality, region, and nation. It seems to me—and admittedly I am biased—that Helga's travel narrative is not reducible to a

[5] Larsen, *Quicksand*, 26, 94.

[6] Larsen, *Quicksand*, 26, 48.

moveable feast (or famine) that remains forever Naxos.[7] Even if one accepts that Helga experiences "each of these displacements as if she were being reborn" (58-59), thereby foreshadowing her born-again religiosity, it is Dabashi making the leap of faith from chapter 1 to chapter 20. By leaving out so much, *Losing the Plot* itself risks "devaluing" the plot of *Quicksand*. Relatedly, the turn to Garbo's films, fascinating as it may be, risks eclipsing rather than illuminating Larsen's novel: whereas about eight pages concentrate on *Quicksand*, around twenty are devoted to *The Kiss* (1929), *Mata Hari*, and *Camille*.

Much like modernist literary studies, queer theory has tended to be highly suspicious of plot in its established forms: after all, the traditional love-and-marriage plot valorises the legally sanctioned coming together of a heteronormative, monogamous couple. Critics have celebrated Barnes' *Nightwood* for its simultaneously modernist *and* queer antipathy toward such formal and social conventions, lauding the novel's rejection of both "the formal constraints of plot" (93) and, via its representation of Robin Vote, compulsory heterosexuality. Dabashi does not exactly disagree—she notes early on that *Nightwood* "does not so much tell a story as it allows narrative energy to accrue around […] Robin Vote" (89)—but argues that, contra Coleman and later critics, "*Nightwood* is deeply ambivalent about the displacement of plot" (90) for reasons rooted in Barnes' own queer experience. Barnes began writing *Nightwood* in the aftermath of her split from long-term partner Thelma Wood (transparently the model for Vote). Barnes had "wanted monogamy" (91) and "bourgeois domesticity" (122); she agonised over "her inability to live up to the antinormative ideals Wood seemed to embody so effortlessly" (91). This wish to "inhabit one single, solitary love plot" (93) resulted in Barnes' break from Wood, and the writing of *Nightwood*.

Like *Quicksand*, *Nightwood* explores and exhibits a tension between formal experimentation and the personal despair endured by the autobiographical avatar: here, Larsen's Helga Crane anticipates Barnes' Nora Flood. As Dabashi observes with typical verve, "Nora does not want to be in a novel like *Nightwood*": not only

[7] I should acknowledge here my investment in a different reading of *Quicksand*: see Martyn Bone, *Where the New World Is: Literature about the U.S. South at Global Scales* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2018), 53-74.

because Robin mistreats her, but also because the narrative form negates "causality" and "consequence" (121). Dabashi's reading for the love plot—the one that Nora wants, but cannot have—is so dazzling that it left me reassessing (and re-reading!) Barnes' novel in a vastly different light. Dabashi demonstrates how, for all the "narrative energy" consumed by Robin, Nora, and other prominent characters—Matthew O'Connor, Felix Volkbein—"rage against the disembodying contrivances of style and desperately seek out the formal shelter of story" (91). What is more, Dabashi discovers what to "do" with that "connection" to Marlene Dietrich. If Barnes was "watching Dietrich so effortlessly subvert the love plot" (123) in films like *Blonde Venus*, *Shanghai Express* (both 1932), and T*he Scarlett Empress* (1934), it served to clarify the author's awareness that, like Nora in *Nightwood*, she could not live up to (or with) such cool queer subversion. Having demonstrated that Dietrich did indeed resemble Robin, *Losing the Plot* is more interested in—and more interesting on—Barnes' feeling for "bad modernists" like Nora. Whereas Dietrich and Vote "would prefer to exist outside of plot rather than in it" (118), Nora seeks "narrative structures of social, sexual, and historical meaning" that may appear "passé" (120-21), but which Barnes herself missed and mourned, too.

The final chapter connects two of Faulkner's canonical modernist novels not to his Hollywood career between 1932 and 1954 but rather the period between 1895 and 1927 during which film transitioned from the early "cinema of attractions" to a narrative-driven medium. Dabashi builds on John Faulkner's brief account of how he and brother Bill watched Westerns at Oxford's Lyric Theater by doing a deep dive into the movie programs printed in the *Oxford Eagle* newspaper. Dabashi claims this archival work "proves Faulkner was positively steeped in early film culture as a young man" (133). Not all readers will take the case as proven, and Dabashi does not discuss in detail any of the films listed in the *Eagle*. What *Losing the Plot* does offer is an impressive, theoretically informed analysis of *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying* as modernist texts that combine formal experimentation with reflection on emplotment and "the palliative promises of narrative unity" (133) offered up by cinema. To be sure, there has been no shortage of critical attention to the formal properties of these two novels. Many readers will already know that Quentin Compson "is anxious to restore narrative order to his world" (134); that Jason engages in a "pathological form of storytelling" driven by feelings of "injustice and dispossession" (154); and that

Benjy's opening section involves the "act of showing scenes rather than telling or emplotting them" (142). Dabashi's contribution is to foreground Faulkner's awareness that "losing the plot for modernism meant losing it to *film*" (134). It is for this reason, Dabashi argues, that Benjy's section resembles the cinema of attractions, while Quentin's obsession with narrative order reflects film's transition from "the formal and narrative limits of the *event*" (146) to its seductive investment in storytelling.

In *The Sound and the Fury*, plotting remains, in familiar modernist fashion, a deeply dubious practice. Quentin's frantic need to make meaning descends into a disturbing incest plot; Jason's paranoid conviction that every occurrence is part of a plot to cheat and humiliate him devolves into violence. By contrast, *As I Lay Dying* "shows the desire for plot in a far more sympathetic light" (135). Dabashi emphasises that Faulkner distinguishes the novel's formal fragmentation—what Eric J. Sundquist called its "dissolution" and "decomposition," and John T. Matthews dubbed its "disembodiment" and "disintegration"—from the lived experience of his characters.[8] For the Bundrens—not least Darl, the family's vernacular modernist, for whom mother Addie's coffin becomes "a cubistic bug" —fragmentation tends to be deeply disturbing.[9] As such, a tension emerges. Faulkner's "formal choice" to narrate entirely in the present tense "may come at the expense of his characters' ability to gain traction on novelistic time" (165) — hence Darl's longing to "just ravel out in time."[10] Yet as Dabashi rightly qualifies, *As I Lay Dying* remains "a plotted novel" (165), its trajectory (temporal and spatial) driven by the family's overriding goal of burying Addie in Jefferson. We might even call this, pardon the pun, the Bundrens' burial plot.

Losing the Plot's reading of Faulkner dovetails powerfully with the foregoing discussions of Larsen and Barnes: modernism's putatively progressive experimentation with form, its disdain for what Virginia Woolf termed the

[8] Eric J. Sundquist, *Faulkner: The House Divided* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 32; John T. Matthews, "*As I Lay Dying* in the Machine Age," *boundary 2* 19, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 87.

[9] William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying* (New York: Vintage International, 1990), 219.

[10] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 208.

"tyranny" of plot (90), often came at the expense of the traumatised, marginalised characters who populate novels like *Quicksand*, *Nightwood*, and *As I Lay Dying*. Dabashi concludes chapter 3 with one last speculation: that maybe even Faulkner privately indulged the consolations of plot—"the pleasure of watching a narrative come to an assuring close" (173)—when he was moviegoing in the mid-Twenties. Whether or not that was the case, *Losing the Plot* shows the value of situating Faulkner's most canonical modernist novels in relation to earlier film history rather than the "Golden Land" Faulkner wrote about (as well as for) between the Thirties and Fifties.

Losing the Plot unspools a final plot twist of its own: a "coda" that, at fifty-six pages, is longer than each of the preceding chapters. Here Dabashi turns to the films of Max Ophuls, a figure she acknowledges is "perhaps new to scholars of literary modernism" (183). In Ophuls' *ouevre*, Dabashi proposes, we see how "plot became an object of ambivalence in cinema's own properly modernist moment of the midcentury" (177). Ophuls' films, especially *The Earrings of Madame de…* (1955), are relevant to the book's larger project because they meditate on how movies maintain conservative plot structures—most obviously the love-and-marriage plot—even as they develop "a form of cinematic expression based in the autonomous movement of the camera" (184). There are some clear echoes of the prior literary analyses: as in *Nightwood*, so in *Madame de…* it is love not desire that seems disruptive, even subversive; like Nora in *Nightwood*, Gaby in *La signora di tutti* (1934) "would prefer to exist outside plot and the coercive mechanics of plotting" (202). Still, literary scholars like myself (modernists or otherwise!) may feel that the advertised focus on "the modern novel" rather recedes from view. This is not a critique of the coda's substance: my point is that *Losing the Plot*'s subtitle could have signalled that the book is about not only film's role in the modern novel, but also modern film itself—in ways that are important, and thus worth signposting. *Losing the Plot* is a strikingly innovative and provocative book: it deserves attention far beyond the field of modernist literary studies.