



PROJECT MUSE®

---

The Erotic Economy of Ellen Glasgow's Barren Ground : How  
Success Almost Spoiled Dorinda Oakley

Dianne Bunch

The Southern Literary Journal, Volume 34, Number 1, Fall 2001, pp. 14-28  
(Article)

Published by The University of North Carolina Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/slj.2001.0019>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/31730>

# The Erotic Economy of Ellen Glasgow's *Barren Ground*: How Success Almost Spoiled Dorinda Oakley

by *Dianne Bunch*

Although *Barren Ground* is Ellen Glasgow's most critically acclaimed novel, less attention has been paid to the novel's overall meaning than to Glasgow's poignant portrayal of her protagonist, Dorinda Oakley. In his biography of Ellen Glasgow, E. Stanley Godbold concludes that "Dorinda Oakley could have been created only by an embittered and cynical woman" and that "more than any other character in her novels, Dorinda Oakley is Ellen Glasgow" (137). These provocative statements dare us to take a closer look at Glasgow's novel *Barren Ground* in order to decide for ourselves just what Glasgow's character actually shares with her creator. In Glasgow's somewhat enigmatic 1933 preface to the Old Dominion edition of *Barren Ground*, she does sympathize with Dorinda's dilemma; however, I believe that she also establishes a clear demarcation between author and character, saying, "Though I wrote always toward an end that I saw . . . Dorinda was free" (viii). Moreover, when Glasgow states that Dorinda "exists wherever a human being has learned to live without joy, wherever the spirit of fortitude has triumphed over the sense of futility" (viii), Glasgow clearly distances herself from Dorinda's bitterness, since she proclaims in the same preface that the experience of writing *Barren Ground* gave her a joyous renewal in living:

All the forms in which I had thought and by which I had lived, even the substance of things and the very shape of my universe had shifted and changed. . . . In *Barren Ground*, . . . I felt that the scene, apart from the human figures, possessed an added dimension, a

universal rhythm deeper and more fluid than any material texture. Beneath the lights and shadows there is the brooding spirit of place, but, deeper still, beneath the spirit of place there is the whole movement of life. (vii–viii)

Instead of praising the solid “material texture” that objectifies human existence, Glasgow indicates that, in this novel, she focused upon depicting the deeper human impulses that evoke “the whole movement of life.” This vision of a fluid reality, one she terms as the “added dimension,” is found, however, only when the complete “scene” of her creation is taken into account rather than simply the one-dimensional perspective of her female protagonist, Dorinda.

Therefore, I propose that if the relationship between author and character in *Barren Ground* is recognized as sympathetic but nevertheless antagonistic, cynicism does not characterize *Barren Ground*; instead, it reveals Glasgow’s validation, not repudiation, of emotional impulses and the desire for pleasure over work. Indeed, I will argue that throughout the novel, Glasgow’s narrator portrays Dorinda’s erotic sensibility as the inextinguishable scintilla of her life—an impulse toward joy that connects her to “the whole movement of life.”

The emotional urgency found in Glasgow’s preface to *Barren Ground* is similar to the anti-rational stance of her autobiography, *The Woman Within*. In this autobiography, Nietzsche’s *Thus Spake Zarathustra* is deemed a “great prose-poem” (91). Glasgow was interested in German philosophy for most of her life, and although she read Nietzsche’s work in the 1890s, her alliance with Nietzsche is clearly visible in the Preface to *Barren Ground* and, as I will argue, in the deeper meaning of the novel itself.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, I want to suggest that Glasgow’s understanding of Nietzschean philosophy in *Barren Ground* anticipates Nietzsche’s other admirer, French literary critic and philosopher, Georges Bataille. When Bataille explains that “Nietzsche’s cry recalls the cry we would need to give out, with all our strength, in dreaming” (*Accursed* 3:370), he mirrors Glasgow’s depiction of the repressed Dorinda, whose dreams and erotic impulses continually cry out, undercutting her satisfaction with material success. Bataille’s philosophy also resonates with Glasgow’s privileging of a “universal rhythm” over “material texture.” Bataille’s explanation that “Nietzsche is on the side of those who give . . . in opposition to the bourgeoisie, which accumulates” (*Accursed* 3:370–371) articulates what, I believe, Glasgow’s depiction of Dorinda Oakley’s success reveals: the accumulation of the material creates a desolation of the spirit. Only at the end

of Dorinda Oakley's life, when she halts her bourgeois game of accumulation, does the character see—what the narrator of *Barren Ground* has known all along—that a choice of accumulation and tight control over expenditure is an empty victory. Dorinda's most futile moments of loss, experienced in unleashed erotic desire and irrational affection for others, are ultimately revealed as the most meaningful moments of life, an idea consistent with Nietzsche's philosophy.

Critical interpretations of *Barren Ground* have varied according to the positive or negative view of Dorinda Oakley's success. Earlier critics denigrated the novel's unsexing of Dorinda and gave less attention to the possible philosophical ramifications of that portrayal. Frederick McDowell praises the irony of the novel, indicating that "by brooding over her lost ecstasy in spite of her determination to forget love, Dorinda tacitly concedes its pervasive power" (155). Julius Raper also sees the distance and the difference "between the conscious and the unconscious Dorindas" ("Transition" 147). However, Raper's book, *From the Sunken Garden*, defines *Barren Ground* as a "tale of revenge" disguised as "a female success story" (80).

Others have praised Dorinda's material success, and, thereby Glasgow's writing of the novel, as a triumph of hard work and stamina. C. Hugh Holman says that after Glasgow wrote *Barren Ground* "the gift of work was enough" (110). Blair Rouse agrees, saying, "Ellen Glasgow shows that a worthwhile life could be lived by Dorinda, with fortitude, but without joy, without delight" (163). Curiously, feminist criticism of the novel has also tended to view Dorinda Oakley as a role model of how women might succeed in the material world. Pamela Matthews argues, "Dorinda is able to create for herself a contented female life by substituting female companionship for heterosexuality" (159). Susan Goodman's recent biography of Glasgow concurs, explaining that in *Barren Ground*, Glasgow found "a code of humane stoicism" that "incorporate[d] many of her father's Calvinist values" (166). Jamie Marchant seeks to refute the "generations of mostly male critics" who "insist on seeing [Dorinda] as an incomplete human being" (69), but she states that the most significant force in Dorinda's life is her "quest to build a successful career and turn barren land into a productive farm" (71).

My reading of the novel proposes a re-evaluation of Dorinda's "success" by suggesting that Glasgow's definition of that term is based on philosophical insights closer to Nietzsche's rather than an embrace of twentieth-century progress and materialism. She chooses to depict her critique of success in the modern world, through Dorinda Oakley's

conflicting interaction with two economies—the traditional economy of production, exchange, and accumulation and an unassimilable economy of desire, waste, and expenditure.

When *Barren Ground* begins, Dorinda Oakley is a young woman of twenty, living on her family's poor Virginia farm. Raised by staunch, Scots-Irish Presbyterians, Dorinda grows up in her parents' economy, which shuns waste, dirt, and indeed pleasure; her brothers use all "the stable trash" (55) for the field and her mother can't lie in bed because she sees "dirt gathering" (54). To bring extra money to the household, Dorinda works a monotonous job in a mercantile store. According to the narrator, Dorinda believes that "dullness, not pleasure was the fundamental law of morality" (81); however, Dorinda has "secret recoils" (81) to her firmly held belief system and those recoils lurk menacingly within her unconsciousness, refusing to be assimilated into the moral economy of her devout Presbyterian parents. This inner conflict is mirrored by the young woman's physical description; Dorinda's chin has "too much determination in its outward thrust" (10), but her eyes "sh[i]ne beneath her black lashes with a clear burning colour" and her cheeks are so red, she looks like an "exotic flower" (10).

In contrast to Dorinda's family, who are hard-working and resigned to poverty, is the aristocratic, decadent family of Jason Greylock, a young doctor who eventually becomes Dorinda's lover. The Greylocks are the last remnants of the Old South. Living in the decaying mansion, Five Oaks, Jason's father, Doctor Greylock, is a dissipated, alcoholic who wanders around the house with a horsewhip, yelling at his mulatto mistress and their children, while "looking in every room and closet for something to flog" (111). When Five Oaks is described through Dorinda's conscious eyes, it is a scene of waste: "Dirt, mildew, decay everywhere! . . . Chips, trash, broken bottles littering the yard and the back steps, which were rotting to pieces. Windows so darkened by dust and cobwebs that they were like eyes blurred by cataract. Several mulatto babies crawling, like small, sly animals, over the logs at the woodpile" (134). This description, with its racist overtones, depicts Dorinda's conscious disgust at the blurring of sexual and racial boundaries along with her horror toward waste and chaos.<sup>2</sup> However, the passage also expresses Dorinda's attraction to the scene; the narrative becomes more passionate and metaphorical in order to describe that which is repulsive. Furthermore, Jason, who hails from this locale of waste and indistinct boundaries, becomes the life-long source of Dorinda's unbridled passion, looming large in her erotic dreams.

The subversive power of Dorinda's sensibilities recalls Bataille's explanation of the heterogeneous economy that "includes everything resulting from unproductive expenditure" (*Visions* 142) and continually subverts the dominant economy of production. For Bataille, heterogeneous elements include waste, excess, and any non-accumulating consumption or expenditure. Glasgow reveals that this wasteful, excessive economy simultaneously repels and attracts Dorinda.

Trapped within her parents' life of drudgery, Dorinda longs to express her emotions. After she falls in love with Jason Greylock, Dorinda awakens into the possibility, yet brutality, of an erotic existence. Jason causes Dorinda's "inner life," described as an object "bare as a rock," to burst into something living, "suddenly rich with bloom" (36). In the narrator's most dramatic voice, Dorinda's desire for Jason is depicted as excessive, "over-running the desolate hidden field of her life" (64). However, when Dorinda experiences sexual orgasm as an "ecstasy" that "streamed through her with the swiftness of light" (117), she nevertheless holds back, fearful that "at any instant the glory might vanish and she might drop back again into the dull grey of existence." With this passage, Glasgow portrays the essence of erotic anguish, the fearful feeling of individuation sliding away but not completely lost. Here, Glasgow anticipates and illustrates Bataille's definition of eroticism as a "disequilibrium in which the being consciously calls his own existence into question" (*Erotism* 31).

The fact that Dorinda conceives a child during this experience connotes Glasgow's depiction of pregnancy and childbirth as part of the heterogeneous. I agree with Susan Lurie that Dorinda's illegitimate pregnancy emphasizes "that the meaning of the poor white woman's pregnancy depends on the whims of elite men" and "set[s] the stage for Dorinda's refusal to participate in elite marriage and maternity" (106). However, her pregnancy also portrays a span of time when Dorinda is at one with heterogeneity, the unassimilable other within her; unfortunately, Dorinda is ignorant of this fact until it is over. Having traveled to New York, after Jason breaks their engagement and marries the daughter of a more prosperous farmer, Dorinda experiences morning sickness and falls in front of a New York City cab. The subsequent loss of Dorinda and Jason's "love" child is also the loss of her chance to experience a life lived with and through another. Indeed, Dorinda's morning sickness (a manifestation of the child within) is likened to her fluid, erotic ecstasy with Jason; like eroticism, this "sickness," too, "wash[es] over her like black water, rising from her body" (213) taking her out into "an ocean of space" (214). When Dorinda awakens and realizes that she has lost her child, she feels the

“peace of the Sabbath” (215); for Dorinda, this move away from heterogeneity is a return to the strength of her parent’s religious resignation to a life of work without joy. Dorinda briefly grieves for the child, but quickly comforts herself with the fact that her baby would have had Jason’s red hair and she “should have hated it” (219), a reminder of her sojourn into the ecstasy of the heterogeneous and a living reminder of her erotic connection with others. Although Dorinda suppresses her love for the child, the narrative makes it clear that this tragic loss marks the hardening of Dorinda’s inner being, a conscious attempt to disconnect herself from any heterogeneous element that makes her feel the presence of that “other” economy.

Returning to Virginia, Dorinda steels herself for success in the traditional economy of production and accumulation. Significantly, Glasgow equates Dorinda’s evolution with the movement of Calvinist faith in postponed salvation to the materialism of the modern world. Dorinda rejects the spirituality of her parents’ Calvinism while continuing to view the world as a place of work without pleasure. This portrayal anticipates Bataille’s economic critique of how Protestant devotion to work for salvation leads to an economy of accumulation: “Once the servitude was granted, the world of *things* (the world of modern industry) could develop of itself, without any further thought of the absent God” (*Accursed* 1:136). Through Dorinda’s move from lover to landowner, Glasgow reveals how the Puritan-Presbyterian concept of grace is supplanted by its signifiers. After rejecting the morality of toil and love as an illusion, Dorinda is poised to become a solid citizen of the modern economy, allowing the rewards of toil to become a belief in simply possessing things as an end in itself.

This traditional economy with its spiritual fervor for ownership shows what Bataille would later describe in *Visions of Excess* as the homogeneous economy: “It is exactly in the middle segment of the so-called capitalist or bourgeois class that the tendential reduction of human character takes place, making it an abstract and interchangeable entity: a reflection of the *homogeneous things* the individual owns” (138). Bataille explains, and Glasgow illustrates by Dorinda’s success, that the homogeneous economy (usually synonymous with capitalism) assimilates human beings as tools for production, reducing them into objects and mere reflections of what they possess.

Correctly perceiving that the essence of a life controlled by the sensibilities is anguish, Dorinda proceeds to spend the rest of her life with “dignity,” making money, acquiring land, and denying her erotic impulses.

After the death of her father, Dorinda throws herself into reforming the land into an efficient agricultural system, rotating crops, buying dairy cows, and adopting modern milking techniques for commercial success.

Dorinda's marriage to Nathan Pedlar, an unattractive widower who owns the country store and with whom she worked as a girl, is a practical affair. Even Dorinda's wedding supper is "dreary" with a "lumpy and heavy" wedding cake (379). Pedlar, who has a knack for mending broken things, is the antithesis of Jason and the destruction Dorinda consciously despises. Glad that Nathan has children, Dorinda objectifies them, too, as more helpers to work the farm. The notable exception is Nathan's sensitive and disabled son, John Abner, clearly a member of the heterogeneous economy, for whom Dorinda has an irrational affection. Dorinda's marriage further enhances her material success, since the coupling of Dorinda's drive with Nathan's Yankee ingenuity (he foresaw the importance of the telephone, the modern churn, and the separator) allows Dorinda to become increasingly prosperous and able to buy more land and cows.

Of course, her marriage to Nathan is a celibate affair. When Dorinda goes to the barn to milk cows on her honeymoon night, her conversation with the African American milkers provides some of Glasgow's and the narrator's most humorous irony:

"I declar, Miss Dorindy, you mought jes' ez well not be mah'ed at all," Nimrod remarked dolefully.

"Well, I won't let it interfere with my work. No man is going to do that."

Mary Joe bridled and giggled; for being an engaging mulatto girl, she knew all that could be told of the interference of men. "Naw'm, dat dey ain't, nor breck yo' heart needer. Hit's a pity we ain't all ez strong-minded ez you is."

Dorinda laughed. "Break my heart? I should think not," she replied. And she meant what she said while she was saying it. One man had ruined her life; but no other man should interfere with it. She was encased in wounded pride as in defensive armour.

One of the other milkers, a big black woman named Saphira, smiled approvingly. "Hi! Dat's moughty sassy, Miss Dorindy," she exclaimed, "but hit ain't natur!" (381–382)

Clearly, Glasgow's narrator shares the dairy workers' attitude that working on your wedding night "ain't natur." Like the milkers, including the mulatto Mary Joe, a representative of the boundary breaking heterogeneous,



the narrator subtly depicts Dorinda's choice of accumulation over expenditure as abhorrent. Moreover, the text also questions Dorinda's own belief in this choice; she means what she says only "while she was saying it." Dorinda's tough talk is an empty signifier, and, like her pride, another "defensive armour," shielding Dorinda from overwhelming emotions.

The narrator's best vehicle for undercutting Dorinda's choice for success is Glasgow's fascinating characterization of Fluvanna Moody. Fluvanna is Dorinda's ever-present, highly efficient housekeeper and milker, who works harder than any other character in the novel, including Dorinda, without buying into her employer's drive for success. Although we might criticize Glasgow for not being more critical of Dorinda's disallowing Fluvanna equal social status and monetary rewards for her so-called partnership, I believe the aim of the text is not to propose an idealized social unit between black and white; rather, it is to expose Dorinda's failure to recognize the heterogeneous economy. Of all the characters in the novel, only Fluvanna seems capable of living a life that gracefully validates both economies while recognizing the greater importance of the heterogeneous.

Unlike Dorinda, Fluvanna works hard while keeping "a sunny disposition" (287). There are few descriptions of Fluvanna, but Dorinda calls her look "intelligent," describing her "perfect teeth, which show always, for she never stopped smiling" (287). Throughout the novel, Fluvanna's work is emphasized; she makes tea and toast, cooks supper, and milks cows. During Dorinda's struggle toward success—with agricultural schemes, property accumulation, marriage, parents' funerals, and eventually a husband's death—Fluvanna is present, facilitating all of Dorinda's actions. However, Fluvanna remains in distinct contrast to her employer. She often "slight[s] her work as soon as she [is] given authority over others" (310) and shares with the other workers a "instinct to slight" that, according to Dorinda, "was indigenous to the soil of the South." This "instinct," of course, reveals Fluvanna's embrace of pleasure and, indeed, the expenditure of the temporal world itself. Covertly skeptical of Dorinda's self-exile and, thereby of her own, Fluvanna questions, "Just you and me? Won't you get lonesome without some white folks?" (345). After Dorinda gains full control of the farm from her brothers, Fluvanna again subtly expresses her reservation about Dorinda's desire to own everything: "Well, it's all your'n now, ain't it?" she inquired placidly, as Dorinda's eyes swept the horizon" (345). What also sets Dorinda and Fluvanna apart is the fact that while Fluvanna helps Dorinda maintain the farm, she likes to discuss her "love affairs" (349) at night and has borne a son. Unfortu-

nately, Fluvanna's "love" life and childbirth are not catalogued in the novel, but Glasgow's mentioning them indicates her intent to show Fluvanna's "other" life. It also helps to explain Fluvanna's advice to Dorinda: "You oughtn't to let yo'self go, Miss Dorindy. There ain't any use in the world for you to slave and stint the way you do. You ought to go about mo' and begin to take notice. . . . What's the use of being young and proud if you don't strut?" (355). At Dorinda's wedding reception to Nathan Pedlar, Fluvanna openly complains, "I don't see . . . why anybody wanted to have a poky wedding like this. There ain't even a fiddle to make things lively" (378).

Through Fluvanna's few direct comments, Glasgow's larger vision of reality begins to emerge far beyond Dorinda's shortsighted drive for success, and this vision seems much closer to Fluvanna's than Dorinda's. Glasgow's depiction of Dorinda's disgust at miscegenation or her envisioning Jason Greylock as a menacing shadow in her dreams, therefore, is consistent with the novel's portrayal of the heterogeneous as the dark, dangerous life force that mercifully stalks Dorinda throughout her life. If *Barren Ground's* overall message is seen as an affirmation of the African-American characters in the novel, Glasgow actually validates their ability to live for pleasure alone and, thereby, resist total assimilation into the homogeneous economy and its definition of human beings as tools of production: "The Negro, who was by temperament a happiness-hunter, could pursue the small game of amusement . . . with an unflagging pace" (469). Although the narrator continually writes from Dorinda's perspective, the overall evaluation of Fluvanna (and the other minor African-American characters) reveals a narrative stance that supports Fluvanna's sympathy toward Dorinda, yet proves her more vigorous loyalty to a life that includes pleasure—the life of a happiness-hunter.

After Dorinda achieves material success and becomes a powerful and wealthy woman in the community, her erotic impulses fight even harder to escape and become more difficult to contain; the undercurrents of a more fluid reality, whose manifestations include erotic impulses and the desire to give everything away, begin to gain momentum. When Dorinda at age thirty-eight is able to buy Five Oaks plantation from her old lover, Jason Greylock, who is now an alcoholic, she feels a "triumphant independence" but she also feels "that the part of her that was sex withered and died. . . . In the matter of sex, he had won; matched merely as human beings, as man to man, she knew that she was the stronger" (401). Although Dorinda tells herself that she wants the plantation in order to renovate it from "sloth and decay" (398) and add it to her increasing acquisitions of

property, the narrator explains that Dorinda's moment of triumph over her betrayer is tempered by a growing conscious realization of the price of that so-called victory. This statement, directly attributed to Dorinda, is highly ironic, since the loss of the "matter of sex" is revealed as a high price for her to have paid.

Glasgow's narrator overtly explains how important this "matter of sex" with Jason actually has been throughout Dorinda's life:

The part of her consciousness that she could control she had released from [Jason's] influence; but there were innate impulses which were independent of her will or her emotions; and in these blind instincts of her being there were even now occasional flashes of longing. While she was awake she could escape him; but at night, when she slept, she would live over again all the happiest hours she had spent with him. (296)

With this acknowledgment, Glasgow undercuts statements directly attributed to Dorinda, such as, "Hearts might be broken, men might live and die, but the cows must be milked" (316). Rather than exalting Dorinda's work ethic, Glasgow employs an ironic and humorous voice for these aphorisms that actually mock Dorinda's use of work as an end in itself. Again, Glasgow's narrative anticipates Nietzsche's and Bataille's critique of modern society's failure to include unassimilable eroticism into its economic equation. Glasgow exposes Dorinda's obsession with ownership, warning that the hoarding of goods and an inability to enjoy spending resources is a perverse outcome of American capitalism.

Having watched Dorinda triumph over unfaithful men and turn her parent's poor farm into a small empire, Glasgow—somewhat melodramatically—leads the reader to wonder if Dorinda will ever succumb to her "real" desires. This tension provides most of the drama in the last chapters of the novel. It is only when the widowed, fifty-year-old Dorinda watches Jason's dead body be lowered into his grave that a chaos of mind overtakes her:

Out of this whirling chaos in her mind, Jason's face emerged like the face of a marionette. Then dissolving as quickly as it has formed, it reappeared as the face of Nathan, and vanished again to assume the features of . . . every man she had ever known closely or remotely in her life. They meant nothing. They had no significance, these dissolving faces; . . . Faces. Ghosts. Dreams. Regrets. Old vibrations that were incomplete. Unconscious impulses which had never quiv-

ered into being. All the things that she might have known and had never known in her life. (519)

Revealed in a burst of dream-like imagery, this moment reflects Dorinda's unordered longing, not for Jason, but for the pleasures of an erotic life she has never known. Later, lying in her bed with a chill and stripped of her material possessions, Dorinda remembers the power of desire: "In that hour of memory the work of thirty years was nothing. Time was nothing. Reality was nothing. Success, achievement, victory over fate, all these things were nothing beside that imperishable illusion. Love was the only thing that made life desirable, and love was irrevocably lost to her" (523–524). Here, the narrator firmly declares that love—the erotic impulses that Dorinda declared an illusion so long ago—is actually the only imperishable truth, for it alone continues past the grave, the only thing that really "counts." Finally, the disordered economy of eroticism is at last admitted by Dorinda herself to be more powerful than any economy of toil, ownership, and accumulation; Dorinda and the narrator's consciousness seem, at last, to be one.

Much of the critical controversy surrounding *Barren Ground* concerns Dorinda's subsequent actions after her sickbed epiphany. Julius Raper sums up this controversy when he asks, "Can we trust the last three pages of the book when Dorinda and the narrator seem to collaborate a final paean to optimism, endurance, the land, fortitude, and the vein of iron—all inspired by the passing of a storm and the dawn of a sunny day?" Raper concludes that although Glasgow speaks continually about "a universal rhythm more fluent than any material texture of life," this arose from her "necessary phantasies" (98).

I suggest that the last pages of the novel may be seen as Glasgow's paean to the evolution in Dorinda's inner being as she accepts a total economy that includes heterogeneous elements. Dorinda has a clearer mind after her recovery, and everything is described as lacking solid boundaries and part of a continuum—a rational salute to irrationality. She sees the material world as a "tide," the sunrise as a "flame," and the daylight as the "white fire of the life-everlasting" (524). Reconsidering her night visions, Dorinda

saw now, as she had seen in the night, that life is never what one dreamed, that it is seldom what one desired; yet for the vital spirit and the eager mind, the future will always hold the search for buried treasure and possibilities of high adventure. Though in a measure

destiny had defeated her, for it had given her none of the gifts she had asked of it, still her failure was one of those defeats, she realized which are victories. (525)

In this post-epiphanous state, Dorinda does not credit accumulated wealth, property, efficient agricultural methods, or, even, hard work as truly valuable. She sees that the gift she had truly wanted—the pleasures found in erotic loss—can also be attained by embracing this new economy where the unearned gift and the chance to live for expenditure alone (“the search for buried treasure” and “high adventure”) are still possible. Dorinda realizes that her quasi-religious allegiance to postponed salvation through materialism is a dreary victory. She acknowledges that heterogeneity has won, yet, by losing everything, she has been given a greater victory. As Dorinda’s daytime consciousness finally coalesces with her impulsive nighttime sensibilities, she sees her future reflected, not in the solidity of the land and the boundaries that mark her ownership, but in the uncontrollable, rhythmic revolutions of the natural world:

She saw other autumns like this one, hazy, bountiful in harvest, mellowing through the blue sheen of air into the red afterglow of winter; she saw the coral-tinted buds of spring opening into the profusion of summer; and she saw the rim of the harvest moon shining orange-yellow through the boughs of the harp-shapen pine. Though she remembered the time when loveliness was like a sword in her heart, she knew now that where beauty exists the understanding soul can never remain desolate. (525)

Alluding to her erotic moments with Jason when Dorinda felt herself at one with the blooming spring, these images, too, present a new understanding of continual movement and loss, in which beauty is found only when boundaries (land, body, race) are pierced and broken, allowing them to become fluid and diffuse.

If we see Dorinda’s post-epiphany as an embrace of the heterogeneous economy of expenditure and, thereby, beauty, along with a rejection of acquisition and hoarding, the final pages of *Barren Ground* are not a reinscription of Dorinda’s old belief in endurance and fortitude; her subsequent actions prove that Dorinda’s spirit is indeed “flowing out again toward life.”<sup>3</sup> Resolved to give her possessions away rather than acquire more, Dorinda tells her stepson John Abner that she will not marry wealthy landowner Bob Ellgood. With this decision, Dorinda knows that she will lose her chance to merge the two largest farms in the county and

increase her social status. While exclaiming to John Abner that “I am thankful to have finished with all that” (526), Dorinda smiles; and it is a “pensive, ironic, and infinitely wise” expression, reflecting her choice of expenditure over accumulation. Although Dorinda’s rejection of marriage at the end of the novel is often seen as evidence of her hardened heart, it is important to recognize that Dorinda is not rejecting love but a union with Bob Ellgood, the consummate representative of the patriarchal economy of ownership. More indicative of Dorinda’s true change of heart is her decision to leave her property to John Abner. With this move, Dorinda pays tribute to her heart and the irrational affection she has always had for her sensitive stepson. It is fitting that she now sees the slightly disabled John Abner as her rightful heir; his diasbility is no longer crippling in a heterogenous economy where inefficiency and excess (a halting walk and a clubfoot) are valued over the precision of perfect bodies designed for production. By telling John Abner that he must now “bear with [her] fancies” (526) and accept her extravagant gift, Dorinda reveals that her energies will now privilege expenditure and indulgence. Whether or not Dorinda (or John Abner) can live only within a heterogeneous economy is unclear at the end of the novel; however, I suggest that Glasgow leaves Dorinda within the embrace of an economy of expenditure and pleasure.

With empathy for the dearth of a woman’s choices in the traditional, masculinist economy, Glasgow nevertheless wrote *Barren Ground* to depict the pathos of anyone who chooses a life based on the values of that economy; she reveals that the choice of accumulation over expenditure always leads to servitude rather than personal sovereignty. Consistent with Nietzsche’s cogito, explained by Bataille as “the refusal to serve (to be useful)” (*Accursed* 3:368), Glasgow, through her character Dorinda, illustrates Nietzsche’s description in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* of those living in an economy which denies impulse and joy: “Of man there is little here: therefore do their women masculinise themselves. For only he who is man enough, will—*save the woman* in woman” (205). I believe that if the added dimension, the erotic economy of *Barren Ground*, is recognized, the novel reveals that Ellen Glasgow was indeed “man enough” to save the woman within Dorinda Oakley. By allowing Dorinda to win in a man’s world only to find it worthless, Glasgow rejects bitterness and cynicism; instead, what endures is the ironic, pensive smile of a Southern woman who has found the “whole movement of life” within herself.

## NOTES

1. Terence Allan Hoagwood also notes the importance of Nietzsche's work to Glasgow's intellectual development, explaining that her "lifelong critique of traditional religion" (364) and its connection her father's Presbyterian beliefs and patriarchal domination was rooted in Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*.

2. For Susan Lurie, the split between *Barren Ground's* narrator and the character of Dorinda Oakley exposes Glasgow's personal ambiguity concerning race and gender. Lurie sees Glasgow's narrator as a participant in the novel's racism as a means to fight sexism; she explains that "the feminist insights of Glasgow's characters . . . and of her own narration coexist with a tendency to authorize feminism with the racist discourses that undermine it." My reading disagrees somewhat with Lurie's, since I see Glasgow's narrator ridiculing Dorinda's racial attitudes, exposing them as another attempt to place African Americans (and everything else) within a traditional economy of production and accumulation.

3. Other critics have also interpreted the novel's ending as an evolution of Dorinda's inner self rather than a congratulatory reinscription of her material "success." Linda Wagner concludes that the end of the novel shows a new Dorinda Oakley who finds happiness from "a kind of constancy, a satisfaction with herself" (76). Catherine Rainwater suggests that Dorinda finds an authentic self at the end of the novel through the creation of "an ethics of compassion in a female-centered, domesticated universe" (217).

## WORKS CITED

- Bataille, Georges. *Visions of Excess (Selected Writings, 1927–1939)*. Trans. Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lobitt, and Donald M. Leslie, Jr. Minneapolis: U of Michigan P, 1985.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Accursed Share*. 3 vols. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Zone Books, 1991.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*. 1962. Trans. Mary Dalwood. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986.
- Glasgow, Ellen. *Barren Ground*. 1925. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1985.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Preface. *Barren Ground*. Garden City: Doubleday, Doran, 1933.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Woman Within*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1954.
- Godbold, E. Stanly, Jr. *Ellen Glasgow and the Woman Within*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1972.
- Goodman, Susan. *Ellen Glasgow: A Biography*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1998.
- Hoagwood, Terence Allan. "Glasgow's Poetry: A Critique of Ideological Illusion." *Mississippi Quarterly* 49.2 (1996): 362–372.
- Holman, C. Hugh. "The Comedies of Manners." *Ellen Glasgow Centennial Essays*. Ed. M. Thomas Inge. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1976. 108–128.
- Lurie, Susan. *Unsettled Subject: Restoring Feminist Politics to Poststructuralist Critique*. Durham: Duke UP, 1997.
- Marchant, Jamie. "Ellen Glasgow's New Women: *Barren Ground* and *They Stood to Folly*." *Centennial Review* 41.1 (1997): 63–81.

- Matthews, Pamela R. *Ellen Glasgow and a Woman's Traditions*. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1994.
- McDowell, Frederick P. W. *Ellen Glasgow and the Ironic Art of Fiction*. Madison: U Wisconsin P, 1960.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. 1909. Trans. Thomas Common. Ed. Oscar Levy. Vol. 11. New York: Russell & Russell, 1964.
- Rainwater, Catherine. "Consciousness, Gender, and Animal Signs in *Barren Ground* and *Vein of Iron*?" *Ellen Glasgow: New Perspectives*. Ed. Dorothy M. Scura. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1995. 204–219.
- Raper, Julius Rowan. "Barren Ground and the Transition to Southern Modernism." *Ellen Glasgow: New Perspectives*. Ed. Dorothy M. Scura. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1995. 146–161.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *From the Sunken Garden*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1980.
- Rouse, Blair. "Ellen Glasgow's Civilized Men." *Ellen Glasgow Centennial Essays*. Ed. M. Thomas Inge. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1976. 131–166.
- Wagner, Linda W. *Ellen Glasgow: Beyond Convention*. Austin: U of Texas P, 1982.